Star-Queen

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by TheBetterAngelsOfOurNature

Summary

What if the light had stayed with Meredith?
This work is the first part in a series that answers that question. It reverses the timeline of the movies; Ego is dealt with in this work, and Ronan in the next. I always thought it was a little lame that Meredith's function in the movies (and comics, actually) is just to give birth to Peter and then die. I think Peter would agree; his mother was more than that. This is a fic to illuminate what might have happened if Meredith Quill had followed her son to space. If you like handyman badass secretly-cinnamon-roll Kraglin, emotional sassy mothering Meredith, grumbly badass angst-covering Yondu, and peppy pickpocket rambunctious Peter, then this fic is for you.

Meredith Quill, Mother of the Guardians of the Galaxy.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Damn Terrans

Meredith's boy had a black eye again. He tilted his face, trying to hide it, but Meredith's eyesight was still sharp, despite the cancer.

“Why you been fightin' with the other boys again, baby?” She kept her tone gentle, but Peter didn't answer. “Peter...”

The boy sniffled. “They killed a little frog what ain't done nothin'. Smushed it with a stick.”

Meredith's chest jolted slightly as she laughed weakly. “You are so like your daddy.”

The image of Jason seemed to swim in front of Meredith; his smile, his starry eyes... she could practically hear the timbre of his voice.

“And he was an angel,” Meredith breathed, “made of pure light...”

“Mery?” Meredith's father cleared his throat. “You uh, you got somethin' there for Peter, right?”

“Of course,” Meredith breathed. She tried to push the package towards him, but moving her arm felt like sliding lead.

“Gotcha covered, Pete,” Meredith's father said gruffly, stowing the brightly-colored package into Peter's backpack.

“You open that up when I'm gone, baby.” Meredith tried to smile. “Your grandpa is going to take such good care of you, at least until your daddy comes back to get you.”

Suddenly, Meredith felt something in her chest. Almost like a balloon was blowing up in her body, and as it did, she lost feeling in her fingers, her toes...and it was spreading. Instinctively, Meredith knew she was being called.

“Take my hand, baby.” Meredith reached out for one last touch.

Peter turned his head away; he couldn't watch her die. But still, Meredith reached out, desperate for some way to say goodbye.

“Peter, take my hand.”

“Peter,” Meredith's father warned.

Suddenly, the balloon in Meredith's body popped, and the heart monitor screamed a flat line.

“Mom? Mom!” Peter grabbed for her arm. “No! No!”

“Come on, Peter!” Meredith's father moved him out of the room as doctors scrambled in. “Just stay here for me, okay? Okay?”

As soon as Meredith's father turned away, Peter ran.
The blinding light began to fade as Peter blinked his eyes, but he could still hear screaming. It took him a minute to realize that screaming was coming from him.

“Damn, Terrans is loud.”

“Is they all that small?”

“No you idiot, it's a kid!” The loudest voice roared.

Peter didn’t recognize any of the voices. Sobbing, he blinked away the patterns still swirling over his eyelids, then looked up. Standing right in front of him was a man with a red crest on his forehead, blue skin, and teeth like jagged bones.

Peter screamed again.

The figures around him cringed, some covering their ears.

“Shut that damn thing up!”

A hand, half-coated in fur and bearing long claws, came down as if to strike Peter across the face. Streaks of red appeared across Peter’s vision, and his breath caught in his throat. An arrow had sliced across the furry hand; the bearer of it yowled and stumbled back.

“Don't you lay a damned hand on the cargo,” the blue man snarled, “or you'll be answrin' t'me, y'all hear?”

The figures nodded. “Aye, cap'n.”

Peter stared up in shock and horror, tears stinging. The blue man looked down at him.

“Whass wrong with you,” the blue man asked.

Peter couldn't speak.

“I said, whass wrong with ya?”

The snarl frightened Peter, who immediately started to bawl again.

“Maybe Terrans don't know how to talk at twelve years, captain.” A tall, lanky teen stammered.

“I know what Terrans can do, smartass!” The blue man, the captain, roared over his shoulder, then looked back at Peter. “He can speak. He's just too much of a pansy to do it.”

The blue man kneeled down to get eye-to-eye with Peter.

“What's your name,” he asked.

“Peter Quill.” Peter blurted it automatically. “I wanna go home.”

“Why you wanna go home, boy? You got any reason to go home?”

Peter opened his mouth, then closed it, starting to sob again. He sunk to his knees and cried on the round doorway he'd came through. The rest of the figures shuffled awkwardly.

“Y'all get back to it,” the blue man said, “I'll take care of the cargo.”

“Aye, cap'n.”
As the rest of the figures shuffled off, the blue man stared down at the sobbing kid.

“Kraglin,” he barked.

The lanky teen from before came before the captain, and saluted him by slamming his right fist over his left shoulder.

“Go get a berth ready for the kid, and some food,” the captain said quietly, “and don't let nobody do anythin' stupid to it like last time.”

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin quickly left.

Peter took a deep, shaky breath, his fingers still clutching his Walkman.

“What'chu got there, boy?” The blue man made as if to take the Walkman.

Slap! Wham! Peter drew the back of his hand across the blue man’s face then kicked him hard in the shin.

“Get away from me,” Peter screamed.

The blue man yelled, more in shock than pain, and Peter ran. He ran down filthy metal tunnels, tears streaming from his eyes. He made a left turn and found himself in a room full of figures. In the light, he could see them clearly; scarred, bizarre faces. Not human. Definitely not human.

Peter stopped, wide-eyed.

They looked at him, unperturbed; one of them raised a tentacle.

“What'chu goin’?”

Peter screamed and ran again.

As he made back down the hallway, he looked behind him to see if any of the monsters were following him. Nothing.

Slam! He collided with someone.

Kraglin looked down at him. “Hey kid, ain't the uh, ain't the captain with you?”

Peter edged slowly around the teen. It was the most human thing he’d seen on the ship, but that didn't mean he trusted it.

“Hey, where you goin’?” Kraglin’s eyebrows knit together.

“Kraglin, you idiot!” The blue man came skidding into the hall. “Grab that boy!”

Kraglin’s eyes shot wide, and he scrambled to grab Peter. Peter screamed and ducked, then bolted away from them. He could see the round door he'd been kneeling on earlier; that had to be the portal home. This was all a dream, Peter was sure, a terrible dream. His mom was alive. He was at home with his grandpa. This was all a dream.

An eerie, beautiful whistle came from behind Peter. He felt a sharp tug on the back of his shirt, and found himself pinned to the wall. As he kicked and screamed, the blue man and Kraglin came up, panting.
“He sure is fast, captain.”

“I'll say,” the blue man panted, half-grinning, “and a slippery little fucker, too.”

Kraglin looked at his captain. “Useful slippery or mucus slippery?”

“Useful slippery, you idiot! Terrans ain't got no mucus coverin'.” The blue man put his hands on his hips and scrutinized Peter, who hung there like a towel on the back of a bathroom door.

“You's a runnin' boy,” the blue man said, “I see that. We pick you up, you runnin'. We put you here, you runnin'. Whatchu runnin' from, boy?”

“Monsters!” Peter screamed.

Kraglin snorted. “Kid's never seen an extraterrestrial life form.”

That made the blue man laugh. “Terrans.”

Peter hung there, eyes wide. Extraterrestrials. They weren't monsters; they were aliens.

“But that don't explain why you was runnin' when we found ya,” the blue man said.

“Yeah,” said Kraglin, “so why?”

Peter's breathing was heavy. His mother's face, soft and drained of life, swam before him. His eyes burned again.

“My mom,” he said, barely above a breath, “my mom died.”

The gentle hum of the ship seemed as loud as a roaring waterfall as Peter hung there, eyes downcast.

“Aw kid,” Kraglin said, “I'm sorry.”

Peter's hot tears streaked down his face.

“You know your daddy, boy?” The blue man's voice was unusually quiet.

“No.”

“So, you're an orphan.” The blue man crossed his arms. “Me too.”

Peter looked up. He hadn't thought about being an orphan. It sounded sad. He looked at them both.

“Me too,” added Kraglin, “so you're among folks who get it, kid.”

“How did-”

“Kree war raid,” Kraglin finished, “on the Xandarian outpost I grew up. Parents, sister. My whole family gone.”

“And-”

“None of your damn business,” the blue man growled.

Peter closed his mouth.

“How about you,” Kraglin asked.
“Brain tumor,” Peter said. Two words that meant a lifetime of grief.

Something in the blue man's face changed. He gave a short whistle, and Peter fell to the ground, unpinned.

“Go with Kraglin,” the blue man said, “and don't make trouble.”

“What happens if I make trouble,” Peter blurted.

“We eat ya,” the blue man snorted.

Peter's eyes widened. Aliens eat Earth people.

Peter screamed again, and Kraglin dragged him off. The blue man shook his head and gave a low whistle that slid the arrow back into its quiver.

Damn Terrans.

Meredith was used to pain. Slow, drawn-out pain; cancer was like that. But this was a different pain. This was sharp and piercing, like she was getting a javelin through the chest. The balloon had popped, but something was tethering her to her body, tying her to the pain. Meredith couldn't go.

Suddenly, her chest heaved. Her eyes fluttered open. The room was empty; everyone was gone. There was a body bag lying next to her. Her head felt clearer than it had in a long time; a kind of strength that she hadn't felt in a while seemed to be fusing itself back into her muscles.

For the first time in a long time, she felt strong. The needles and tubes were out; nothing stopped her from swinging her legs over the side of the hospital bed. Meredith looked around, marveling. She was alive.

She needed to find her baby. Meredith stood up and looked around. A nurse ran by, yelling something.

“The boy's gone!”

“Peter?” Meredith got to her feet, shivering at the cold. Her aunt had left a leather jacket on the chair next to Meredith's bed; Meredith borrowed it. Pulling it on, she stumbled out of the hospital room.

“Papa? Peter?”

Then, she heard Peter scream.

“Mom!”

Meredith ran.

While the boy was set up, Yondu went to the round portal.

“Gef,” he said over his communications device, “pick up, you idiot.”

“Aye cap'n?”
I'm goin' down to take a look-see. I wanna make sure we grabbed the right kid."

"Aye cap'n."

Yondu stood over the round portal and was slowly lowered back down onto Earth's surface. He hit a button on his bracer which activated a modular refraction field, rendering him invisible. The ship above him was camouflaged; no human except the kid would know they'd been here.

"Peter!"

A Terran woman was running barefoot across the parking lot.

"Peter," the woman screamed, "Peter!"

Yondu Udonta had a skill with reading people; this woman was very sick and very desperate. Yondu knew that face too fucking well.

"Pete..." The woman sunk onto the grass, breathing heavily.

For a moment, Yondu thought about calling the whole damn thing off. Telling Ego to stuff those units up his ass. Dumping the kid right here next to his mom and forgetting he ever heard of Peter Quill. But then, the woman started breathing heavy and clutching her hand to her chest.

"Peter... Peter... I'm so sorry, baby..." The woman slunk to the ground, gasping.

Yondu knew what a dyin' Terran looked like, too. Still covered in the refraction field, he knelt down and pushed the woman on her back.

"Stay steady you damn fool," Yondu growled.

"Who's there?" The woman's eyes rolled around. "Peter? Jason?"

"Do I sound like a God-damned Jason to you?" Yondu snarled, trying to keep the woman still until some other Terran showed up. Yondu knew what a dying Terran looked like, but he didn't know how to save one.

"Do you know where Peter is?" The woman looked up, eyes wide and face pale.

"His father's here to pick him up," Yondu lied.

"Oh, Jason... promise me you'll take care of him." The woman's breath was becoming ragged; Yondu could hear her heart failing.

Yondu's eyes widened. "You fuckin' think I'm Ego? What the fuck is wrong with you?"

The woman jolted and seized Yondu's jacket with surprising accuracy. "You're not Peter's dad? What did you do with my baby?!"

"Holy fuck!" Yondu tried to wrench her arms off; she was skinny, but the adrenaline made her ridiculously strong. He watched in shock as she stumbled back onto her feet and screamed.

"Peter! Peter! Baby, where are you?"

There was a banging on glass; Yondu and the woman both looked up.

"Help!" The boy's voice was faint, but in the silence of the night, it was still audible.
The ship's cloaking device shut off, and the woman gasped. A huge spaceship floated only a few yards above her, and clearly visible through the cockpit window was Peter Quill, screaming and sobbing.

“Oh my God!” The woman's eyes widened.

Yondu cursed. Damned Terrans. He pulled out a large weapon and shot; a bolt of lightning hit the woman, and she fell to the ground, stunned. He shut off his modular refraction device before the battery blew and stepped over her body.

Yondu snarled into his communications device, “Who the fuck turned off the cloakin’?”

“It was an accident, cap'n,” was the reply. “The boy's elbow, it hit the switch.”

“When I get up there I want that boy in restraints.”

“Cap'n!” Yondu heard Kraglin yell into the microphone. “Behind you!”

Something large and heavy slammed into Yondu, and suddenly limbs were wrapped around his body. The woman sank her teeth into his neck, and Yondu felt the sharp sting of broken skin. The light from the tractor beam washed over them both.

When Kraglin finally made it to the portal opening, he walked in on chaos. The Terran woman, fragile and sickly, was screaming; Centaurian blood was dripping from her chin. Yondu was bleeding from the base of his neck, and the boy was screaming at the top of his lungs. Yondu whistled; his yama arrow sliced a thin line across the Terran woman's cheek, causing her to fall backwards. Yondu's whistle spiked; Kraglin closed his eyes so he didn't have to see the Terran die. But when he opened his eyes again, she was still alive. Peter Quill had bolted for the still-open portal back to Earth; Yondu had pinned him to the wall just as he dove.

“Peter!” The Terran woman immediately put herself between Peter and the Ravagers. “It's okay, Peter. It's okay.”

“They're aliens,” Peter hissed, his eyes wide in terror.

“Well, if they take a step closer, they're going to be dead aliens,” she said.

“What, you gonna chew us to death? You got spunk, girl,” Yondu grinned, “but you way in over your head.”

“More than likely, yes.” She took a deep breath. “But you won't lay a hand on my baby.”

Meredith slowly backed up and tilted herself so they couldn't see Peter as he tried to slip out of his jacket.

“Sorry t'interrupt your dyin',” Yondu growled, “but we've got a kid to deliver.”

“Well I delivered him first,” Meredith quipped, “so get in line, you big blue asshole.”

Peter giggled. “You said asshole.”

“Don't use that word, okay baby?” Meredith smiled at him. “Mama has to use some grown-up words on these deleterious scoundrels.”
Yondu and Kraglin looked at each other in mild disbelief; Peter slipped an arm out of his jacket.

“What the hell does delete...dela...” Kraglin frowned.

Meredith huffed. “It means bad, aight?”

“Then why the fuck don't you say 'bad',” Yondu asked.

“Because then I wouldn't know long and interesting conversation starters like 'deleterious',” Meredith said with a hint of sarcasm.

Peter's feet hit the ground. Meredith dove for the arrow, wrapping her hands around it tightly. Yondu whistled, but the Terran's grip slowed the arrow down. It was Kraglin hitting the emergency door latch that ultimately prevented Peter Quill from making it to Earth. Peter slammed into the closed metal hatch, then bolted down the hallway. Yondu whistled sharply; the arrow tore out of the Terran woman's grip and pinned Peter to the floor by the cuff of his pants. Peter tripped and fell. Kraglin wrestled the Terran woman, finally slapping a pair of handcuffs on her. The crew came in through the doors, having heard Yondu's whistling. Two of them grabbed Peter.

“Damn Terrans,” Yondu said.

“What do we do with 'em, Captain?”

“Throw her in a brig,” Yondu said, gesturing to the woman, “and keep the crew off her.”

The crew sniggered. The two holding Peter lifted him slightly. “And the boy?”

“In a cell next to her; easier to keep the crew off him that way.” Yondu leaned over and picked up the arrow.

“Don't feel bad, not bein' able to hold this down.” He flicked it in front of Meredith's face. “Big big for a scrawny little Terran like you.”

“If I wanted to handle something small, honey,” she said with contempt, “I'd be giving out handjobs to your crew.”

There were collective snarls and hisses; Meredith smiled slightly. Yondu walked over and pressed the arrow's point to her head.

“You better watch your mouth,” he said, “these boys ain't no gentlemans.”

“I'm sure,” she said with distaste.

Yondu looked down at the Terran woman. She was thin and bald, with no curve to her form. The only color in her face was the purple under her eyes and in her lips. There was nothing beautiful about her; she'd go for nothing on that kind of market. Her only value was if Ego would want her.

“Haul 'em away,” he said.

“Aye, Captain.”

The two Terrans were dragged into cells, separated by one wall. The one they called Kraglin was set to watch them. Peter curled up on the slab bed they provided and started to shake.
“Peter.” Meredith hit the wall with her hands. “Peter, can you hear me?”

Peter went to the part of the wall where her voice was loudest. “Yeah.”

“Peter, baby, did they hurt you?”

“I got a bruise on my leg from hitting the round floor door thing.”

“I’m so sorry that didn’t work, Peter.” Meredith put her face in her hands. “I should have been faster.”

Peter didn’t know what to say to that. He looked down at his Walkman, then back at the wall. His throat tightened, and he started to cry. Meredith blinked back tears. Her baby was crying on the other side of that wall, and she couldn't even hold him.

“Peter,” she said softly, “I want you to know that you are the light of my life. I'm so proud of you, and I'm so proud of how much you've grown. You're so cute, and smart, and funny, and most of all, Peter baby, you're good. I'm very proud of you, and I love you.”

On the other side of the wall, Peter wiped his eyes. His mom was right; Peter was smart. His mom was alive, and she had gotten trapped trying to save Peter. It was up to Peter to free them both. He went up to the door and looked at the lock. Kraglin was leaning against the wall between the two cells, wiping his eyes.

“Are you crying?” Peter blinked.

“No,” Kraglin said through a thick throat, “I ain't.”

“Yes you are, I can see you.”

“I am not! Shut up!”

“Who's crying?” Meredith came to the other door. “Kraglin, are you crying or is that Peter?”

“Peter's cryin'!”

“Yeah, so are you!”

“Kraglin, why are you crying?” Meredith squinted.

“Nothin'. None of your business,” Kraglin sniffed.

“Peter, you should get some sleep,” Meredith said.

“But I want to help you escape!”

Meredith laughed. “We'll escape tomorrow; they'll be expecting us to do it tonight.”

“I'm right here,” Kraglin said, “I can hear you talking about escaping.”

Peter crawled onto the bunk and put his headphones in.

Meredith tried to see into Peter's cell. “Is he asleep?”

Kraglin looked. “Naw, he's just got them headphones on.”

“Good,” she sighed, “now we can talk.”
“I ain't talking to you.”

“Yes you are.”

“No I'm not!”

“Kraglin, you're talking to me right now.”

Kraglin shut his mouth.

“Look, I'm not asking for anything you're not allowed to tell me.” Meredith slid to the floor on the other side of the cage. “Just tell me what's about to happen to us.”

“Why d'you want to know?”

“Because I can pretend to be brave and Peter won't be as scared.” Meredith hugged her knees to herself. “He's my baby. I'm his momma. I have to be brave, and in order to do that I need a little heads-up on what comes after this.”

“You're not scared?” Kraglin blinked.

Meredith's voice was strangely calm. “I'm terrified. I died today. I don't know why I'm still here. I ain't got a doctor, no medicine, no hope. I'm not long for this life. But that's not important right now. There's a little boy in that cell who might lose all the family he's got, maybe forever. He needs someone to believe in, and I aim to be that person for as long as I've got left.”

“Well, he's got his dad,” Kraglin reasoned, “but from what the Captain said, that ain't much use as protection.”

“Jason?” Meredith's heart leapt.


“He was an angel,” Meredith said firmly, “and he said he was from space.”

“And course he was.”

Meredith let out a weak laugh and pressed her hand to her forehead. “No one believed me when I said Peter's daddy was from space.”

“Terrans don't interact with other species.” Kraglin rolled his eyes. “Kinda stupid if you ask me.”

“Is that what Peter and I are? Terrans?”

Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz. “You're cargo. That makes you valuable.”

“So if we do somethin' wrong, we ain't gonna get hurt? Because we're valuable?”

“Naw, we would just kill ya.”

A laugh escaped Meredith's throat. “Oh, is that all? Great. Just death. No big deal; already did that once today.”

Kraglin looked a little perturbed. Terrans that laugh at death were not something he had ever encountered before.
“So, Kraglin,” Meredith began politely, “where are you from?”

“Yazkin-8,” he said, “a Xandarian outpost.”

“Is it nice there?”

“It's gone,” he said, not looking at Meredith, “blasted off the map by Kree.”

“Kree,” Meredith frowned, “what do they look like?”

“Big blue bastards.” Kraglin spit on the ground.

“Ah,” Meredith grinned, “like our new friend with the bad teeth and the arrow?”

“Naw, he's a Centaurian. Kree don't got the, y'know.” Kraglin gestured to his head.

“That big red thing on his head?”

“Yeah, that.”

“So Kree are bad news,” Meredith said, “and Xandarians are...?”

“Most of ’em are the stuck-up Nova Corps,” Kraglin explained, “upholdin' laws and all that. Some of ’em are right assholes, though.”

“And you?”

“Ravager.”

“Which is?”

Kraglin snorted. “Everythin' you're lookin' at. This is a Ravager ship. Captain Yondu, me, the crew; we're all Ravagers.”

“So that's not a species-based thing.” Meredith nodded. “So... are you guys slavers?”

“No!” Kraglin's eyes shot wide. “Hell fuckin' no, no way!”

“Right,” Meredith said scathingly, “kidnapping a woman and a child from their home planet to sell them for cash, that's not slavery.”

“It ain't... like that,” Kraglin rubbed his forehead, saying, “I mean, not really.”

“How is not like that?”

Kraglin didn't have an answer. He fidgeted for a moment, then said, “You oughta get some sleep. You're gonna need it for tomorrow.”

For a moment, Meredith thought about pressing him for more information, but today had been long, and the exhaustion was beginning to seep into her bones. She crawled up on the slab bed and curled up.

“Don't let anyone stupid inside Peter's cell,” she muttered.

“What about you? Ain't you worried somebody's gonna get in there and... y'know, getcha?”

“You said Ravagers have a code of honor.” Meredith lifted her head slightly. “Do you?”
“Yeah.”

“Then I hold you to it.” Meredith lowered her head and closed her eyes. “I figured I didn’t have to ask for you to keep someone from doing that. Besides... I’ll probably die in the middle of the night anyway.”

Kraglin had no answer to that either. He waited until he could hear both of the Terran’s heartbeats slow and their breathing deepen, then popped open a flask and took a deep drink.

Damn Terrans.
Kraglin had never seen a Terran kid up close. It looked just like a Xandarian kid. That bothered Kraglin a little; similar species often had similar biological and physical aspects, but Kraglin had never heard of any biological link between Xandar and Terra.

The boy, Peter, was pressing his face between the bars, seeing if he could fit. The black headphones, still on from last night, dwarfed his tiny head and threatened to slip off his ears. Kraglin leaned against the door, listening to the rest of the crew talk.

“I hear he's the last one.”

“You think the other Ravagers will let us back into the fold once it's done?”

“No, we're out.”

“We're loyal to Yondu whether they like it or not. The rest of the Ravagers can suck my enormous furry-”

“Watch your language,” someone said, “there's a kid on board.”

“He's just cargo,” the furry crewmember, a recent hire named Drazkar, waved his paw.

“I don't know,” Kraglin said, looking at Peter, “maybe not this one.”

There was a second or two where all Kraglin could hear was the faint melody of Peter's music.

“What're you talking about?”

Kraglin looked at Drazkar. “I think this one's different. Why is it that this one still got a mom? Other ones we picked up, their family was dead. Not this one. This one was the one Ego kept goin' on about, remember?”

Some of the crew nodded, looking solemn. Kraglin lifted his scrawny shoulders and scratched his peach fuzz. “I just think this one's a little different. Might be useful. Small, skinny kid.”

“Just the kind of scrawny little fucker who could slip into places adults can't get,” a voice said. “Could make us a lot of units.”

The crew scrambled to make way as Yondu Udonta strode into the hall.

“Captain.” Kraglin saluted. “The kid's awake; so's the lady.”

Yondu nodded, then looked around at the shuffling crew. He stared at them all in turn, baring his disfigured teeth; the tension was palpable.
“Kraglin!”

Kraglin jumped. “A-aye, Captain?”

“You saw the way that skinny Terran kid ran. Slippery little fucker, huh?” Yondu crossed his arms.

Kraglin didn't dare disagree. “Aye, Captain. Couldn't catch him, no sir.”

“And scrawny.” Yondu nodded. “Yeah, real scrawny. Kind of scrawny that can fit places. Tight places. Get into places we can't, right?”

The crew nodded. The kid was a twig, they understood that.

“But how's that make units, cap'n?” Drazkar scratched his furry head.

“You idjit! You know how many people think they's gonna get robbed by a kid? None!” Yondu gestured violently. “This kid's a fuckin' goldmine! He's the most useful damn tool we ever picked up!”


Secret weapon! The crew guffawed with excitement, the prospect of Ego's units suddenly forgotten, overshadowed by the novelty of a Terran child spy. They could earn hundreds of units off him, and then toss him to Ego when they were bored.

“So, what'dya think, boys?” Yondu squared his shoulders and flashed a crooked grin. “Y'all think havin' a Terran secret weapon sound aight?”

The roar of approval was unanimous.

“Make that kid a Ravager!”

“Somebody get him a coat!”

“I got a patch with the flames on it, anybody got a jacket small enough?” Drazkar pulled the patch out of his pocket, waving it around.

“Wait!”

Everyone looked at Kraglin, who was looking at Yondu.

“What about the lady,” he asked.

The crew looked at Yondu.

“The lady wasn't part of the deal,” Yondu allowed, “but we ain't gonna get rid of her until we know she ain't worth anything to Ego. Might be worth a fat little bonus.”

“Well, er, Captain,” Kraglin stammered, “ain't she gonna need a doctor? I mean, we ain't got one, and...”

“Doctors are expensive!” Drazkar affirmed. “What if she costs more than she's worth?”

“We don't know nothin' about treatin' Terrans,” Kraglin shrugged.

Yondu nodded slowly, looking around at the crew.
“So,” Yondu said slowly, “if the boy earns enough units to pay for the doctor, then we keep them both.”

Peter stared through the bars with a pale face; Yondu turned and looked him in the eyes.

“If he don't,” Yondu said, “we kill her.”

While Kraglin and the crew worked themselves up into a gleeful frenzy, Yondu watched the boy. Big tears were streaming from his eyes.

“Alright kid, we made a decision.” Yondu grimaced. “You ain't much use to us as cargo.”

“Cargo? Why am I cargo?” Peter blinked.

“Food cargo,” Yondu said off-handedly.

Peter paled and opened his mouth to scream.

Yondu clamped his hand over Peter's mouth and snarled, “You scream and we'll be eatin' Terran sooner than you think!”

As Yondu pulled his hand away, Peter's voice warbled out, “I heard you all talking about me. Sort of.”

“These boys here, they want to eat you!” Yondu lied with ease. “I talked 'em out of it.”

Peter's expression of relief nearly made Yondu laugh. Instead, Yondu poked Peter hard in the chest.

“See kid, I saved your life.” Yondu locked eyes with Peter. “You're a Ravager now, you hear? You gotta live by the code. You live by the code, you'll be richer than you can even imagine.”

“But what's going to happen to me?” Peter's voice shook.

Yondu paused.

“Boy,” he said, “you're a Ravager now. We take care of our own.”

Peter followed Yondu to Meredith's cage. She was awake, and watching them warily. When she saw Peter, she squinted.

“Peter, are they letting us out?”

Peter shrugged. The cage door opened, and Yondu and most of the crew wedged themselves into the cage.

“S'gonna be tough, bein' the only lady on board.” Yondu crossed his arms.

“I've been thinking,” Meredith said, “and after I castrate the first few who try, I think the rest will get it through their thick heads to leave me alone.”

Yondu laughed; the rest of the crew shifted nervously.

“So, is this a group effort or an audience to watch me die,” Meredith asked.

Yondu reached into his jacket; the arrow glinted. Meredith took a deep breath.

“Turns out, you're expensive cargo, little missy,” Yondu said, “so your boy's gonna be pickin' up
your slack."

Meredith looked back and forth between them. “I don't understand.”

“Peter here's a secret weapon!” Kraglin grinned.

The crew roared with approval. Meredith looked at Peter in confusion; Peter shrugged, half-terrified, half-bewildered. Yondu tossed her a patch.

“Put this on the boy,” he growled, “or we shove you both out an airlock.”

Meredith closed her eyes briefly. Kraglin draped a small red jacket over Yondu's shoulder.

“Smallest we could find, Captain.” Kraglin beamed.

Yondu pulled the jacket over Peter, straightening it. Peter looked down; the jacket was still way too big. He looked up at Yondu.

“It'll shrink, right?” Peter asked hopefully.

Yondu smiled, showing his teeth, and pulled the collar down properly. Peter turned to his mother, who held the Ravager flame in her hand like it was a ticking bomb.

“Peter, you can't do this.” Tears streamed down her face. “I ain't worth breakin' the law for, Peter.”

Peter walked up and took her hands in his. “Mom, you're all I got now.”

Meredith nodded, her throat tight. She pinned the symbol to Peter's jacket with a sense of dread.

Peter turned to Yondu, who poked the Ravager flame and looked at Peter.

“You wear these flames, you're one of us,” Yondu said, “and we take care of our own. Don't we, boys?”

There was another gleeful roar. Peter looked around in shock, but he didn't run.

“Kraglin,” Yondu said, “you're in charge of showin' him the ropes. Watch the boy; he's slippery.”

“Peter,” Peter said.

Yondu and Kraglin looked at him.

“My name is Peter Quill,” Peter said, and for the first time, he felt a little brave.

“What kind of dumbass name is Peter Quill?” Drazkar snorted.

Peter looked down at his Walkman, then back at the huge fuzzy crewmember.

“There's another name I go by,” Peter said, walking up to Drazkar.

Drazkar laughed, “What's that, pipsqueak?”

Peter's leg moved so fast it was a blur; though he was small, he still kicked with enough power to send Drazkar flat on his rear. Peter bolted over Drazkar's chest and grabbed his long ears, pulling hard. Drazkar howled in anguish, and Meredith and the crew roared with laughter.

“Star-Lord,” Peter said, gritting his teeth.
“That's my baby!” Meredith’s eyes shone bright.

Yondu chuckled, shaking his head, “Star-Lord? Boy, you's Peter Quill, whether you like it or not.”

Kraglin pulled Peter off Drazkar. “And what do we call the lady?”

“Ms. Quill,” Meredith answered.

The crew blinked. They didn't refer to anyone as Ms., Mr., or anything like that. It was first-name last-name.

“Meredith Quill,” she sighed. The crew nodded; that was a name they could understand.

“Where next, Captain,” Kraglin asked.

“Warp to the Andromeda galaxy,” Yondu said, “and let's get the fuck out of this one.”

“Wait!” Peter kicked his legs. “We're leaving Earth?!”

Yondu turned his back on Peter. “There ain't nothin' left here for you, boy.”

Peter ran to the window anyway.

“Peter!” Meredith ran to the bars.

Peter didn’t stop until he was staring out the front of the cockpit. He stared out at the vast darkness, and at Earth, floating there like a blue marble on a sheet of diamond-speckled velvet.

“We already left,” he breathed.

“Don't worry, Pete.” Kraglin slapped Peter on the back. “We'll take care of ya if your mom kicks the bucket.”

Peter looked around at the mismatched faces and races of the Ravagers, then back at Kraglin.

“Have any of you ever raised a kid before,” asked Peter.

The crew looked around at each other, each shrugging or shaking their heads.

“Not technically, no.” Kraglin looked down.

Peter exclaimed, “Then how are you supposed to know how to take care of me?”

The crew shrugged and shuffled off. Peter looked at Kraglin, who smiled as winningly as he could; Peter grimaced.

“Alright, Peter, let's start with the basics.”

Space travel was not nearly as exciting as Peter thought it would be. It looked exciting for Yondu, who piloted the ship, but for a ship’s boy, it was extremely boring.

Peter looked at the controls. “Can I try?”

Yondu did a double-take. “Can you try? Boy, this ship is worth more units than you are diced and fried, you understand? And Terran goes high on the market when it's fried, don't it boys?”
There was a general murmer of assent; the crew didn't know what Yondu was talking about, but it was always best to agree with the captain. Peter paled and stared at his feet.

The Andromeda galaxy, however, was beautiful. Peter sat cross-legged out the window and stared at the stars and the planets. Yondu set the ship to remain at its coordinates and walked around, waiting for a call. He looked down at Peter.

"Whatchu starin' at, boy?"

"It's beautiful," Peter said.

Yondu stopped and looked out at the Andromeda galaxy as it glittered. How many years had it been since he'd noticed the beauty in anything besides women and wealth? He looked out at it and tried to remember how he'd felt the first time he'd seen it. He took a deep breath, and the corners of his mouth twitched up slightly.

Peter's face shone up at Yondu. “Can my mom come see?”

Yondu grimaced and didn't answer.

Kraglin steered Peter off the bridge, gripping his shoulder firmly.

“Peter, your mom's sick,” Kraglin said.

“I know that, stupid.” Peter glared. “She shouldn't be in that cell.”

“It just ain't safe for her out here, okay? Now come on.”

Kraglin led Peter down a hallway. A vent cover had been yanked off the wall; the duct gaped open. Kraglin kicked the vent cover to the side and knelt down, his hands on his knees.

“Yep, looks like an Orloni nest.” Kraglin stood back up. “Get in there and get it.”

“A what nest?”

“Orloni. Little jumpy rat things.” Kraglin handed Peter a bag. “Go get the nest and put it in this bag.”

Peter took the bag. “What if they bite me?”

“Punch 'em.”

Peter looked down the vent; he could barely see the end of the duct. Kraglin was right; there was a small nest of plastic strips and cloth at the very end of it. Peter crawled into the duct, his fist curled around the rough fabric of the bag. He made it to the nest and looked at it.

“Just grab it and shove it in,” Kraglin reminded.

Peter grabbed the nest with his right hand and heard a series of tiny squeaks. Craning his neck, he could see eight tiny, squealing Orloni.

Peter looked back down the vent. “Kraglin?”

Kraglin's face appeared. “What?”

“It's got babies in here.”
“So?”

“I can't hurt babies.” Peter started to back out of the vent.

“If you let those things live, they'll be chewin' through cables and strandin' us out past the edge of the damn galaxy. Put 'em in the bag and be done with it.”

“I can't hurt babies!”

“It ain't hurtin' em, it's...relocatin'.”

Peter stopped. “Relocating them where?”

“A tropical paradise,” Kraglin said sarcastically.

It was better than someone blasting them, Peter decided. Gently, he slid the Orloni nest into the bag and gingerly slid it down the duct. Crawling was difficult while supporting the nest, so Peter moved slow.

“T ook you long enough,” Kraglin said when Peter finally crawled out of the vent.

“I saved the babies.” Peter lifted the hood of the bag. “Look.”

Kraglin made a face. “Disgustin'. Throw those things out an airlock.”

“No!” Peter stood, hugging the nest as gently as he could.

“Give me the bag, Peter.”

“No! No no no!”

“Peter!”

Kraglin tried using his future-first-mate voice, but he miscalculated. Instead of listening, Peter just ran.

“Peter, dammit!” Kraglin sped after the boy.

“You can't hurt the babies!” Peter scrambled around a corner, heading for his mother's cell.

“Moooooom! Moooooooom! Kraglin's trying to kill babies!”

Meredith looked up at the sound of her son yelling. She went to the bars and wrapped her hands around them, leaning on them for support. That morning, she'd woken up feeling worse than she had in a long time. Her pain medication from yesterday was completely out of her system, and the soreness alone was fierce.

“Mom!” Peter ran in carrying what looked to be a pile of garbage in a bag. “Mom, Kraglin's trying to kill babies!”

“Kill babies?” Meredith blinked. “What?”

Kraglin slid into the room, panting. “I ain't tryin' to kill babies, he's lyin'!”

“I am not,” Peter yelled, “you said you'd push them out an airlock!”

“They're not babies, they're rats!”
“You're a rat!”

Kraglin swatted Peter upside the head; Peter kicked Kraglin in the shin. Meredith bristled.

“Young man, you stop that this instant!”

Kraglin and Peter both froze.

Meredith crossed her arms. “Now, one at a time. Peter, tell me what happened.”

“I was in a vent trying to get rid of this nest!” Peter thrust it towards his mother, who cringed; there were a few mewling, hairless mites in it. “But it's got babies in it, momma. I can't hurt no babies.”

“Okay, honey.” Meredith stroked his hair. “God, if you ain't the sweetest little thing.”

“They ain't babies,” Kraglin muttered, “they're rats.”

“Kraglin, why don't you tell me what's goin' on?” Meredith sat on the ground by the bars.

“Cap'n's orders was to get rid of that Orloni nest 'afore they start chewin' on cables and strandin' us out in the void or sommat.” Kraglin crossed his arms. “And Peter wants to keep 'em.”

“Can't we drop them off somewhere,” Meredith said.

“Make port just to drop off an Orloni nest? No way. Cap'n would never agree to it.”

Meredith sighed. “We can't just kill 'em.”

“Why not? They're pests,” Kraglin explained, “they ain't worth nothin’.”

“They're babies,” Peter said.

“He's got you there.” Meredith chuckled. “Babies are precious little miracles.”

Kraglin looked down at the pile of squeaking, hairless Orloni; their wrinkled skin and long teeth were pale and practically translucent, and they twitched. Kraglin thought he'd never seen anything look less like a miracle in his entire life.

“You sure we can't just airlock 'em,” he begged.

“How about this.” Meredith stood. “Peter, you're in charge of makin' sure these little things don't die. But, if they chew on a single cable, they gotta go, baby.”

Peter squeezed the nest slightly; the Orloni squealed. “I promise.”

Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz. “Cap'n's not gonna like this.”

“Dear Lord above, save us from all the things your captain doesn't like,” Meredith huffed.

Kraglin grinned. “You'll like him once you get t'know him.”

“Fat chance, honey, but thank you for the positive outlook,” said Meredith.

“Kraglin!” Yondu's voice boomed through the comms.

“Speak of the blue devil,” Meredith muttered.
“On the bridge, now.” Yondu's voice echoed through the halls. “We're headin' out.”

“Gotta go. Have a good day, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin hoisted his pants up and ran out. His long legs were thrown about him while he ran; he cut an ungainly figure. Meredith chuckled; of all the Ravagers, she thought Kraglin was the only one worth a damn.

“I saved the babies, mama.” Peter beamed at her like a cherub.

“Course you did, baby.” Meredith ruffled his hair. “A regular space angel, just like your daddy.”

Peter looked down at the nest. “I'm gonna put 'em in a box.”

“A box?”

“So they won't chew on no cables,” Peter explained.

“Make sure there's holes in the box so they get air.” Meredith chuckled. “If we wanted 'em suffocated, we'd have put 'em in the airlock.”

“Nobody's airlockin' any babies,” Peter said firmly, “specially not these ones.”

Meredith chuckled as Peter scampered off. As soon as he left, she gritted her teeth and closed her eyes. The pain was back. It abated a little when she was distracted, but when she was alone it swelled up in her like a geyser. She needed something to distract herself. Anything.

“I can't stop this feelin', deep inside of me,” she sang weakly, “girl, you just don't realize what you do to me.”

The pain lessened slightly. Meredith kept singing under her breath; it did double-duty of both controlling her breathing and keeping her entertained. Meredith loved to sing; she knew the words to every song on the radio. Back then, she remembered, her voice had been strong and clear. Now she barely had enough breath support to fill the room. As long as the singing was taking the pain away, Meredith didn't care. She didn't know how long she'd be able to live like this. If she didn't need a coroner first, she was going to need a doctor, and unfortunately the man to ask about getting medical services was probably the big blue asshole himself.

Meredith felt the ship jolt slightly and winced as a bolt of pain shot up her neck.

“Gentle on the controls, please,” she said aloud, “we got an invalid in the cells.”

No one answered her, just as she expected. She leaned her head against the bars; the cold metal pressed against the soft skin of her forehead, and she sighed.

“Oh, the good love when we're all alone...”
Chapter Summary

Peter and Kraglin have convinced Yondu to let Meredith have a proper room. Trying to handle the Ravagers' fast-paced life is hard enough for Meredith, but knowing her baby is having to break the law to keep her alive hurts so much more.

Yondu was munching his way through a cooked laukha when he noticed Peter not eating. It'd been a week since they picked the boy up; he still wasn't used to the food. Yondu didn't care; wasting food was wasting units.

“Eat, boy,” he said through a mouthful of bird meat.

Peter looked at the meat and shook his head.

“Eat,” Yondu growled, “or we eat you.”

Peter picked up his fork, his hand trembling. Yondu watched him put a forkful of meat into his mouth and chew.

“Now swallow,” Yondu said.

Peter did. One of the other crewmembers scowled.

“Jus' pop open his jaw and shove it in,” he said.

Yondu silenced him with a look, then looked back at Peter.

“Keep eatin’,” he said.

Peter did. At one moment, he encountered a piece of slimy gristle and nearly gagged, but Yondu leaned in close and growled,

“You throw that up, I make you eat it back down.”

Peter was so scared that he swallowed instinctively; the food went down and stayed down. Yondu nodded; slight approval, but approval nonetheless. After dinner, Peter took his mother her meal.

“It tastes like chicken,” Peter said.

Meredith laughed as she took the food. “Oh good, space chicken! My favorite!”

Peter sat next to the bars and talked while his mother ate. He told her all about the week; he'd been feeding his Orloni. Once he figured out if they were boys or girls, he could give them names. Yondu had tried to put them out an airlock, but Peter cried until Yondu let him keep them. Yondu, Peter decided, was okay if you just annoyed him enough.

“And so I'm trying to talk Yondu into letting you out,” Peter explained, “for health.”
“Peter, baby, that's so kind.” Meredith smiled, but shook her head. “But I can't go out there. My immune system is shot. Out there ain't sterile, baby.”

“Then I'll clean it,” Peter said firmly.

Meredith laughed. “To think I used to have to hound you to clean your room, and now you wanna go clean the whole ship. You're so good, Peter.”

Peter stood and took his mother's dishes. “I'll get Kraglin to help.”

“I'm sure he'll be happy to,” Meredith lied.

Much to Meredith's surprise, Kraglin was willing to help; or at least, willing to provide alternate solutions.

“Yeah, about that sterile environment thing,” Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz, “I don't think anybody on this ship is much of a cleaner.”

“No wonder you've never had a doctor aboard; who could operate in this kind of environment?” Meredith made a face. “It's uninhabitable.”

“You could try the lower parts of the ship,” Kraglin reasoned, “nobody goes down there much.”

“I have to get out of this cage first.”

Kraglin blinked. “You could just... open it. It ain't locked anymore.”

“Not locked?” Meredith pushed on the door; it creaked open easily. “Then why have I been in here the whole time?”

“Cap'n kinda thought you wanted to stay in there, on account of how dirty we are. We kind of thought of it as the ladies' room.” Kraglin shrugged. “Usually we sleep wherever we fall down. You probably want to check the lower cargo area for an empty room.”

Meredith nodded, then looked around. “Which way is that?”

“Er, you don't wanna get lost.” Kraglin pulled out a piece of paper and started scrawling a diagram on it with a pen. “Here, I'll make you a map of the ship.”

“Thank you, that's very kind.”

Kraglin looked up seriously. “Never say that.”

“What? Why?”

“Kindness is soft. So is gratitude. Ravagers aren't supposed to be soft.”

“So you're all cruel and selfish?”

“Not all the time, but... Ravagers are supposed to be independent, tough, and rich.”

“Ravagers are space pirates, then.”

“Yep,” Kraglin said, drawing in the berths and hallways, “pretty much.”

Meredith sighed. Kraglin finished his map and handed it to her. Meredith looked down; the
handwriting was scratchy, but still legible.

“You wrote it in English,” she noticed.

“Universal Common,” he corrected.

“Oh. Thank you,” Meredith said.

“Don't say that.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Don't say that either,” Kraglin warned, then walked away.

Meredith looked back at the map and started walking. Her footsteps echoed down the metal halls, and her lone shadow shifted as she passed each ceiling light. She came to a set of stairs and passed down them until she came to a sliding door. Above it, in glowing scarlet, read 'CARGO'. She looked at the side panel. It was awash with buttons. Meredith pressed the biggest one; the door opened.

“Huh,” she said, and walked through.

The cargo area was slightly cleaner than the rest of the ship in that it had no signs of habitation, but it was still far from medically sterile. At the end of the hallway there was another sliding door; Meredith opened it. This room was practically empty except for an old metal desk and a thick layer of dust. Coughing, Meredith hit a switch on the side of the wall; the lone white light flickered to life. Meredith walked in the middle of the room, leaving dusty footprints in her wake.

“I guess this is it,” she said, looking around.

“This is what?”

Meredith screamed. Peter had appeared behind her.

“Oh my God, Peter, don't do that!” She clutched her heart. “You scared me half to death!”

“I'm sorry,” Peter said, walking into the room.

Meredith pulled out the desk chair, cutting lines through the dust as she did so.

“Would you believe this is the cleanest place I've found on the ship?” Meredith grimaced.

Peter sat in the desk chair. “Do you want to go back to Earth, Mom?”

Meredith paused. “Baby?”

“Because I do,” Peter said.

“Me too, baby, but we've got to see your father first.”

“Why?”

“Because it's about damn time he showed up.”

The words were out before Meredith could stop herself. Meredith and Peter looked at one another. The ship's exhaust breathed through the pipes around them, and the whole ship churned with mechanical sound.
Meredith sighed. “I'm sorry baby, that wasn't right. I'm just frustrated that no one's here to stick up for us but us. We're gonna have to look out for each other.”

“I won't let you get hurt, Mom,” Peter said.

“I won't let you get hurt either, Peter,” Meredith replied.

She hugged her son as tightly as she could. Being alive and always a breath away from death was constant pain, but knowing she could still hold Peter in her arms meant the world to Meredith Quill. She buried her face in his shoulder, blinking back tears. Her baby was too young to be worrying about protecting her. He shouldn't have to be breaking the law to pay for her medical bills. He shouldn't have to be dealing with that big blue asshole. But maybe Peter was more of a Ravager than she thought; he'd do anything to take care of his own.

True to his word, Peter helped Meredith clean the storage room. He came in at odd hours; Yondu kept calling him off the ship for some reason. Some of the crew members had protested about a piece of cargo getting her own room, but Meredith pointed it out that the cells were always available if they felt like they needed some personal space. Kraglin had given it his best shot to convince them that it was smart to keep the sick cargo away from the healthy Ravagers, and shockingly enough, they'd listened.

Unfortunately, such luxury came at a price. Now that she was living in a regular part of the ship, she had a difficult time keeping curious Ravagers out of her things. Yesterday it was Drazkar asking for bobby pins; today it was an unannounced visit from Yondu.

“Put this on.” Yondu threw a pair of red leather pants and a dusty gray shirt at Meredith.

She caught them. “What?”

“I said put that on, dammit. Can't have you running around with nothin' on but that.” Yondu gestured to the hospital gown and jacket.

Looking down, Meredith decided not to argue. She put the clothes in the drawer of a filing cabinet. She'd been able to scrounge up some furniture, but it wasn't much; one filing cabinet, the rusty metal desk, a backless chair, and a bunk none of the Ravagers would use since someone had died in it. Meredith didn't care; the odds were high that she'd die in it, too. She'd tried to convince Yondu to let Peter sleep in the storage room with her, but he was firm that Peter live like a proper Ravager. That didn't set well with Meredith, but she wasn't in a position to argue; if she ticked the captain off, she could find herself floating through the void of space. She'd done her best to avoid him, but now he was standing in her storage room with his teeth bared and glaring at everything.

“What the fuck is it so clean?” Yondu spread his arms wide.

“Sick people need clean spaces,” she said.

Yondu grimaced. “You still sick?”

“I've been sick for months.” Meredith closed the drawer of the filing cabinet. “It's not going to just go away. I'm lucky to still be alive.”

“How much you need a doctor,” Yondu asked, his hands on his hips.

Meredith looked at him. “Have you ever given birth?”
“What?” Yondu's eyes boggled.

“Because the amount of pain I'm feeling is kind of like that, only through my spine and neck.” Meredith crossed over to the bed and fluffed the pillow. “Combined with the worst hangover you've ever had, and also someone is scraping the inside of my skull with a metal spoon.”

Yondu frowned. “Sounds deleterus.”

Meredith blinked. “Deleterious? I mean... that's not how that word works.”

“You said that meant bad.”

“Yes, but bad in a not-very-beneficial, not-worth-much way, not in a this-is-agony, if-it-weren't-for-Peter-I'd-jump-out-an-airlock way.”

“That bad?”

“That bad.” Meredith sunk onto the bunk. “What kind of doctor do you think I'll get?”

Yondu rubbed his chin. “I'm thinkin' you wouldn't survive no procedure to get that out of you.”

“The tumor? No use. Comes back so fast you'd think it had a life of its own,” she said.

“So I'm thinkin' we deal with the symptoms.” Yondu squinted. “Damaged cargo ain't gonna be much worth when we make it to the final destination.”

“Which is?”

“None of your goddamn business,” Yondu said, “so don't ask. Kraglin's got a plan. Talk to him.”

With that, Yondu left. Meredith closed the door and engaged the lock, then pulled on the leather pants and gray shirt. The pants were designed to be tight, but Meredith's emanciated body barely filled them out. The shirt hung off of her like a tent. She sighed; she wasn't sure she'd ever see her body the way she remembered it, or feel a moment without some kind of pain.

There was a knock on the door.

“Ms. Quill?”

Meredith opened the door. “Hey, Kraglin honey.”

“Did the uh, did the cap'n tell you about the plan?” Kraglin stepped into the room.

Meredith shook her head. “He said I was damaged cargo and told me to ask you.”

“Alright, well...listen,” Kraglin said, “do you know anythin' about cybernetics?”

“No, I don't think so.”

“Body modifications, machinery and the like. Fixes a whole bunch of problems.”

“You're gonna put metal in me?”

“Just to fix what we can,” Kraglin explained, “until you're tough enough to get a cerebral core.”

“What's that?”
“Robot brain.”

“Oh no.” Meredith held up her hands as if to physically stop the idea. “I'm not becoming a robot.”

“You'd still be you,” Kraglin said, “I promise. The cerebral core will go in your head, fight the tumor 24/7, keep your brain alive.”

“Has anyone ever done that before?”

“Yes.” Kraglin leaned against the wall. “I happen to know six or seven fellas with a cerebral core. Expensive as hell, but they work.”

“Guaranteed?”

“Guaranteed,” said Kraglin.

Meredith sighed. “Yondu's going to make Peter pay for it, isn't he.”

Kraglin shrugged. “That's how the deal goes.”

“It's not fair.” Meredith crossed her arms. “He's just a baby.”

“He earned eight hundred units in the last week.”

Meredith's eyes widened. “What?”

“Pickpocketing,” Kraglin explained, “kid's a natural. Skinny little fingers. Good at pickin' cards, wallets, purses.”

Meredith put her face in her hands. Her son, the petty thief. If the cancer didn't kill Meredith first, Meredith was going to kill Yondu.

“It ain't that bad.” Kraglin awkwardly patted Meredith's shoulder. “He only goes after mean folk. Drives Yondu crazy, but kid's got an eye for rich, asshole marks who got their units in rotten ways anyway.”

Meredith looked up. “Like Robin Hood?”

“Yeah, he's robbed a few 'hoods.”

“No, Robin Hood.” Meredith sighed. “He's a fictional myth, a kind of tall-tale in Terran folklore. He stole from the rich who exploited the poor, and he used all the money he stole to help the poor.”

“He gave it all away?” Kraglin blinked. “Idjit.”

Meredith laughed. “Maybe by your standards, but people love the story. He stands for doing the right thing, even if it's illegal. He's compassionate and skilled and admirable.”

“Sounds like you got a crush.”

“Robin Hood was my favorite cartoon growing up,” Meredith admitted, “although I don't think I'd ever shack up with a law-breaking fox.”

Kraglin laughed. Meredith rubbed her arms, then pulled on her leather jacket.

“That's a nice jacket, Ms. Quill.”
“Thank you, Kraglin. Keeps me warm, on account of I don't got enough body fat to do it.” Meredith sighed.

“You want lunch?”

“Sounds great.”

In the mess hall, Meredith questioned Kraglin more about the cybernetics idea.

“So what exactly would be going in me?”

“Well,” Kraglin said, “I think the first thing would be a spinal pain inhibitor.”

“A pain inhibitor? Wouldn't that be dangerous? I mean, pain is natural.”

“Yeah, but uh, not the way you do it.” Kraglin spoke through a mouth of half-chewed greens. “It ain't gonna hurt nothin'; that's kinda the point. After that, probably limb actuators.”

“Limb... what?”

Kraglin pointed at her with a fork. “You know, somethin' to help you get your strength back. Pull your own weight around here.”

“Good thing I don't weigh much,” said Meredith.

Kraglin dumped some greens onto Meredith's plate. “Eat up.”

Meredith laughed, but obediently ate. Kraglin looked around; other members of the crew were giving her sideways looks. She was still a relatively unknown quality, and furthermore, a woman. She didn't look much like one, but it was the first woman that many of them had interacted with for than one night or a couple drinks at a bar. They didn't have sisters; their mothers were long-forgotten tragedies. Yondu had never had female Ravagers on the ship; bad for morale, he always said. Women were persnickety. But now, he didn't have much of a choice; Meredith was free cargo and therefore free units. The crew was going to have to live with that, and her, whether they liked it or not. It suited Kraglin fine. He'd grown up having a sister; Meredith was no different, except that she was a little older and balder and sicker.

“You got a family back on Terra?” Kraglin looked at Meredith, watching her eat.

She nodded, then swallowed. “A father and an aunt.”

“No brothers or sisters?”

“My mama died bringin' one into the world. Papa and I were heartbroken.”

Kraglin frowned. “What happened?”

“Somethin' about her blood,” Meredith said, “freak accident, more like. Neither her nor the baby survived.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I thought Ravagers weren't supposed to say that.”

Kraglin shifted. “I ain't very good at followin' that rule.”
“Good.” Meredith smiled. “You've been very kind to Peter and I, and I appreciate it.”

The crew was glaring holes into Kraglin's back. He shifted uncomfortably and cleared his throat. Nearly inaudibly, he muttered, “You’re welcome.”

Meredith smiled and kept eating. Drazkar and Gef had done the cooking today; if you ignored the bits of Drazkar's fur, it wasn't half bad. After she finished, she washed her own dish. Gef stared at her.

“What?” She rinsed off the plate.

Gef squinted at the ragged, heavily-marked piece of paper over the sink. Meredith looked more closely at it. It was a schedule of duties dedicated to washing kitchen equipment. Many names had been crossed out and crammed into corners as Ravagers swapped timetables.

“Is you on here?” Gef ran his finger along the column.

“No, I just...” Meredith handed him the bowl. “I mean, do you want to clean it?”

“No.” Gef wiped it on a dry rag. “Just confused is all.”

“Where I come from, everybody washes their own plates and works together on the pots and pans,” Meredith explained, “and it goes a lot faster.”

“Too many of us for that,” Gef answered, “with not a big enough sink.”

Meredith grinned. She looked at the piles of food-encrusted dishes and the smile slid off her face.

“You have to wash all this by yourself?”

“Duties are duties,” Gef said.

“Do you want some help?”

Gef stared at her. “For... for free?”

Meredith crossed her arms. “How about two units per dish.”

“Done.” Gef tossed her a rag, and they began working.

Trying to clean the pots was like chipping at concrete, but Meredith persisted. Gef took a metal chisel and hacked at the bottom of a sauce pan. They worked for an hour and a half, until both their hands were pruny and Meredith was exhausted. Wincing, she sank onto a mess hall bench.

“I'm sorry, Gef, I just can't wash another thing.”

“Good.” Gef tossed down a rag. “I owe you nearly two hundred units. Damn, woman, you wash fast.”

Meredith looked at the pile of clean dishes. “I washed a hundred dishes?”

“If you count each piece o' silverware as its own dish, then yep.” Gef carried the clean silverware to a drawer and dumped it in. “And I don't aim to cheat you.”

“Kraglin tells me that all Ravagers cheat. That you're never kind or grateful for anything.”
“Cheat the world, cheat death, maybe,” Gef said, “but we don’t cheat each other. We've got a code. Us against the world, and you're part o' us now.”

“I'm not a Ravager.”

“We'll see how long that lasts, lil' missy,” Gef said.

Meredith sighed. The strength of the morning had left her; the jolts of pain in her spine were back, and her vision was starting to get blurry.

“I need to get back to my room,” she said.

Gef hoisted her up by her arms. “Then get. Don't need you here, shoo.”

Meredith leaned a hand on the wall and used it to support her as she ambled back to her room. A few Ravagers watched her struggle, but did nothing. Meredith didn't care; partially because she was determined to be independent, and partially because her vision was too blurry to see them. She opened the door to her room, took a few brave steps forwards, and then curled up on her bed. The pain was shooting up and down her spine, and her vision was one great blur. Patterns danced in front of her eyelids. Her heartbeat was pounding against the inside of her skull. Desperately, she prayed for sleep. Death wasn't an option while Peter was still around, but sleep... how much she wanted the blissful void of sleep.

“Mom?”

Meredith opened her eyes. Peter was staring down at her, his face pale. He had his Ravager jacket on; Yondu stood behind him, leaning in the doorway.

Meredith tried to smile. “Hey baby.”

“It hurts, doesn't it Mom?” Peter swallowed.

“Just a little, baby.”

“You're crying.”

Meredith blinked. The pain had brought tears to her eyes and down her face, but she hadn't even noticed.

“Guess I'm missin' home. Don't worry about me, baby, you just stay safe.” Meredith reached out an emaciated hand and stroked Peter's hair. “How's your day, Peter?”

“Good,” he said, “I made three hundred units.”

Meredith chuckled, but blinked tears from her eyes. “You're not old enough to be takin' care of your momma's medical bills.”

“I don't mind. I want you around.” Peter took her hand. “You gotta pull through. You just have to.”

“I will,” Meredith promised, “I'm sure. They're talkin' about puttin' some kind of machine in me to fix me up.”

“Is it safe?”

“Kraglin says so.”
Peter made an expression that told Meredith very clearly what Peter thought of Kraglin.

“Don't be that way, Peter.” Meredith squeezed his hand. “He's tryin' to help.”

From the doorway, Yondu cleared his throat. Peter looked over his shoulder, then back at his mom.

“I gotta go.”

Meredith frowned. “Where you goin’, baby?”

“I only made three hundred units. Yondu says a visit to the doctor's gonna cost five hundred.”

Meredith's chest jolted as she laughed. “You go find that nice man who's doin' the dishes. Gef, I think he's called. Tell him your momma sent you for the two hundred units he owes me.”

Peter's eyes widened. “How'd you make money?”

Yondu frowned and entered the room. “What's all this?”

“Gef paid me two units per dish,” Meredith explained, “and I must've washed near a hundred dishes, countin' silverware. That's what laid me out like this. I'm exhausted.”

“We made the five hundred,” Peter breathed.

“So now you don't have to go nowhere, do you?” Meredith smiled and squeezed Peter's hand. “Baby, could you bring me a glass of water?”

Peter dashed out the door, headed for the kitchen. Yondu looked down at the bald Terran and frowned. Her labored breathing was the only sound in the room.

“You brought him here because he said no, didn't you.” Meredith's eyes darted up at Yondu. “He said no, and you brought him here to remind him what happens if he says no.”

Well fuck. Terrans weren't as stupid as Yondu thought they were. He crossed his arms and didn't answer, but Meredith seemed to take his silence for affirmation.

“You keep up like this,” Yondu said, “and there ain't gonna be no reason to make money for you. You'll be dead.”

“Death is cheap,” Meredith breathed, “and if it was the best thing for Peter, I'd jump out an airlock in a heartbeat.”

Yondu frowned. “Why ain't you done it yet?”

“And leave Peter in the hands of space pirates who can't clean a dish to save their life?” Meredith's chest jolted as she laughed. “Like hell.”

Peter came back into the room with a glass of water. He carried it as carefully as he could; it was filled to the brim.

“Gef said it was the cleanest glass they had,” Peter said, “and that he'll get the units to Yondu before dinner.”

“I'll have to thank him later.” With effort, Meredith propped herself up on her elbow.

“I said 'Thank you from my mom'.” Peter handed his mother the glass.
Meredith took a sip from the water and lowered it to safe levels. “Thank you, baby.”

Yondu looked from one Terran to the other. Terrans were a weak species, but resilient. Yondu had to admit, he was slightly impressed by how long they'd both lasted and how quickly they'd adapted. Maybe that was the reason Terrans kept going; they were really good at not dying.

“Cap'n?” Kraglin's voice buzzed over Yondu's comm unit. “Got a call from uh... from you-know-who.”

Yondu left the room so fast that the tails of his coat fluttered behind him. While Peter attended his mother, Yondu went to the bridge. Waiting for him was a call from one of his least favorite people.

“Ego,” Yondu said through gritted, gnarled teeth.

“Ah, Captain Udonta.”

The worst thing about Ego was his voice; smooth like oil and sweet enough to rot your gut. Yondu didn't trust him any more than he could throw him, and Ego was a goddamn planet.

“How's the boy?” Ego's holographic image crossed its arms.

“Alive; that's all you need to know.” Yondu scowled.

“Keep him that way. He's just lost his mother, so be gentle. I await your ship in three weeks.”

“It's gonna take longer than that,” Yondu said.

Ego frowned. “Four weeks?”

“Four months,” Yondu said, “at the least.”

“Four months?” Ego shook his head. “No. Not acceptable.”

“Not acceptable?” Yondu bared his teeth. “Fine. We'll throw him out the airlock and you can come pick him up yourself.”

Ego's expression soured. “Fine. Four months.”

“We'll see you then.” Yondu ended the call.

Kraglin looked at the captain. Yondu's expression was twisted, but his eyes were focused, sharp, and shrewd.

“What're you thinkin', cap'n?”

“How the hell did he know the woman was dyin',” Yondu muttered, “and why don't he know she ain't dead?”

A long pause answered his statement. The other Ravagers exchanged looks.

“Somethin' ain't right here,” Yondu said, echoing their thoughts.

“What do we do, cap'n?”

“Keep the lady alive,” he said, “and the boy. When we make it to Ego, be ready for anything.”

“You think he'll attack, captain?” Drazkar scratched his furry head.
Yondu shook his head, then left the bridge. The Ravagers looked to Kraglin; he was the only one who could consistently predict what Yondu would do.

“Somethin’ ain't right,” Kraglin echoed, “but all we can do is wait and see what it is.”

The Ravagers went back to their duties. Wait-and-see was an order they could follow.

Kraglin walked off the bridge and went looking for Peter; since they'd come back from breaking into that jewelry store, he'd been rather quiet. Yondu had told him to kill the guard dog; Peter had staunchly refused. Instead, he'd ran for it; the dog had chased Peter, allowing Yondu and Kraglin to crack the safe. Peter'd done what they brought him there to do; eliminate the dog. Just... not in the way they'd expected.

Kraglin went to Meredith's room and knocked on the door. “Ms. Quill?”

Peter opened the door with a sour expression. “Mom's not feeling well. Go away.”

“I know that, idjit.” Kraglin scowled. “I'm here to, you know, see if she needs anything.”

“Yeah.” Peter closed the door in Kraglin's face. “She needs quiet.”

Outraged, Kraglin slammed his fist on the door. “Lemme in you little brat!”

“Make me!” Peter's voice on the other side of the door was shrill.

“When I get hold of you, you're gonna wish you'd never been born!”

“Mom, Kraglin's bein' mean to me!”

“He shut the door in my face!”

“Both of you, stop.” Inside the room, Meredith's head was pounding. “Please.”

Peter opened the door. Both boys stood staring at the floor, heads hanging in shame.

“Sorry, mom.”

“Sorry, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith smiled. “It's okay. Kraglin, honey, I'm glad you're here. Could you do me a little favor?”

“Sure, Ms. Quill.”

“Could you go get me a strong, sweet drink?” Meredith closed her eyes. “Or medicine, or anything. I can't sleep with the pain.”

“Got just the thing,” said Kraglin.

Peter watched the Xandarian leave, then shut the door.

“He's weird,” Peter muttered.

“Peter.” Meredith frowned. “I'd still be in that cage if not for him. You be nice to Kraglin; he's tryin' to help.”
Peter stared at his shoes.

“Peter.”

“I'm supposed to help,” Peter muttered, “not him. I'm your son.”

“Aww, honey,” Meredith reached out and stroked his hair. “Peter, baby, you're so young. When you get bigger I know you'll take care of your own family. You'll be a big, strong man like your father, and the whole galaxy will know your name.”

Peter swelled with pride. “Really?”

Meredith smiled. “Promise.”

Within minutes, Kraglin returned with a short, fat glass. Some purple liquid sloshed around in it, which Meredith regarded with apprehension.

“What is that?”

“Harberry juice.” Kraglin handed it to her. “Knocks you out cold.”

“What do you use it for?”

“Surgeries, usually,” Kraglin said, “but we use it for pranks.”

Meredith grimaced. She didn't want to know what kind of pranks utilized a surgical-strength anesthesia. She sniffed it.

“It's safe,” Kraglin said, “I promise.”

“It just seems like some kind of date-rape drug,” Meredith admitted, “and I'm not sayin' you're trying to drug me, but on a ship where you and Peter are the only ones you can trust…”

“I'll guard your door,” Kraglin said, “same as the cell. But you don't gotta worry, you know. Ravagers... we don't do, y'know... that.”

“Really?”

“It's against the code,” Kraglin said.

“Really.” Meredith nodded. “Not a bad code after all.”

“What're you talking about, mom?” Peter sat on her bed. “What's against the code?”

“You'll learn when you're older,” Meredith promised.

Peter made a face. “Darn.”

The purple liquid swirled around as Meredith lifted the cup. She took a deep breath, then downed the juice. The sour liquid bit into her tongue and throat; it tasted like a mixture between citron and an unripe blackberry. Meredith made a face.

“Bitter, ain't it?” Kraglin took the empty cup.

“Sour, more like.” Meredith smacked her lips. “I ain't gonna like having that aftertaste in my mouth.”

“By the time you wake up, it'll be gone.” Kraglin rubbed the inside of the cup with his shirt, then
placed it on the floor under her bunk. “I gave you enough to lay you out for a good eight hours.”

“Good.” Meredith's head began to buzz. “Hey...how long does it take to...”

“Kick in?”

“Yeah, how long does that take?” Meredith looked at him, then collapsed onto the bed, her eyes shut and breathing heavy.

Kraglin let out a low whistle. “Damn, that didn't take long.”

Peter poked his mom. “Mom?”

“She's asleep, Pete.” Kraglin pulled up the desk chair and sat facing the door. “We're in charge of guardin' her.”

“I'm in charge of guarding her.” Peter's hands curled into fists. “You're not her son.”

“Ain't about that,” Kraglin said, “s'about keepin' people safe.”

“Why do you care?”

“I had a sister.” Kraglin stared at the door. “And if it were my sister layin' out, sick and tired and all sorts of dyin', I'd want people to take good damn care of her.”

Peter looked at the empty glass. He picked it up and set it on the desk. Meredith was sleeping soundly; Peter couldn't remember the last time that'd happened. He sat on the desk, swinging his legs.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

“Don't mention it, Pete.” Kraglin's eyes darted over to the Terran. “Say kid, how's your Orloni doin'?”

“I fed 'em kitchen scraps yesterday.” Peter kept swinging his legs. “On account of how they were tryin' to eat each other.”

Kraglin laughed. “Dumb animals.”

“You think they'll eat each other?”

“If they get too hungry, yeah.” Kraglin shrugged. “Keep 'em fed, I guess.”

“Okay.” Peter hopped off the desk and sat on the floor next to Kraglin. “Did you ever have a pet?”

“My mama had a dog,” Kraglin said, “that was twice as big as you. Her name was Krixie.”

“Was she nice?”

“She was a junkyard mutt,” Kraglin said, “and sweet as sugar.”

“I wish I had a dog,” Peter said.

“Me too, kid,” Kraglin sighed, “but the cap'n is allergic.”

“Yondu's allergic to dogs?”
“Why the hell do you think we brought you along to deal with the one today? I ain't fast enough to deal with no dog, and Yondu'd start sneezin' so loud it'd bring the whole goddamn Nova Corps in.” Kraglin chuckled. “No, the cap'n don't want no dogs around. He ain't much of a cat person either.”

“I got scratched by a cat once.” Peter rolled up the sleeve of his jacket and showed Kraglin the thin white scar. “See?”

“That ain't nothin,” Kraglin snorted, “I got a scar on my back as long as your arm.”

“Do not!”

“Do too.”

“Prove it.” Peter squinted.

Kraglin slid his jacket to the floor and rolled up his t-shirt. True enough, on his back there was a long pink scar that rippled from his right shoulder to the small of his back.

“Wow.” Peter's eyes widened. “Can I poke it?”

Kraglin snorted. “Couldn't feel it if you did.”

Peter poked the pink skin; it was smooth and poreless. “What happened?”

“Thruster misfire on an A8 shuttle,” Kraglin explained, “while I was workin' on repairin' the stabilizers.”

“Why were you working on fixing that?”

“I was a wrench jockey on Yazkin-8, before home got blown up.” Kraglin rolled his shirt back down. “Lucky Yondu showed up or I'd be corpse-meat.”

“Yondu saved you?”

“Sure did.” Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz. “Well, I kinda saved him.”

Peter sat next to Kraglin. “Tell me the story.”

“When the Kree attacked the Nova Corps, they went after the little outposts first. Yazkin-8 was an agricultural outpost. We made food,” he explained, “for more important folks. My parents and my sister, they worked in town. I was always out fixin' farm machinery. I was out in the field when the Kree dropped a bomb on my hometown.”

Peter hugged his knees. “The whole thing?”

“Yeah.” Kraglin looked at his shoes. “The whole thing.”

“What did you do?”

“Thought I could fix up a shuttle, maybe throw some guns on it, take out as many Kree as I could before they got me.” Kraglin blinked back tears. “Didn't much care if I lived or died. Then, outta the sky, comes this Ravager craft. Crashes right on the other side of the field. Nearly shot the cap'n, thinkin' he was a Kree. 'Course, once I figured out he was there to kill 'em, I was right happy to help.”

“Yondu kills Kree?”
“The bad ones, yeah. Whenever he finds 'em,” Kraglin said, “those slavers get killed. Cap'n hates Kree slavers. Hates 'em more than anythin'.”

“So you helped fix his ship?”

“Yes. It was a patch job, really. Couple parts from my shuttle, a tractor motor, and some barbed wire. But it held up long enough for us to take out some Kree and get back to the ship.” Kraglin smiled. “When they heard about how I'd helped Yondu, Stakar wanted me on board. So, I became a Ravager.”

“How old were you?”

“About twelve.” Kraglin looked down at Peter. “Little older than you, really. Back then, the cap'n wasn't even a cap'n. He got his own clan about two weeks after that.”

Peter blinked. He couldn't understand any version of Yondu where Yondu wasn't in charge. Instead of pondering that impossibility, he hugged his knees.

“Did you ever go back?”

“To Yazkin-8?” Kraglin frowned. “No. Ain't nothin' for me there, Pete.”

“Are you happy here in space?”

“Pretty happy,” Kraglin said, “if I do say so m'self. Got a bunk, friends, a job to do. What more can you ask for?”

“You need a girlfriend,” Peter said.

Kraglin flushed. “Shut up, Peter. Don't be stupid.”

Peter wasn't bothered by being told to shut up; Yondu said it about ten times a day. Peter stared at the door, thinking about Kraglin's story.

“Kraglin?”

“Yeah?”

“Can you teach me how to fly a space ship?”

“Me?” Kraglin chuckled. “No, you want the cap'n teachin' you that. He's a regular ace.”

“I don't think he'll want to teach me.” Peter rested his cheek on his knees. “But you could.”

“How about this. I'll teach you the basics. Thrusters, gear shift, stabilizers, stuff like that. Think we got an ol' flight simulator somewhere in storage. Then, when you're good enough to really fly, we'll show Yondu what you can do. I'm sure he'd teach you then,” Kraglin said.

Peter jumped to his feet. “Really?”

“Pete!” Kraglin jerked a thumb towards Meredith. “Hush.”

“Right. Sorry.” Peter sat back down. “Wow, a real spaceship...”

Kraglin grinned. “What'll you call her?”
“What?”

“Your spaceship, what's her name gonna be? Star-Lord?”

“No, that's my name.” Peter thought about it. “Maybe... Milano.”

“Milano?” Kraglin wrinkled his nose. “Alright, your ship, your name.”

“What about you?”

“Ain't got a craft good enough to deserve it, but if I did... Suzarra.” Kraglin stared at the door.

“Was that your sister's name?”

Kraglin just nodded. Peter stared at the door.

“It's a nice name, Kraglin.”

“Thanks, kid.” The corners of Kraglin's mouth twitched. “Don't know what the heck a Milano is, but it sounds nice.”

“Thanks.”

“Don't mention it.”
Yondu takes Meredith and Peter to the "hospital". Yondu thinks it's high time the Ravagers got a taste of some medicine, too, but Meredith wants to make sure there's a spoonful of sugar involved. (Mary Poppins reference, y'all.)

(I came up with a random race for the doctor's assistant; I don't think it actually exists. So, slight canon deviation. Also, I wrote a lullaby and now you have to look at it. My apologies.)

Meredith looked up at the building. The bricks were chipped and discolored, and the door hung on its hinges like a dislocated hip. A large green bird with a white beak was making a nest in the gutters, which were filled with dead, fern-like leaves.

Meredith looked at Yondu. “This is a hospital?”

“For five hundred units? Hell yeah it's a hospital.” Yondu strode forwards.

They'd made port to resupply when Yondu had dragged Peter and Meredith off the ship. It was the first time Meredith had ever been on another planet, but she was too nervous about the doctor to take in the enormity of the moment.

Yondu went up to the building and banged on the door. Meredith peered through the glass. Someone was shuffling down the hallway. When the door opened, she saw a stout man with slightly greenish skin. His pupils were rectangular, like a goats. Next to Meredith, Peter shivered.

“Corky,” Yondu grunted, “how you been?”

“Oh dear.” Corky looked at the motley crew on the doorstep. “I must be doing better than you if you've brought the whole party with you.”

“We need Mareet,” Yondu grunted.

“Doctor Mareet,” Corky corrected, “and she's a little busy at the moment. What seems to be the situation, Yondu?”

“Need an appraisal of some cargo, and we want an estimate on some high-end cybernetics.”

Corky squinted at Meredith. “Is that... that's not a Terran, is it?”

“Yep.” Kraglin crossed his arms. “Straight outta Terra.”

“How interesting.” Corky blinked; his eyelids closed vertically. “You must come in and tell me all about yourself.”

With that, Corky finally opened the door. Peter, Meredith, Yondu and Kraglin all tried to step
through the doorway at once, which resulted in an awkward bottleneck shuffle. Corky led them
down the hallway; the wood floor creaked under the weight of so many feet. The sitting room
smelled a little musty, but it was generally warm and inviting. Soft, cushy chairs were tucked in the
corners, and the floor was covered by a cream-and-black rug.

“Sit, sit.” Corky took Meredith's arm gently and led her to the largest chair in the room. “Tell me,
could you recite a list of Terran internal organs?”

Meredith blinked. “I mean... I could name a lot of them.”

“Splendid!” Corky let her sit down, then immediately grabbed a holopad. “Please, begin.”

“Well, there's the stomach, liver, heart, brain...”

While Meredith kept talking, Yondu sank into a big blue chair. Peter laid down and rolled on the rug.

“What the fuck are you doin',” Yondu asked.

“It's soft,” Peter replied.

Yondu grinned. That Terran kid was an idiot, but in the last two weeks, he'd also been the biggest
source of entertainment Yondu'd ever seen. Though he hated to admit it, Peter was downright
adorable.

Peter rolled on his back and looked up at Yondu.

“Why do you have that big red thing on your head?”

“My fin?” Yondu pulled out the arrow and handed it to Peter. “Helps me control this.”

Peter ran his fingers along the shaft of the arrow. “How?”

“It's made of yama.” Yondu looked down at the sprawled Terran. “Special kind of metal, see?
Moves when I whistle.”

“Can I try?” Peter looked up at Yondu with big green eyes.

Yondu chuckled. “Sure, kid.”

Peter whistled, but could only produce a weak tone. The arrow didn't even twitch. He screwed up
his face and whistled as hard as he could. Still nothing, but he kept on going until he was sputtering
and red in the face. Yondu covered his mouth with his hand, trying not to laugh. How many times
had he seen Kraglin trying the same damn thing when he didn't think Yondu was looking?

Grinning almost too much to properly move his lips, Yondu let out a low, warbling tone. The arrow
slid out of Peter's hands and spiraled slowly in the air. Peter jumped up and tried to grab it. Yondu's
whistle kept on, and the arrow weaved around the room; Peter chased it. Clambering over chairs and
reaching under tables, he pursued the arrow with dogged resolve. Yondu's mouth hurt from trying
not to smile. The arrow spiraled under a table; Peter followed. The arrow danced over Kraglin's
head; Peter tried to climb him like a tree. The arrow made circles around Peter's head, and the boy
nearly fell over from being so dizzy. Yondu made it go past the door... at precisely the wrong
moment.

Dr. Mareet looked down at the arrow lodged in her waist. “Oh.”

Yondu's face went slack. Peter screamed; Kraglin paled.
“...thyroid gland, lower intestine.” Meredith saw the woman with the arrow in her side. “Oh my God!”

Dr. Mareet sighed and pulled the arrow directly out. “It's fine.”

The tall doctor handed Peter the arrow, then looked at Corky. He sighed, walked over, and took the doctor's fuschia hand. Almost immediately, the wound healed.

Peter's mouth fell open. “Wow.”

Corky chuckled. “That's what Hassrin are good for, little boy.”

“What would I do without you.” Dr. Mareet stroked Corky's square jaw fondly.

“Bleed internally,” he answered.

“Mareet,” Yondu grunted, “we gotta problem.”

“You've got a problem? You just pierced my lower abdomen with your stupid toy,” Dr. Mareet said.

“It was an accident.”

“Of course it was.” The doctor sighed. “What is it this time, Yondu? Liver disease, internal bleeding, sexually-transmitted viruses?”

“Brain tumor,” he replied.

The doctor's raspberry eyes widened. “Oh. I'm so sorry.”

“Ain't me.” Yondu gestured towards Meredith. “It's her. She's cargo, but I need her alive.”

“She must be very valuable if you're bothering to spend money on her.” Dr. Mareet extended a slender hand. “Hello, I'm Dr. Mareet.”

“Meredith Quill.” Meredith shook her hand.

“So, how long have you...”

“Been dyin' for about eight months now,” Meredith said, “and managed to die once. Don't know why I'm still around.”

“It's because she's awesome.” Peter hugged his mother's legs.

Dr. Mareet chuckled. “Let's see what we can do for you, Mrs. Quill.”

“Ms.,” Meredith said, “and thank you.”

Meredith left with the doctor. Peter tried to follow, but Dr. Mareet held him back.

“It's best for your mother if you wait out here,” she said.

Peter opened his mouth to protest, but Meredith stroked his hair and smiled.

“You wait right here, baby,” she said, “and listen to your Walkman, okay?”

Peter threw himself in a chair and slumped. He dropped his headphones over his ears, his eyes watering.
“He hates it when I go to the doctor,” Meredith explained after the doctor led her away.

Dr. Mareet smiled. “Your child is adorable, Ms. Quill.”

“Ain't he a peach? Don't know what I'd do without him,” Meredith said.

Dr. Mareet led Meredith into a surprisingly sterile room. Medical machines lined the wall; Meredith had never seen any of them before. A pod-like bed with a glass hatch dominated the middle of the room.

“Get in, please.” The doctor began hitting switches and turning dials. “Just a quick scan.”

Meredith crawled into the pod and pulled the glass door down over her. She took a deep breath; her breath fogged the glass slightly.

“Nervous, Ms. Quill?”

“I've never been to a space doctor before,” Meredith confessed.

Dr. Mareet laughed. “Don't worry; the Hippocratic oath still stands. Just relax.”

Meredith closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. Just relax.

In the other room, Peter was anything but relaxed. He was sulking. Eyes closed, he blared his music and ignored Kraglin and Yondu. Meredith's visit with Dr. Mareet lasted a long time. Peter couldn't tell if that was a good thing or a bad thing. His mother always looked the same when she came back from the doctors, whether the news was good or bad. She always looked tired, but kept smiling.

“Come on, baby.” She reached out and took his hand.

“Are you gonna be okay?” Peter stared up at her. He hated asking that question every time she went to the doctor, especially since the answer was never what he wanted to hear.

“Maybe,” she said.

That was the closest thing to a 'yes' that Peter had heard in a very long time. He beamed and tugged her over to Kraglin.

“Doctor says maybe,” he said proudly.

Kraglin looked at Meredith's tired face and sad eyes. If it really was a 'maybe,' it was the most doubtful 'maybe' Kraglin had ever seen.

“Good,” he said, “good to hear.”

“Kraglin,” Yondu grunted, “take Quill back to the ship.”

Meredith and Peter blinked.

“Er...” Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz. “Which one, cap'n?”

“The little one, idjit.” Yondu stood up. “I gotta talk costs with the other one.”

Meredith sighed. Peter gripped her hand tightly and edged away from Kraglin. Meredith handed his
hand to Kraglin nonetheless.

“Go back to the ship, baby.” Meredith smiled as warmly as she could. “I'll be right there once I'm done payin' the doctor, okay?”

Peter looked between Kraglin and Meredith, then shook his head.

“Peter.”

Meredith's warning tone made it clear that there was to be no argument. Peter shuffled right past Kraglin and out of the room.

“Why is he always runnin' away,” Kraglin muttered.

Meredith watched Kraglin leave, then turned to Yondu.

“So,” she said, “costs.”

Dr. Mareet and Corky came in holding a calculator and a sheet of paper. Corky was already tallying up costs while Dr. Mareet rattled off the procedure.

“Sterilization scan, twenty units. Neurological analysis, one-hundred-fifty units.” Dr. Mareet looked up at Meredith. “By the way, we need to talk about that.”

“About what?”

“There was an anomaly in your central nervous system,” Dr. Mareet explained.

“That'd be the tumor, doc.” Yondu grinned. “Damn, what kind of machines are you usin' back there?”

“Besides that,” Dr. Mareet said, “obviously. I saw an older anomaly. I'll check it out; it may be what caused the tumor in the first place.”

“How much will that cost?” Meredith shifted her weight.

Dr. Mareet chuckled. “I'm not Yondu. I don't charge for things I find enjoyable, and analyzing a neurological anomaly I've never encountered before definitely qualifies as enjoyable.”

“She has such a passion for her art,” Corky sighed.

Dr. Mareet smiled. Meredith leaned over, looked at the financial calculations, and swallowed.

“I didn't realize cybernetics were so expensive,” she admitted.

Corky kept tapping at the calculator. “You're a Ravager. I'm sure you'll manage somehow.”

“I'm not a Ravager.”

Corky looked up. “What?”

“She's cargo,” Yondu said, “and she's only valuable if she's alive. But her cost is more than she's worth, so I've got her and the boy working to make up the difference. S'working out pretty well.”

Dr. Mareet and Corky stared at Yondu.

“What,” he grunted.
“You're making a virulently ill woman and her young son work for you?” Dr. Mareet blinked. “That's horrible, Yondu.”

“I may be as pretty as an angel,” Yondu said, “but I sure as hell ain't one.”

Meredith sighed. “Doctor, it's fine. I've been around worse than him, I promise.”

“Really?” Corky raised an eyebrow. “Who?”

Meredith paused. “Alright, so not off the top of my head, but I'm sure if I really thought about it...”

Dr. Mareet looked as if she was trying not to smile. “I'm sure you can handle it. You've made it this far; you really are a remarkable Terran.”

Meredith's cheeks warmed.

“Just tryin' to stay alive for my baby,” she said.

The doctor handed her a bill. Meredith looked down. It was exactly five hundred units, just as Yondu had said it would be. Meredith looked to Yondu, who transferred the units to Dr. Mareet.

“A pleasure as always, Yondu.” Dr. Mareet looked at the hole in her shirt. “With one unfortunate exception.”

Yondu grunted what could have been mistaken for an apology, but what was most likely him complaining about Peter. Dr. Mareet handed Meredith a lime green bottle filled with little black pills.

“Painkiller,” Dr. Mareet said, “potent and non-addictive. Send me a holomessage if you need a refill.”

“Thank you.” Meredith pocketed the bottle. “How will I pay you for refills?”

“No need,” Dr. Mareet said, “if you'll just do me a favor. When you start passing them out to everyone you meet, tell them who you got them from. It's good for business.”

Meredith blinked. Dr. Mareet was so professional that Meredith had forgotten that she was probably a criminal, same as Yondu.

Corky smiled. “Selling prescription drugs at discount prices. Prescriptions by request, of course. No questions asked. You need it, we'll find it.”

Dr. Mareet lifted her shoulders and smiled. “It beats cooking drugs in a den on Knowhere.”

“Ah, those were the days.” Corky sighed and left the room.

Meredith shook the doctor's hand. “Thank you.”

Dr. Mareet chuckled. “First time I've heard that in a while. You're welcome. If you ever need medical assistance with no questions asked, you know where to find me. Good luck working off your debt. If you ever need emergency units, I do remove organs, and pay a modest price for each one I get.”

Meredith remembered the long list of organs she'd told Corky and paled.

“I'll keep it in mind,” she said, just to be polite.
That seemed to make the doctor happy. Meredith quickly made a beeline for the ship, just in case Dr. Mareet started sizing her up as a donator.

“Wonderful woman,” Dr. Mareet observed, “but a little jumpy.”

“Terrans is like that,” Yondu said.

Dr. Mareet fixed Yondu with her raspberry pink eyes. “I didn't know you trafficked humans, Yondu.”

“Ain't traffickin’.” Yondu crossed his arms. “Just takin' the kid and his mama to the father is all. If anythin', I'm reunitin' a family. I'm a goddamn saint.”

Dr. Mareet raised an eyebrow. “Right. Which is why she's cargo instead of a guest, and she's footing her own medical bills instead of charging them to the father.”

Yondu wouldn't meet her eyes. “Whatever happened to no goddamn questions?”

Dr. Mareet sighed. “Just get out of here before Ogord knows I'm indulging you with my presence.”

“Don't tell him I was here.”

“You think I want to lose all my Ravager business? Go,” the Krylorian doctor said, “before I change my mind and charge you for breathing my air.”

Yondu didn't need telling twice. He stalked out of the building without so much as a good-bye. When he got back on the ship, Meredith was explaining to Kraglin and Peter what the doctor had said. She's accumulated a small audience of curious Ravagers.

“So,” she said, “I'm gonna need a pain inhibitor, limb actuator... she wants to put some kinda fast-twitch muscle enhancer in me, says I'll be more dangerous that way? Don't know what she meant, but she said I'd be able to handle myself in a fight. That sounds good to me.”

“What'd she say about the cerebral core,” Kraglin said.

Meredith took a deep breath. This is what she'd been avoiding.

“Doctor says that it's possible that the cerebral core will be able to keep me in homeostasis,” she said, “and that if it does, I'll be... It'll all be over. Tumor gone. Never worry about it again.”

Peter's face light up like the sun. He broke out into laughter and rushed his mother, wrapping his arms around her in a tight hug. Meredith folded her arms around him, but she was frowning.

“Baby, it's gonna be a very dangerous procedure.” She knelt down and looked him in the eyes. “I know it's the first hope we've gotten in a long time, but...”

“You'll make it.” Peter's childlike faith shone out of his eyes. “I know you will.”

The other Ravagers exchanged looks. The kid was setting himself up for heartbreak.

“First,” Kraglin said, “you gotta pay for all the other cybernetics.”

“He's right.” Meredith stood back up. “The doctor says I likely won't survive unless I've got the limb actuator and the pain inhibitor in. The stress would be enough to kill me; my body's got to get used to working with the tech.”
Peter hugged her legs. “It'll be okay. We'll pay for it together.”

Meredith stroked his hair. “That's my boy.”

She looked out at the Ravagers. “Speaking of, I wash dishes for two units a pop.”

“Do you do laundry?” One of the Ravagers spoke up.

“Everything but underpants,” Meredith chuckled.

“How about sewin’, can you sew?”

“Course I can sew.”

“Can you fly a ship?”

Meredith shook her head. “Sorry, no.”

There were some noises of concern.

“Lady should be able t'fly her own ship,” one of them said, “s'a mark of proper independence.”

“She ain't a Ravager,” Kraglin reminded.

“Still.” Gef frowned. “Kraglin, you should teach her. You're teaching the boy already.”

Meredith's head whipped around. “You what?”

“I'm teachin' Peter how to fly a ship.” Kraglin swallowed. “Just on simulations. He ain't in any danger.”

Meredith was very still. Kraglin watched her process that information; he could practically see her eyes trying to find a defect in the plan, some tiny aspect of a simulation that might harm her baby. Her shoulders fell; she might not like it, but it was safe. She couldn't tell Peter no, not while he was beaming with pride. Meredith knew learning to fly meant a lot to Peter.

“Fine,” she said.

Peter and Kraglin high-fived, and Meredith smiled against her will. Those boys were becoming friends, and Meredith couldn't complain. Out of all the Ravagers, Kraglin was the kindest. Peter needed friends; he hadn't had many on Earth. Other kids found him annoying. The Ravagers found him annoying too, but at least they admired his dedication and persistence. Plus, they had to admit he was kinda cute.

Yondu crossed his arms and watched Meredith talk with the Ravagers. They were starting to get used to her and the kid. Yondu frowned. The Quills seemed to have a special talent for softening people up, and Yondu wasn't having it. The crew needed something hard, something harsh. They needed a good dose of danger. Stakar Ogord had always plunged his crew into a tough situation when they started getting too comfortable. He'd always said a proper Ravager was like steel; forged in flame.

Absentmindedly, Yondu fiddled with the flames on his jacket. It'd been a while since he'd thought about Stakar; it was easier to forget about him. The sting of exile still hadn't passed.

“Cap'n?”
Yondu looked up.

Kraglin saluted him. “Call from Dayzir Tar, cap'n. He seems pretty shook up.”

“I'll take care of it.” Yondu's crimson eyes darted between Kraglin and the Quills. “How's the cargo doin'?”

“Which one?”

“Both.”

“Peter's getting used to bein' around. Learnin' to fly. Makes us good money.”

“And the lady?”

“She ain't makin' money, but she's tryin' her best.” Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz. “The crew likes her. Likes 'em both, really.”

“Likes 'em?” Yondu frowned. “They only been on board for two weeks.”

Kraglin shrugged. “Charismatic.”

“Charismatic,” Yondu scoffed, putting his hands in his pockets. “Y'all are goin' soft.”

“Don't say that, cap'n.” Kraglin's shoulders sagged. “We're Ravagers, through and through.”

Yondu said nothing in reply; he simply turned and made his way to the bridge. They were definitely getting soft, Kraglin especially. The Xandarian was naturally intuitive; he had a sixth sense that nearly always hit the mark. Unfortunately, that made him emotionally susceptible to sentiment, and that's exactly what the Quills seemed to spawn. Sentiment.

Yondu tapped the call, and Dayzir Tar appeared.

“About time.” Dayzir looked around, fiddling with the collar of his Nova Corps jacket. “I have what you wanted.”

“The location?”

“Maorda-4,” Dayzir said, “at 18:00. They'll be taking a full contingent. It's gonna get ugly, Udonta.”

“Then we oughta turn up. Put some pretty faces on that battlefield.”

“The Nova Corps won't engage.” Dayzir's jaw hardened. “But someone's got to stop those Kree bastards.”

“How much we talkin'?”

“About five hundred Kree.”

“I meant this.” Yondu rubbed his fingers together. “Nothin's free.”

“There's a shipment of Krylorian plasma coming in from Maorda-4. You could intercept it while the battle's going on. The Nova Corps would assume the Kree took it. Each vial is worth eight-hundred units on the open market, easy.”

“Sounds good.” Yondu scratched his chin.
“Be careful. They're extremely volatile. One wrong hit and, well,” Dayzir chuckled, “I hope you like your panties well-fried.”

“We'll take care of the Kree and the plasma,” Yondu said.

“Don't let those bastards breathe a single second more than you have to,” Dayzir said.

With that, Dayzir Tar ended the call. Yondu put his hands on his hips and looked out the window. Kree slavers. Possibility of Nova Corps engaging. Stealing a supply of highly-combustible plasma from the biggest law-enforcement conglomerate in the galaxy. Yondu grinned, and his reflection showed his broken, crooked teeth.

Yep, that sounded like exactly the kind of danger they needed.

When she went to tuck in Peter that night, Meredith walked in on pandemonium. The crew were cursing at each other, shoving one another around. Peter was curled up in a corner, face red, tears streaming, and screaming at the top of his lungs. Yondu was nowhere to be found.

Meredith scooped Peter into her arms, pressing his head to her shoulder.

“It's okay baby,” she said, “it's okay.”

“Everyone's so me-me-mean to me!” Peter howled.

Kraglin was shoved against the wall; a fist came down, but he moved his long skinny neck just enough to steer his head out of the way. Unfortunately, he didn't avoid the left hook that slammed into his nose.

“Hey!” Meredith stood, eyes flashing. “You leave him alone or so help me!”

“Or so help you what,” the Ravager spat.

“Little boy, you don't wanna know.” Meredith put Peter down. “Now what the hell is going on around here? What's the ruckus?”

“We're all riled up,” Kraglin muttered, “and can't nobody get a bit of shut-eye. Nerves, I guess.”

Peter glared at the Ravagers. “These jerks don't have brains enough to have nerves.”

“Peter, don't be fresh.” Meredith looked around, pressing her hand to her forehead. “What's goin' on, Kraglin? What's got everybody rustled up?”

“We're fightin' five hundred Kree slavers tomorrow.” Gef answered from behind her, then took a massive swig from a glass bottle. “Chances are high they'll be fightin' back.”

“And on top of all that, we're liftin' extremely dangerous explosives from the Nova Corps itself,” Kraglin said.

Meredith looked at her son. “Peter, tomorrow you do not leave my sight.”

“Yes, mom.”

Meredith looked out at the Ravagers. Their cursing rang in her ears; she covered Peter's. “Don't listen to this, baby.”
“I’ve heard it before, mom.” Peter took her hands off his ears.

Of course he had; he’d spent two weeks around Yondu, Meredith thought. She had to stop this blood-fest before someone hurt Peter. “Lessee...”

“What’re you thinkin’, Ms. Quill?” Kraglin wiped his bloody nose on his sleeve.

“I'm thinkin' about when Peter was a little baby, how I'd get him to go to sleep.”

“How?”

“Music, how else?” Meredith looked at Peter's Walkman. “But that's hardly loud enough to cover this din.”

“And Peter ain't exactly got a lullaby on there,” Kraglin said.

“A lullaby. Kraglin, you're a genius.” Meredith put her hands over her mouth. “Y'all pay attention!”

The crowd of frenzied, violent Ravagers looked at her.

“Now y'all listen,” she said gently, “I know it's been a rough day for you, and I wanna help. Could you all lay down and get comfy?”

The Ravagers looked at each other and lied down. They didn't figure Meredith for the kind of woman to give a load of Ravagers comfort in bed, but they weren't about to argue either.

“Now close your eyes.”

They did so. Meredith cleared her throat and pointed at Kraglin's bedroll; he quickly crawled in it. Meredith went to the lights and flicked them off. Then, she began to sing.

*Darling dear, don't you fear,*

*All your worries disappear,*

*Soft the sky, up so high*

*Stars sing you a lullaby*

Some of the Ravagers made noises of protest; the rest quickly hissed, “Shh!” Most of them had never even heard a lullaby, much less had one sang to them.

*See them shine in velvet night*

*Sweet their song and bright the light*

*Soft the sky, you and I*

*Will sing them back a lullaby*

While she sang, Meredith wandered around the room tucking Ravagers in. She gave Drazkar his favorite quilt and helped a Ravager remove his cybernetic eye. She pulled a blanket over Kraglin's feet; he was much too tall for his bed roll.

*Songs of freedom, songs of joy*

*Music no one can destroy*
This song is meant to share my love

Stars sing to you high above

Finally, Meredith sat next to Peter, stroking his hair and singing to him. She hadn't done this since he was a little baby. His eyes were shut, and his sweet little mouth was drawn up in a smile. It had been so long since she was able to do this kind of thing; first it was cancer, then it was Ravagers. Doing this felt right; it felt like being a proper mother.

Close your eyes, say good-night

Stars will burn like candlelight

As many stars as are in the sky

That's how much I love you... good-night.

Meredith's last wavering note was almost drowned out by the resounding Ravager snores. She grinned. Under the muscles and tattoos and bad breath, they were just overgrown kids. She kissed Peter's forehead.

“Good night, baby,” she said.

His soft breathing was his only response. Meredith stood, slipped out the door, and closed it gently as she could. She turned around and nearly bumped into Yondu.

“Where have you been?” She crossed her arms. “Your crew were tearing each other limb-from-limb.”

“Happens,” Yondu said.

“Kraglin thinks they're nervous.”

“You kiddin’?” Yondu snorted. “This lot ain't got the brains to be nervous.”

Meredith smiled. “That's exactly what Peter said.”

Yondu shifted his weight. He wasn't sure why, but Peter saying the same things Yondu did made him feel a little happy.

“He's turnin' into a damn fine Ravager,” said Yondu.

“That reminds me.” Meredith took a deep breath, then thrust her finger into Yondu's chest. “That boy is not getting in any space battles, you hear me.”

Yondu looked at the fragile, bald woman and the skinny finger she was threatening him with. It was all he could do not to laugh in her face.

“I ain't puttin' Peter in no goddamn space battle.” Yondu swatted her hand out of the way. “What kind of idiot do you think I am?”

Meredith crossed her arms. “The big blue kind.”

Yondu scowled. “Heard you singin’.”

“So?”
Yondu frowned and leaned against the wall. “You tryin' to turn these boys soft, motherin’ them like that?”

“I’m a mother, Yondu. I mother. It's what I do.”

“And now I gotta spend extra time toughenin' 'em up.”

Meredith smiled and shrugged. “You want to lead and inspire them with violence, go ahead. I'll keep doing what I do. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.”

Yondu grunted and shoved past her.

“Want me to come in and sing you to sleep,” she asked sweetly.

All she got in return was his warning growl. Meredith chuckled and went to the bathroom. It was always safer for her to shower when everyone else was either out fighting or knocked out cold; there was no chance of “accidental” voyeurism. She changed into pajamas and brushed her teeth. After spitting in the sink, she looked in the mirror. The dark circles under her eyes would soon be gone; Dr. Mareet's pain medication had been incredibly helpful. Surely now, she could sleep. She washed her hands, dried them on her pants, and walked back to her room. The halls were dark and empty; her feet made soft padding sounds that echoed as she walked.

Meredith’s room was starting to feel more like home. Kraglin had scrounged her up a quilt from goodness-knows-where, and Peter had picked her some flowers when they’d made port. He hadn't had a vase, so he put them in an empty soda can. Meredith lied in bed and looked at them. In the dark, she chuckled. Her boy was the sweetest creature that ever walked. She hoped he'd never change, but the more he spent around Yondu and the Ravagers, the more he was getting used to them. Meredith couldn't condone that, but she couldn't exactly act against it, either. Peter was becoming his own person in his own way, and all Meredith could do was watch and coach. Maybe that was all any parent could do, she thought sleepily. Teach, watch, and pray.
Smart Terrans

Chapter Summary

An Orloni named Skeletor gets Peter into his first big space battle. Yondu is outwitted by two Terrans, a portable light, and an empty chip bag. In the midst of battle, Kraglin finds himself racing against certain doom. With her baby growing up so fast in space, Meredith has to come to terms with Peter's life as a Ravager.

(Guys, I wrote over 25,000 words in five days. What have I done.)

Yondu woke up the next morning with Peter's head on his chest. It looked like the boy had gotten cold in the middle of the night and curled up by Yondu's side. Peter's sleeping face lacked all the energy and precociousness that the boy possessed during the day. Sleeping, Peter looked for all the world like a little angel.

Yondu's chest tightened, and he shoved Peter off.

"Gerroff me," he grunted, swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

Peter didn't answer, but curled up in the warm indent where Yondu had just been.

"Curled up like a little rat," Yondu said.

The insult didn't work; Peter still looked so fragile that the Ravager captain couldn't help but feel a little for him. It had to be hard, being that pathetic. Yondu growled and threw a blanket over him, being careful not to smother his face.

"Damn Terrans."

Yondu reached out and grabbed a plausibly-clean shirt. He sniffed it. Nope. He threw it at the hole in the wall, hearing it slide all the way down to the laundry room. Yondu grabbed another and performed the same test. Good enough; Yondu stuffed himself into it.

There were no dirty dishes in the mess hall. Yondu looked around at the spaces where piles of pans and pots used to obscure the walls. He checked the schedule of duties over the sink. Someone, and it was pretty goddamn obvious who, had scrawled "& Meredith" on many of the ledger entries.

"So that's how you're makin' money," he muttered.

Yondu heard the portal open and turned around. Meredith herself stood in the door, blinking sleep out of her eyes. She shuffled about in an overly-large t-shirt and drawstring pants. They'd been Kraglin's, Yondu remembered, until he got too damn tall for them. Yondu watched Meredith fiddle with the coffee machine.

"What're you doin'," he said, "that thing's busted."

"Kraglin fixed it for me." Meredith yawned. "Want some coffee?"

Yondu thought about refusing, but he couldn't remember the last time he had a decent cup of coffee.
on his own ship.

“What the hell. Pour me a mug.” Yondu went to the cabinet and pulled out a box of cereal.

“Gotcha covered.” Meredith took down twelve mugs.

Yondu watched her line them all up and start the coffee machine. While it boiled and bubbled, she sat down, crossed her arms, and laid her head on them. Her eyes closed.

By the time Yondu was munching his way through breakfast, the coffee was done. Meredith poured coffee into all twelve cups, then lined them up on the mess hall table. One she slid towards Yondu.

“On the house,” she said sleepily, then cupped one in her own hands.

Yondu squinted. “What the hell are you talkin' about?”

“Just watch.” Meredith smiled. “I'm about to make fifty units.”

Yondu nearly choked on his cereal.

True enough, Ravagers started filing into the mess hall. These were the early risers; those poor souls whose jobs started in the wee hours of the morning. Some of them came up and tapped on their interface, then grabbed a cup.

“Sugar?” One of them frowned.

“Gotcha covered, honey.” Meredith ripped open a sugar packet and dumped in the contents. “You have a good morning.”

The Ravager smiled, pleased, but quickly changed his expression when he saw Yondu.

“Er, thanks, I mean.” The Ravager coughed. “Sugar... have to have it for, uh, medical reasons.”

Within twenty minutes, all ten of the mugs had been taken and paid for; the outlying two belonged to Yondu and Meredith. She lifted her mug in a slight “cheers” gesture.

“Guess I'm getting better at making units,” she said.

Yondu frowned. “Is this how you're makin' your goddamned units? Spoilin' these suckers?”

Meredith took a sip from her coffee. “It's a living.”

“Well knock it off,” he growled.

“How else am I supposed to make units, Yondu.” Meredith pressed her hands to the mug, absorbing the warmth.

“The boy makes units.” Yondu crunched through his cereal. “You focus on not dyin' before we turn you over.”

“Are you ever going to tell me where we're going?”

Yondu chewed his cereal. He couldn't remember if he'd ever told her about Ego, but if he had, she'd forgotten. Lucky her.

“Hell no,” he said.
Meredith sighed. “Didn't think so.”

After breakfast, Meredith made another eighty-six units by helping with the dishes. Then she went to wake up Peter. She found him curled up in the dent on Yondu's bed, snuggled up with Yondu's blanket. Meredith felt a twinge of jealousy, but pushed it away. Clearly the only reason Peter was curled up there was because it was warm.

“Peter?” Meredith rubbed his back. “Good mornin', baby.”

Rubbing Peter's back made his whole body relax. He opened his eyes, saw his mother, and smiled.

“Hi, mom.”

“Time to get up, honey.” Meredith pulled out some clothes for him; the Ravagers had taken to donating their too-small clothes to a cardboard box. Someone had crudely written on it, “Terran Closet”. Meredith suspected Drazkar.

A few hours later, Meredith was folding her own laundry when Yondu's voice boomed over the comms.

“Prep for launch!”

Meredith frowned and put down her laundry. She raced up to the bridge, where Ravagers were scrambling around. Meredith found Kraglin.

“Where's Peter,” she asked.

Kraglin pulled on his flight jacket. “Feedin' his Orloni.”

“They're still alive?”

“Two left. The others ate each other.” Kraglin adjusted his comm unit. “He named 'em Skeletor and Dolly Parton.”

Meredith sighed. “Of course he did.”

Kraglin sat down and started strapping on his flight boots. Meredith looked at all the Ravagers as they pulled on extra equipment, lucky charms, and the thousand-and-one other things that the superstitious Ravagers did before a mission.

“Is it really that dangerous?” Meredith's eyes darted around at all the protective gear.

“Might be,” Kraglin said, “might not be. Better safe than dead.”

“I'm going to go find Peter.” Meredith walked away.

She had a bad feeling she couldn't shake off; it settled low in her stomach and filled her with an unexplainable tension. Wherever Peter was, Meredith knew something was wrong. Mother's intuition or mother's paranoia; she didn't care what it was called, she just knew something was up.

Yondu stalked past her in the hallway, flanked by two Ravagers.

“Have you seen Peter?” Meredith nearly had to jog to keep up.

“Ain't my problem.” Yondu grunted, but glanced over. “What, you lost him?”
“I didn't lose him,” she said, “I'm looking for him.”

“So you lost him.”

“I don't have time for this. Kraglin said Peter was feeding his Orloni; do you know where he put
them.”

“Hangar bay,” one of the Ravagers answered, “in a dumb little box.”

“Thank you,” Meredith said, then glared at Yondu. He was no help at all.

Yondu kept walking. He was mapping the plan of attack out in his head, mentally estimating the
odds of success for each plan he built. Yondu Udonta had never attended a formal school, but he
was still a learned strategist. He'd had years learning under the greatest Ravager Admiral that ever
sailed the stars; Stakar Ogord. Stakar had always said Yondu had a gift for war. Living twenty years
as a Kree battle slave would do that to a man. Stakar didn't see Yondu's violent tendencies as a
drawback; he saw it as an opportunity. He turned Yondu from a raw lump of savage iron into the
cool, sharp steel machine he was today. Yondu owed Stakar more than his life; he owed him
everything.

Dammit. He was thinking sentimental nonsense again. Yondu bared his teeth and went back to
thinking about the battle plan. In the back of his mind, he realized that with Peter missing there was a
very big chance that the Terran boy would pop up somewhere unexpected and ruin everything.
Yondu shook that thought off; Peter wasn't smart enough to be a problem.

Down in the hanger bay, Peter had a problem. Dolly Parton the Orloni was fast asleep in the nest.
She had curled up in some of Yondu's socks; Peter had shoved them into his backpack and snuck
them down into the bay. Peter figured that they had so many holes in them that Yondu wouldn't miss
them, and Dolly really seemed to like them. The problem was that Skeletor the Orloni was definitely
missing. Peter had checked all over the box, and Skeletor definitely wasn't there. He remembered
what his mother had said; if a single cord was chewed, the Orloni had to go.

Peter had to find Skeletor.

“Skeletor?” Peter slung his backpack over his shoulders and wandered around the hanger bay.
“Skeletor!”

He didn't really expect the Orloni to come when called; Skeletor wasn't that smart. But he figured if
he yelled, the Orloni might think he was bringing food or something. Peter climbed the stairs of the
hanger bay, looking around. There were about a hundred ships docked here, and Skeletor could be
in any of them.

“Rats,” Peter said.

Peter got lucky. In the hangar, sound tended to echo. Peter could hear a skittering sound coming
from a nearby crate.

“Skeletor?”

The Orloni was scraping his teeth on the wood of the crate.

“No, Skeletor! You'll get yourself and Dolly thrown out into space! If you don't care about yourself,
at least think about Dolly!”
Peter lunged for the Orloni; it squeaked and leapt clear over the Terran boy. Landing awkwardly, it went hopping towards Yondu's ship.

“No! No no no no!” Peter ran after it. “Skeletor, we can take his socks but you can't take his ship!”

Skeletor paused at the base of Yondu's ship. Then, almost with a kind of defiance, Skeletor hopped up the loading ramp.

“Gosh heck it, Skeletor!” Peter ran up the loading ramp after the Orloni. “You're trying to get me into trouble!”

Skeletor squeaked and hopped down into the cargo unit of Yondu's ship.

“Darn it, Skeletor!”

Peter stopped at the hole that led down into the cargo unit. A single metal ladder descended into darkness. He looked back at the loading ramp. Peter knew he wasn't supposed to be here, and he definitely wasn't supposed to go in Yondu's ship, but he couldn't help but remember what Kraglin had said about Orloni and chewing wires. If Skeletor chewed through something important while Yondu was out fighting bad guys, Yondu could be stranded out in space. With no way to fly, he'd be blown up for sure. Yondu was a big blue jerk, but that didn't mean Peter wanted him dead.

Peter climbed down the ladder. He had to find Skeletor.

Meredith was starting to panic. She'd found Peter's box, with an Orloni still inside, but Peter was nowhere to be found. Ravagers were running by her in full flight suits, starting up engines and flying out of the hangar. They'd made it to Maorda-4. Down below, the Maordan militia was getting slaughtered by the Kree; the Ravagers had to engage, and fast. What if they ran out of Kree to kill?

Kraglin sprinted by, his long legs shooting out awkwardly. “Hey Ms. Q!”

“Kraglin!” Meredith tried running next to him. “Have you seen Peter?”

“Nope! If he ain't with his Orloni, I don't know, Ms. Q.” Kraglin grabbed a crate of photon torpedoes and started shoving it up the loading ramp. “Did you try askin' the cap'n?”

“He doesn't know and he doesn't care!” Meredith put her hand on her forehead. “Something's wrong, I just know it. He's in trouble or in danger or something!”

“Ms. Q.” Kraglin finished pushing the crate up the ramp, then turned around and looked at Meredith. “Ms. Q, you gotta take a deep breath.”

“Don't tell me to calm down!” Meredith bristled.

“That ain't what I'm sayin'.” Kraglin held his hands up as if in surrender. “Just take a deep breath and think, 'where would Peter be?'”

Meredith closed her eyes. Kraglin kept loading crates of photon torpedoes, shoving each crate up the ramp where Drazkar would carry them off.

Meredith put her face in her hands. “Either he's watching all the ships fly off, standing on the bridge, or he's gotten onto one of the ships because he wants to see space.”

“Then he's on the bridge,” Kraglin said.
"But what if he got onto one of the ships?"

"Trust me." Kraglin snorted. "Only a complete idjit could fly off without realizin' that kid is on their ship."

Meredith nodded. "You're right. You're right. I'll check the bridge, thank you."

After Meredith walked off, Drazkar bared his sharp teeth at Kraglin.

"Why are you always helping her? She's so emotional!"

"What, just because she gives a damn about her own goddamn son?" Kraglin scowled. "You're just jealous because nobody gives that much of a fuck about you. Load the damn torpedoes and shut up, Draz."

Drazkar growled, but obediently slid the torpedoes into the launcher.

"Besides," Kraglin said, "ain't it kinda nice?"

"Ravagers aren't 'nice'."

"I meant havin' her around is nice," Kraglin said, "what with the laundry and the dishes. Ain't havin' to do any more soft work, are we?"

"That's true." Gef came on over the comms. "Sorry mates, couldn't help but listen."

"Gef, goddamn it, are you eavesdroppin'?" Drazkar threw the empty crates down the loading ramp; they bounced and slid the rest of the way down.

"Just sayin', Krags has got a point." Gef's voice emanated from the cockpit of the ship. "Not havin' to do any soft work is nice. More time for doin' what Ravagers are meant to do; make money."

Drazkar grunted in acknowledgement. "Can't argue with that."

Kraglin dropped into the pilot's seat and took a deep breath. The cap'n was starting to think that Meredith was turning the Ravagers soft. If he suspected she was a liability, he'd get rid of her; Ego's units be damned. He might even throw the kid with her. Kraglin just couldn't let that happen. Yondu had to think that Meredith and Peter were assets; all Kraglin had to do was convince the crew, and the crew would convince Yondu.

Flipping on a handful of switches, Kraglin started the ship. "Gef, you still on comms?"

"Sure am. Stay safe out there, you stupid sons-of-bitches."

Kraglin grinned. "Will do, you lazy fat sack of shit."

The ship pulled forwards and joined the steady stream of M-craft that were exiting the Eclector. Kraglin looked at the gleaming ships plastered with colors, decals of women, and tally marks that kept track of kills. Down below was Maorda-4, a glistening silver planet of ice. Hanging over it was a Kree warship and a hundred fighters, locked in battle with the Maordan militia. Kraglin looked down at the battle, then back at the Ravager crafts.

"Alright boys." Yondu's voice came on over the comms. "Let's go get 'em."

A massive wave of cheers greeted this statement; Kraglin himself let out a passionate whoop. As they plummeted down towards the battle, Kraglin had a moment of supreme clarity. He was here,
going where he was supposed to be going and doing what he was truly meant to do. This was what he was made for.

Damn, he was glad to be a Ravager.

Yondu led the charge. Kree ships changed their formation in reaction to the unexpected Ravager attack; Yondu had predicted this. The Ravager fleet split into two; half of them began peppering the Kree ships and protected the militia, and the other half went straight for the warship. Yondu tapped the comm link.

“Kraglin, keep 'em off me. I'm goin' for the shipment.”

Dwarfed by the Kree warship and blurred by the laser fire, a large cargo ship was drifting just behind the militia. With the Ravagers defending them, they'd scarcely notice Yondu slipping in. The ship itself was clearly automated; no one in his right mind would fly a machine filled to the brim with highly-combustible explosives. Except Yondu, maybe.

He pulled up next to the cargo ship and tapped the comms link. “Gef, can you get a lock on it?”

“Aye, captain. Forcing a boarding procedure.”

The cargo ship's loading ramp was more of a loading tube; it sealed onto Yondu's ship, and he walked across it, his finger to his comm unit.

“Kraglin?”

“Ain't nobody even noticed you're down there, cap'n.”

Yondu bared his teeth in a crooked grin. He approached a sealed vault door.

“Gef?”

“On it, captain. Forcing vault override procedure.”

The vault door swung open. Yondu rubbed his mouth to keep from grinning so much. He was supposed to be a goddamn professional, and professionals don't smile.

In the vault were rows upon rows of glowing green tubes. They were tightly held in boxes that prevented them from hitting each other. If that glass so much as cracked, the contents would react with every available molecule within a very wide radius. In short, boom.

Yondu slid the boxes out very carefully. He figured he could safely carry about two at one time, so if he made it to his ship and back in twenty seconds, that was six boxes per minute. If every box carried about ten tubes, and each tube was worth eight-hundred units...

The crooked grin was back. He was going to make 240,000 units in five minutes.

“Cap'n?” Kraglin's voice came over the comms. “You've got about three Kree headed your way.”

“Take care of 'em.” Yondu hoisted twin boxes of plasma tubes. “I got the goods.”

Yondu carried the boxes across the loading tube, then carefully took them down to the cargo hold. An Orloni squealed and jumped over his foot; Yondu kicked it.
“Damn things,” Yondu said.

He sat the boxes down; the light from the plasma washed the entire cargo hold in lime green light. Yondu turned around and climbed up the ladder.

“Two down,” he said, “a shit-ton more to go.”

Yondu crossed back to the cargo ship and slid two more boxes off the ship.

“Cap'n? The Kree have definitely noticed you now,” said Kraglin over the comms link, “and I think they figured out who you are.”

“Keep 'em off me, Kraglin.” Yondu carefully picked up a box.

“You can handle five goddamn ships.”

“This is more like... fifty.”

Yondu nearly dropped the box.

“Shit!” He gripped it tight, his heart pounding. “Gef, tell the idiots defending the militia to get their slack-asses over here.”

“Trying to disengage, captain, but we risk turning our back to them. They're trying to get behind us.”

Yondu cursed and put down the box. “I'll take care of the Kree.”

“Cap'n, watch out!” Kraglin shouted over the comm link.

The cargo ship shook with impact; Yondu grabbed the frame of the door to steady himself. The plasma tubes tickled each other, tinkling threateningly.

“Good shot, cap'n!”

Yondu looked up. Someone was in his ship. He went running down the loading tube as fast as he could. Yondu whirled onto his ship, grabbed the pilot's chair, and spun it around.

Peter Quill looked up at him with big, slightly-watery green eyes. The weapons systems were active; the boy had shot the Kree himself. Yondu looked down; there was a dead Orloni was lying in Peter's lap.

“Skeletor's dead.” Peter picked up the Orloni corpse and dangled it in front of Yondu's face. “He got fried by the cords he chewed.”

Yondu blinked his crimson eyes. He was hallucinating. There was no way that Peter Quill was sitting in front of him holding a dead Orloni. There was no way in hell that Peter Quill had just shot down a Kree fighter. Yondu had finally lost it; there was no other explanation. Terrans just weren't smart enough to do this kind of thing.

“Cap'n? They're coming around again.”

Yondu looked up; three Kree ships were approaching from the front in a triangle position. Yondu grabbed Peter under the arms and tossed him into the co-pilot's seat.
“Buckle up, boy.” Yondu dropped into the pilot's seat and interfaced with the weapons system.

Peter quickly latched the belt around his waist. Yondu aimed and fired; the Kree fired back, but Yondu caught the middle one's wing; as it spiraled out of control, it took the ship on the right with it. The other Kree ship was left without a wingman; it wisely flew off to regroup.

“That was cool.” Peter's eyes were wide with admiration.

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up slightly. He was pretty cool, wasn't he.

“Gef, I need you to shut off that loading tube.”

“Done, captain.”

“Kraglin, I want you to take the goods.”

“Me, cap'n? What about you?”

“They're followin' me. Must be about that bounty in all them Kree provinces.” Yondu soared off. “I gotta get back to the goddamned Eclector.”

“Cap'n? Somethin' wrong?”

Yondu bared his teeth in a half-grin, half-grimace.

“Tell Meredith Quill I found her goddamn son.”

Peter had scarcely stepped off the ship when Meredith snatched him up in her arms.

“Peter! Oh my God, Peter!”

“Hi mom.” Peter could barely speak because of how tight she was hugging him.

“What happened? Are you hurt, are you okay?” Meredith set Peter down and cupped his face in her hands. “Peter, what did you think you were doing?”

“It was an accident, Mom. I was chasing my Orloni.” Peter held up the dead Orloni as proof. “But I got into the cargo unit by accident. I'm really sorry.”

Meredith blinked back tears. All the adrenaline was leaving her body; she started to shake slightly.

“Never do that again, baby,” she said.

“I promise to never chase an Orloni onto Yondu's ship ever again,” he replied.

Sighing, Meredith put her hands on Peter's shoulders.

“My little trouble-making angel,” she said.

Peter hugged her legs. “Yondu brought me back. I was going to say thank you, but I think he was really angry at me. Do you think he'll let me say thank you later?”

Meredith turned around to thank Yondu, but he and his ship were already gone.

“I think he knows, baby.”
As punishment for stowing away on Yondu's ship, Meredith made Peter go to his room and stay there until the battle was over. Meredith herself sat on the bridge, shaking. All the excitement wasn't good for her, she knew that, but she couldn't help it. Now that she had a minute to think, she was sorting through how she felt.

She couldn't be angry at Peter, of course. It'd been an accident; he was only chasing after the Orloni. It wasn't Kraglin's fault; it wasn't his job to keep tabs on Peter. No, Meredith could only blame herself... and Yondu.

It was her fault for losing Peter; she acknowledged that. But Yondu had flown off with her son in a cargo unit and allowed him to operate a spaceship without adult supervision. Peter had shot down a Kree fighter. With a small shiver, Meredith realized Peter had killed that Kree. Yondu had turned her baby from a thief into a killer. That, she reflected, was why she was angry. Yondu was forcing Peter to grow up too soon and putting him through too much. Peter was just a baby.

Meredith rubbed her arms; without her jacket, she shivered and shook. Still sitting on the ground, she looked at all the monitors in the bridge; they showed the battle. The Ravagers had disabled the thrusters on the Kree warship. The Maoran militia was hammering it, trying to completely destroy it. Meredith could pick Kraglin's ship out from the mass; it was making its way towards the cargo ship.

Then, everything went wrong. Kraglin was chased away from the cargo by a triad of Kree fighters. A militia ship saw and dived, trying to keep them off Kraglin. The Kree reversed their formation and fired at the militia ship. The wing was clipped; it spiraled right towards the cargo ship. The militia craft bumped the side of the cargo ship, which moved slightly in the void.

Meredith held her breath. “Oh God, no.”

The craft exploded in a sunburst of green light. The militia ship was eviscerated; the expanding wave of plasma took out two of the Kree fighters following Kraglin.

“Come on, come on!” Meredith was on her feet. “Faster, honey!”

Kraglin raced against the expanding plasma, dodging the laser fire from the pursuing Kree fighter. He soared over and under, avoiding shrapnel from the cargo ship and heading towards the main body of Ravager ships.

“Come on.” Meredith walked along the line of monitors, following Kraglin's progress. “Come on, honey.”

The Kree ship fired; it clipped Kraglin's thrusters, slowing him down considerably. Meredith's breath caught in her throat. The Kree fighter was right on top of Kraglin. There was no way it would miss again.

A blue stream of light shot across the screen, and the Kree ship exploded. Yondu's craft soared into view, coming in to flank Kraglin's. Meredith exhaled; thank God for proton torpedoes. Behind her, Gef was whooping on the comms.

“Damn fine shooting, captain! Holy shit!”

“Thanks, cap'n.” Kraglin's voice was heavy with relief.

“Don't say that, idjit,” Yondu said over the comms.
Meredith looked back at the comms unit. She was still upset with Yondu; he'd still made Peter into a Ravager much too quickly. But if what Yondu had just done was any indication, he wouldn't have let Peter get hurt. Ravagers protected their own, she remembered, and whether she liked it or not, Peter was becoming a Ravager.

When the crew got back on the Eclector, they all met on the bridge. Gef replayed the recordings of the battle, and the crew watched. They brought snacks and drinks, and sat around and commented on the events. Meredith thought it was kind of like a movie night; a really violent, aggressive movie night.

“So, that shot there.” Kraglin pointed at the shot that hit the Kree ship. “That shot was Pete?”

“Damn fool,” Yondu grunted.

Peter stared at his feet.

“Good shot though,” Yondu allowed.

Peter beamed. Meredith closed her eyes and ignored the twinge of annoyance that passed through her. She should be proud; her son saved Yondu's ship, and if that ship had hit the plasma cargo, both he and Yondu would have been eviscerated. She should be proud. She should not be annoyed that Peter liked praise from Yondu. She should definitely not react to this in a petty way.

But, she couldn't help it. Meredith looked at Kraglin. “What was it you said? Only a complete idiot would take off without realizing Peter was aboard the ship?”

Kraglin shuffled, muttering, “I didn't say that.”

The crew chuckled; Yondu glared a hole in the back of Meredith's head. She couldn't help but smile. Maybe it was petty, but he'd dragged her son to a plasma time-bomb. Speaking of plasma, they watched as the militia craft bumped the cargo ship. Green flashed across the screen; they all groaned.

“There went all the goddamn units,” Gef said.

Peter shuffled awkwardly, hoisting his backpack a little higher. “Oh no. How sad.”

Meredith stroked his hair. “Not your fault, baby.”

Kraglin grinned as the crew began whooping appreciatively; Kraglin's feat outrunning the plasma explosion was the most exciting part of the battle. They watched with admiration as he spiraled past shrapnel and dodged laser fire.

“Not bad,” Yondu muttered.

Meredith had never seen Kraglin smile so big. Then, a streak of blue on the screen was met with applause. Yondu grinned slightly.

“Photon torpedoes,” Kraglin said, “like homin' pidgeons of death.”

Meredith watched the ships on screen disperse; the Ravagers returned to the Eclector and shot off into space, and the feed cut.

“Gef,” she said softly, “can I get a copy of that?”
Gef wrinkled his pig-like nose. “Why?”

“Just do it.”

A few clicks and some data transfer later, and Gef handed Meredith a datapad. She thanked him, then took a pen and scrawled over the label; *Peter's First Space Battle*.

Whether Meredith liked it or not, Peter was growing. She was just going to have to accept that this was his life now. All she could do was keep being the best mother she could be, and if that meant that he was going to end up a Ravager, she was going to make sure he was the kindest, most talented, most morally straight Ravager in the galaxy.

Despite the movie night and the fact that none of them had died, the crew was still pissed. They’d dived in to get the plasma, and instead all they’d done was save a stupid little planet’s militia. Sure, they’d gotten to kill some Kree, but what was the point if you didn't get paid. Yondu surveyed his crew, judging their morale.

Yondu grimaced. “Take the night off, boys.”

The crew dispersed in low spirits. It was a sheer miracle that none of them had died, but they didn't have anything to show for it except wounds and stories. They filed into the mess hall, popped open some bottles, and drank. When Meredith walked in four hours later, they were all snoring, face-down, on the table.

“Poor boys.” Meredith would never say it if they were awake, but they were out cold. “Been a tough day for all of us.”

She draped a few blankets over their shoulders and tried to keep the heavier ones from sliding off the table. Cleaning up the dishes didn't take long; she charged two units a dish towards the Ravager who's duty it had been to wash them. After that, she went looking for Peter. She found him on the bridge, tapping away at Yondu's holographic display.

“Peter?”

“It wasn't me!” Peter jumped, wide-eyed.

Meredith sighed. Yondu had definitely made an impact on her son. She walked up and looked at the holographic screen.

“What are you up to, baby?”

Peter slowly reached up and tapped a button. “Nothing?”

“Peter.” Meredith frowned.

“You know those plasma thingies?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you know how I wasn't supposed to be on Yondu's ship but then my Orloni got on it?”

Meredith closed her eyes. “Yes, Peter. Never do that again.”

“Oh I won't,” Peter said quickly, “but you know how I was hiding in the cargo hold on his ship?”

“Yes, baby.”
“And he was next to the big ship full of plasma?”

“Get to the point, baby.”

“Well…” Peter opened his backpack. It was filled to the brim with green tubes. “When he put the tubes in the cargo hold, I kinda borrowed some.”

Meredith's eyes shot open. She picked up Peter and ran him to the other side of the bridge.

“Mom, what are you doing?” Peter kicked his legs. “I'm trying to sell those!”

“Peter, those are dangerous.” She put him down and gripped his shoulders firmly. “Young man, don't you ever go handling explosives without adult supervision again!”

Meredith gripped him in a tight hug, screwing her eyes shut. Peter squeezed her as firmly as he could.

“It's okay, Mom.”

“No, Peter. It's not okay. That was very dangerous. You did a lot of very dangerous things today and I don't want you doing them again.” Meredith took a deep, shaky breath. “At least, not until you know what you're doing.”

“But mom, I–”

“Peter!” Meredith's voice shot shrill.

“Yes mom.” Peter stared at his shoes, blinking back tears. “I just... we need the money to pay for the surgery, and I thought I could help.”

“Oh baby.” Meredith cupped his face with her hands; she was trying not to cry now, too. “Peter, you are the most thoughtful little angel in the galaxy, but if you aren't around, what am I even alive for? Don't ever risk your life to save mine, baby. A parent should never have to bury their child.”

“But what about you?” Big tears were rolling down Peter's cheeks.

“I'm a big strong woman,” Meredith said, “and I will be okay.”

Peter and Meredith hugged. Then she kissed his forehead and stood up.

“What do we do?”

Meredith looked at the backpack. A crazy, half-formed idea was rushing through her mind. It was stupid. It was risky. But, if it worked, Peter wouldn't be performing petty thievery for Yondu for as long, and Meredith would be one step closer to regaining her full health.

“Mom?”

Meredith crossed to Yondu's chair and picked up the backpack. The tubes inside clinked against each other; Meredith flinched. She’d seen these things in action; she didn't want to see it again. She took most of them out, laying them on Yondu's dashboard.

“Peter, honey, grab me that portable light over there.”

Peter brought her the light; it ran off fusion energy and functioned as an emergency light should the ship's power go down. Meredith started opening drawers in Yondu's desk.
“What are you looking for, mom?”

“Something green.”

Peter went to the trash and started looking. He pulled out a green plastic chip bag; mostly transparent, it was printed on in a language neither of them could read.

“Perfect.” Meredith dropped the portable light in the chip bag and put it in the backpack. She zipped it up, then handed it to Peter. “Baby, be very, very careful.”

Peter looked at the bag, then back at his mother. “Mom, you just put a light in an empty chip bag. What’s going on?”

Meredith's mouth curved into a smile. “Trust me, baby.”

“Captain!” Gef’s voice came on over the comms.

Yondu was lounging in his quarters. He hit the button to connect the comms link. “What is it, Gef?”

“The Quills have gone crazy!”

Yondu swung his legs over the side of the bed. “What are you talkin’ about?”

“Apparently the boy got some of the plasma,” Gef said, “and he's just walkin' around the ship with it!”

Yondu's heart skipped a beat. The plasma. Yondu had grabbed two boxes and completely forgotten about them. Peter had taken them. The most erratic, irresponsible child Yondu had ever met was running around the Eclector carrying moon-destroying explosives. He wasn't sure whether to be livid or proud.

“I'll take care of it. Do you see the boy?”

“Aye, captain. He's headin' towards the hangar bay.”

“Makin' a run for it.” Yondu grunted as he stood. “Wants to sell 'em, make the units for his momma.”

“I'm thinkin' you're right, captain. He's trying to start up a ship.”

Yondu snorted. “He don't know how to to that.”

A roar tore through the ship; the ground under Yondu's feet jolted slightly.

“Perhaps he does, captain?”

Yondu broke out into a sprint. He ended up doubled over, panting, staring at Peter Quill. Peter had settled himself in the pilot seat of Yondu's own M-craft; his little feet couldn't even reach the pedals.

“Hi, Yondu!”

“Quill!” Yondu yelled, then took a couple deep breaths. “What the fuck are you doin', boy?”

Peter unzipped his backpack; a green light shone out.

“Gonna go sell these for units, duh.”
Yondu had to think fast. Peter couldn't start up the ship, but if he tried, he could crash. If he crashed, the plasma would turn Peter, Yondu, and everything within a fifty kilometer radius into green dust. Whatever he did, Yondu couldn't scare him off. This time, if Peter ran for it, he was taking the whole ship with him.

“Why don't you come on out here, boy.” Yondu leaned on the railing. “Let's talk this out.”

“Nothing to talk about.” Peter reached for the gear shift. “I'm gonna go sell the green stuff.”

“Don't touch that!” Yondu's heart shot into his throat. “You tryin' to kill us all?”

Peter blinked. “No. I'm just trying to get units to give to my mom.”

“Look, kid.” Yondu tried a different approach. “I get it. You want money. I can help with that. I'll give you five hundred units for every plasma tube you brought me. That's nice, right? Sounds nice?”

Yondu grinned; his broken teeth still stuck out of his mouth like jagged bones. Peter made a face.

“The holoscreen said I could sell them for eight hundred on the open market.”

Dammit. Maybe the Terran wasn't as stupid as Yondu thought he was. The grin slid off Yondu's face. He was quickly running out of options, so he switched tactics again.

“Listen, boy, you're alive because of me! When we picked you and your momma up on Terra, them boys wanted to eat you! I talked 'em out of it! I saved your life!”

“Normal people don't even think about eating other people!” Peter yelled and reached for the gear shift.

“No!” Yondu reached out with both hands, eyes wide. “Boy! Do not touch that gear shift.”

“Then give me six hundred units for every plasma tube.”

Yondu stared at Peter. A horrible tumult of emotions was washing over him. Peter had stowed away on Yondu's ship without Yondu knowing. He'd saved Yondu from the Kree fighter by pure accident, and then had outwitted him by taking the plasma while no one was looking. He was attempting to steal Yondu's ship. He was risking everyone's life, including his own, for the chance to save his mother. And now, the little shit was haggling with him. Yondu should have wanted to scream; instead, he could scarcely stop from laughing.

“Deal, you little ingrate.”

“Tell Gef,” Peter said.

“What?”

“Gef's on the comms. If Gef hears it, then you can't go back on your word.”

Yondu bared his teeth. “Says who?”

“Says you. I'm a Ravager, you said so.” Peter smiled. “And Ravagers never cheat each other. That's against the code.”

Yondu was ashamed of how proud he was of Peter at that moment. He flicked on the comms.

“Deal, son.”
“Great!” Peter hopped out of the pilot's seat, the backpack slung over his shoulder.

As soon as he left the ship, Yondu ran forwards and snatched the backpack out of his hands.

“You dirty little scum-lickin' idjit!” Froth was coming out of Yondu's mouth; it speckled against Peter's face. “You nearly killed everybody on this goddamn ship! Me! Kraglin! Your own goddamn momma! Your own damn self! What kind of bargain-bin discount stupid did they give you, boy?”

Yondu's face was flush with blood, and he was breathing heavy. Peter had closed his eyes to avoid the spit. As Yondu took a breather, mentally preparing how he was about to rip into the boy, Peter looked up. His eyes opened, and a mischievous little grin spread across his face.

Yondu's eyes narrowed. This was going nowhere good, fast.

Peter unzipped his backpack. In it was a portable light shoved in a bag of chips. Yondu looked up at Peter.

“You sneaky little son-of-a–”

“Meredith just came in, captain.” Gef's voice cut through Yondu's swearing. “Says Peter stashed the plasma tubes in her room. Offered to keep 'em safe until you show up.”

Yondu dragged Peter off by the neck of his jacket, letting a constant stream of curses flow under his breath.

Peter was still smiling.

Meredith knew who came knocking on her door by the sheer aggression of it. She opened the portal and found herself face-to-face with a heated, panting, livid Yondu.

“Hello,” she said.

Yondu lifted Peter by the back of his jacket. “This little shit.”

“Peter,” Meredith said, “have you been causing more trouble?”

“Yes, mom.” Peter smiled.

Meredith had never wanted to laugh more in her entire life, but laughing in Yondu's face might push him over the edge. She wanted him pliable, willing to negotiate, not violent and in a bloodthirsty rage.

“You've got the plasma?”

Meredith lifted the pillow off her bunk; underneath, gently laid side-by-side, were the plasma tubes. There were twenty. Yondu made the calculations. If he was able to sell all of them at market price, they'd be bringing in sixteen thousand units, easy.

“You owe Peter twelve thousand units,” Meredith said.

Yondu's lip curled. He'd been tricked into making a rush deal, and there was no way around it either. He'd given his word, and Gef had heard him. Besides, even if he hadn't, there was security footage backing Peter's claim. Yondu would only be pulling in four thousand units out of a sixteen thousand unit opportunity; only a fraction of what he'd hoped.
“Four thousand units profit ain't much.” He crossed his arms.

Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Would you prefer zero? We can sell it ourselves.”

“You got that plasma with my ship, on my job!”

“And you screwed the job up. Peter took the opportunities presented to him. We're offering you a chance to pull in four thousand units when previously you had zip.” Meredith pursed her lips. “Don't get greedy, Yondu.”

“Greedy dog drops his bone,” Peter said.

“What?” Yondu blinked.

“There's a story about a dog and the dog has a bone and he looks in the water and sees his reflection and thinks the reflection is another dog,” Peter prattled, “and then he sees the dog's bone and he wants that bone so he barks at the other dog and when he barks the real bone falls out of his mouth and in the water and he loses it forever.”

Yondu looked at Peter, who frowned.

“You don't get it,” Peter decided, “because you're allergic.”

“The hell you talkin' about, boy? What do dogs have to do with goddamn anything?”

“His point is,” Meredith said, “you can be happy with four thousand units or you can grab for more that you don't need and lose it all.”

Yondu squinted. Meredith's clear grey eyes were untroubled, despite the fact that there were explosives capable of destroying small moons on her bunk.

“You planned this?” Yondu's voice was dangerously quiet.

“Not until I saw Peter trying to sell these things on the open market,” she admitted, “and then it kind of all came together.”

Yondu put his hands on his hips. “Explain.”

“I knew you wouldn't make a deal with me. I'm not a Ravager.” Meredith stroked Peter's hair. “But you say Peter is. So I sent Peter to the hangar bay so you'd think he was trying to leave. While Peter made the deal, I kept the explosives safe. I couldn't risk him running around with them. But, you needed to believe that he had them, so I threw a portable light in a plastic bag. With his backpack glowing green, you'd have no reason to believe that he didn't have the plasma. With Peter carrying enough explosives to level the Eclector, I figured you'd be more willing to negotiate with him.”

Yondu stared at the Quills. On one hand, they'd tricked him out of sixteen thousand units. On the other hand, Yondu wouldn't even have four thousand if it wasn't for Peter. They'd manipulated him into making a deal. But, they'd still let him in on the cut. Yondu was insulted, but... he was also impressed. Terrans were much smarter than he had previously thought. Maybe too smart.

“Gimme five tubes,” he grunted, “and I'll sell 'em. I'll take that cash, give it around. We'll sell the other ones private-like, so nobody knows they existed. This deal never happened.”

“What about Gef,” Peter asked.

“Gef'll keep his mouth shut for a hundred units,” Yondu said, “but I ain't so sure about you.”
“Peter, honey.” Meredith stroked her son's hair. “If anyone asks, how many plasma tubes did you pick up?”

Peter's face was the picture of innocence. “Just five. They were too heavy to carry any more. I'm just a little Terran.”

The corners of both Meredith and Yondu's mouths threatened smiles.
Chapter Summary

The Eclector lands to let off a little steam. With Kraglin and Peter running off to play video games and eat junk food, Meredith finally gets a moment to herself. There's just one problem; Yondu. The stressed captain also wants some goddamn time alone, and it's kind of hard to be alone with other people. Or is it?

(Ayyyy, title is SU reference.)

A few days later, Meredith noticed that they were making port. She was a little surprised, but not very; Yondu tended to make port as the whim took him, whether to resupply or just to harass the locals. What was surprising was the amount of Ravagers that were preparing to leave the Eclector. Usually everyone remained on board, so Meredith didn't know what was different. It wasn't until midday that she found out.

“Kraglin?” Meredith stepped out from the bathroom, drying her hands on an old t-shirt. “Where's the rest of the crew?”

“We made port to let off a little steam,” Kraglin explained, “after the whole plasma thing. Since Peter snagged us four thousand, we thought we'd blow it on a little recreation.”

Meredith looked out the windows at the neon signs and scantily-clad women. “I see.”

“Can I go, Mom?” Peter looked up hopefully.

“Absolutely not,” said Meredith, “no son of mine is gettin' into that kind of nonsense, Ravager or not.”

“Well, Ms. Quill...” Kraglin shifted slightly. “What if I took him to the arcade?”

“Mom, they have an arcade!” Peter lit up.

“The best arcade in the galaxy,” Kraglin clarified.

“Mom it's the best in the galaxy!” Peter's eyes widened.

“I heard, Peter.” Meredith sighed and crossed her arms. “I don't know...”

“I'd keep an eye on him and keep him away from all the red-light stuff and I'd have him back before midnight,” Kraglin said.

Meredith looked at Peter's wide, shining eyes, and sighed. “Go ahead.”

Kraglin and Peter high-fived.

“Are you coming Mom,” Peter asked.
“No honey, I'll stay on the ship.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “I don't think I'd be very safe out there.”

“You'll be here alone?” Peter frowned.

“Cap'n's staying on the ship,” Kraglin said, “so she'll be fine.”

Peter relaxed instantly. He'd learned from Kraglin to put complete trust in everything Yondu said or did; Meredith thought it could be the start to a real problem.

She sighed. “Guess it's just me and Yondu.”

“Candlelit dinner,” Gef joked as he passed by.

Meredith snorted. “If by candlelit, you mean he set it on fire. He's a horrible cook.”

Kraglin shrugged. “Nobody judges a Ravager by how flaky their pie crust is.”

“I do. So, what's the deal with Yondu staying behind? Is that typical?” Meredith crossed her arms.

“Not really, but cap'n does what the cap'n does.” Kraglin looked down at Peter. “Come on, kid; we gotta make it to the other side of town before sundown.”

“Why?”

“You'll know when you're older,” Meredith said.

“Okay.” Peter hugged his mom. “See you later, Mom. Love you.”

Meredith hugged him back. “I love you too.”

Kraglin shifted awkwardly, but Meredith rubbed his shoulder fondly.

“You stay safe, Kraglin,” she said, “and keep an eye on my baby.”

“Yes, Ms. Quill.”

Being one of two people left on the ship was kind of nice. Meredith took a long, hot shower without worrying about any accidental voyeurism. She took as long as she wanted doing her laundry; it still exhausted her, but she relaxed in her room and played her music as loud as she pleased. The only issue was dinner; her name was up on the list, so feeding Yondu was her responsibility.

The kitchen was fairly well-stocked. Over the past few weeks, Meredith had gotten used to the foreign foods and had started to figure out what tasted good together. Meredith's father had taught her to cook. Looking around, she decided she had enough ingredients to make stew. She figured that had to be good enough for Yondu. He wasn't picky...usually.

Meredith diced up some laukha meat and tested some potato-like vegetables. They were a little sweet, so she balanced it out with a salty, garlic-like root. By the time Yondu strode into the mess hall, it was filled with the savory steam of the stew. He sat down, and Meredith placed a full bowl in front of him.

Yondu curled his lip. “What is this?”

“It's stew.” Meredith ladled some into her own bowl. “You're gonna eat it.”
“Says who?”

“You wanna cook your own dinner?” Meredith gestured with a spoon. “Because I can guarantee it ain't gonna be as tasty as that.”

Yondu stuck a spoonful of stew in his mouth, glowering at Meredith. She put the pot back on the stove, then turned around. Yondu was staring at his bowl.

“Holy fuck,” he said.

Meredith grinned. “That bad?”

Yondu picked up the bowl and started drinking.

“Yondu!” Meredith grabbed his shoulder. “Yondu, that's got chunks in it! You'll choke if you try to drink it! Chew, dammit!”

Yondu swallowed, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “I know how to fuckin' eat, Mery.”

“Sure you do.” Meredith rolled her eyes.

“More.” Yondu slid the bowl down to her.

“What's the magic word.”

“More, goddamit.”

“That's not the magic word, Yondu.” Meredith tried using the baby voice she used to use on Peter. “Can you say the magic word? Can you say, 'Please'?”

“I ain't a child.”

“Then why are you throwing a tantrum?” Meredith stirred the stew with a ladle. “Come on, say the magic word.”

“I want more motherfuckin' goddamn son-of-a-bitchin' stew.”

“That's not the magic word, Yondu,” Meredith sang.

“I ain't sayin' please on my own goddamn ship!” Yondu snarled.

Meredith gasped. “You said the magic word! Good job!”

She put a full bowl of steaming hot soup right in front of him.

“Eat up. There's more when you're done.”

That was more to Yondu’s speed. He slurped and munched through his second bowl while Meredith ate her first. She blew gently on each steaming mouthful.

“All food on Terra this good?”

“No,” she replied, “not really. This is a special recipe.”

“Where's it from?”

“My papa. He made it with deer steak, but this ain't bad.”
“Bad?” Yondu snorted, then drained a bit more broth; he slurped when he drank. “Ain't bad.”

“Good?”

“Damn good.”

Meredith smiled. “Good.”

Yondu pushed his empty bowl towards her; she sighed, stood up, and filled it again.

“Hungry today, aren't you.”

“Had a shitty week.” Yondu took the bowl back. “Gotta grab this before somebody else does.”

“Somebody else?” Meredith sat back down. “We're the only people on the ship, genius, and I promise you I can't eat all that. If my vision goes blurry again, that'd all come right back up.”

“Don't need that image,” he grunted.

When she finished, Meredith took the dishes to the sink. Yondu leaned back in his chair and suppressed a belch. He watched Meredith go about her business.

“Your hair's back,” he said.

“Yeah, thanks for noticing.” Meredith smiled, running her hands over the soft velvet of her incoming hair. “I can actually fit into pants now too, it's great. Whatever Dr. Mareet put in those little black pills, it really worked. I feel so much better. I'm actually kind of excited for the first cybernetic surgery; Peter says the plasma shipment raked in enough units to pay for the pain inhibitor.”

From out of the cabinet, she pulled a tall glass bottle filled with amber liquid; some kind of Terran drink. Yondu watched her uncork it.

“What is it,” he asked.

“Whiskey.” She poured herself a stout glass of it. “Terran liquor. Kraglin found it for me a few days ago. I'm not allowed to drink before the procedure, so I'm doing it now.”

“Pour me one.”

Meredith grabbed another glass and poured the amber liquid in.

She handed it to Yondu. “Cheers.”

He lifted the glass lazily, then knocked a good fourth of the liquid down his throat. “This shit ain't bad. Thought you didn't drink.”

“I don't drink around Peter,” she corrected, “but Kraglin's babysitting.”

“You left Peter with Kraglin?” Yondu's eyebrows furrowed. “On this goddamn planet?”

“They're going to the arcade.”

“Like hell.” Yondu snorted. “Kraglin's usin' Peter as chic bait; I'd stake my life on it.”

Meredith's eyes narrowed. “No, he took him to the arcade. He wouldn't lie to me.”

“Yes he would. Peter's chic bait.”
“They're at the arcade.”

“Chic bait.”

“Arcade.”

“Chic bait.”

“Arcade.”

“Chic bait.”

“Arcade,” Meredith said, “and I'll stake twenty units on it.”

“Only twenty? You ain't that certain.” Yondu took another sip of his drink. “Hundred units says he's chic bait.”

“Five hundred units says he's at the arcade.” Meredith knocked back some whiskey. “Kraglin wouldn't lie to me, I'm telling you.”

“Kraglin is a goddamned Ravager.” Yondu growled. “One thousand fuckin' units. He's chic bait.”

“I'll take that bet!” Meredith put her hands on her hips. “And if I'm wrong, I'll cook you a whole vat of stew, that's what I'll do.”

“If I'm wrong, which I ain't,” Yondu said, “I'll let you fly the goddamned Eclector.”

“Deal,” she said.

Yondu held his hand out. Meredith took it, and they shook hands with equally shrewd expressions. Yondu's hand was rough, laced with scars, and heavy; Meredith's was slender, soft, and surprisingly strong.

“Maybe we're both wrong.” Meredith pulled her hand back. “Maybe Peter's using Kraglin as a chic magnet.”

Yondu laughed. “That'll be the day. He'll be a proper Ravager then.”

“Shooting guns, flying spaceships, hitting on alien women...” Meredith sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. “What am I going to do with him when we get back on Earth?”

Yondu's chest tightened. “What's so damn special about Terra, anyway?”

“It's beautiful.”

“So's the whole goddamn galaxy.”

“It's comfortable.”

“You can get comfortable anywhere, that's what hotels are for.”

“It's full of people who love and care about us.”

Yondu opened his mouth, then closed it, scowling. “Got me there, though I can't imagine why anybody'd care about anyone as damn annoyin' as you two.”

Meredith laughed. “You'll have to ask when you drop us off. I'm sure my papa would just love to
“Meet you.”

“Really?”

“No. He'd probably sit you down, give you a whiskey, and then give you his man-speech,” she said, “about integrity and honor and character and what makes a man worth somethin' in this life.”

“But it comes with free liquor?”

“Usually, yeah.”

“Fuck it, sign me up.”

Meredith grinned and sipped her whiskey, but her eyes were distant. Yondu fiddled with his glass; he could see Meredith out of the corner of his eye. To his surprise, tears started to drip down her face. She set her whiskey down and started scrubbing the stew pot, keeping her back to Yondu. Trying to hide, he decided.

“What's with the waterworks?” Yondu decided making her a little uncomfortable wasn't such a bad idea. “Why are both you Terrans always cryin' all the goddamn time.”

“I miss my father.” Her voice was surprisingly steady. “I don't suppose that's something you can understand. Parents, I mean.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The way you act.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

Meredith turned around. Her eyes weren't red, and her mouth was flat as a line.

“You act like you didn't have any parents growing up. I can see it in the way you interact with people, the way you treat them. I've seen it before on Earth, er, I mean Terra.”

Yondu scowled. “Who died and made you a goddamned psychologist?”

Meredith shrugged. “I'm not a shrink, I just made a hypothesis. Am I wrong?”

“Shut up,” he grunted.

Meredith tilted her head. “I'm not wrong. You're an orphan.”

“I said shut up.” Yondu slammed his whiskey on the table.

His aggression sparked Meredith's adrenaline.

“Or what, you'll kill me?” Meredith knocked back the whiskey in one burning gulp. “Look, pal, if it was cheaper for Peter I'd let you do it.”

“Goddamned Terrans.” Yondu stood up and made a beeline for the door.

“You are so dramatic.” Meredith dropped her glass in the sink. “Why are you such an asshole?”

Yondu punched the panel that opened the door. “Why are you such a goddamned bitch?”

“Because some blue asshole abducted me from my planet and makes my son steal shit for a living.”
Meredith threw her hands in the air; the angrier she got, the more her Missouri accent bled through. “What mother wouldn't be a bitch in that situation? You tried to take him without me! If I'd been two seconds late, you would have just sped him off into the stars.”

“Shoulda done it.” The goddamned door was jammed; Yondu had hit it too hard. “Shoulda just taken the boy and left your ass on Terra.”

“I would have found him.”

Yondu barked a laugh. “How?”

“Don't ask me how. I would have done it.” Meredith stalked over and popped open the door panel; a few disconnected wires appeared to be the problem. “You don't understand. You don't have kids and you didn't have parents. You don't understand.”

Yondu bared his teeth. “Don't tell me what I don't understand.”

“If you haven't had kids, you don't understand.” Meredith started connecting the wires. The faster she got Yondu away from her, the better she was going to feel. “I'd rather die than see my boy taken away from me and used as a slave.”

“He ain't a slave.” Yondu's voice had taken a dark tone.

Meredith pursed her lips. “You're exploiting him for money.”

“He gets the money.”

“And spends it on me.”

“That's his choice.”

“Wow, what a choice. Work for me, or your mom dies. Wow.” Meredith snapped the panel back on. “What a choice. With options like that, how can he not work?”

“He could just not give a fuck about his momma,” Yondu said.

“You don't know Peter. He's a good boy.” Meredith hit the button; the portal opened. “Better than you, better than me. He's a downright angel, and I'd die a thousand deaths before I let anyone hurt him. And you can't understand that because I don't think anyone's ever done that for you, and you've never done that for anyone else, either.”

Yondu stared at the open portal. “When did you learn to do that?”

“Kraglin taught me,” Meredith muttered, “the one in the cargo bay always sticks.”

With that, Meredith turned her back and went back to scrubbing the stew pot. Yondu went to his quarters, scowling the entire time. Damn Terran; who did she think she was? If it wasn't for the boy, Yondu'd kick her ass to Ego and let her get killed. As it was, she wasn't worth the trouble of the call anyway. Yondu ripped off his shirt and crawled in bed, then lay there, glaring at the ceiling. The clock on his desk read only 7:37, but Yondu just wanted to sleep. He was so used to the sounds of other Ravagers snoring that the silence seemed too loud for him, but eventually he slipped into fitful sleep.

Meredith was walking by Yondu's quarters when she heard the yelling. Guttural, panicked yelling.
Thinking Yondu was being attacked, she threw open the door to his quarters. Meredith peered in the dark. No one was there except Yondu, but he was twitching and turning in his sleep and letting out strangled yells.

“Yondu?” She took a few hesitant steps into the room. “Are you okay?”

He let out a strangled sound, and Meredith realized he wasn't turning; he was fighting in his sleep, and he was going to hurt himself.

“You big blue...darn it.” Meredith sighed. “Fine, here I come.”

She walked up and gently put her hands on his thick blue wrists. “Shh, come on.”

That was the wrong thing to do. With a bellow, Yondu threw her to the side. Meredith screamed and kicked; her feet whacked uselessly against him. She was flat on her back, pressed down against the mattress and scarcely able to breathe. Yondu had his forearm pressed across her chest, his whole body weight pinning her down. The red eyes were wide, almost manic, and his teeth were bared in a snarl. He was holding his arrow to her throat.

For a few seconds, all they could hear was their own breathing. He let out a grunt of surprise and rolled off her, and she sat up, gasping.

“What the hell are you doin' in here?” Yondu dropped the arrow. “Nearly killed you.”

“You were yelling in your sleep. I thought you were in trouble. I came in, and you were... flailing, I guess.” Meredith panted. “I tried to hold you still. You freaked out.”

Yondu slung his legs over the bed. He rested his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands. Meredith stared at his muscled back. She'd seen her father do that when things were just too bad to handle. She scooted over and sat next to him, her hands folded in her lap. Yondu's breathing was labored and heavy; his back was slightly shiny with sweat. A nightmare, Meredith thought.

“Where were you,” she asked.

“What?”

“In the dream. Where were you?”

Yondu growled. “None of your goddamn business.”

“It helps to talk about nightmares. It makes them less real.” Meredith's voice was soft. “And it's not like you're damaging your reputation. I already know you could kill me quite literally in your sleep; you just proved that. Nightmares or not, you're honestly kind of terrifying. I've got no reason to tell anyone, and besides, I'm not that kind of person. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but it's not like you're hurting yourself if you do. Plus, you know, if I did tell anyone? You could just kill me.”

Meredith watched Yondu's back rise and fall. She waited.

“Hala,” he said, “Kree homeworld.”

“You looked like you were getting pretty violent.” Meredith kept her tone light. “Who were you beating the crap out of?”

“I was getting the shit kicked out of me.” Yondu stared at the floor.
“With muscles like yours, that’s hard to imagine.”

“I wasn’t ten years old yet.”

Meredith frowned. “Who was hitting you?”

Yondu bared his teeth. “Dal-Char.”

“How old was he?”

“Adult. He trained the battle slaves. Motherfuckin’ Kree son-of-a-bitch.”

Slowly, it dawned on Meredith what he was saying. She looked at the scars on his head, on his back and wrists, then swallowed.

“That must’ve been hard to go through.”

“It was hell,” Yondu spat.

“How did you end up on the Kree homeworld?”

Yondu sat up. His eyes were distant, and his lip curled.

“Got sold,” he said, “when I was a bitty baby.”

Meredith’s heart wrenched. She had an inexplicable urge to hug Yondu and tell him things were going to be okay, but she figured that was a guaranteed way to get her neck broken.

“Your parents sold you.”

Yondu nodded.

Meredith stared at the floor. “How could they do that?”

“Units,” he said.

“But why?”

“They didn’t want me.” Yondu’s voice was dead.

Meredith looked at him for a few seconds, then back at the floor.

“Yeah, well, their loss. You ended up a Ravager captain with a fleet of ships, a crew that’d die for you, and all the freedom in the galaxy. Your average parent would be glad.”

Yondu snorted. “Don’t think any momma in her goddamned mind would want me.”

“Well, if you stopped running around after women and exploiting Peter for child labor and stopped swearing all the goddamn time,” Meredith said, “I’d consider mothering you. I’m already mothering everyone else, why not get in on the opportunity? It’s free, I swear.”

A bark of a laugh tore out of Yondu’s throat. “You’re nuts.”

Meredith smiled. “Yeah, but so’s everyone else on this ship.”

Yondu grinned, then looked over at Meredith. She wasn’t giving him the pity look he’d come to loathe. He hadn’t made her uncomfortable. No, she just looked at him the same way as ever. He was
still, in her eyes, a terrifying, heartless, unit-loving Ravager captain. Good; the last thing he needed was Meredith Quill getting sentimental and motherly.

“So, can I go to sleep or do I need to stay in here in case you try to strangle your desk lamp?”

Yep, definitely not sentimental or motherly. He stood up and rolled his shoulders.

“You should go,” he said, “before somebody comes in and wonders what the hell you're doin' in my bed.”

Meredith laughed. “Tucking you in, of course. You want me to sing? I'm getting my voice back so I'm much better now.”

“Go take your goddamn pills so you're not useless tomorrow,” he said.

“Will do.” She stood up and went to the door. “Yondu?”

“What?”

“Why didn't you get off the ship? Booze, neon, girls with low standards.” She shrugged. “Seems like your kind of party.”

“Didn't want you stealing my ship and sailin' back to Terra,” he said.

“Really?”

Yondu turned to her. In the light from the door, she could see him clearly. His chest and arms were covered in well-defined muscle. If he wasn't that weird shade of blue, Meredith decided, he'd be worth looking at. Then she looked at his face and remembered that he was ugly as sin.

“That shit on Maorda-4 was goddamned exhausting,” he admitted, “and I wanted five seconds without havin' to lead a damn army.”

Meredith smiled slightly. “Leadership's a burden; I won't argue with you there.”

“That's a goddamn change of pace,” he grumbled.

She grinned and left him alone. As soon as she left, Yondu closed the door and sat back down on his bed. It'd been years since he had that dream. Meredith's bickering about proper parenting must have triggered it. Yondu rubbed his face. He didn't want to go back to sleep; he was afraid he'd have it again. Usually he didn't have much choice; with the Ravagers around, he could show no weakness. After all, dreams weren't real.

“But they're goddamned terrifyin','” he muttered aloud.

He sat back up and looked around for something to distract him. Kraglin's bedroll was crooked. Drazkar had left his bobby pins all over the floor; hell if Yondu knew what he used them for. Gef's desk drawers were a mess, as usual. Hooked on the corner of his cardboard box of clothes were Peter's headphones. His Walkman was laid nearby. Peter hadn't taken them with him; smart boy, Yondu thought. Something like that was at high-risk of being stolen. Looking at the Walkman, a stupid idea was running through Yondu's head. Seeing as the alternative was to sleep, he decided to chase it.

The child headphones didn't fit over Yondu's fin. He had to grab a pair of earbuds from Gef's desk and fiddle with the aux cord to get it to work. Terran technology was stupid, low-tech garbage.
Finally he laid in bed, staring at the ceiling, with the tape slowly rotating in his hands. This Terran music wasn't bad, he thought. He didn't know what the hell 'yoga' was, or a 'pina colada', but he thought 'champagne' was a kind of Terran liquor. Yondu let the entire tape play through, then went back and listened again. He looked over at the clock on his desk; 11:38. Peter would be back soon; Kraglin would want to have the kid back on the Eclector before midnight.

Yondu yanked the earbuds out and tossed them back on Gef's desk. He plugged Peter's headphones back in and placed the Walkman in as close to its original position as he could, gently hooking the headphones over the rim of the box. Yondu didn't know why he didn't want the kid knowing he'd messed with his shit, but dammit, he didn't.

“Cap'n?” Kraglin's voice came over the comm. “Coming aboard, cap'n.”

“Got it,” Yondu grunted.

Kraglin and Peter walked up the loading ramp with huge grins. Their faces were smeared with the leftovers from some frozen drinks; Kraglin had made sure they made a virgin one for Peter. The arcade had been packed, but that was fine. Kraglin had showed Peter all his favorite games, and Peter had shown Kraglin how to play the game with the yellow pie thing and the dots. They'd gotten into a bit of a spat with some Oskavarians playing something Peter called “air hockey”. It turns out Peter was pretty good at that, too; they'd won fifty units in bets when they beat the Oskavarians. Kraglin had thought taking Peter out would just be a way to give Ms. Quill some rest; he hadn't expected it to be this fun. The kid was a goddamn rascal, but he wasn't all bad.

Yondu was standing at the top of the ramp with his hands on his hips. Meredith was standing a little ways behind him, tugging her jacket on.

“Hey boys!” She waved. “Did you have fun!”

“Yeah!” Peter grinned, showing green teeth. “I had a big green drink with an umbrella in it and it was tasty!”

Meredith chuckled. “I bet! Was the arcade good?”

“It was awesome!” Peter ran up the ramp, still bubbling with excitement. “They had Pac-Man! And air hockey! And this holographic game where you blast jellyfish!”

Meredith grinned. “That's great, baby.”

“Where else did you go,” Yondu asked.

Kraglin blinked. “We just went to the arcade, cap'n.”

Yondu chuckled. “Sure you did.”

“No, really, cap'n.” Kraglin pulled arcade tickets out of his pockets. “Peter and I were hustlin' folks for their units. Kid's pretty good at that Terran game with the yellow pie.”

“Pac-Man,” Peter said, “he's called Pac-Man.”

“Whatever.”

The grin had slid off of Yondu's face. “You didn't go anywhere else?”
“No, cap'n.” Kraglin shrugged. “Peter's too young to go anywhere else, plus I promised Ms. Quill.”

Meredith smiled and put her left hand on her hip. Her right hand she held in front of Yondu's face, wiggling her fingers.

“Cough it up, buttercup.”

“Goddamn Terrans.” Yondu transferred her a thousand units.

Kraglin frowned. “What's goin' on?”

“We bet on whether or not you'd lied to me.” Meredith chuckled. “A thousand units.”

“What did you think I was gonna do, use him as chic bait?” Kraglin crossed his arms. “He's only a little kid, that ain't right.”

Yondu growled and stomped off.

“Cap'n?” Kraglin's face fell.

“Kraglin, honey, that's exactly what he thought you were doing.” A big grin was splashed across Meredith's face. “I am so proud of you; you're such a good babysitter.”

Kraglin rubbed the back of his long, scrawny neck. “Is... is he mad at me?”

“He's mad at himself, honey. Don't you worry,” she said, “I'm sure he'll get over once he realizes that you didn't lie. Good Ravagers don't lie about their responsibilities, do they?”

“No. No, we don't skip out on what we said we'd do.” Kraglin shifted slightly. “But... he really ain't mad?”

“Of course not.” Meredith took Peter's hand and walked down the hall.

Kraglin let out an audible sigh of relief. “Good.”

“How are you feeling, Mom,” asked Peter.

Meredith blinked. She hadn't thought much about how she was feeling since she'd started taking Dr. Mareet's pills.

“My vision blurs out sometimes, and I still get very tired,” she confessed, “but not having any pain has really helped my mobility.”

“So... you're feeling better?” Peter looked up.

Meredith smiled. “Much better, baby.”

Peter beamed. Kraglin smiled and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Good to hear, Ms. Quill.”

“Procedure's in a few days.” Meredith swung her and Peter's hands. “Got the appointment set up yesterday.”

“Can I come,” Peter asked.

“No baby,” she replied, “it's better if you wait on the ship.”

Peter frowned. “Why?”
“Because it's gonna take a really long time, Peter.” Meredith sighed. “I don't want you unsupervised for that long.”

“But you'll be going alone!” Peter hung onto her hand.

“I'll go with her, Pete,” Kraglin puffed up his chest.

Meredith smiled. “That would be very kind, Kraglin.”

Kraglin looked around. “Don't say that. What if somebody hears?”

Meredith sighed. “I will never understand why Ravagers don't value kindness, gratitude, and generosity.”

“I think it's because it doesn't make units, mom.” Peter frowned.

“I think you're right, baby.” Meredith chuckled. “One more reason I'll never be a Ravager.”

Kraglin gave her half a grin. “Never say never, Ms. Quill.”
Improvements

Chapter Summary

With the proceeds from the plasma shipment, Meredith finally has enough units to go through the first cybernetic surgery. Meanwhile, Kraglin has his own improvements to worry about. Training to be a first mate is hard; it's even harder when you don't believe you can do it.

Meredith sat in Dr. Mareet's waiting room, staring at her feet. It had been three days since her eventful evening with Yondu, and he'd said nothing about it since. Meredith was fine with that; she had enough on her mind. Mainly the surgery, but also Peter. If something went wrong...

“Dear God.” She put her head in her hands. “Please, let nothing go wrong.”

Corky had led her into the building, and she'd been waiting for about ten minutes. Yondu had kept Peter on the ship and sent Kraglin along with her. The Xandarian leaned against the wall, his eyes darting towards the windows and door. Yondu had told him to keep an eye on Meredith; Kraglin had interpreted that as an order to guard her. Kraglin had always kind of liked the idea of being a bodyguard, and Meredith didn't mind the company. If she passed out from fear, someone would be there to catch her.

“Ms. Quill?”

Meredith looked up. Dr. Mareet stood in front of her, holding a clipboard.

“We're ready for you now, Ms. Quill.”

Taking a deep breath, Meredith nodded. She stood and followed Dr. Mareet.

“I'll keep an eye on things out here,” Kraglin said gruffly.

She smiled; Kraglin was taking his duties very seriously. “Thank you, honey. I know I'm in good hands.”

Kraglin puffed out his chest. Meredith followed Dr. Mareet into the same room as before. The strange bed with the glass top awaited her.

“Am I getting in?” Meredith rolled her shoulders.

“I'll need you to remove some of your clothing first,” Dr. Mareet said, “specifically your shirt, brassiere, and jacket.”

Meredith took another deep breath, then yanked her jacket off her shoulders. Dr. Mareet raised her eyebrows.

“Nervous, Ms. Quill?”

“Yeah.” Meredith pulled her shirt over her head. “I was excited about it earlier, but...”
“It's finally hit you that you're about to be put under the scalpel of a criminal alien doctor?” Dr. Mareet smiled.

Meredith swallowed. “Yeah. Yeah, that's hit me.”

Dr. Mareet's raspberry eyes were sympathetic. “I understand it can be frightening, but I've implanted no less than forty-eight pain inhibitors in all manners of species, both fauna and flora. You'll be fine, Ms. Quill.”

“Wait, did you say flora?” Meredith stopped unhooking her bra. “Why would a plant need a pain inhibitor?”

“She was a sentient plant, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith slid her bra off her arms. “You know what, I'm not even going to question that. After everything I've seen, a sentient plant should be no surprise.”

Dr. Mareet laughed. “That's the spirit. Lie down, if you would.”

Meredith crawled into the bed and pulled the glass down over her. Dr. Mareet tapped at a series of buttons; a yellow light scanned Meredith.

“What's this?”

“It's sanitizing you, and scanning to see if anything's changed since your last visit.”

Meredith swallowed. “Has it?”

“Yes, and that's good.” Dr. Mareet scrolled through the holodisplay. “Your blood sugar is right where it needs to be, and you've been sleeping more, haven't you?”

“The pills you gave me worked wonders.”

“They only stop the pain. I must remind you that's all the implant will do, too. You're far from cured, Ms. Quill.”

“But it's still going to help, right?”

“Of course.” Dr. Mareet went over to a table and grabbed a test tube. “This is what we call an immersion implant; it's going to link itself through your entire body.”

Meredith took another deep breath; her breath fogged up the glass. “Great. Good. Awesome.”

Dr. Mareet chuckled. “It will be a low-impact modification, barely a veneer over your physique. Your body shouldn't have much of a reaction to it. What it will do is allow your body to adapt to being modified, to grow around it. Because of this, the next implant will not be as much of a shock.”

“It's a stepping-stone.”

“Precisely.” Dr. Mareet poured a deep purple liquid into the test tube.

Meredith lifted her head slightly. “Is that... is that harberry juice?”

Dr. Mareet turned. “You have experience with it?”

“I drank some the day before my first visit with you,” Meredith confessed, “just to help me sleep.”
“Ah, I see. Well, then I shouldn't have to warn you about the flavor.” Dr. Mareet opened the glass and handed Meredith the test tube. “Bottoms up, as it were.”

Meredith sat up and knocked the test tube back. Her face twisted at the sour flavor. Almost immediately, she felt the familiar buzz.

“If something goes wrong, doctor?” Meredith laid back down. “Tell Peter it's not his fault, and that he should open the present I gave him on Terra.”

“Nothing's going to go wrong, Ms. Quill.” Dr. Mareet closed the glass hatch. “I don't mean to brag, but I'm rather skilled at this.”

Meredith smiled; her eyes began to sag in sleep. “I trust you, doctor, but anything can happen. It's in God's hands.”

Dr. Mareet chuckled. “I forgot Terran religion is very strong.”

Meredith's head dropped back onto the bed, her mouth parted slightly. Dr. Mareet looked at the holotape; the patient was out. She walked over to her instruments and selected a thin scalpel. It was always the same before a surgery. Clear mind, clear purpose, clear results.

Peter was sitting at the base of the loading ramp. Nothing the Ravagers could do seemed to move him; yelling, persuading, even offering him units. The boy simply sat, stared at the loading ramp, and waited for his mother. It was creeping the Ravagers out; Peter could hear them as he sat there.

“What's the kid waitin' for, again?”

“His mother, you dickbrain.”

“Where's she at?”

“Hospital.”

“You know she fixed that hole in my best pair of flight pants?”

“The one from where your fat ass split 'em?”

“Shut up. She fixed it, didn't she? Good as new. Saved me one-hundred-fifty units.”

Yondu came down to the loading bay and saw the Ravagers skulking around Peter, exchanging units and little slips of paper.

“Want in on the pot, cap'n?” A Ravager showed him a sheet. “Odds are getting pretty dicey.”

“What the hell are y'all bettin' on?” Yondu put his hands on his hips and stared down at all the odds.

“If the lady makes it,” Gef said.

Yondu frowned. “What do you figure the odds?”

Gef shrugged. “Everybody disagrees, captain. Some think she's tougher than she looks; others think she'd bleed to death the moment someone sticks her.”

Yondu scanned the data sheet where Gef was recording all the bets. At the very top was Kraglin’s
name next to the number 3,264.

“That's all he has,” Yondu muttered.

Gef laughed. “Yep. He came in right before he left and staked it all on a flawless procedure.”

Yondu's eyes boggled. “He's gone nuts!”

“Peter wouldn't stop crying.” Gef shuffled some betting slips. “So Kraglin bet it all that she'd have a perfect procedure. Show o' faith, I suppose.”

Yondu looked over at Peter. The boy was staring at the loading ramp.

“Has he moved,” Yondu asked.

“Not at all, captain.”

“Has he said anything?”

“No, captain.”

Setting the datapad back down, Yondu frowned. He crossed over to where Peter sat, and knelt down next to him.

“Waitin' for your momma?”

Peter nodded.

Yondu bared his teeth. “You scared?”

Peter shook his head.

“I don't believe that for a goddamned second.” Yondu sat next to Peter. “You must be scared.”

“I'm not the one getting surgery.” Peter hugged his knees. “I'm worried, not scared.”

Yondu looked at the loading ramp. “Your momma, she scared?”

“She tries not to let me see, but yeah. She's brave,” Peter said, “so she'll be okay.”

Yondu turned his head. Peter was smiling, his chin resting on his knees. His green eyes were locked on the loading ramp, just waiting for his momma to come striding up, good as new. Yondu was a savage, selfish son-of-a-bitch, but still... watching this kid wait was goddamn heartbreaking. Yondu stood and went back over to the betting table.

“Gef,” he said.

“Aye, captain?” Gef looked up.

“Two hundred,” he said, “on the Terran to live.”

“Aye, captain.”

Peter waited for six hours. For six hours, he stared at the loading ramp. For six hours, the Ravagers took bets. For six hours, Yondu stood in the shadows and watched the watcher.
The loading ramp groaned and began to descend. Peter hopped to his feet.

“She's back!” His cries of joy echoed through the whole loading bay.


There was a last-minute swap of units as the loading ramp hit the ground. Light swarmed in; Peter had to squint against the bright whiteness. The Ravagers held their breath; they had units on the line. Everyone waited to see if Meredith would walk up a healthier woman, or if Kraglin would be lugging her corpse.

One figure appeared in the light. The Ravagers squinted. Was it Kraglin? Was it Meredith? Dammit, she was so curveless that it was hard to tell!

“Mom,” Peter said hopefully.

Meredith Quill stepped out of the blinding light. A series of linear, angled scars laced her body; the scars on her neck shone slightly silver. The lower parts of her eye socket were a bruised violet, but her eyes were bright.

“Hey baby,” she said.

“Mom!” Peter rushed her and tackled her into a huge hug.

“Oh!” Meredith cringed and bit her tongue to avoid crying out. “Careful, Peter. Ow. Ow, honey.”

Peter quickly grabbed her arm. “Mom, are you okay? How’d it go, the surgery?”

Everyone around the betting table held their breath.

“Perfect.” Despite the weak way she climbed the ramp, Meredith was beaming. “Just like Dr. Mareet said it would. She did everything perfectly. I'm sore as a farmer, but I'll be alright once the wounds heal. Just gotta keep 'em clean, you know.”

From behind her, Kraglin strode onto the Eclector with a spring in his step. He leaned over and placed both hands on the betting table with a huge, wicked grin.

“Cough it up, dumb-fucks.”

Everyone groaned. Kraglin raked in the units with open glee. Back in the shadows, Yondu grinned. Kraglin was a sentimental son-of-a-bitch, but he was a good damn Ravager.

Peter helped his mother climb the ramp. Meredith was breathing heavily; some of her scars were starting to bleed.

“Peter, Peter stop.” Meredith leaned one hand against the wall and panted. “Sorry baby. Kraglin helped me walk all the way here. Thought I could make it all the way up the ramp on my own.”

Peter's eyes were darting between his mother's. Meredith winced, partially out of pain and partially out of guilt. She wasn't supposed to let Peter see this; she wasn't supposed to show pain. She forced a smile.

“It's okay, honey. Just sore.”

“Are you sure?” Peter's eyebrows furrowed.
“Yeah, honey.” She supported herself with the wall. “Let's go.”

As Peter helped her limp down the hall, Meredith watched him. He was growing so much; his eyes were green as grass, and his hair... thick as beaver fur, just like Jason's.

Oh Jason. If he was here, he'd scoop Meredith up in his arms, put Peter on his shoulders, and carry them off single-handedly. He was always so strong and so capable, and always such a gentleman. The locals had turned their nose up at Meredith when they'd found out she was pregnant out of wedlock, but they didn't understand. She'd felt married to Jason from the moment they met. They just belonged together, that was it. They still belonged together; Jason, Meredith, and Peter. They were a family. Maybe Jason was still out there, she thought, waiting for them. Maybe he still remembered the curly-haired blonde he'd given his heart to and the baby boy he'd once come back to see.

Meredith sighed, then winced as the wounds twinged. Dr. Mareet had told her to stay in the clinic. She'd told her that moving would be incredibly painful, but did Meredith listen. Of course not, Meredith thought, how could I? She stroked Peter's hair gently. She knew Peter would be waiting for her, and it was her job to be there for him, no matter how much it hurt. And it definitely hurt.

By the time Peter got her to the cargo bay, Meredith was almost dizzy with the pain. She sat on her bed and rubbed her arms.

“Peter, could you bring me that lime green bottle over on the desk?”

Peter brought her the bottle, and opened it too for good measure. “Here you go, mom.”

“Thank you, baby.” Meredith knocked back one of the small black pills. “Can't wait until I don't have to take these anymore.”

Closing the bottle, Peter frowned. “I thought this thing was supposed to take away the pain.”

“It will, sweetheart, in twenty-four hours.” Meredith took off her jacket, wincing slightly as the skin of her back pulled at the scars. “Just takes a little time to kick in, just like medicine.”

“Okay. You're sure the doctor did everything right,” Peter said.

“Absolutely, honey. She's a professional.”

“Okay. If you said she did it right, then she did it right.” Peter looked around. “Can I help any more?”

“I'll just get dressed and go to bed, honey.” Meredith leaned forwards and kissed his forehead. “Sorry I can't sing you to sleep yet, baby.”

Peter hugged her gently. “It's okay. Just try really hard to get better.”

Meredith took him gingerly in her arms. “I promise, baby. I'll give it everything I've got. I want to be around to be with you.”

“I love you, mom.” Peter's eyes were watery.

“I love you too, Peter. You are the light of my life. My precious baby.” Meredith kissed his hair. “My little Star-Lord.”

Kraglin went whistling down the hallway. It'd been a good day for Kraglin; he'd kept Ms. Quill safe,
guarded the hospital, and made about ten thousand units. It was, he decided, the best day he'd had in a long damn time.

He saw the cap'n heading back to the bridge. It had been such a good day that for once, Kraglin felt like trying his luck with something that'd been bothering him for a while.

“Cap'n,” he said.

Yondu turned around. “What is it, Kraglin?”

“Er, cap'n, I don't mean to bother you none, but...” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “You remember what we talked about on Contraxia last year?”

For a horrible moment, Kraglin thought Yondu had forgotten. But Yondu nodded and put his hands on his hips.

“I remember.”

Kraglin swallowed. “How am I doin’?”

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. “Not bad.”

Kraglin's heart leapt. “How close am I?”

“Almost.” Yondu pointed at Kraglin, gently poking him in the chest. “Only one more thing you gotta change. Same damn thing it always is.”

Kraglin tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice. “Okay, cap'n.”

Yondu turned around and began to climb the stairs to the bridge.

“Cap'n?”

Yondu stopped. “Yeah?”

“Cap'n, it's been the same thing, but you don't ever tell me what it is.” Kraglin took a step forwards. “What's left? What am I missing?”

“Figure it out,” Yondu yelled, “that's what a first mate does.”

The tails of Yondu's coat disappeared, and Kraglin's shoulders dropped. So much for that run of good luck. Kraglin went back to the quarters and curled up in his bedroll.

A whole year. For a whole year, Kraglin had been in training to be a proper first mate. He was the natural choice, he knew. He could read the cap'n like nobody else could, and he trusted Yondu with his life. Other Ravagers looked up to Yondu, but to Kraglin, he was practically an idol. Yondu Udonta was, in Kraglin's opinion, the best goddamn Ravager in the universe. Even being considered as a first mate was a miracle to Kraglin. But still, he thought as he punched his pillow into a more comfortable shape, he wasn't quite first mate material. Yondu said he lacked one thing. Whatever it was, once Kraglin found it, he wasn't ever letting it go. He wanted to be a good first mate more than he'd ever wanted anything. His heart was in it; he burned for it. But damn it all if he just wasn't making the cut.

Other Ravagers began trickling into the quarters; Kraglin turned so no one could see the tears in his eyes. First mates didn't cry, no matter how worthless they felt. Kraglin just had to try a little harder. He couldn't accept that he wasn't enough, even though he knew he wasn't. His dream was what kept
him going. His hope, his stupid, irrational hope that he'd ever be as fantastic as the cap'n was all that kept him working hard. Units were nice, he admitted, but that's not what he wanted out of life. He loved being a Ravager, and Yondu was the best at it. Kraglin... Kraglin was almost there, Yondu had said. Just one more thing.

The next morning, Kraglin laid in bed a little longer than usual, fiddling with a deactivated reception processor. He hadn't gone to breakfast; he wasn't hungry. No one much cared. It wasn't until nearly eight o'clock that someone even bothered to find him. He had hoped it would be Yondu, but he expected it to be Peter, sent from Yondu to find out where the hell his future-right-hand man went. Instead, it was Meredith.

“Kraglin, have you brought me your laundry?” Meredith popped her head in the doorway. “Bring it to me quick and I'll do it for free.”

Kraglin was laying on his bedroll, messing with some kind of machine. “I'll get to it in a minute, Ms. Quill.”

“You'll want to hurry; Drazkar's bringing his down,” she said, “and that means all the others after will end up with fur in them. You know how he sheds.”

Kraglin sighed and set down the machine. He rolled over and grabbed his bag of laundry. Meredith watched him drag it along the floor and frowned. He caught her expression and quickly straightened up.

“How're you feelin', Ms. Q?”

Meredith showed him the back of her neck. He could see the healed scars, and the tiny lines of metal that led further down her back.

“Scars are healed,” she said proudly, “and I'm completely painless. Poked myself with a knife just to be sure. Pain feels more like a kind of...sparky kind of pressure.”

“That's great, Ms. Quill, but don't overdo it. Pain's how people know when to stop and when to keep goin', and if I do say so myself, you've got a tendency to just keep on goin’.” Kraglin gave her half a smile. “Don't hurt yourself, Ms. Q.”

“Yes, sir.” Meredith chuckled. “Look at you, giving orders like a regular captain.”

Kraglin's expression immediately became morose again. Meredith frowned.

“Kraglin, honey, are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah,” he sighed.

She put her hand on his shoulder, frowning. “Are you sure, Kraglin?”

He nodded and hoisted the bag up in his arms. “Just a bad day, Ms. Quill. Nothin' serious.”

Meredith frowned. “What happened?”

The bag slipped out of Kraglin's hands; he cursed. Why did he screw up everything he did? Some first mate he'd be. Kraglin leaned forwards and pressed his head against the hallway wall. The cool metal stung against his skin. Good. Kraglin deserved it.
“You ever really want somethin’, Ms. Quill,” he said, “but no matter what you do, you just ain’t cut out for it?”

Meredith frowned. “Yeah.”

Kraglin tilted his head slightly to look at her. “What was it?”

“I really wanted to be a big star country singer when I was little,” Meredith said, “with all my little heart. I took lessons. I was so darn good that I ended up at college for it, singin’ real fine songs in all sorts of ways. There, I learned to dance and sing and the whole kit-and-caboodle.”

“What happened,” Kraglin asked.

“I met Jason,” she said.

“And?”

“And I got pregnant with Peter.” Meredith smiled. “Not two months out of college when I ran into Jason, and then he left for a while, and when he came back, things got pretty serious between us. I got pregnant with Peter, and then I had a choice. Peter, or my career.”

“You chose Peter.” Kraglin's eyebrows furrowed. “But singin’ was your dream.”

“I don't regret it, either. Peter was the best damn thing that ever happened to me.

“But what about your dream?”

“Dreams aren't worth much if you can't share them with the ones you love.”

Kraglin turned that over in his head. He took the bag of laundry in both arms and heaved it up, then followed her. While Kraglin and Meredith walked along to the laundry room, he kept thinking about what she'd said.

“Ms. Quill?” Kraglin set down his bag of laundry in front of the huge industrial machines. “You were cut out for singin' though, right?”

“Nope.” Meredith unlatched the door on a gigantic washer. “Just like I told you; I wasn't cut out for that dream.”

“Why not? Were you bad?”

Meredith raised her eyebrows. “You've heard me sing. You think I was bad?”

“No,” he said.

“I wasn't bad.” She started throwing clothes in the washers, being careful to sort the colors and whites. “I just wasn't cut out for the singer's life. I wanted kids, a family, a home with people I loved. Oh, the traveling was nice, I won't argue with that, but the agents, the divas, the stress. All anybody seemed to care about was money, money, money.”

“Sounds familiar.” Kraglin snorted.

Meredith grinned. “There you go. Some of these Ravagers, my goodness. They ain't nothin' but space divas.”

Kraglin laughed.
“But like I said,” Meredith continued as she loaded clothing, “it wasn’t meant for me. I cared too much about the things that mattered. I wouldn’t give my home and family up, not for all the money and fame in the world. I thought singing was my dream, but really it was having a family. See, Kraglin, what matters most in this life is staying true to who you are and what you love. Me, I love my home and I love my family. I love Earth, or Terra as you call it, and I love Peter and my papa and my aunt and all my cousins. That’s what’s most important to me, and so everything I do is for that. For Peter, most of all. As long as you're true to who you are and what you love, you'll never go wrong.”

Kraglin handed her a blue box of powdered white soap.

“I love bein’ a Ravager,” he said, “and I aim to be the best goddamned one I can be.”

Meredith took the box and poured the soap into the gaping soap intake. “And as long as that’s what you want to be and that's who you are, you'll be happy bein' one. Just be a good one, alright? Don't be a space diva.”

Kraglin grinned. “I ain't no space diva, Ms. Quill.”

“I know, honey.” Meredith put the box down and dusted the powder off her hands. “Say, why all the questions? Everything alright?”

Kraglin hadn't told anyone about being first mate yet. All the Ravagers kind of guessed it, but secretly working for it and openly declaring that he wanted it were two very different things. If he openly declared what he wanted, Ravagers would line up to try and take him down just to prove they could. Some might even angle for the position themselves. But Meredith, Kraglin reasoned, wasn't a Ravager.

“I'm tryin' to be first mate,” he said, “but cap'n Yondu, he says I ain't quite makin' the cut yet.”

Meredith opened the portal out of the laundry room. “Is that what you want to be?”

“More than goddamn anything, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith and Kraglin left the laundry room, the smell of soap lingering where they walked. As the portal closed behind them, Meredith patted Kraglin's arm affectionately.

“You'll get there,” she said, “you just need to believe you deserve it. Self-confidence, honey; it works wonders.”

Kraglin let out a depressed kind of chuckle. “Kind of hard to build self-confidence on this ship, Ms. Quill. Ravagers don't take too kindly to the high-and-mighty.”

“They don't take too kindly to the worthless-but-arrogant.” Meredith winked. “But it ain't braggin' if you can do it. I think you'd be surprised by how much you can intimidate people if you just exercise those skills of yours.”

“Me, intimidate anybody?” Kraglin rubbed his neck. “Shucks, Ms. Quill, I can't even scare a goddamn Orloni.”

“I didn't say scare, I said intimidate,” she replied, “and intimidation is about skill and confidence, not being scary or threatening. Why do you look up to Yondu?”

“Because he's not afraid to do what needs to be done. And because he could kill us all just by whistling,” Kraglin added.
“You admire his skill,” she said, “and his capability to be a leader. Him being scary is just... well, that's just Yondu.”

Kraglin laughed. “Yep, that's the cap'n.”

“So all you need to do is have faith in your ability and confidence in your skills, and I'm sure you'll get the job. You'll be a great first mate.” Meredith smiled. “I know you will.”

“You really think so, Ms. Q?” A note of desperation slunk into Kraglin's voice.

“Honey, I don't lie. There is not a more qualified person in the galaxy.”

Kraglin sighed. “I ain't callin' you a liar, I just...”

Meredith stopped him, her hand on his shoulder.

“Kraglin,” she said, “I believe in you with everything I've got.”

A warm feeling swelled in Kraglin's chest. It was the same feeling he got on the rare occasions where the cap'n complimented his work, or when he fixed a machine no one else could wrangle. Kraglin had always thought it was gratitude, but it also kind of felt like... pride. Might even be self-confidence, but Kraglin wasn't betting any units on that quite yet.

He blinked furiously. “Thanks, Ms. Quill.”

“Don't say that.” Meredith winked. “Mr. Future-First-Mate.”

Kraglin's ears turned red, and Meredith patted his arm again. She took the stairs up into the bridge, probably looking for Peter. Suddenly she stopped, went back down the stairs, and looked at Kraglin.

“You are welcome though, honey. Anytime you need to talk,” she said, “I'll be around.”

With that, she went back up the stairs. Kraglin smiled; that Ms. Quill was a real nice lady.
Peter sat in a dark hold of the cargo bay, kicking his legs. Kraglin had brought him down here after dinner, saying he had a surprise for Peter. Usually a space pirate dragging you down to a dark place claiming he had a surprise was a really bad thing, but Peter wasn't worried. This was Kraglin. Peter's mom liked Kraglin, and Peter's mom was always right.

Metal ground on metal as Kraglin pushed a huge metal pod out of storage. Dust covered the glass on the front, and several of the wires looked like they'd been installed in a rush. It looked as though it used to be gold and green, but the paint was so chipped that Peter couldn't really tell.

"Here she is, Peter." Kraglin took a rag out of his overalls and wiped his sweaty forehead. "One hijacked Nova Corps flight simulator. Hacked it myself and brought it up to Ravager specs."

"Wow!" Peter jumped up and pressed both hands to the glass. "I get to fly this thing?"

"You get to pretend-fly." Kraglin threw the rag over his neck. "Back up now, and let me show you how it works."

Peter took a step back. Kraglin pulled a lever, and the glass rose. Inside there was a pilot's seat just like Yondu's. Kraglin had refitted the interior to match what a Ravager's ship would be like, right down to the trash on the floor. Peter had never seen anything so cool.

He scrambled up into the seat and started hitting buttons.

"Bam, phew!" He wrenched on the controls. "Pow! Bam, dut-dut-dut-dut! Kaboom!"

Kraglin scowled. "Get out of there, dammit. You don't even know how it works."

"Yes I do!"

"Peter, no you don't. It ain't even on."

"Oh." Peter looked around for a switch. "How do I turn it on?"

"Look, Peter, this is serious stuff. Flyin' a ship is serious business. If you don't do it right, you could crash and hurt yourself. Maybe even die." Kraglin dropped the rag on the ground and stepped into the tiny pod, cramming himself behind Peter. "Now I'm gonna teach you because your momma says it's okay, but if you don't pay attention, you ain't gonna get to come down here anymore."

Peter's shoulders sagged. Kraglin was starting to sound like Peter's mom.

"I'll pay attention," he said.
Kraglin puffed up his chest a little; the kid was finally starting to listen to his authority. Maybe Ms. Quill was right about Kraglin being a good first mate.

“Okay, Peter. Hit that green switch first. That primes the computer.”

Peter hit it. The lights flickered on; a big grin started to spread over Peter's face.

“Then,” Kraglin said, “twist this dial all the way to the right. That starts the engines and lets you adjust the thruster capacity.”

Peter grabbed it with both hands, but he couldn't quite get it to turn all the way. His face screwed up with effort; Peter had to throw his whole upper body into turning the dial. When he did, the pod rumbled with the simulated sound of a spaceship engine.

“Alright.” Kraglin pointed at the four pedals on the floor. “Now, pedal to your left is how you adjust the thruster levels. Pedal in the middle is how you damper them. Pedal to the right, that's the accelerator; increases thruster speed.”

Peter pointed at the fourth pedal, a round one in the upper center. “What about that one?”

“Emergency stop.”

“Oh.” Peter blinked. “For emergencies.”

Kraglin snorted. “Yep, that's why it's called an emergency stop.”

“Right. What do I do now?”

“Push in the thruster adjuster.”

Peter giggled. “Thruster adjuster.”

Kraglin sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. This was going to take a lot longer to teach than he had previously thought.

“Alright. Now, get on the accelerator real slow-like, Pete.”

Peter pushed his foot on the accelerator; all the dials darted to red.


Peter pushed down slowly. The dials slowly climbed up to and past the green wedges.

“Okay, good speed, but you're still pushin' too far down. When the little dial hits the green wedge, you're safe. If it goes yellow, slow down,” Kraglin said.

Peter looked over his shoulder. “What if it's red?”

“If you're goin' red, someone better be dyin' or else you'll be dead,” Kraglin said.

Peter swallowed and nodded. He tried the accelerator again; this time, when the dials hit green, he held the accelerator pedal still.

“Perfect, Pete.” Kraglin smiled. “Alright, now use your other foot and hit the adjuster. Just go all the way down with that one; it's about speed, not bein' gentle.”
Peter slammed his foot on the adjuster, and the dials jumped down.

“Quick, get on the accelerator!”

Peter's other foot pressed down, and the dials went up again. On the glass in front of him a starscape appeared, complete with all the normal holoindicators that Peter had seen on Yondu's ship; the weapons system, the communications array, all the hangars, bays, and other entry and exit points clearly marked. Peter's eyes widened.

“Good job,” Kraglin said, “you're flyin' a spaceship.”

Up in the bridge, Yondu had a flight problem of his own. Mainly that he'd lost a bet with a certain goddamn Terran, and now he had to figure out how to let an untrained, untested pilot fly a fourteen-thousand ton ship full of people, smaller crafts, junk, and the occasional Orloni. The crew usually kept off the bridge after dinner, except for Gef, who ran communications and pretty much never left. Yondu had paid him a hundred units to keep his mouth shut about this, but Gef wouldn't have told anyone anyway. He didn't want his mates to know that their cause-of-death was likely going to be a sick Terran woman trying to figure out what a thruster adjuster was.

“Okay,” she said, squinting, “just run it by me one more time.”

Yondu closed his eyes and scowled. “You're fuckin' kiddin' me.”

“One more time. Please, Yondu.” Meredith straightened herself up. “I don't want to make a mistake and hurt Peter.”

“And everyone else on the ship,” Gef added.

“Yes, but mostly Peter,” she said.

Yondu pointed at each pedal in turn. “Go faster. Go slower. Switch levels. Stop.”

Meredith hovered her foot over each one. “So... gas, brake, clutch, emergency brake.”

“Technically,” Gef added, “it's thruster accelerator, thruster dampener, thruster adjuster, and emergency stop initiator.”

“You call it what you understand, I'll call it what I understand.” Meredith pointed at the hand controls. “What's this.”


Meredith squinted. She looked out at all the machinery, the endless buttons and different things to mess up. A memory from long ago was resurfacing; a sunny day in Missouri. A sea of untidy green grass stretched out before her, trimmed with a wire fence and a trim of trees. Her father was wearing a straw hat, muddy jeans, and an old t-shirt. Little Meredith was wearing a white tank top, shorts, and a floppy sun hat that was way too big for her. Her father was sitting on the tractor with her in his lap, showing her how to use it. The tractor had seemed so complicated for little twelve-year-old Meredith. Sitting here with Yondu beside her explaining the ship controls, Meredith had a moment of clarity.

“It's a tractor,” she said.

“What?” Yondu blinked.
Meredith took the steering mechanism in both hands and eased gently on the thruster accelerator with her left foot. When the holographic indicator turned green, she pressed down on the thruster adjuster with her right foot. An orange bar appeared, showing that she'd switched to a different level of fuel consumption.

“It's a tractor,” she breathed, “a big flying space tractor.”

Yondu and Gef stared at her.

“Well,” Gef said, “at least she's got the basics.”

“You didn't even prime the goddamn computer!” Yondu gestured at the console. “You skipped about a million goddamn steps!”

“Whee!” Meredith giggled. “I'm flying a space tractor! Yondu, Yondu, go get Peter! I want him to see me fly the space tractor.”

Yondu's face was turning purple with barely-suppressed rage.

“Fine, fine, be that way.” Meredith pressed gently on the accelerator, tuning the adjuster when the indicator light flashed. “Gef, would you go get Peter?”

Gef looked at Yondu's expression and swallowed.

“Can't leave my post,” he said.

“Gef, you're sitting at the comms station. Could you just let me talk to Kraglin?”

“I guess.” Gef hit a button, and the comms unit switched on.

“Kraglin honey, are you there?” Meredith leaned over, still keeping an eye out at the expanse of space. It wasn't exactly keeping an eye on the road, but she figured the same principles applied.

“Ms. Quill?” Meredith could hear the incredulity in Kraglin's voice. “What the hell are you doing on the cap'n's private comm line?”

“Bring Peter up to the bridge, quick.”

“He's in the flight simulator.”

“Then get him out of it.” Meredith was grinning. “Tell him his momma's flying the Eclector.”

A stunned silence lingered on the other end of the line.

“Holy shit,” Kraglin said, “Peter! Come on, get out! Get out get out get out! We gotta go, come on!”

A giggle bubbled out of Meredith's mouth and she shook her shoulders with excitement. Yondu bared his teeth, reached under the desk, and pulled out a tall bottle of maroon liquor. Tearing the cork off with his teeth, he took a big swig of it.

“Goddamn Terrans,” he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

Within minutes, the portal to the bridge flew open. Kraglin and Peter bounded up the stairs, eyes wide. When they saw Meredith in the pilot's seat, they both grinned.

“Mom!” Peter ran over and hugged her while she was flying. “You're flying a spaceship!”
Meredith couldn't keep the grin off her face. “I sure am! Your momma's a space pilot.”

Yondu couldn't handle this. It was bad enough that the goddamn Terran was flying, but the sugary mother-and-son stuff was just too much. He stalked off the bridge with the bottle in hand, taking another swig of it on the way out. Kraglin watched him go.

“You alright, cap'n?”

“I'm fine, you idjit,” Yondu grunted.

The portal closed, and Yondu was gone. Kraglin looked back at Meredith. Barely a day out of the surgery, and already she was giggling and smiling and acting much more like a proper person should. She was always so tired, Kraglin thought, and then on top of that she had Peter. Peter was enough to exhaust anybody, even a young Ravager like Kraglin. The kid was just a regular ball of energy. Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz as he watched the Quills.

“Hey, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin came up and stood next to the pilot's seat. “How'd you learn this so fast?”

“It's the same basic set-up as an Earth tractor,” she explained, “but I really can't do anything more than speed up, slow down, and turn.”

“What about the comms array?”

“No idea.”

“Weapons system?”

“Not a clue.”

Kraglin chuckled. “You got a lot to learn, Ms. Quill.”

“You'll get it, Mom.” Peter looked at all the controls with wonder. “Wow, a real spaceship.”

Meredith looked at her baby's wide eyes. She let go of the steering mechanism, grabbed under his arms and lifted. Kraglin winced to see someone as thin and fragile as her exert so much effort, but Meredith didn't even cringe. She put Peter in her lap and let him hold the steering mechanism.

“Nice and steady, now.” Meredith wrapped her arms around Peter in a tight hug. “Keep us straight.”

Peter looked at his hands with wide eyes. He was flying a spaceship. Meredith smiled and kissed Peter's head.

She looked over her shoulder. “Gef, can you get us the cameras on the bridge and out on the hull, please?”

Gef swiped the holoscreen and twin screens jumped up. One showed the Eclector cruising through space; the other showed the bridge, with Meredith and Peter piloting the ship.

“That's us!” Peter took one hand off the steering mechanism to point. “Wow!”

Meredith hadn't smiled so wide in years. “Yeah, baby. We're flying a spaceship.”

Peter started to laugh. It was contagious; Meredith broke out into giggles too. Gef and Kraglin exchanged uncomfortable looks. Watching the Quills was like watching someone propose; you knew it was nice, and you were happy for them, but you also knew it wasn't for you. It wasn't your happiness to have or share.
After an hour, the captain was back. He strode into the bridge without the bottle, his teeth bared.

“Yondu!” Peter grinned. “I'm flying the Eclector!”

“Big whoop,” Yondu snarled.

“Teach me how to do the thing you do with the thing,” Peter pleaded.

That caught Yondu off guard. “Wait, what?”

“The thing!” Peter pointed to the hyperspace controls. “The cool wormhole thing!”

“You want to fly into a hyperspace jump?” Yondu squinted. “Why the hell do you want to do that?”

“Because it's cool,” Peter said, “duh!”

Meredith grinned. “You heard him, Yondu. Let Peter fly through a hyperspace jump and we'll be out of your pilot's seat. Promise.”

Yondu grunted; Meredith took that as a yes. He stalked over to Gef.

“Nearest jump, Gef?”

“Three clicks away, captain.” Gef glanced at the screen. “Heads to Emris.”

“Emris,” Kraglin said, “that's been a while. Could we go, cap'n? Mine out some of that volcanic soil, that'd sell good.”

Gef checked the market. “Two units per pound. Not bad, captain. Not a lot of sellers, either, but the demand is always high for top quality topsoil.”

“You want to go mine dirt,” Yondu said.

“Volcanic dirt,” Gef said.

“Dirt's still dirt, idjit.”

“What about kornerupine?” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “Scans showed a lot of that on Emris.”

Yondu sighed. “Fine. If it gets the goddamn Quills out of my chair and turns a profit, I'm all for it.”

“What about the Quills?” Meredith called over her shoulder. “Speak up if you're saying mean things; it's only fair you give me a chance to retaliate.”

Yondu scowled. “I ain't sayin' shit. I found your damn hyperspace jump. Turn four degrees starboard.”

“There are stars everywhere, Yondu.” Peter squinted at the starscape. “Which one am I aiming for?”

“He means turn a little to the right, baby.” Meredith guided Peter's hands. “That's it, you're doing just fine.”

“Gef?”

“Two clicks away, captain.”
Yondu nodded to Meredith. She kept on the accelerator, activating the adjuster when necessary. The Eclector sped towards a hexagon-shaped ripple. Peter laughed and leaned forwards.

“This is so cool!”

Yondu went to the controls. With one hand on the seat, he primed the hyperspace controls.

“Boy,” he said.

Peter looked up.

Yondu pointed at a big blue button.

“Punch that,” he said.

Peter had never had been so happy in his entire life. He slammed his fist onto the button, and the ship lurched forwards, tunneling through space like a bolt through the blue. Entire systems streamed past like blurs; suns were simply pinpricks that passed with each second. Peter's eyes were wide. This is what he wanted to do for the rest of his life.

Meredith held him close with tears in her eyes. Her boy had gone so long without being really, truly happy. If something did happen to her, she thought, at least she had given him this. She’d failed him in every other way; he was a slave to her health, living thousands of light-years away from everything he'd ever known, and breaking the law just to keep her alive. Meredith's heart hurt more than the cancer ever did. She was a terrible mother, but at least she'd given him this.

Yondu watched them both out of his peripherals. Terrans were goddamn crazy. The Quills had identical split-faced grins as they watched the hyperspace jump with glee. Yondu did this all the time. Maybe he’d forgotten how lucky he was to be a Ravager, to be free to do whatever he wanted and go wherever he pleased. Maybe he needed a day to just enjoy being a badass captain of a badass ship living life in the fast lane. The thought appealed to him greatly.

The ship slowed considerably. The starscape faded back to the vast star-speckled blackness. A planet floated below; it was mostly green, but great patches of black and of blue coated the surface.

Meredith tried to pick up Peter, but frowned.

“What's wrong, Mom,” Peter asked.

“Strained myself.” Meredith rolled her shoulders. “Can't feel the pain, but I can feel my muscles shaking.”

“Move, boy.” Yondu grunted and scooped Peter up by the arms.

“Whee!” Peter lifted his arms. “Wow, Yondu, you're taller than mom.”

Yondu put him down. “Get out of here, you little insect.”

Meredith stood up, then immediately grabbed onto the chair for support. She sighed.

“Kraglin,” she said, “remember how you told me not to over-exert myself?”

“Yeah,” he replied, “I remember that, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith hung her head. “Apparently I didn't listen. My whole body is trembling.”

Kraglin frowned and put her arm over his shoulder. He helped her walk along.
“Told you so, Ms. Q.”

“Now’s not the time, honey.”

“Wait.” Gef intercepted Kraglin and Meredith as they moved towards the door. “Got somethin’ for you, Quill.”

He handed her a datapad.

“Figured you'd want Peter and you flyin' the Eclector,” Gef said.

Meredith beamed. “Thank you.”

Gef sighed. “How many times do we have to tell you not to say that?”

“At least once more, Gef.” Meredith grinned. “Thank you.”

Gef hit the panel; the portal slid open.

“Come on, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin hoisted her a little higher. “You need sleep.”

As the door closed behind Kraglin and Meredith, Yondu looked down at his chair. No one had sat in this chair besides him since Stakar had given him the Eclector. He sat in it and gripped the steering mechanism. How had he felt the first time he'd flown her? An image of Peter's face, alight with wonder and excitement, flashed over his eyes. Yondu smiled. He didn't look like that, goddamn it, but that was exactly the way it'd felt. Not a worry, not a care, just a free man at the helm of his own life.

A memory from long ago rose to the surface of his mind. A thin, emaciated Centaurian kneeling in a cage, bleeding from his mouth. A man threw open the door and dragged him out. Stakar Ogord; tall, commanding, relentless. Yondu's personal goddamn savior. He blasted the chains to pieces and kicked the cuffs aside. No man should live a life under the thumb of another, he'd said. To Yondu, it was goddamn poetry. He knew he'd follow that man until the day he died.

Yondu's chest tightened. Or, he thought, he'd fuck up, take a couple hundred-thousand units and Stakar would never speak to him again. Five-hundred-thousand units for delivering the kid; more, if he gave Meredith to Ego. A thread of doubt was worming its way into his heart. Yondu never thought about whether or not he was doing the right thing; uncertainty was a new feeling to him. Maybe he should call the whole thing off. Call Ego and tell him to stuff his units up his goddamn ass. Get ahold of Stakar and tell him he'd changed.

Dammit. Regret wasn't the Ravager way. Yondu had made his mistake, he'd cast his lot; now he needed to nut up and take the consequences. No regrets. All he could do was keep being a Ravager, and if Stakar couldn't see he was worthy, then he could go to hell. Yondu bared his teeth, the anger in his heart burning the pain and doubt. He was Yondu Udonta, and he wasn't going to live under the thumb of Stakar Ogord. He was Yondu Udonta, and he was going to be the richest goddamn man in the galaxy. He was Yondu Udonta; he hadn't forgotten who he was and what he wanted. He wanted goddamn son-of-a-bitchin' money.

Peter's face popped in his head again; the boy, stupid and excited and free. Yondu's grip tightened on the steering mechanism.

Money, fuck money. What about freedom? Had he really forgotten how much that meant to him? After Dal-Char, after Hala, after twenty years of being conditioned to be a ruthless murdering machine, freedom had been the most important thing in the world. Yondu scratched his chin,
frowning. Dammit. Maybe he had forgotten. Maybe he was more off-track than he thought. Humility wasn't exactly in a Ravager's nature, but loving freedom, that was a goddamn necessity.

Yondu needed to re-center. He needed to remind himself why he wanted to be a Ravager in the first place, and it wasn't the goddamn money. It was the freedom, dammit. The boy, he thought, the boy was just becoming a Ravager. Maybe it was time for Yondu to show him exactly what that meant. The thought brought a grin to his face. Emris would be the perfect place to start.
Yondu is acting strange. Extremely strange, in Meredith's opinion. While Yondu walks off to teach some Ravager basics to her son, Meredith is given a small task force and told to accomplish an impossible task; cleaning the Eclector.

(Couldn't post yesterday due to unforeseen circumstances; glad to be able to post today!)

The Eclector had landed. Where, Meredith couldn't remember. But as she looked around at the greenery and the tall, graceful trees, she decided she didn't care.

“It's beautiful,” she breathed.

“Ain't it?” Kraglin took a deep breath of the cool air. “This is one of my favorite places to dock. Reminds me of Yazkin-8.”

“Where are we, again?”

“Emris,” he said, “abandoned planet. Folks used to live here a long time ago, but then the volcanoes all erupted and wiped 'em all out.”

Meredith shifted. “They're not going to erupt again, are they?

“Nope.” Kraglin snorted. “That was a couple thousand years ago, Ms. Quill. They've been dormant for a long time.”

Meredith's eyes darted around. “Right. Of course.”

“Relax, Quill.” Yondu stomped down the loading ramp.

She looked over her shoulder. “If we all burn to death in hot lava, I'm going to find you in the afterlife just to tell you, 'I told you so'.”

Yondu stopped. “How the hell are you gonna find me in the afterlife.”

Meredith grinned. “I'll check the bar.”

The laugh he gave her was unexpectedly genuine. Yondu gestured to the loading ramp and gave Kraglin a look; Kraglin immediately sprinted back onto the ship. Peter stumbled after Yondu, brandishing something shiny in his hand.

“Mom!” Peter's face was glowing. “Yondu's going to teach me how to shoot stuff!”

Meredith's breath caught in her chest; that shiny thing was a gun.

“Peter!” Her voice shot shrill. “Don't run with firearms!”

“What, you think when people are shootin' at him, he should just take a leisurely stroll?” Yondu snorted and put his heavy blue hand on Peter's shoulder. “It'll be fine. Kid's got to learn sometime.”
Meredith's heartbeat was racing. “No.”

“Mom, you always said Grandpa gave you your first gun when you were eight years old,” Peter said.

“Yes, Peter,” she sighed, “but that was an air rifle. I couldn't have killed myself with it.”

Yondu took the gun from Peter and showed her the stun pack he'd attached to it.

“He couldn't kill himself if he tried.” Yondu's voice was surprisingly gentle. “Kid's gotta learn, Mery.”

“I know he does.” Meredith just shook her head. “I know it's important. I know that. Self-defense is really important. I know, it's just... oh goodness.”

She ran her hands through her very short hair. Peter's little face was so hopeful and so expectant. Meredith pressed a hand to her forehead.

“Just... be really careful, honey.” Meredith's eyes were beginning to sting. “Don't know what I'd do if I lost you.”

Peter hugged her legs. “You won't, mom.”

Yondu handed Peter the blaster, and he went scampering off into the woods with it. He nearly tripped over a log, but caught himself, stepped over it carefully, and kept running. Yondu chuckled, then turned to Meredith. Her eyes were watery, and she was pressing her hand firmly to his forehead.

“If he gets hurt, I'm going to kill you,” she said.

“It'll be fine.” Yondu smiled. “Kid's gotta learn.”

Meredith squinted slightly. “When did you start being so nice? Is this a set-up?”

Yondu's laugh echoed off the trees. He put a muscled blue arm around her shoulder, still chuckling. Meredith's eyes widened; this wasn't Yondu.

“You worry too goddamn much, Mery.” Yondu watched Kraglin bring out the ammo cans. “I bring the kid out here to teach him a little, let you get some fresh air, and you start thinkin' I'm settin' you up.”

“You're scaring me,” she said.

Yondu grinned.

“This is way too nice for you. You're up to something.” Meredith pointed at him. “That's got to be it. Something’s up that you and Kraglin just aren't telling me. That has to be it. There is no other explanation.”

Kraglin and Yondu exchanged big grins.

“Maybe,” Yondu said, “I'm just being nice.”

Meredith squinted and crossed her arms. “I'm watching you.”

Yondu laughed again. Kraglin handed Yondu the ammo cans, and he went strolling off into the forest, whistling. As he did, his yama arrow cut a red streak through the air. It wound itself around
Meredith's body, dancing in front of her face before zooming off into the woods.

“He's teasing me,” Meredith huffed.

Kraglin turned away so she couldn't see the massive grin growing on his face.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Oh, and now you're in on it too?” Meredith put her hands on her hips. “Spill the beans, Kraglin. What's he doing this time?”

“Absolutely nothin', Ms. Quill.” Kraglin tried to keep from laughing. “I swear, the cap'n is just trying to have a good time.”

Meredith's mouth twisted. “I can't believe you're in on this, honey. I thought you were a good young man.”

Kraglin put his hand over his heart as if wounded. “Ms. Quill, I ain't lyin'. The cap'n is just bein' real nice.”

“Why?”

“You'd have to ask him, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin lifted an ammo box. “But I think he's just takin' a day to be glad he's a Ravager. We do that sometimes. Sometimes, you just gotta be glad you're livin' life as an outlaw.”

Meredith rubbed her arms, her hands sliding over the healed scars from her surgery.

“I don't understand pirates,” she said.

Kraglin laughed. More Ravagers came off the ship, looking confused.

“Kraglin!” Gef trotted down. “Where's the captain?”

Kraglin pointed into the woods. Gef blinked.

“Then what the hell are we supposed to do?” Gef gestured around. “He didn't even leave us orders.”

“Yes he did.” Kraglin set down the ammo box and dusted off his hands. “You got two choices.”

The Ravager's ears perked up. Being given a choice of assignment was a rare treat.

“Choice one; you grab a pickaxe and a shovel, head over towards that mountain there, and start mining all the dirt and kornerupine you can carry.” Kraglin pointed towards a huge, looming mound.

“What's choice two!” Drazkar had to yell from the back of the group.

“Choice two; you grab a rag and a bucket of water and report to Ms. Quill for cleanin' detail. Cap'n wants the whole ship spotless before nightfall,” Kraglin said.

There was an enormous groan. Nobody liked cleaning detail. Meredith squinted, thinking about what Kraglin had just said.

“Wait, Kraglin.” She put her hand on his shoulder. “You said report to me for cleaning detail?”

“Yes, Ms. Quill.”
Meredith squinted. “Yondu put me in charge of something.”

Kraglin grinned. “That's right.”

“Oh, he's definitely up to something.” Meredith crossed her arms. “That's it.”

“Wait, how come she gets to lead the cleanin' detail?” One of the Ravagers scowled. “Her brat might be the captain's pet, but she ain't a Ravager.”

Kraglin's eyes flashed. “Watch your mouth before I put my goddamn foot in it.”

The Ravager's mouth shut, but he sneered at Meredith. She took a deep breath and ignored him. Not everyone on the ship liked her and Peter; she knew that. She also knew that it didn't matter. As long as Peter was safe and she had Kraglin to talk to, Meredith could weather this storm.

“So there's your choices, boys.” Kraglin put his hands on his hips. “Dirt or cleaning.”

Most of the Ravagers went back in to grab pick-axes. Clearly the choice was dirt. A few, either old like Gef or lazy like Drazkar, lingered back and chose to clean. They figured Meredith would be an easier boss to work for than Kraglin.

Meredith looked at Kraglin. “Do I have to clean the whole ship by myself?”

“Technically, Ms. Quill, you don't have to listen to a goddamn word I say. You're still classified as cargo in the cap'n's book.” Kraglin grinned. “So you don't have to follow a single order. You just whip them boys into cleaning.”

Meredith looked at her cleaning crew. Gef and Drazkar were there. There was a scrawny purple Kallusian; Meredith thought his name was Lunis. One of them was a huge green Ravager, who crossed his arms and scowled down at Meredith.

“So you're the boss,” he said.

“According to Kraglin? Yeah, honey,” she said, “I'm the boss.”

The Ravager shrugged. “I'm Holdon.”

“Holdon.” Meredith tilted her head. “That's an interesting name.”

“He got shoved out of an airlock the day after we hired him,” Gef muttered, “for refusin' to kill. Son-of-a-bitch held on to the airlock door for hours, then crawled back in. Yondu thought it was so goddamn hilarious that he kept him on as a cargo loader. Fucker has muscles like steel cords.”

“So they call me Holdon.” The green Ravager smiled.

“You survived in space?” Meredith's eyes widened. “Wow.”

“I'm a Mandos,” he explained, “that's what we're good at. We can survive a whole day without freezing.”

“Well, how good are you at cleaning?” Meredith put her hands on her hips.

“I'm shit at it, to be honest.” Holdon looked at the Ravagers who were dragging pick-axes. “But it's better than going with that lot, mining more than all of them, and having it stolen from me on the way back.”
“You're shit at it, huh?” Meredith smiled. “Well honey, practice makes perfect, and we're going to have a lot of practice today.”

Lunis twitched. “So. So how long do you think it's going to take. To clean the ship, I mean. A long time?”

“That depends on how hard we work,” Meredith said.

Drazkar's shoulders slumped. “I don't like working hard.”

“I don't like complaining,” Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Now look, we can do this the hard way or the easy way.”

“Easy way,” they all chorused.

Meredith smiled. “Good.”

Peter loved Emris. There were ferns here that were twice as big as he was. The light from Emris' yellow sun shone through the leaves, highlighting everything with a soft green light. Peter laughed and jumped over a fallen branch.

Behind Peter, Yondu was strolling with a smile on his face. The Terran kid was a goddamn idiot, but hell if he wasn't energetic. Yondu took a deep breath, inhaling the warm forest air. Re-center, he told himself, re-fucking-center. Centaurians were usually a spiritual people; Yondu didn't buy into all that shit, but he did believe a man's soul should be his center. Re-center, he told himself, and be the goddamn person you used to be.

“Yondu!”

Peter was standing on a big fallen tree. It was coated in soft moss, moss so thick that Peter's feet weren't visible.

“This place is so cool,” he shouted.

“Get down from there before you break your goddamn legs,” he said.

Peter climbed down and ran over to Yondu. He was still carrying the stun blaster.

“Are we gonna shoot stuff,” he asked.

“Yep.” Yondu looked over his shoulder; the Eclector was still visible. “Gotta keep walkin', though.”

Peter scampered off again.

“Don't you get too far, boy.” Yondu called after him. “There's cliffs round here.”

“I'll be careful,” was the yelled reply.

Yondu grinned. His childhood hadn't been much like Peter's. No, no fun running around for him. Kids shouldn't have to be put through what he'd had to go through; Yondu knew that. But Peter wasn't going to be a Kree battle slave. Peter was going to be a Ravager, and being a Ravager meant being able to defend yourself. It meant being reliant on no one. To be equal to any challenge you could face. Yondu had learned it wasn't about having the biggest gun on the battlefield; it was being able to use any gun to devastating effect. Yondu had killed people with Krylorian plasma launchers,
Oskavarian needleguns, Terran revolvers, Xandarian blasters, and of course, his arrow. A Ravager had to be well-versed in the arts of death; Yondu was practically a goddamn poet.

“Alright, kid.” Yondu looked around. “Should be far enough away now that we ain't gonna shoot no one by accident.”

Peter fiddled with the blaster.

“How do you turn it on,” he asked.

Yondu knelt down and took the blaster. He pointed to each part in turn.

“Trigger. Pull it to shoot. This is the action. Pull it back first; turns it on.” Yondu flipped it over and showed Peter a little switch. “This is the safety. Keep it on unless you feel like you're gonna need to fuck someone's shit up.”

“Mom says not to use those words,” Peter said.

“Your momma ain't here.” Yondu stood back up. “Alright, boy. Let's see you turn off the safety.”

Peter hit the little switch; light shot through the power lines, making the whole thing warm. Peter grinned.

“Cool,” he said.

“Now, never point that goddamn thing at anybody you don't want to kill, understand?” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “It's your job to know what you're shootin' and what's around what you're shootin'. Don't want that blast comin' through your enemy and takin' out someone you didn't want dead.”

“Okay,” Peter said.

“Pull back the action, boy.”

Peter pulled it back, then put his arms out, holding the gun straight. Yondu knelt down behind him.

“Keep that elbow straight, that's right. Good.” Yondu looked in the direction Peter was aiming. “You see that tree over there? That big one with the hollow? Try to hit it.”

Peter squeezed the trigger. A bolt of white-blue light shot out of the end of the blaster. The slight recoil moved his arms a little, but with his elbow straight, the gun came right back down level. The bolt shot through the forest and burst against the tree.

“Wow!” Peter's eyes widened.

Yondu grinned. “Again.”

Peter aimed and fired; this time, his shot missed. He frowned.

“Don't worry about it. Keep that elbow straight,” Yondu said.

Peter fired. The bolt smashed against the tree again.

“I did it!”

“Sure did, kid, but stay focused.” Yondu pointed at a smaller branch. “Blast that fucker off.”
Peter fired a few times; the last shot hit the branch, sending it spiraling through the air.

Yondu laughed. “That's one fucker dead. Remember; shoot first and don't miss, and you'll never have to worry.”

Peter handed him the gun.

“Show me,” he said.

Yondu slid his fingers around the grip, then pulled Peter tight to his side.

“Stay still kid, I don't want to blast you.”

Peter grabbed onto the tails of Yondu's coat. “I won't move.”

Yondu aimed at the tree. He took a deep breath, his elbow straight, and fired several shots in rapid succession. Each one found their mark on a different branch; he stripped the tree of all its limbs in less than five seconds. He aimed at the trunk and fired a series of bolts. The tree made a horrible crunching sound, then fell forwards.

“Shit,” Yondu said.

He grabbed Peter and jumped; the tree slammed down nearly a yard from where they were standing. Yondu's blood chilled a little. The kid could have gotten hurt.

“That was so cool!” Peter's face lit up. “You killed the whole tree! You didn't even miss once, wow!”

Yondu stared at the kid's bright, shining grin. He'd forgotten. Near-death experiences didn't scare Terrans; they thought they were fun. Yondu stood up and dusted the leaves off his jacket. Peter had leaves in his hair; Yondu ruffled it and they fell out.

“Hey!” Peter laughed. “No fair, no fair!”

Yondu tried not to smile. “Ravager's ain't fair, boy.”

Peter ran up and touched the tree that Yondu had felled.

“It's almost as big around as mom,” he said.

“That ain't sayin' much. Your momma's skinny as hell,” Yondu said.

Peter frowned. “Of course she is. She's sick.”

Yondu bared his teeth. With as energetic and stubborn as Meredith was, it was sometimes easy to forget she was still dying.

“Yondu, how much does the next machine thing cost?” Peter sat on the fallen tree. “Is it a lot?”

“Fifty-thousand units.” Yondu fiddled with his arrow. “Twice what the last one cost.”

Peter took a deep breath. “That's a lot.”

“And that ain't the end. The last one, one that's actually gonna fix her? Three-hundred-thousand units.”
Peter's jaw dropped. “You're kidding!”

“That's right. So you better work long and hard for your momma, boy, because...” Yondu trailed off.

“What?” Peter's voice had an edge of panic to it. “What is it?”

Yondu sat down on the tree next to Peter. His face was serious; Peter's was wide-eyed and concerned.

“Boy, you don't have to do this. You know that, right?”

“Have to do what? Work for you? Yeah I do, that's how I get money.”

“You don't have to get money. Money ain't shit.” Yondu poked Peter in the chest. “Freedom. Freedom's what matters. You ain't no slave to your momma's health. You can stop doin' this any time you want.”

Peter looked at Yondu's face with horror. “Stop helping my mom? Let her die? Are you crazy?”

“You're a free man,” Yondu said, “and your life is yours.”

“She is dying.” Peter gripped the tree bark hard. “And I'm her son. I know I'm free, I'm from America! That's not the point!”

Yondu didn't know what America was, but the boy was getting agitated.

“Freedom, who cares about that when my mom's sick?” Peter threw his arms up in the air. “Free without her, so what? Free to get eaten by you guys. Free to get lost or thrown out an airlock or something. I love my mom, Yondu, I'm not gonna let her die.”

The boy had a fire in his eyes. Yondu's mouth twitched up in a slight smile; the boy had passion, and bravery. He'd make a good Ravager.

“So you're gonna keep workin'? Gonna be a Ravager?”

“I'm already a Ravager,” Peter said, “I take care of my own. And my own is my mom.”

Yondu raised his eyebrows, then lightly punched Peter's shoulder.

Peter rubbed it. “Ow.”

“I barely nudged you, boy.” Yondu stood back up. “Let's get back to the Eclector.”

Peter stood and followed Yondu.

“Yondu,” he said after a moment.

“Yeah, boy?”

Peter looked up at him. “If you were me, would you keep helping your mom?”

Yondu blinked. “Didn't know her. Wouldn't care much.”

“But if you did know her and you did care about her,” Peter said.

Yondu wanted to scowl and tell the kid to shut his mouth. But, the boy had that fire in his eyes; Peter was testing him, Yondu knew it.
“If I cared about any goddamn person as much as you love your momma,” he said, “I'd work my fingers to the goddamn bone.”

Peter nodded. “Because Ravagers take care of their own.”

“That's right, kid.” Yondu gave Peter a crooked smile. “That's right.”

Peter and Yondu had made it back to the Eclector. Yondu looked at the floor. The scuff marks and footprints had been mopped away. Even the corners were free of dust and dirt. As he walked along, he noticed more. Someone had wiped all the dirty fingerprints off the railing. The stairs had been swept. The kitchen was spotless. Even the goddamn bathrooms were clean. Yondu felt like he'd stepped onto someone else's ship. This couldn't be the Eclector.

He opened the portal to the bridge. Drazkar and Lunis were on their hands and knees, scrubbing the floor with a sponge. Holdon, the big green bastard, was wiping the windows. Gef was red-faced, struggling as he dragged two huge bags of garbage to the door. Meredith was wiping down the chairs and furniture.

“Quill,” Yondu barked. Goddamn it, he should have known not to let that Terran out of Kraglin's sight.

Meredith looked up at him. He spread his arms wide and squinted.

“You said you wanted it clean,” she said.

“Clean, not goddamn sterile.” He walked in; as the mud from his boots stuck to the wet floor, Drazkar groaned.

“Hey, hey!” Meredith pointed at the tracks Yondu had made. “Look what you just did.”

Yondu looked down. Then, he dragged his foot in a huge circle, making a dirty ring.

He chuckled. “Clean it up, Draz.”

“Aye, cap'n.” Drazkar's head hung low.

“Come on, it's bad enough he has to keep cleaning up everywhere he goes. We've picked up enough of Drazkar's hair to knit another whole Drazkar,” Meredith said.

Yondu snorted. “Just what we need.”

“Captain?” Gef had come back from getting rid of the garbage; his face was crimson and slick with sweat. “Permission to return to normal duties, captain.”

“Go ahead.” Yondu bared his teeth.

Gef collapsed into his chair behind the comms systems, panting. Yondu looked at Meredith and raised his eyebrows.

“Now who's a slave driver,” he said.

“Still you,” she quipped.

“This was the easy way, captain.” Gef wiped the sweat from his brow. “I don't want to know what
the hard way was.”

Meredith started to rub down the wall.

“The hard way was I give you all toothbrushes,” she said, “and you clean everything with that.”

Gef shuddered. A light came on, and he tapped the comms unit.

“Report,” he said.

“Miners coming back.” Kraglin's voice was frosted with static from the comms. “Got a good haul of kornerupine today, and a bunch of crates of this dirt.”

Gef was just about to answer when Meredith ripped the comms unit out of his hands.

“Young man,” she said, “you tell those people moving that dirt that if I see so much as half a clump of it on the cargo bay floors, I will personally nail sponges to their tongues and make them scrub it.”

A second of silence met her statement.

“Gee, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin's voice wavered. “Nail 'em to our tongues? Ain't that a little harsh?”

“Then I'll let Yondu do it,” she said, “he'd probably find it funny.”

Yondu grinned.

“Alright, Ms. Quill,” Kraglin said, “we'll be real careful. Boarding now.”

Kraglin ended the call. The door to the bridge opened; Peter came running in, waving a blaster.

“Mom,” he cried out, “I learned how to shoot stuff.”

Everyone but Yondu and Meredith ducked; the Terran had a gun. Yondu scowled and pulled the blaster out of his hands.

“What did I tell you about runnin' with firearms,” he said.

Peter's head hung. “Not to run with them because the safety could come off.”

“And?”

“Never point the gun at anything I don't want blasted to pieces.”

“And?”

“Not to go waving it around like a fool,” Peter finished.

“That's right.” Yondu handed the boy the gun. “Now put it in the holster.”

Peter wedged it into the holster; it was nearly as wide as his hip. He beamed at his mother.

“I learned gun safety today,” he said.

“So I see.” Meredith put her hands on her hips. “Color me impressed, Yondu. You actually taught him something.”

Yondu scowled and opened the door. “I know more than you give me credit for, Quill.”
Meredith picked up Peter and walked out into the hall; it was best if Peter and his gun weren't around the other Ravagers.

“I never questioned how much you knew,” she said, “just your efficiency with sharing it.”

“It was really fun, mom.” Peter held onto her tightly. “He says next, I get to learn how to aim better. I'm not good at aiming yet.”

“Aiming is hard, baby, ain't no doubt about that.” Meredith smiled. “But gun safety is the most important part.”

“I can be a gun-slinger cowboy!” Peter's face lit up.

“Or a Ravager,” Yondu added as he followed the Quills down the hall.

“Or a gun-slinger Ravager cowboy-pirate!”

Meredith laughed. “Absolutely.”

“What did you do all day, mom?”

“I cleaned,” she said.

Peter made a face. “I don't like cleaning. I like shooting things.”

Yondu laughed. “See? Ravager.”

“He's a child. No child likes cleaning things.” Meredith put Peter down. “Although someone needs to go put their dirty clothes in a bag so I can wash them, or he's not going to have clean pants next week.”

“Okay, mom.” Peter scampered off.

Meredith watched him go.

“I'm sorry about earlier,” she said.

Yondu frowned. “What?”

“I said I'm sorry.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “You did something really good for Peter, and all I did was be suspicious.”

Yondu grinned; his teeth were as gnarled and crooked as ever.

“You don't trust me, Mery?”

“If you were me,” she said, “would you trust you?”

The grin slid off his face.

“If I were you, I'd have taken that blaster, took off the stun pack, shot every goddamn person on the ship, grabbed my kid, stole the Eclector and headed back to Terra,” he said.

Meredith laughed. “Darn it. Guess I missed that chance.”

“Why don't you do it?” Yondu was frowning now. “Why don't you just kill us all and take the ship? We let you run free, pretty much. You could kill us all in our sleep.”
Meredith made a face. “Is this what you think about all the time? Whether or not someone's going to stab you to death in the middle of the night?”

“Yes,” he said.

“I'm not going to stab you. I'm not going to stab anyone, not if I can help it. Look,” she said, “I want to go home more than anything. I want to let Peter live his life the way it should have been. But I'm not going to brutally murder you all to get there.”

“Why not?”

“Because I wouldn't be able to live with myself,” she said, “and because Peter wouldn't like it.”

Yondu scratched his chin. “Killin' a ship full of space pirates ain't his cup of tea, huh?”

“No, it's not. No matter how weird they are,” Meredith said, “or how rude. Besides, you guys are aggressive, violent assholes, but that doesn't mean you're one-hundred-percent dicks.”

Yondu laughed. “Not that bad, huh?”

“Ravagers don't like being soft.” Meredith crossed her arms. “I've learned that. Kindness, gratitude, generosity; that don't mean shit to y'all. But still, every once in a while I see you doing the most selfless acts and the most bullshit jackass-ery at the same time. It's kind of fascinating, actually.”

“What the hell you talkin' about?”

“Maorda-4,” she said, “Ravagers engage and destroy nearly five hundred Kree slaver ships. You saved that planet. People are alive because of what you did. But, at the same time you risked your own life to steal a bunch of bullshit green tubes full of explosives.”

Yondu shrugged. “That was the job.”

“You abduct me and Peter from Terra with no explanation. You tell us we're cargo but don't tell us where we're going. You treat Peter like he's a nuisance and me like a maid. You don't care that you ripped us out of our lives.” Meredith gestured. “But then, you feed us and give us the clothes on our backs. You let Peter and I earn units and spend them however we please. You hook us up with an amazing doctor who's going to cure what killed me. You give me a chance to live, a chance for Peter and I to still be a family. You teach him things like how to fly and how to shoot; things he should have been taught by... well, by my dad, since Jason wasn't around. But still, you see how your behavior confuses me sometimes?”

“Maybe that's the point,” he grunted.

“If that was your goal, Yondu, then congratulations.” Meredith pulled a rag out of her pocket and started wiping down the wall. “Color me very confused as to the make-up of your character. All I can figure is that you're a big blue asshole who occasionally approximates someone half-decent.”

Yondu snorted, but Meredith didn't laugh. Instead, she kept wiping down the wall. A datapad fell out of her jacket pocket. Yondu leaned over slightly to read it. Peter's First Space Flight, it read.

Yondu stared at her. The inside of his chest felt like it was warping. He realized it was the same feeling he had when Peter did something undeniably sweet and adorable. Yondu was starting to hate that feeling.

Meredith leaned over and picked up the data pad she'd dropped. When she stood, she noticed him
scowling.

“What,” she said.

Yondu just growled and pushed past her.

“What?” Meredith held her arms out. “I'm his mother, I keep these things!”

“I know, goddamn it.” Yondu's face was uncomfortably warm. He stalked down the hall and turned
the corner; Meredith watched the tails of his coat flutter, and then he was gone.

Meredith put the datapad back in her jacket pocket, sighing. “Sometimes he is just so confusing.”
After Yondu and Peter go missing, it's up to Kraglin and Meredith to pull off an extraction. Kraglin gets his first taste of what being a first mate means when the captain's not around.

(Three days with no update, yikes! Things have been busy, y'all. I dropped something heavy on my foot, so I might not be able to get about for a while. So, just in case I'm out of the loop for a while, here's two chapters instead of one!)

Both Meredith and Peter had been taking daily flight lessons with Kraglin, and Peter had been learning to use a blaster. Today was no different; after lunch, Yondu dragged Peter down to some forsaken planet while Meredith earned two-hundred units washing dishes. Between the lessons and the work, Meredith was seeing her baby less and less. After the dishes, she went down to wash her own clothes for a change.

“Ms. Quill!”

Meredith hadn't been folding clothes for more than five minutes when Kraglin came bursting through the portal.

“Kraglin?” Meredith dropped her laundry. “What is it?”

“Somewhat’s engaged down on the planet,” he said “they're tryin' to shoot down the cap'n.”

Meredith's hands went cold. “Peter's on that ship.”

Kraglin was breathing heavy. “I know.”

“What do we do?” Meredith strode away, the laundry forgotten.

“What do we do?” Kraglin entered the bridge; the pain was gone, but she was still short of breath and easily exhausted. She had forgotten; the life of a Ravager could go from calm to deadly in an instant, and Peter was a Ravager now.

“Gef?” Kraglin yelled as he entered the bridge. “Report.”

“Looks like the captain's ship is mostly fine,” Gef said, “seeing as he landed it. Bad news is, whatever took him down is circling overhead. He's not going to be able to fly out of there.”

“What do we do?” Drazkar looked at Kraglin.

Kraglin swallowed; all the Ravagers were looking at Kraglin. This was his moment to prove he could be a first mate. His chest swelled; the cap'n was depending on him.

“Alright,” he said, “let's keep in alignment with the cap'n's ship. We need to pull for an extraction.”
“An extraction?” Gef's bushy eyebrows knit together. “O' what sort, exactly?”

“Personnel.” Kraglin was already strapping flight gear on. “I'm gonna go get the cap'n.”

Gef scowled and pointed at the dark shape circling Yondu's ship. “Kraglin, whatever that thing is, it took down Yondu. Sorry mate, but you're not gonna be able to out-fly it. The captain's twice the pilot you are.”

“I'm the next best thing,” Kraglin said, “and I gotta give it a shot. That's our cap'n down there, dammit. I need a co-pilot. Anyone else brave or stupid enough to do this with me?”

Silence stretched across the bridge. The Ravagers wouldn't meet his eyes.

“You're shitting me,” he said, “that's our cap'n!”

“Whatever that thing is, it took down Yondu,” Holdon said, “and I don't think any of us fancy our chances against it, Kargas. Yondu can make it back on his own.”

“Go to hell, then.” Kraglin snarled. “I'll do it myself.”

Kraglin stormed out of the bridge, leaving the rest of the Ravagers in silence.

Down in the hangar bay, Kraglin was loading photon torpedoes. He was moving as fast as he could without making mistakes; a single error could cost him his life. Not that it mattered; he was going to save Yondu or die trying. Slamming the launcher shut, he dropped into the pilot's seat.

“Ready?”

Kraglin jumped about a foot in the air.

“Ms. Quill?” He blinked. “What are you doing in the co-pilot's seat?”

“Co-piloting.” She hooked her seat belt. “You said you needed someone brave and stupid. Well, here I am.”

Kraglin gritted his teeth; he didn't have time for this.

“Ms. Quill, with all due respect, you can't fly.”

“I know. That's why I'm not piloting. I'm co-piloting.”

“Ms. Quill.” Kraglin closed his eyes. “You do realize co-piloting is the same goddamn thing as piloting, right?”

“Kraglin!” Meredith's voice shot shrill and hard. “My baby boy is down on some God-forsaken planet with nothing but your captain to protect him. Now I swear, if you don't get this ship moving right now, I will do my damn best to get it there myself.”

Kraglin sighed and wrenched the dial; the ship sputtered to life.

“This is very dangerous, Ms. Q.”

“We'll be alright, honey. I believe in you,” she said.
Kraglin took a deep breath. “Thanks, Ms. Q.”

“Kraglin, you psycho!” Gef was yelling through the comms. “She can't even fly!”

“It weren't exactly my decision, Gef.” Kraglin stayed focused as he entered the atmosphere. “By the way, she can hear you.”

“Hi, Gef,” Meredith said.

“Hi, Quill.” Gef sighed. “You're both crazy.”

“Brain tumor,” Meredith said.

“Ravager,” Kraglin said.

They could hear Gef groan on the other side of the comms.

“Fine,” he said, “but don't say I didn't warn you, mates.”

“Thanks, Gef.” Kraglin switched off the side thrusters as they swooped down through the planet's stratosphere.

Meredith looked down at the lush, foreign planet. “Where are we?”

Kraglin squinted at the readouts. “Planet designation K-3992. Unnamed, undiscovered, unimportant. Apparently roped off; some kind of tribal people live here.”

“I hope we don't disturb them,” Meredith said.

“Honestly, Ms. Quill, I just hope they don't try to kill us.” Kraglin spotted Yondu's ship. “There's the cap'n's ship...where's that big dark thing what took him down?”

Gef's voice snapped over the comms. “It's spotted you! Left!”

Kraglin wrenched the controls; the ship did a tight spiral to the left. A huge, dark blue form flew past, beating enormous wings.

“It's not a ship,” Meredith breathed, “it's a bird.”

It was indeed a bird, a great dark blue bird with huge talons and a curved beak. It had four eyes, two on each side, and it focused on Kraglin's ship with deadly intent.

“That thing must think we're a bird,” Meredith said, “imposing on his turf.”

Kraglin flipped open the weapons system. “It's about to be fried chicken.”

Three proton torpedoes shot out, leaving a blue trail behind them. They curved through the air and exploded on the underside of the bird's body. With a horrific screech, its wings folded and it plummeted towards the ground.

“We'd best land,” Kraglin said, “in case that thing gets back up.”

Kraglin landed the ship in a small meadow rimmed with trees. He opened the loading ramp and grabbed a blaster; you could never tell with these savage planets. Meredith stepped off of the loading
ramp and onto the lush forest floor.

“Wow,” she breathed, “it’s beautiful.”

A warbling sound answered her. She looked right. Standing between two trees was a tall, rough-skinned alien wearing a barkcloth tunic. It was entirely green, with long, taloned fingers and a small mouth. Its eyes were a deeper green, and they blinked at Meredith. The alien warbled again.

Meredith spoke slowly. “I cannot understand what you are saying.”

The green alien tilted its head and let out a series of warbling noises. It took a step forwards. Meredith tensed, and the alien froze. They both waited for the other to make a move.

“Ms. Quill!”

Kraglin dropped down in front of Meredith and leveled a blaster at the alien, his expression fierce.

“Whoa, honey.” Meredith put her hand on Kraglin's wrist. “First contact, remember? Play nice.”

“Ms. Quill, playing nice is how you get killed.” Kraglin's jaw was hard. “Shoot first, ask questions later.”

“If I'm wrong, you can shoot him later,” she said, “but let me try, okay?”

Kraglin lowered his blaster; the alien watched his arm move.

“Hi.” Meredith stepped in front of Kraglin. “I'm sorry to bother you, really I am.”

The alien tilted its head and warbled. Kraglin frowned.

“It talks,” he said.

“Well, it makes that strange sound.” Meredith shrugged. “I guess that's talking.”

“No, Ms. Q.” Kraglin tapped his ear. “I forgot, you ain't got a universal translator yet.”

“You know what it's saying?”

“Sort of.” Kraglin squinted. “It's a weird language.”

Meredith frowned. “I wish I could hear it.”

Kraglin pulled the comm link out of his ear and tossed it to Meredith. “Go ahead.”

She quickly stuck the link in her ear and listened to the alien's speech.

“Identity-query?” Its voice was trembling a little. “Identity-query?”

“I'm Meredith,” she said. The comms unit emitted a trilling warble.

The alien blinked. “Identity-Meredith.”


“Identity-red-egg-down-tree,” the alien said.

“Red-egg-down-tree...” Meredith squinted. “Yeah, okay.”
The alien gestured towards Kraglin. “Identity-query?”

“Identity-Kraglin,” she said.

“Identity-Kraglin.” The alien looked between Meredith and Kraglin. “Form-body-different.”

“Gender differences,” Meredith said.

A buzzing in her ear announced that there was no word in this language for gender. Or sex. Or male. Or female. Meredith blinked.

“They're monosexual,” she said to Kraglin, “they've never seen a species that had gender before.”

Kraglin made a face. “Weird.”

“I think it's amazing,” Meredith said, “we're the first contact this species has ever had with another sentient life form. I wonder if they have religion? What is their society like?”

Kraglin scowled. “I'd love to let you interrogate this green son-of-a-bitch, but Yondu and Peter are still out there.”

Meredith flinched. “You're right. I'm sorry.”

She turned back to the alien. “We're looking for two of our friends who crash-landed here. The big bird took down their ship and it won't let them leave.”


Meredith took a deep breath. “Yes. I think.”


“Thank you,” Meredith said.

Red-egg-down-tree ran off into the forest.

“Good riddance,” Kraglin said.

“He said he'd help us,” Meredith tossed the comm link back to Kraglin. “At least, that's what I think he said. Or 'it' said? I guess it's an it since they're monogendered.”

“Whatever.” Kraglin squinted and looked around. “Which way do you figure?”

Meredith closed her eyes and pointed the same way the alien had walked.

“How d'you figure that,” Kraglin asked.

“I don't know,” she said, “I just... I feel like Peter's that way.”

Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz. “Do Terrans got homing signals?”

“Something like that,” Meredith said as she stalked along the forest floor, “it's called mother's intuition.”

Kraglin followed her. “So you're guessing.”
Meredith sighed. “Yep.”

It was all the goddamn bird's fault. Yondu scowled up at it as it circled around the ship. The big blue beast had taken its talons and torn at the thrusters. Now, Yondu was having to repair them by himself. Not for the first time, he wished he'd thought to bring Kraglin. With Kraglin by his side, Yondu could have maneuvered away from the bird. Kraglin could fix the thrusters with one goddamn hand tied behind his back. As it was, Yondu didn't have Kraglin. He had Peter, and the little Terran wouldn't stop crying.

“Boy,” Yondu grunted, “if you don't knock that off, I'll give you somethin' to cry about.”

“We're stuck here.” Peter hugged his knees. “That is something to cry about.”

“If you don't stop your crying,” Yondu said, “I'm gonna carve you up and eat you. I'll tell your momma it was survival.”

“Mom would kill you,” Peter said.

Yondu chuckled. “Boy, your momma can't kill a stoned Orloni.”

There was a series of explosions, followed by a horrific screech; Yondu and Peter looked up. The great bird had folded its blue wings and was plummeting towards the ground.

“Shit,” Yondu cursed, “someone just wasted torpedoes.”

“Wasted?” Peter watched the bird crash into the trees; it was so big that its wings lay over the canopy. “That looked like a good shot to me.”

Yondu scowled.

“At least Kraglin finally showed up,” he said.

Peter shook his head. “No, it's mom.”

“Your momma can't operate a weapons system,” Yondu said.

“Neither can you,” Peter quipped, “when you're fighting a big bird.”

“It came out of goddamn nowhere!” Yondu bared his teeth. “You wanna get eaten, boy?”

Peter's mouth snapped shut. He watched the bird limp off, then saw what had taken it down.

“Yondu.” Peter hopped up. “They landed. We should go find them.”

“Stay put, dammit.” Yondu banged a thruster fuel tube into place. “They'll find us. That's why they're here.”

Peter sat back down and hugged his knees. “I hate waiting.”

“Get over it.”

“You're mean.”

“You're an idjit.”
“You're a big blue asshole.”

“Watch your goddamn language.”

“Mom says it,” Peter muttered.

“Shut up, boy.”

“Why do you always tell me to shut up?”

“I mean it.” Yondu clamped his hand over Peter's mouth. “We're bein' watched.”

Green faces had appeared out of the trees. They had large green eyes like dark emeralds, and they were locked on Yondu and Peter.

Yondu bared his teeth. “Get out of here, you sons-of-bitches.”

The comms unit in Yondu's ear trilled that out to them; they blinked, shocked. One of them warbled.

Peter looked back and forth. “What are they saying?”

“Shut up, boy. I'll handle this.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “If any of y'all come within five feet of me, you're dead.”

The aliens looked at each other; there was a chorus of warbling. Peter held his breath. Another alien came walking through the trees, warbling loudly. Yondu's head whipped around and he sneered. The aliens all warbled at the newcomer, who warbled back.

“What are they saying?” Peter's eyebrows knit together.

“That skinny one there,” Yondu said, pointing to the newcomer, “it says it saw your momma and Kraglin. They're lookin' for us.”

“And the other ones? What are they saying?”

“They want us to go away,” he said.

“Good.” Peter stood up. “We want to go away, too.”

The aliens were standing in a circle and warbling at one another. Peter watched them.

“They don't speak universal common?” Peter frowned.

“They ain't a space-farin' race, boy. Just tribal peoples, livin' and dyin' on the same goddamn rock they were born on.”

Peter looked up at Yondu. “Like Terrans?”

“Like Terrans,” Yondu said.

“Peter!”

At the sound of his mother's voice, Peter looked around wildly.

“Mom,” he called, “I'm over here!”

“Peter!” Meredith came sprinting out of the woods. “Peter!”
“Mom!”

Meredith scooped her son up in her arms. Yondu noticed she was crying again; what was it with Terrans and crying?

“Oh baby.” She held Peter close. “I was so worried about you. Are you alright?”

“Yeah, mom.” Peter hugged her. “Yondu pulled the safety rig on me so I didn't get hurt when we crashed.”

“He did what?” Meredith blinked.

“Kid's not big enough to pull the safety rig down,” Yondu muttered, “so I had to do it for him. Weak little Terran, ain't he.”

Meredith held her son close. “I'm so glad you're okay, Peter.”

“Cap'n?” Kraglin came jogging up behind Meredith. “Everything alright?”


Kraglin saluted Yondu, then sprung to attention.

“Extraction ship less than a half kilometer away, awaiting orders, cap'n. The Eclector is in alignment for extraction process.” Kraglin kept his tone professional. “Should be a simple matter of up, up, and away, cap'n.”

Yondu grunted in approval, and the corner of Kraglin's mouth turned up. The two Ravagers looked at Yondu's ship.

“Give me fifteen minutes,” Kraglin said, “and I'll have us two ships on the way out, cap'n. Hate to see this thing stay here.”

“Fifteen minutes?” Peter made a face. “You can't fix a ship in fifteen minutes.”

“You can't fix a ship in fifteen minutes.” Kraglin whipped out his omnitool and set to work. “I'm a goddamn professional.”

Yondu grinned. “Glad to have you down here. Now shut up and work.”

Meredith had never seen Kraglin smile like that before. The Xandarian was a whiz with machines, she admitted, and the speed at which he repaired Yondu's ship was impressive. Meanwhile, the green aliens shuffled about and warbled.

“They're getting antsy,” Meredith noticed, “is that bad?”

“Not unless they start goin' at us with them claws.” Yondu eyed the talons of the green aliens. “Those things look like they'd peel the flesh off a man in seconds.”

“I think they eat bark,” Meredith said, “and that's why they need the talons. I think they scrape it off. I saw lots of scrapings in the woods, but they were concentric, geometric, and purposeful. It couldn't have been an animal.”

“What, you some kind of scientist now?”

“I just think it's interesting.” Meredith shrugged. “Don't you?”
“Not really,” Yondu grunted.

“You've got no curiosity,” she said.

“I've got curiosity,” Peter said, “and Kraglin says it'll kill me.”

Kraglin winced; he could feel Meredith's glare like ice on his back.

“Curiosity killed the cat, Ms. Q.” Kraglin expertly repaired the stabilizers. “Just a turn of phrase. I wasn't threatenin' nothing.”

“I know, Kraglin, but all the same.”

Yondu hopped in the pilot's seat. “Kraglin, how long?”

“Five more minutes, cap'n.”

“Quill, get in the goddamn ship.” Yondu flipped on the computer.

“Which one?”

“Both of you, goddamn it.” Yondu scowled. “If I wanted a specific one, I'd say so!”

Meredith rolled her eyes. Peter and Meredith climbed on the ship. When Kraglin had repaired the ship good enough for flight, he hit the side with his hand.

“Let 'er rip, cap'n!”

Yondu fired up the thrusters. They sputtered for a moment, then roared to life. Kraglin climbed in the ship and the loading ramp closed behind him. As they rose into the air, Meredith stuck her head out the window and yelled at the green aliens.

“Thank you, Red-egg-down-tree!”

One of the aliens crossed its arms. Meredith assumed that was a way to say good-bye, or at least good riddance. Yondu swerved low, dropping Kraglin off at his ship.

“See you up top.” Kraglin leapt out of the loading bay and landed on the ground.

“Mom, can I go with Kraglin?” Peter's voice was hopeful.

“Baby, we're not even landed.” Meredith rubbed Peter's back gently. “Maybe next time.”

Peter's face fell. Yondu's craft pulled up into the atmosphere with Kraglin's craft beside it. Yondu pressed his finger to the comms unit.

“Check in,” he said.

“Everything's goddamn dandy, cap'n.” Kraglin's voice piped up from the comms unit.

“Where the hell is everyone else?” Yondu bared his teeth.

“Goddamn cowards, the lot of 'em, cap'n. I'm the only one who came. Oh, and Ms. Quill,” Kraglin added, “on account of Peter.”

Peter hugged his mom; she stroked his hair and pressed a kiss to his forehead.
“You mean no one on that goddamn ship would face a big blue chicken?” Yondu scowled. “When I get up there, there's gonna be hell to pay.”

“Lazy goddamn cowards!” Yondu bellowed at the Ravagers. “Goddamn loyalty don't count for shit, huh?”

The Ravagers hung their heads and didn't look up. They were loyal, but... maybe not very brave. Yondu was purple in the face from yelling at them; Kraglin and Meredith hung back, avoiding involvement. Yondu pointed at the Ravagers.

“You sons-of-bitches better shape your shit up,” he said, “or I'll be thinnin' this crew faster than you can say, 'Aye, cap'n.'”

“Aye, cap'n,” they muttered.

Yondu signalled to the Ravagers, and they dispersed.

“Kraglin.” Yondu turned around. “Get this hunk of junk moving. I wanna be out of this galaxy eight goddamn minutes ago.”

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin strode towards the bridge.

“Hey.” Yondu grabbed him by the shoulder. “Not bad. You're getting it now.”

Kraglin's eyes widened; he swallowed. “The last thing, cap'n?”

“Yeah. Go on, get.”

Yondu watched Kraglin go, then turned to Meredith. She stood with her hands on Peter's shoulders. Yondu bared his teeth.

“You went on a goddamn suicide mission,” he said.

“If something had happened to Peter,” she said, “it wouldn't have mattered if I lived.”

“Coulda died.”

“I trust Kraglin,” she said.

Yondu scowled and walked away. The Quills watched him leave.

Peter looked up at his mother. “It was my fault Yondu crashed. I accidentally kicked the scanner and it didn't pick up the big bird.”

Meredith frowned. “Why were you kicking the scanner?”

“I was just kicking my feet, it was an accident!”

“You learned your lesson about messing around in the cockpit of a spaceship, didn't you Peter?”

“Yes, mom.” Peter's shoulders sagged.

“Go on, go get dinner. Then it's straight to bed with you.” Meredith's voice was soft, but stern. “Now, you're being punished for crashing a ship, so I don't want to see any Walkman, okay? I'll tell
Kraglin and he'll tell me if you're not doing as I say.”

“Yes, mom.” Peter walked away with his head hung. “I'm sorry.”

“I know, baby.” Meredith ran her fingers through her short curls as she watched her baby walk away. He'd nearly died today, and all that had saved him was pure chance. And, she thought, Yondu pulling that safety rig. The big blue asshole had saved Peter's life. Meredith tilted her head and stared at nothing in particular. Saving Peter, keeping Meredith alive... why? She knew they were cargo, but where were they bound? Who wanted them? Why? What made the Quills so valuable? Meredith had a million questions, but she had a feeling Yondu wasn't about to answer a single one.
Acts of Friendship

Chapter Summary

Meredith solo-pilots a spaceship and proves to the Ravagers that she's got what it takes to be one. Not that she would be, of course. Peter's Orloni dies, and Yondu proves that his cleverness isn't limited solely to criminal activities.

(Chapter two of update; sorry about the wait, but life happens!)

Something was up with the cap'n. Kraglin didn't quite know how he knew it, but something was up. If he didn't know any better, he'd think Yondu was worried.

It had been three days since the crash landing had occurred. Meredith had been pestering Kraglin every day for flight lessons; the crash had really freaked her out. Now, Kraglin had been ordered to prep Yondu's ship. The cap'n himself stalked up and down the hangar bay with his teeth bared. He kicked an Orloni; it sailed clear over the railing. Kraglin swallowed and said nothing. Yep; there was definitely something up with the cap'n, and as future-first-mate, Kraglin felt it was his duty to find out what it was.

He cleared his throat. “Cap'n?”

Yondu glared at him.

Kraglin swallowed. “Nevermind, cap'n.”

Yondu scowled and kept pacing. There was the sound of light footsteps on the metal stairs, and Meredith Quill came trotting up. She was wearing a tight Ravager flight suit and all the protective gear that would fit on her slender frame. Her short blonde curls bounced around her face as she strode up to the two Ravagers.

“Ready when you are,” she said to Yondu.

Kraglin looked at Yondu, who scowled.

“You sure about this?” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “Thought you weren't willin' to risk your life as long as the boy was still around.”

“That was before I saw a crash landing.” Meredith crossed her arms. “This is one of those have-to-have-it skills out here. Kraglin's taught me enough; I have to try it now.”

“With all due respect, Ms. Quill, all you know how to do is fly.” Kraglin scratched the peach fuzz on his chin. “What if you get into a situation where you've got to use the weapons system?”

“Peter figured it out on Maorda-4 with a dead Orloni in his lap.” Meredith's voice was relaxed. “If he can do it, I can do it.”

“Cap'n?” Kraglin looked at Yondu, hoping he wouldn't let Ms. Quill do this.

Yondu's teeth were bared, but he jerked his head towards his ship.
“Get on,” he said, “and get flyin’.”

Meredith quickly paced right up the loading ramp. Kraglin exhaled, shaking his head.

“This is real risky, cap'n.”

“Tried tellin' her that.” Yondu adjusted his flight jacket. “But she's goddamn stubborn when she wants to be.”

“Yep.” Kraglin leaned against the railing, looking up at Meredith; he could see her through the cockpit window. “She'd make a damn fine Ravager, cap'n.”

Yondu grumbled, but for once, he didn't argue. Kraglin took that as a good omen.

Yondu had picked the planet for Meredith to test-fly; Arazine, a desert planet covered in quartz crystals. If she crashed, the wreckage would be clearly visible against the white sands, and the Eclector would have no trouble finding them. Plus, the entire planet was riddled with rock formations, caverns, crags, and gorges; the perfect obstacle course.

“Take 'er down,” Yondu said.

Meredith obediently descended. Fire burned against the hull as they entered the atmosphere; the gold-orange light lit up the interior of the ship. The craft shook until they entered the lower stratosphere. There, everything was clear. The sky was a cloudless blue, lit up by an enormous white sun that baked the quartz crystals below. The entire planet glittered; Meredith drank it all in. Earth was beautiful, but she knew she could never see something like this on her own planet.

“See that ugly-lookin' rock over there?” Yondu nodded towards it.

Meredith squinted. “The one that looks like your face?”

“Har har. Just fly around it a couple times,” he said.

She cut concentric circles around the rock formation. Kraglin had taught her how to keep the steering mechanism just so, so that the craft would carve perfect circles without spiraling in or out. About her fifth pass around, Meredith noticed that they were being followed.

“Yondu?” Meredith glanced in the rear-view display. “What's that?”

Yondu looked at the display. A short, wide golden ship was flying behind them, flashing green lights.

He shrugged. “Nova Corps tracker.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“It's a robot,” he explained, “sent to track criminals and alert the Nova Corps.”

Meredith eyed it. “Is it a problem?”

“Yep.” Yondu leaned back and closed his eyes. “But I ain't flyin', so it ain't my problem. Take care of it.”

“Great. So glad you're here to help.” Meredith huffed, then dove into the gaping gorge below.
The Ravager craft and the Nova tracker shot through the gorge, neck-and-neck. Yondu was watching Meredith's every move. For a novice pilot, she was pretty calm. Her movements were still aggressive and rigid, but she'd learn to relax in these kind of situations. If, Yondu thought, she ever committed to being a Ravager. At this point all she needed was the flames and the name.

"Aren't you gonna use the guns on this thing," he said.

"Don't know how, and I don't have the time to find out." Meredith's eyes flickered to the rear-view display. "I'll have to get rid of it another way."

Meredith soared around a corner with the tracker on her tail. The turn was so sharp that Yondu could hear the beer bottles in the back rolling around. They leveled out. Stretching in front of them was the end of the gorge; it narrowed down to a thin, tall canyon; practically a crevice in the stone. The tracker had soared over them, pressing them down to land. Instead, Meredith slammed on the accelerator and headed for the end of the canyon.

"Quill. Canyon." Yondu leaned back, becoming steadily more rigid. "Canyon, Quill. Slow down, Mery. Quill!"

Meredith's foot was flat on the accelerator. The two ships roared towards the thin canyon gap. Yondu had already estimated it; there was no way the M-craft could fit through, but Meredith was gunning it anyway. His heart was in his throat; Meredith was grinning.

Finally, Yondu couldn't keep it in.

"Goddamn it, you crazy bitch!" He gripped the sides of the seat for dear life. "You're gonna kill us both! We'll never fit!"

"No," Meredith said, "we won't."

The crack gaped wide, and Yondu shut his eyes. Dying at the hands of a psychotic Terran; Yondu should have known this was the end.

"Woohoo!" Meredith's triumphant yell made Yondu's eyes shoot open. No way she made it through that.

Meredith slammed on the emergency pedal; Yondu, Meredith, and all of the trash in the ship shot forwards. A few liquor bottles smashed against the front of the ship; Yondu felt a box hit him in the shoulder. The ship jerked to a complete stop right in front of the canyon entrance. The Nova tracker went shooting ahead, smashing into the canyon. It erupted in fire and shards of green and gold, then fell to the ground below like glitter confetti.

Meredith and Yondu looked at each other. Both of them were wild-eyed and breathing hard.

"You ain't right in the head," he said.

"Brain tumor," she replied.

Yondu's face spread out into a huge grin and he started laughing. It was contagious; Meredith snorted a giggle, then broke into hysteries. They hovered in midair surrounded by trash and broken glass, laughing until Yondu was purple in the face and tears were streaking down Meredith's face.

"You're crying!" Yondu's gut hurt; he wasn't sure if it was from the laughter or from seat belt trauma. "Why are you always crying, woman?"
“I can't help it!” Meredith wiped the tears from her eyes. “I'm sorry, I am so sorry.”

“I thought you were gonna do it.” Yondu put his head in his hands, grinning and shaking his head. “I thought you were gonna smash us to goddamn pieces.”

“Not us.” Meredith looked around at the trash. “Maybe everything else in the ship, but not us.”

Yondu hit the comms.

“Gef,” he laughed, “did you see that?”

“Holy shit, captain!” Gef's voice was shrill with panic. “You were two kilometers away! Two! I thought we'd be picking up your pieces for sure.”

Yondu laughed so hard that he couldn't answer. Meredith reached over and turned the comm unit her way.

“Sorry, Gef.” She giggled. “That was me. My fault, sorry. I'm bringing your captain back in one piece, I promise.”

“One piece?” Yondu couldn't stop laughing. “That seat belt nearly sliced me in half!”

“Are you okay?” Meredith looked at him. “I figured if I slowed down, the tracker would see I wasn't trying the canyon and go around.”

“It's fine, it's fine. Bruisin', that's it.” Yondu took a deep breath, calming himself down. “Damn, woman... you're crazy.”

Meredith grinned and turned the ship around. While she focused on ascending out of the atmosphere, Yondu leaned back and chuckled. He hadn't had a real near-death experience like that in a long while. It was kind of refreshing, actually. The adrenaline buzzed in his system, and everything seemed brand new. Nothing like near-death, Yondu thought, to make a Ravager feel alive.

He glanced at Meredith; she was grinning. Yet again, he'd forgotten that Terrans found near-death experiences incredibly entertaining. Adaptable, resilient, good at avoiding death... At this point, Yondu was starting to wonder why all of space wasn't filled with Terrans. They were clearly a pretty goddamn clever species. Maybe one day he'd go recruiting on Terra and get a whole ship full of these psychotic death-defying idjits. The thought made him chuckle.

“Captain's back aboard.” Gef's voice came on over the comms as Meredith docked Yondu's ship.

“Not bad, Quill.” Yondu unhooked his belt. “Next time, use the goddamn weapons system.”

“I'll learn,” she said.

Meredith and Yondu walked down the loading ramp. Peter, Kraglin, and a horde of curious Ravagers were waiting for them. It looked like everyone on the ship had come to see the crazy Terran.

“Mom!” Peter bolted up and hugged Meredith's legs. “That was so cool.”

Meredith grinned and picked him up. Her limbs strained with the effort, but she wanted to hold him.

“Cool?” Yondu grimaced. “She nearly killed me.”

“Ms. Quill?” Kraglin was pale. “Seriously, don't ever almost-kill our cap'n again.”
“I'm sorry, Kraglin honey,” she said, “it won't happen again.”

Kraglin breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. Good.”

The Ravagers looked at Meredith differently now. She had always been the one cooking or cleaning or passing out from exhaustion; seeing her perform Ravager work was not something they were accustomed to. And to see her flirt with death with the captain in the co-pilot's seat? Unbelievable didn't even begin to cover it.

“You're insane,” Holdon said.

“I've got a brain tumor, okay?” Meredith sighed. “Cut me some slack.”

“Gef wants to see you up in comms, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith set Peter back down. “Alright, Kraglin, tell him I'll be right up.”

Kraglin led Meredith up to the bridge. When she got there, Gef was waiting.

“Here,” he said.

Gef dropped a small metal earbud in Meredith's hand.

“About damn time you had one o' these,” he said, “so's we can actually get hold o' you. You know, talk you out o' doing crazy things like almost smashing an M-craft into a goddamn wall.”

“Aw, my own comm link.” Meredith smiled and put it in her ear. “Thanks, Gef.”

“Don't say that,” he warned.

It was all Meredith could do not to roll her eyes.

“Did you want the tape?” Gef held out a datapad.

“What tape?”

“The one of you flying, o' course. Back on Arazine. You always ask for the ones o' Peter.”

Meredith took it. “I guess. Don't know why I'd need it, but thanks for taking the time.”

“Don't say that,” Gef said.

Meredith laughed. “Don't say thank you, don't say please, don't say kindness!' Goodness, I don't go around tellin' y'all, 'Don't say damn, don't say fuck, don't say bitches'.”

Gef shifted. “Just... Ravagers don't say it.”

“I'm not a Ravager.” Meredith tapped Gef on the head with the datapad.

Gef rubbed his head, chuckling. “We'll see how long that lasts, missy.”

“So far?” Meredith pressed the panel to open the bridge door. “Two months and countin'.”

The door closed and Meredith was gone. Gef looked at Kraglin.

“Has it really been two months,” he said.
“Yep.”

Gef chuckled and sat back down at the comms station. “Don't feel like it.”

“I know.” Kraglin dropped into the co-pilot's seat and checked the thruster capacity. “Kinda feels like it's been only days, and it kinda feels like it's been forever.”

“They're soft folks,” Gef said, “but I've met worse.”

“Soft?” Kraglin scoffed. “Peter pulls in more units in a week than the rest of us do in a month. Ms. Quill nearly killed the cap'n today, doin' that stunt. Neither of 'em are soft.”

“Impressive flyin', though.”

“I don't know.” Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz. “I've seen better.”

“So have I, but if she so much as gets out of bed in the morning, I count that as impressive.” Gef shrugged. “Easy to forget that she's dying. Race against time, that's all this is. She's not out of the danger zone until that cerebral core goes in.”

Kraglin frowned. “What're you sayin', Gef?”

“I hope she's doin' stunts like this because she wants to feel alive,” Gef said, “and not because she knows she ain't got long left for livin'.”

“She ain't goin' anywhere.” Kraglin swallowed. “She'll stick around for Pete.”

“Yeah, but that ain't her decision to make. We all hear the horns o' death sometime, Krags. I just hope the boy ain't around when she gets called home.”

“Gef?” Kraglin closed his eyes. “Shut up.”

Gef stopped talking. Kraglin's head was racing with melancholy thoughts. Gef was right; every day that Meredith lived on was another day flirting with death. Maybe that was the reason near-death experiences didn't faze Meredith. To her, every day was a life-or-death coin toss. Kraglin's fingers were numb on the steering mechanism. How many days did she have, he wondered, before the coin came up the wrong way?

Meredith made it back to her room, then sank on her bed and closed her eyes. She did it. She'd successfully solo-piloted a spaceship. Peter was so proud of her. She should be ecstatic.

Instead, she wanted to throw up. It was too much adrenaline, too much physical exertion; her vision was blurring and her thoughts were dull. If she could feel pain, she reasoned, she'd be bed-ridden with it. Meredith had to be careful. Death was still a very real possibility.

Meredith stared at the ceiling through patterns dancing over her vision. Sometimes, late at night, she had that horrible feeling of being pulled out of her body, kept in it only by a javelin through the chest. It was the only pain she felt anymore, and it scared her.

“What's the answer,” she asked no one in particular.

She didn't know the answer. On one hand, if she was dying every night, wouldn't she be dead by now? Meredith figured the incident in the hospital had been a freak accident; her heart had simply started itself again. Now, she wasn't so sure.
Meredith put her hands over her eyes. She wasn't sure about anything except Peter these days. She didn't know where she was being taken, or why, or to who. She didn't know if she was still cargo, even. Maybe the Ravagers had adopted Meredith along with Peter; adopt-one-Quill, get-one-Quill free. She didn't know how close or how far she was from Earth, or what to think about being in space. She didn't know what to think about Yondu, either. He was such an asshole, but then he'd saved Peter's life. There had been a moment on Arazine when they'd started laughing where Meredith looked at him and thought she wouldn't mind being his friend. Then, she'd remembered that he'd kidnapped her and Peter from Earth and thought better of it. Yes, Yondu was confusing. Meredith didn't know what to think about any of it; sometimes she wasn't even sure she was dead or alive.

Meredith took a deep breath and took her hands off her eyes. The patterns were gone. Good. As her mind cleared, she calmed herself down. She had Peter and she had a plan. That plan was to earn units until she was healthy again, and then... Well, then maybe she'd take a leaf out of Yondu's book and steal a ship, fly home, and wait for Yondu to show up purple-faced and yelling, “Damn Terrans!”

Alone in her room, Meredith laughed. “Ravagers.”

Meredith woke up to Kraglin shaking her gently.

“Ms. Quill. Ms. Quill, wake up, we got a problem.”


“He's still asleep,” Kraglin said, “but we got a problem.”

“What is it, honey?”

“His Orloni? Dotty Pardon?”

“Dolly Parton, honey.”

“Whatever,” Kraglin said, “it's dead.”

Meredith covered her mouth with her hand. “Oh no. Peter's going to be devastated.”

“The cap'n found its corpse this morning.” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “Looks like Peter over-fed it and it died of a ruptured stomach. Stupid thing. But the cap'n wanted you to know.”

Meredith's eyebrows contracted. “What am I going to tell Peter?”

“That it died,” Kraglin said, “because he over-fed it.”

“Kraglin, that's a terrible idea.” Meredith sat up in bed. “Don't tell Peter a thing; I'll take care of it. Thanks for telling me.”

“No problem, Ms. Q.”

With that, Kraglin was gone. Meredith got out of bed and pulled on the day's clothes. Peter's Orloni was dead. Dolly Parton the Orloni had been Peter's first actual pet. Skeletor the Orloni had died honorably in battle, or so Meredith had told Peter. Her son had accepted that answer. But this was death by over-feeding, and Peter would definitely blame himself. When Meredith's pet hamster,
Dorito, had died, her father had written a tiny note, supposedly from Dorito himself, explaining that Dorito had to go home and raise his family. Little Meredith had accepted that note completely, but Meredith had been five years old. Peter was twelve. A tiny note was not going to fool him.

Meredith went the whole day thinking about how she was going to break the news to Peter. She kept to herself while she was thinking, and some of the crew noticed. By dinner, they began to think her tumor was causing her trouble.

“Quill,” Gef said, “you're getting soap on your face.”

“Huh?” Meredith had put her hand to her forehead; suds were sticking to her short curls. “Oh, sorry, Gef. I'm distracted.”

“No kidding.” Gef handed her a dry towel. “What's for supper?”

Meredith chuckled and rubbed her head with the dry towel. “No idea. My name's not on the list.”

Gef examined the list and groaned. “Ach, it's Drazkar. I swear, we oughta make him wear a full-body hair net.”

Meredith grinned. “He can't help it.”

“He could shower a bit more,” Gef grumbled, “and shed a bit less.”

“Mom!” Peter came bounding into the kitchen. “Hey, can I have some food? I need to feed Dolly.”

“Dolly?” Meredith covered her mouth. “Oh. Um, Peter?”

“Here you go kid.” Gef tossed Peter some bread. “Go on, feed your stupid bag o' fleas.”

Peter raced off. Meredith took a deep breath and walked after him. This is it, Meredith, she told herself, you've got to break the news. He's a big boy now. He knows what death is, and he can handle this.

Meredith followed Peter to the hangar bay. She found him searching through the Orloni box, tossing socks overhead. Meredith looked down.

“Are those Yondu's socks, honey?”

“They used to be,” Peter said, “but they're Dolly's now.”

Meredith pressed her hand to her forehead. “Yeah, Peter? About Dolly.”

“She's not here.” Peter kept searching through the box. “She never runs off, she's too fat to run off.”

Meredith took a deep breath. “Peter, your Orloni...”

“Mom, look!” Peter pulled out a sheet of fine paper rimmed in gold. “What's this?”

Meredith frowned. She walked up and put her hands on Peter's shoulders. The paper was gold-rimmed and thick. It was embossed with a printed seal depicting an Orloni, and an elaborate, unreadable signature swirled at the bottom.

“To Master Peter Quill... Let it here be known that the Orloni known as Dolly Parton has been found and adopted by her parents, as she is... an extremely rare and valuable breed of Orloni?” Meredith squinted at the paper. “Please accept this small token of our esteem for taking such exceptional care
of such a rare and beautiful example of the breed.”

“Wow!” Peter looked at the data number at the bottom of the form. “Someone gave us units!”

“How much?”

Peter tapped the number into his interface, then lit up. “A whole five-thousand!”

Meredith's eyebrows raised. “Five-thousand units for one Orloni?”

“It says she was a special breed,” Peter said.

Meredith looked over her shoulder. Yondu was standing there with his hands on his hips, suspiciously nonreactive. How had he followed them all the way here without her noticing? Unless, Meredith thought, he had already been in the hangar bay.

“Peter just made five-thousand units off an Orloni,” she said.

“There's idjits in the galaxy that'll pay for anything,” Yondu replied.

Meredith squinted. “And you're not surprised by this?”

Yondu shrugged. Peter beamed up at his mother.

“Can I go show Kraglin,” he asked.

“Sure, baby.” Meredith pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Go on.”

Peter went running across the hangar bay, down the stairs, and disappeared. The corners of Yondu's mouth turned up. Meredith watched his expression, her arms crossed.

“That was one official document,” she said.

“Yep. Musta been a reputable thing,” Yondu said.

“I wonder how an Orloni fanatic got onto your ship, examined Dolly, deemed her valuable, and left without being seen.”

“Gef wasn't watching the cameras,” Yondu said, “I told him to check out the external comms array.”

“And everyone was suspiciously absent from the hangar for the past few hours.”

“Everybody's at dinner, idjit.”

“Except you,” Meredith said.

Yondu bared his teeth. “What are you suggestin’?”

“Me? Shucks, I'm not suggesting anything.” Meredith tried her best not to smile. “The idea that you forged an adoption document for Peter's pet Orloni so he wouldn't know it was dead is just insane. You'd never do that.”

“Exactly,” Yondu growled, “and don't you goddamn forget it.”

He turned around and walked away, but Meredith strode along with him.

“But if you had,” she said, “it'd be a really decent thing you did.”
Yondu wouldn't meet her eyes.

“And it would mean that you skipped dinner,” Meredith said, “so you'd be pretty hungry, wouldn't you?”

“Yep,” he said.

“You'd be able to pack away, say, a vat of stew.” Meredith kept her tone casual. “If, I don't know, someone were to cook one for you.”

Yondu glanced over at her.

“Maybe,” he said, “if it was laukha.”

“It would be.”

“And if it were hot.”

“Definitely.” Meredith shrugged. “You know, it'd probably be ready in an hour or two.”

Yondu wasn't grinning, goddamn it.

“And I would maybe leave it out for an hour after dinner was finished, so someone could consume it without having to share with anyone.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “And then no one would know about anything and this would forever remain a mystery to Peter and the Ravagers.”

Meredith walked through a portal and let it close behind her. Yondu rubbed his chin, trying not to smile. Damn Terrans.

The portal opened again, and Meredith stuck her head in.

“If, of course, any of this were true,” she said, “I would say thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you.”

Yondu froze.

Meredith grinned. “But, hey, it's not, so I won't say that.”

With that, she was gone.

Yondu stalked down towards the loading bay. So he'd paid a forger to fake some adoption documents for a dead Orloni, big whoop. He just didn't want the little Terran screaming, that's all. The boy had a pair of lungs on him, that was for damn sure, and if he started crying the whole Ecolctor would be in an uproar. Yondu wasn't going soft; he was just circumventing a problem. And the units. So what? Yondu paid Peter shit anyway. Giving the kid a little bonus was just good business. The Quills had accumulated only sixteen-thousand of the fifty-thousand units it would take to get Meredith a fast-twitch limb actuator. The extra five-thousand units Yondu had given them was just a bump-up. The sooner Meredith Quill was off her deathbed, the sooner Yondu could kick her and Peter to Ego.

Yondu's blood went cold. They'd already had the Quills for two months. Ego would be expecting a call soon; if he didn't get it, he'd be suspicious. He'd come looking for Yondu. He'd come with questions, and unlike the Quills, Ego could get answers. He'd take the boy without question, and who knew what he'd do to Meredith.
The tumults of emotion rocking around in Yondu's chest bothered him. He kept telling himself the Quills were just an investment. They were temporary. He wasn't attached, he'd just gotten used to having them around. Peter being underfoot was a part of life now; what would Yondu do without that chatty Terran kid following him around? The kid raked in units like a goddamn money magnet. As for Meredith, at this point the crew would probably starve to death without her. Since she'd been doing laundry, the stench of unclean Ravagers had begun to lessen. Any way Yondu looked at it, the Quills were useful. Kraglin had told Yondu that the crew liked the Quills; would they be willing to give the Quills up, or would Yondu have a goddamn mutiny on his hands?

Yondu clenched his fists. The Quills had gone from a small problem to a big damn issue. Yondu couldn't just kick them off anymore. Ego would have to wait. Yondu would take the next two months and keep an eye on the crew and the Quills. If it looked like the crew weren't fond of the Quills, Yondu would have to get rid of them. If the crew favored the Quills, Yondu could keep them aboard. Ego would have to be dealt with, Yondu knew that, but he wasn't too concerned. Ego rarely left his planet; he hadn't left to go get Peter before, why would he go now?

The thought was comforting. Ego wasn't coming after Peter and Meredith. The jackass didn't even know Meredith was alive; if he had, he'd think twice about showing up on the Eclector. The thought of Ego trying to take Peter away from Meredith made Yondu chuckle. No one was taking that kid from that woman. No one.

Meredith had left the stew on the stove. It had been boiling merrily when she left. She'd given Yondu an hour window of time; if, in that time, the stew had disappeared, she had plausible deniability. Now, however, she needed to get the dishes done. As she reached for the door panel, the portal slid open.

“Oh!” Meredith jumped.

Yondu's head snapped up. He had hit the door panel from the other side. They exchanged places, then looked at each other. There was stew on Yondu's bottom lip; he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then pointed at Meredith.

“Not a goddamn word,” he said.

Meredith bit her lips together, trying not to smile. The portal slid shut, and Meredith turned around. The empty vat was on the table next to a single bowl and spoon. He'd turned the burner off. Meredith looked in the pot; he'd also scraped the sides.

“Hungry man,” she said.

There wasn't a single chunk left in the bowl or the vat. Meredith smiled, her cheeks warming a little. Her papa had liked her cooking, but no one had never eaten a whole vat of it in one sitting. It was a Ravager-kind of compliment, and that was the only kind Yondu ever gave.
Meredith pulls off her first job; be sick and don't say anything. Yondu does an old friend a favor, and Peter gets a glimpse of what Meredith has been trying so hard to hide from him.

“Quill!” Yondu looked in the doorway. “Come on.”

Meredith and Peter were sitting on Meredith's bunk. Peter stood up, but Yondu shook his head.

“The other Quill,” he said, “we got a job for you to do.”

Slowly, Meredith stood.

“What kind of job,” she asked.

“Not the kind the boy can do, that's for damn sure. It ain't dangerous,” he said as Meredith opened her mouth, “so don't fly off the handle.”

Meredith looked at Peter. Peter shook his head.

“Bad idea,” he said, “very bad idea. It's probably something with washing exploding dishes or something.”

Meredith laughed and pressed a kiss to Peter's forehead.

“I'd wash more dangerous things than exploding dishes if it meant you weren't paying for my medical bills, baby.” Meredith pulled on her jacket. “Promise me you'll stay safe until I get back?”

“When will you get back,” Peter asked.

Meredith looked at Yondu, who shrugged.

“Early mornin',” he said.

“Don't wait up, Peter.” Meredith zipped up her jacket. “I'll be back before breakfast.”

“Wait.” Peter got off the bed and fixed Yondu with scrutiny. “How many units is this job?”

Yondu grinned. That boy became more and more of a Ravager every goddamn day.

“Forty-thousand units,” he said, “if we get the mark.”

“I'm stealing something?” Meredith frowned. “No, sorry. If I go to jail, Peter's an orphan.”

“You're not stealin' anything, Quill. I'm pickin' up a bounty, and you're the ticket in.” Yondu shrugged. “We need someone sick if we're gonna get into a hospital.”

“Put this on.”

Yondu threw Meredith a white outfit lined with blue.

“Wow.” She touched the thick weave of the outfit. “What kind of hospital needs gowns this fancy?”

“Private Xandarian hospital. Rich folks stay there.” Yondu's grin was so wide that Meredith could see almost every one of his jagged, discolored teeth. “One of their surgeons is wanted for eighty-thousand units. You get me in, we'll split the profits.”

Meredith did the calculation. Forty-thousand units plus the sixteen-thousand they already had... It was enough for the next surgery. She could finally pay for the majority by herself; it was a thrilling feeling. Peter wasn't having to suffer for her this time.

“Peter,” she said, “stay here. I'll be back.”

“Yes, mom.” Peter curled up on her bed. “I'll be right here, I promise.”

Meredith leaned over and kissed his forehead. “Don't wait up.”

Meredith walked out of her room, carrying the outfit; she'd change in the bathroom. Peter fixed Yondu with solemn green eyes.

“If you let my mom get hurt,” he said, “I'm going to do something very bad to you.”

Yondu laughed; Peter didn't.

“I know where you sleep,” Peter said.

The grin slid off Yondu's face. “What's that supposed to mean, boy?”

“Nothing.” Peter walked out of the room slowly. “Or maybe something.”

Peter left Yondu standing in Meredith's room with his eyebrows furrowed, trying to figure out if he'd been threatened or not. He decided that Peter had definitely threatened him, but that just made things more complicated. Now he couldn't figure out if he was angry or proud.

Meredith was waiting in the hangar bay. She looked around, tapping her feet against the floor.

“Nervous, Ms. Q?” Kraglin climbed the stair; he was wearing fine clothing. “First real job for you.”

She nodded. “Kinda nervous, yeah.”

“Well, you're a sick Terran, so it ain't like you're posing for anything.” Kraglin shrugged. “Look at me; I've got to wear this monkey suit and pretend to be rich.”

Meredith chuckled. Yondu came strutting up the stairs. He had shaved, and was wearing a crisp Nova Corps suit. Meredith raised her eyebrows.

“Very dapper,” she said.

Yondu scowled. “I feel like a goddamn clown, but this is the only way to get us in.”

“It don't look so bad, cap'n,” Kraglin said, “if you just pretend it ain't Nova.”
“What's wrong with the Nova Corps,” Meredith asked.

“Stuck-up assholes,” Yondu said, “think they own the galaxy. Only good thing about 'em is they fight the Kree.”

“The Kree think Xandarian culture is a blight,” Kraglin explained, “and so Xandar and Hala have been at each other's throats for centuries.”

Meredith glanced at Yondu. She remembered him mentioning Hala; the Kree homeworld, where he had been kept, trained, and used as a battle slave. Aside from a muscle jumping in his jaw, Yondu looked calm.

“Okay.” Meredith took a deep breath. “So I'm a sick Terran being checked in for examination. Yondu is my bodyguard. Kraglin, you're my... what, exactly?”

“I'm your concerned, wealthy Xandarian son.” Kraglin grinned. “Adopted, of course.”

“Of course.” Meredith chuckled. “And you're checking me in.”

“Right,” Kraglin said.

“Enough talk. Get on the damn ship,” Yondu growled, “and get flyin’.”

Kraglin strode past Yondu's ship and headed to a small Nova Corps shuttle on a lower level of the hangar bay. It had clearly seen some better days, but it would do. Meredith frowned, but shrugged.

“I guess showing up in a Ravager craft would kind of defeat the purpose of the outfits,” she said.

“Now you're getting it, Quill.” Yondu grinned. “Let's go.”

Meredith was being wheeled through the hallways by a Xandarian nurse. Kraglin and Yondu were striding behind her. So far, everything had gone perfect; the Xandarians had allowed the Nova Shuttle into the hangar structure without question, and they'd scanned and confirmed that Meredith was very sick. She glanced up at Kraglin; his face was relaxed.

“Son,” she said, “how are the doctors here?”

“Best in the galaxy, mother.” Kraglin forced his voice into a quaint Xandarian accent. “You'll be well taken care of.”

“You'll be seeing Dr. Tannrik,” the Xandarian nurse said, “a very prestigious brain surgeon. He'll have that tumor out of you in no time.”

If only, Meredith thought, but it would only come back within weeks. The Xandarian nurse wheeled her into a sterile white room.

“The doctor will be with you shortly.” The nurse smiled, then left the room.

Yondu's blank expression immediately formed into a scowl. He looked around the room, his hands on his hips.

“Tannrik's the doc we need,” he said, “so as soon as he shows up, grab him and we'll go.”

“Why does he have a bounty on his head,” Meredith asked.
“He got caught sellin' illegal organs on the black market,” Kraglin said, “but ran to Xandar and got political protection. Ended up blaming his assistant for the organs he stole out of his patients. We're takin' him back to his assistant; she's right pissed.”

“He stole organs?” Meredith paled. “Don't let him get anywhere near me.”

“You'll be fine, Ms. Q.” Kraglin smiled. “He ain't gettin' you under his knife.”

Footsteps came down the hallway. Yondu put his hand on his arrow.

“Well, Ms. Quill, I must say this is the first tumor of its sort I've ever seen.” A tall, dark-haired Xandarian with narrow blue eyes came walking in. “Absolutely incredible. Terrifying, but incredible.”

“Dr. Tannrik?” Meredith tilted her head.

He grinned; one of his teeth was silver. “That's me.”

Yondu gave a sharp whistle; the arrow pressed itself against Dr. Tannrik's forehead. The doctor stumbled back, alarmed.

“Who are you people,” he asked.

“Keep your damn voice down.” Kraglin grabbed a roll of insta-heal gauze and bound the doctor's wrists with it. “We're just takin' you somewhere, don't you fret.”

“Is this about that business on Knowhere?” Dr. Tannrik's voice was frantic. “I told you, I had no idea what that Krylorian was doing!”

“That Krylorian,” Yondu said, “says you damn well did. Now walk, goddamn it.”

The arrow pressed into the small of Dr. Tannrik's back.

“I know who you are,” he said, “you're Yondu Udonta! Ravagers, huh? I should have known Mareet would send you.”

“Dr. Mareet?” Meredith frowned. “That's the Krylorian he betrayed?”

“Yep,” Kraglin said.

Meredith stood up and pointed in Dr. Tannrik’s face.

“She is a very nice woman,” Meredith said, “and she deserves a nice job. How dare you take away such a promising career!”

“Whoa there, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin chuckled. “Let Mareet handle this one.”

The four of them left the room. Kraglin was pushing Meredith's wheelchair; Yondu was standing just behind the doctor, obscuring the arrow threat. They passed down the hall.

“Good day, Dr. Tannrik.” One of the nurses waved.

“Say anything,” Yondu growled, “and I'll gut you from the inside.”

Dr. Tannrik swallowed and waved at the nurse. The four of them made it to the door of the hospital. A few guards milled about by the entrance.
“Tell them to let us out.” Yondu's voice was a quiet threat.

“Guards, if you please.” Dr. Tannrik gestured to the door.

The guards hit the panels; the door slid open. Meredith took a deep breath. They were nearly at the ship.

“Wait,” one of the guards said.

Everyone froze.

“Ma'am,” the guard said, “you can't take the wheelchair out, I'm sorry. That's hospital property.”

“Oh, of course.” Meredith stood, leaning dramatically on Kraglin. “My apologies.”

“No problem, ma'am.” The guard took the wheelchair back.

Dr. Tannrik looked like he was about to cry. Yondu dragged him by the arm to the Nova Corps ship, then threw him in the back. Kraglin helped Meredith get aboard.

“Guess no one noticed us takin' hospital property out as far as personnel goes,” Kraglin chuckled.

“Guess not.” Meredith buckled herself in. “That went... I expected more shooting.”

“Don't jinx it,” Yondu grunted, “we ain't out yet.”

“You won't get away with this,” Dr. Tannrik said, “I am a highly-respected member of the medical community.”

Yondu snorted and taped over his mouth. Yondu dragged Dr. Tannrik down to the cargo bay and stayed there. Kraglin switched on the controls and flew out of the hangar. Meredith watched him fly; his movements were liquid, yet almost mechanical.

“How do you know how to fly a Nova Corps ship,” she asked.

“Pop taught me,” Kraglin replied, “when I was Peter's age.”

“Your father was Nova Corps,” she said.

“Jagar Obfonteri,” Kraglin replied, “was the best goddamn pilot Nova Corps ever had. He retired, went to Yazkin-8 to raise a family. When the Kree showed up, my pop took to the skies. He asked Nova for backup. No one came. He fought alone until the Kree blasted his ship to pieces.”

Meredith covered her mouth, her eyes wide.

“Back then, Xandar didn't want to go to war with the Kree. Not fully. They were indecisive.” Kraglin took a deep breath. “And that cost a lot of goddamn lives. When the Kree bombed Yazkin-8, it weren't no Nova Corps that swooped in to help. While the shuttles took people off the surface, there weren't any Nova Corps fighters guardin' 'em. It was Ravagers. Selfish, money-hungry son-of-a-bitch Ravagers.”

“So that's why you're so fond of Ravagers,” Meredith said.

“Up until that day, Nova Corps were my goddamn heroes.” Kraglin shrugged with a small smile. “After that, it was the Ravagers.”
“And Yondu,” she said.

Kraglin couldn’t look at her. “Yeah.”

“Your piloting skills.” Meredith smiled. “You got them from your dad, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.” Kraglin’s mouth twisted into a smile. “Got the flyin’ from my pop and the feelin’s from my mama.”

Meredith tilted her head. “Feelings?”

“I get feelin’s about things,” he said, “and I just know stuff without knowin’ how I know it.”

“Intuition,” she said.

“Yeah. My mama had that.”

“If your father was a Nova Core pilot, why didn’t his pilot friends show up to help Yazkin-8?”

Kraglin’s face was grim. “Because orders are orders, Ms. Q, and Xandar didn’t think Yazkin-8 was worth going to war over.”

“That’s awful.” Meredith frowned.

“Not everybody works like a Ravager. A Ravager sees his friend in trouble, he helps. He protects his own. No question, no orders, no bureaucrats. He just does what he does,” Kraglin said, “and to hell with the consequences.”

“When you put it that way,” Meredith said, “I’m almost glad Peter’s one.”

“You should be, Ms. Q. Hell of a career.”

“Either you get rich,” she said, “or you die horribly.”

Kraglin grinned. “That’s about it, Ms. Q.”

Meredith put her head in her hands.

“I don’t suppose there’s a third option,” she said, “where he gets to a pretty decent age and retires comfortably to his family farm with his wife and kids?”

“My pop tried that,” Kraglin said, “and he ended up dead.”

“But he died defending his home and his family.” Meredith looked back up. “My papa would say he died with his boots on. Doing what he loved, protecting what he loved.”

They exited the atmosphere; Meredith hadn’t even bothered to ask what planet the hospital was on. It wasn’t Xandar, she knew, but she watched the planet disappear through the windows. When she looked back at Kraglin, she saw tear tracks on his cheeks.

“Honey?” She frowned.

“I think you’re right,” Kraglin said through a thick throat, “I think he died happy, Ms. Q.”

Meredith leaned over and hugged him gently. Hugging him while he flew was difficult, but Meredith couldn’t help it. He needed a hug, she thought, and Yondu wasn’t exactly the type to give him one.
“Of course he did, honey.” Meredith leaned back. “And I bet he’s real proud of you, wherever he is.”

Kraglin’s voice was thick. “Thanks, Ms. Quill.”

The pounding on Dr. Mareet's door was heavy-handed and aggressive. She immediately knew it was Yondu; the man had a brutish way with everything he did. She opened the front door.

“Udonta,” she said, “please stop assaulting my door.”

Yondu grinned, showing off his obscene dental work. At his side was the lanky Xandarian he toted around with him, and Ms. Quill on the other side.

“Brought you a present,” Yondu said.

Dr. Mareet looked down. Her previous colleague, Dr. Adram Tannrik, was on his knees, his wrists bound with gauze and his mouth taped shut. Her raspberry eyes widened.

“Adram,” she stammered, “I can't believe they actually found you.”

Dr. Tannrik kept his eyes down.

“Far from the untouchable Xandarian surgeon now, hm?” Corky came waddling up behind Dr. Mareet. “Let me get the scalpels, my dear, I want to cut him open for you.”

Dr. Mareet caressed Corky's square jaw lovingly. “Go get my financial interface. I feel like Mr. Udonta is about to have a very fortunate windfall.”

Yondu squared his shoulders. “Eighty-thousand was the job, weren't it?”

“Consider it a hundred-thousand now.” Dr. Mareet pressed her palms together in bliss. “Oh, you've all just made my day. Please, please, bring him in.”

Yondu and Kraglin dragged Dr. Tannrik into the building; Meredith trailed behind. Dr. Mareet smiled at her.

“And how are you feeling, Ms. Quill?”

“No pain,” Meredith said, “but I still get awfully exhausted, and sometimes my vision is just a big blur.”

“We'll talk about that while you're here.” Dr. Mareet linked arms with Meredith, beaming. “For now, we celebrate.”

“So, this Tannrik guy.” Meredith looked up at her. “What did he do, exactly? Something about organs?”

“Many years ago,” Dr. Mareet said, “due to a series of poor life choices, I was stuck in Knowhere. It's a mining colony full of the worst the galaxy has to offer. I was cooking drugs in a den when Adram found me. He was selling organs, but he needed the chemicals to preserve them. I could create those chemicals. He ended up teaching me everything I know about medicine, and between you and me, I know quite a lot.”

Dr. Mareet winked; Meredith chuckled.
“He and I were close colleagues, but he got it into his head that we needed to be more. He pressured me to elope with him, but I’ve only ever loved one creature in this galaxy.” Dr. Mareet sighed. “And he just couldn’t accept that I chose Corky over him. So, he pinned all the organ sales on me, grabbed the units, and left Corky and I at the hands of the Nova Core. Luckily, we had friends who smuggled us out. I’ve been trying to get that bastard ever since.”

“What are you going to do,” Meredith asked, “now that you’ve got Dr. Tannrik here?”

Dr. Mareet’s smile was absolutely wicked.

“Experiment,” she said.

Meredith’s eyes widened.

“How many organs can you take out of a Xandarian while still leaving him alive?” Dr. Mareet watched Yondu and Kraglin drag Dr. Tannrik into the operating room. “My bet’s on eight.”

“Ten,” Corky said, “if you don’t get bored.”

Dr. Mareet chuckled. Corky handed her the financial interface. Dr. Mareet tapped on the holoscreen.

“There you are,” she said, “units paid.”

Yondu and Kraglin came out of the operating room; Yondu was looking at his interface.

“Nice doin’ business with you, Mareet.” Yondu tapped on his own holoscreen.

Dr. Mareet frowned. “Why did you transfer me fifty-thousand units?”

“Limb actuator and muscle enhancer,” he said, “for Quill.”

Meredith frowned. “But you said I’d only make forty-thousand.”

“I promised to split it with you,” Yondu grunted, “and half of one-hundred-thousand is fifty-thousand, you idjit.”

Meredith’s mouth hung open.

“Thank you,” she finally managed to say.

“Don’t say that,” Yondu warned.

“Interesting.” Dr. Mareet tilted her head. “I haven’t seen you give anyone a fair deal since you were here with Martinex exchanging Azrillian crystal.”

Yondu scowled. “I don’t cheat my own. And Quill’s cargo; I need her alive.”

Dr. Mareet shrugged. “If you say so. Shall I go ahead and put Ms. Quill under the knife then?”

“What?” Meredith’s head snapped up. “No, no, I have to tell Peter I’m going in for surgery first. If something goes wrong and he didn’t even know I was in surgery, it’d just... it’d be devastating.”

“Very well. Inform your son, then return to me.” Dr. Mareet smiled. “I’ll have plenty of time to operate after I’m done with Dr. Tannrik.”

Meredith suppressed a shudder.
“Great,” she said.

“But mom, how did you get the units?” Peter followed Meredith as she walked around her room. “We only had twenty-one-thousand, and now we have the whole fifty-thousand?”

“I told you, baby.” Meredith tossed her clothes into a filing cabinet drawer. “We pulled in more than we thought we would.”

“By we, you mean you and Yondu?” Peter made a face. “And he didn't just give you forty and keep sixty.”

“Yes, baby. He split it like he said he would.” Meredith kissed Peter's hair. “Guess he couldn't cheat me with you watchin' my back. He knew he'd get what was coming to him, huh?”

Peter puffed up. “Yeah! Nobody cheats my mom.”


“So now you're going to surgery.” Peter hugged her back. “It'll be okay. It was okay last time.”

Meredith sat down on her bed and pulled Peter into her lap.

“Peter, baby, this surgery is a little different. The last one was a pain inhibitor; it just goes into my spine and prevents my brain from feeling pain. This new one, this is for my muscles. So, it's going to be a much harder surgery. It has to go in all over,” Meredith said.

Peter frowned. “Is it more dangerous?”

“Yes, baby.” Meredith sighed. “It's a little more risky.”

Peter jumped off her lap. “Let's go find Kraglin.”


“Because he always bets on you being okay,” Peter said, “and then you're always okay. The other Ravagers say he's got intu... inter...”

“Intuition, baby?”

“Yeah, that.” Peter smiled. “So if he feels like you're going to be okay, you're going to be okay.”

Meredith chuckled. “That's not how intuition works, baby. It can't predict the future.”

Peter frowned. “Darn it.”

“Wait,” Meredith said, “did you say Kraglin bets on me?”

“Yeah. They all do,” Peter said.

“On the surgeries?”

“Yeah, on whether or not you'll be okay.”

“Oh baby.” Meredith grabbed Peter's hand. “We are about to make some wagers.”
The news of Meredith's upcoming surgery had spread through the Eclector like wildfire; now the loading bay was packed with Ravagers swapping units and figuring odds. Gef sat in the middle of it all like a great fat spider, tallying up the dues and calculating returns.

“Gef?”

Gef looked up. “Hey, Quill. And er, smaller Quill.”

Meredith and Peter looked down at the table. It was strewn with betting slips, and a propped-up datapad showed the odds of Meredith's survival. She laughed.

“I don't know if that number is too low,” she said, “or too high.”

Gef winced. “Sorry, Quill, but it's a lot o' fun to bet on.”

“Glad you're enjoying yourselves.”

Meredith's cool tone made several of the Ravagers cough and turn away. Betting on the odds of Meredith's death didn't strike them as exceptionally wrong, but then again, Ravagers weren't known for their sensitivity.

“Kraglin's already been here,” Gef said, “and he staked his winnings from last time. A good ten-thousand units.”

Meredith looked at the datapad that listed who'd already bet. Several of the names stuck out to her; Lunis had put ten units on her dying and ten on her living, Holdon had put two-hundred in her living, and Drazkar had bet five-hundred either way.

“Wait.” Meredith's eyes widened. “Yondu bet a thousand units that I'd live?”

“He said Terrans are death-defying psychos and that nothing as mundane as a surgery could take one down.” Gef chuckled. “Plus, he trusts the doctor. I do too; I'm putting down five-hundred myself on you making it out alive.”

“Who bet against me,” she asked.

“Most of the assholes down in cargo hold,” he replied, “pissed about that time you threatened to nail sponges to their tongues. A big group from systems control, and a lot of the pilots. But don't take that personally; they always bet against Kraglin, the idiot bastards. Draz bet five-hundred on both sides; poor fool doesn't realize he'll lose either way.”

“And win either way,” Peter piped up.

Gef grinned. “I guess. Don't suppose you want to give a crack at it, boy?”

Peter held up the interface Kraglin had given him. “Twenty-thousand on 'Peter's mom lives'.”

There was a brief hush.

“Twenty-thousand units?” Gef's eyebrows raised. “If she lives, you'll pull in sixty-thousand. If she dies, you'll have squat. Bet a little less, boy.”

“Did I stutter?” Peter frowned. “I said twenty-thousand on my mom lives, Gef.”
There was a roar of laughter. Meredith put her hand over her mouth, turning red. Gef took the units, chuckling.

“More and more o’ a Ravager every day, that boy.” Gef slid the betting slip to Peter. “Go on, here you are.”

Peter held the slip up to his mom.

“When you come back,” he said, “we'll be that much closer to getting the big surgery!”

“If, baby.” Meredith looked at the odds with a sinking heart.

“You'll make it, Ms. Q.” Kraglin came striding up. “Dr. Mareet's a professional, and you Terrans are damn resilient.”

“Thanks, honey.” Meredith smiled. “How are you today?”

“Dandy, Ms. Quill. Yourself?”

Meredith gestured towards the odds. “Apparently that's a matter of debate.”

The Ravagers chuckled and kept exchanging units. Kraglin grinned and put his hands on his hips.

“Really, Ms. Q,” he said, “how are you feelin’?”

“Nervous,” she said, “but ready. I want to just get in there and get it over with.”

Kraglin nodded. “It'll all be done with soon, Ms. Quill. After this one, your body will be fully prepped for the cerebral core.”

“And that'll be the last little betting pool about Quill.” Gef sighed. “We'll have to go back to taking bets on whether or not Yondu'll eat Peter.”

Peter hugged Meredith's legs. She stroked his hair soothingly.

“No one would want to eat a Terran,” she said, “we're too tough.”

“We taste bad,” Peter assured, “worse than Yondu's socks.”

Meredith, Gef, and Kraglin chuckled.

This time, Yondu had told Kraglin to stay on the ship. Peter and Yondu were sitting in Dr. Mareet's waiting room, waiting for Meredith to return. Peter was fidgeting; the boy didn't like hospitals and Yondu couldn't blame him. There was a smell about them, Yondu decided, that just wasn't right. Peter had his headphones on, and his green eyes were distant. In addition to being stubborn death-defying crybabies, Yondu had learned that Terrans were also music lovers. Yondu couldn't guess how many times Peter had listened to the same few songs on repeat. Seeing as they'd been sitting there for hours, Yondu figured it was a lot. Yondu looked at the Walkman. If he saw any more of those Terran tape boxes, he'd pick them up. Why not; he picked things up for Kraglin all the time. It was how he let Kraglin know he was doing a decent job.

“Udonta.”

Corky's crisp voice cut through Yondu's concentration; he scowled.
“Goddamn it, Corky, what is it?”

Corky glanced at Peter, then crooked a finger at Yondu.

“Quick and quiet,” Corky said.

Yondu frowned and stood. He followed Corky into the hallway outside the waiting room.

“Somethin' wrong with Quill,” Yondu asked.

“What? No, the surgery is complete. Dr. Mareet is waking her up now. The issue is with the scans we took the last time she was here. Look.” Corky pulled up two images on his interface. “This here, this is a normal Terran neurosystem. This here, with all the light? That's Ms. Quill.”

“So... what,” Yondu grunted, “she's broken?”

“Yes and no.” Corky sighed. “Her neurosystem is repairing itself with non-Terran structures, non-Terran nerves, non-Terran DNA.”

Yondu blinked. “She ain't Terran?”

“Of course she's Terran. Her body is just grafting DNA in a last-ditch attempt to save itself.” Corky shut off the images. “I just thought you should know that your Terran cargo is turning into something entirely different.”

“What's she turning into?”


Yondu snorted. “Alright, now you're pullin' my goddamn leg. Quill, powerful? Like hell.”

“You forget, the Meredith Quill you know is on her deathbed.” Corky blinked; his eyelids closed vertically. “For all you know, she could be quite the opponent when she regains her full strength. She told Dr. Mareet that she's handled weaponry.”

“Air rifle,” Yondu said, “when she was a goddamn kid. She's no threat.”

“Not yet she isn't,” Corky said.

Yondu scowled.

“Also,” Corky said, “she's going to need to be removed from the building once her surgery is complete. She won't be able to walk. The muscle fatigue alone will incapacitate her. Not to mention, the pain inhibitor will need time to sync with the new implant.”

“What the fuck are you saying,” Yondu said.

“She'll be tired and in a lot of pain,” Corky said, “so you'll need to carry her out.”

Yondu scowled. “You got somethin' for me to lug her around in?”

“You have arms,” Corky said, “and those will do.”

“She ain't gonna like that.”

“She doesn't have much of a choice.”
Corky led Yondu to the operating room door. Corky rapped his green knuckles on it.

“Is everyone clothed,” he asked.

“Hold on.” They could hear Dr. Mareet struggling. “How do you clasp a Terran brassiere? This thing is impossible.”

“It's hooks, doctor.” Meredith's voice was faint on the other side of the door. “Just hooks.”

“Oh,” the doctor replied, “well, that's deceptively simple.”

Corky chuckled. “Whenever you're ready.”

The two men waited until the door opened. Dr. Mareet held it open, letting them in. Yondu looked at Meredith. She was lying on the bed with the hatch open, breathing slowly. The areas under her eyes were a bruised purple.

“You look like shit, Quill.” Yondu put his hands on his hips.

“Feel like shit,” she said, “thanks for asking.”

“Her body didn't have much muscle to start with,” Dr. Mareet explained, “so this took a bit more work than I expected.”

“You're a miracle worker, doctor.” Meredith chuckled, then winced. “Ow.”

“Laughing is going to hurt for a few hours, Ms. Quill.” Dr. Mareet scanned a readout on her datapad. “Also, breathing. Smiling. Talking. Eating. Drinking.”

“Great,” Meredith said, “that explains the pain.”

“Then give her a goddamn pain reliever,” Yondu snarled.

“I can't. It would interfere with the new cybernetics.” Dr. Mareet shrugged. “All she can do is just tough it out.”

“I'll be fine,” Meredith breathed.

Yondu crossed his arms and frowned.

“Really,” she said, “I'm fine. I just can't move and it hurts to breathe and talk and laugh.”

“Yeah.” Yondu snorted. “You're just fine.”

“Stop sassing me. Where's Peter?”

“He's waiting.”

“On the Eclector?”

“In the goddamn waiting room, where else?”

Meredith closed her eyes.

“He can't see me like this,” she said.

“Too goddamn bad.” Yondu scooped her up in his muscled blue arms. “This ain't about your damn
pride. You're beaten to hell and you look like shit, but you're alive. That's all he gives a damn about.”

Meredith's face flushed. Yondu had her in his arms like a child, carrying her out of the operating room as if she weighed nothing.

“He's not supposed to see me like this.” She was hissing at him. “I'm supposed to be his momma, I'm supposed to be invincible.”

“Your boy knows you're sick, idjit.”

“I know he does, Yondu.”

“Why is it so goddamn important to be soft?” Yondu didn't even look down at her.

“What?” Meredith blinked.

“Why is it so damn important for you to be kind and shit?”

“Because there's strength in kindness,” she said, “and in generosity and caring.”

“Then stop pretending to be goddamn invincible,” he growled, “and let him see what's actually goin' on. You posturin', keepin' secrets about how much you're hurting... it's tickin' me off. Boy works hard. He deserves to know.”

Meredith wasn't sure what surprised her most; that Yondu knew she was keeping her pain secret from Peter, that Yondu noticed she was even in pain to start with, or that Yondu was right.

“What if he gets scared?” Meredith looked at the waiting room door with trepidation.

“He's brave,” Yondu said, “braver than you think.”

Meredith sighed, then winced as pain wracked her ribcage.

“It hurts, don't it.”

“Not as much as this is going to.”

Yondu carried Meredith into the waiting room. Peter looked up, then tore his headphones off his ears.

“Mom? Mom!” Peter leapt to his feet and raced over. “Are you okay?”

“I'm...”

I'm fine, baby. Meredith wanted to say it so badly, but Yondu was glaring down at her. He was right. Peter could handle this.

“I'm hurtin', baby.” Meredith sighed. “But the surgery went okay.”

“How much does it hurt?” Peter's green eyes were wide.

“I'm awful sore,” she admitted, “and it hurts to talk. Hurts to breathe, even.”

“Then don't talk.” Peter put his headphones over her ears. “Here, just listen. You don't have to move and you won't bored.”

“Thanks, baby.”
“Don't talk, Mom.” Peter looked up at Yondu. “What are you doing?”

“She can't walk, idjit.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Shut up and open the front damn door.”

Peter raced down the hall and opened the front door. His anxious expression was tearing at Meredith's heart. She tried to take a deep breath, but cringed as her ribcage exploded in pain. Gritting her teeth didn't help; she cried out.

Yondu froze. “What is it?”

“Breathing,” she said, “why does breathing of all things have to hurt?”

“Mom?” Peter's voice wavered.

“She'll be fine.” Dr. Mareet came down the hallway, pulling gloves off her slender pink hands. “The implants will sync and the pain will go away.”

Peter held the door open as Yondu carried Meredith through. Meredith's heart was aching, and it wasn't the implant. Her baby was seeing her weak. He was seeing someone who couldn't even walk out of a door, let alone protect him. Meredith felt like the worst mother in the world.

Peter reached up and took her hand.

"It's okay, mom," he said, "we'll take care of you."

“Thank the doctor for me, Peter.” Meredith's voice was barely audible.

“Thank you, Dr. Mareet,” Peter said, then closed the door.

Dr. Mareet chuckled. She looked down the hallway to the end room, where Corky was tying down a gagged Dr. Tannrik.

“Oh no,” she said, “thank you.”
Chapter Summary

Meredith hates being incapable more than she's ever hated anything. She struggles with allowing her son to take care of her. Yondu takes Peter to an amphibious market and learns a little more about Terra.

(I have to throw The Eagles into this mix. I can't help it. Please forgive me.)

(Also, the Infinity stone mentioned is the Tesseract from back in Captain America's days.)

Meredith was starting to think death was preferable to her current state. Everything hurt. Breathing, talking, eating, drinking, even blinking hurt. The pain was bad, but the worst thing was the complete helplessness. Yondu had laid her in bed, and she hadn't moved since. It was a blessing that Dr. Mareet had made Meredith go to the bathroom before the procedure; Meredith couldn't move her legs off the bed, let alone walk to the bathroom.

There was a knock on the door.

“Ms. Quill? It's me, Kraglin.” The Xandarian opened the portal. “Still feel like shit?”

Meredith's neck muscles ached as she nodded.

“Shit.” Kraglin frowned. “Can you eat?”

More pain as she shook her head.

“Shucks.” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “Guess we'll need to find a way to get some food into you.”

Meredith closed her eyes. She couldn't even feed herself. This was worse than the worst moments of having cancer; at least then it had been a nurse that took care of her, not her own son.

There was a chuckle. Meredith opened her eyes and looked over. Yondu had appeared in the doorway, and he was grinning at her.

“Pay for yourself one day,” he said, “can't even goddamn move the next.”

“Screw off,” she managed to say.

Yondu laughed. Kraglin shifted, frowning slightly.

“She's got to eat, cap'n,” he said, “and she can't exactly feed herself.”

“I'll tough it out.” Meredith's teeth were gritted.

“Tough it out?” Kraglin put his hands on his hips. “Goddamn it, Ms. Q, every muscle in your body is adaptin' to a highly-complex piece of machinery. Stop pretendin' like it don't hurt.”
“It hurts.” Meredith swallowed, tears in the corners of her eyes. “Ain't pretendin’.”

“Stubborn woman.” Yondu crossed his muscled arms. “You think somebody feedin' you would hurt worse than this?”

Meredith's gray eyes flicked to him.

“Imagine if it was you,” she said.

“I'd tell Kraglin to slit my goddamn throat, that's what I would do if I were you.” Yondu scowled. “Rather be dead than useless.”

Kraglin winced. “Maybe we don't suggest death, cap'n?”

“She won't off herself, idjit.” Yondu scowled and went to the foot of Meredith's bed. “Now you listen here, dammit, and you listen good.”

Yondu held up two fingers.

“You got two choices here, see? One, nobody feeds you, your body ain't got energy for shit, your muscles blitz the fuck out, and you die. That's option one; you die of your own goddamn pride and stubbornness. Option two; you get off your goddamn high horse, the boy feeds you, you live, and then when you ain't laid out with pain you can go back to bein' goddamn crazy and trying to smash ships into canyon walls.” Yondu's crimson eyes were locked onto Meredith. “Now pick, goddamn it.”

Meredith closed her eyes.

“I hate it when you're right,” she said.

Yondu broke out into a crooked grin. Kraglin breathed a sigh of relief.

“The boy will bring food,” Yondu said as he strode out the door.

Meredith watched him go.

“Big blue asshole,” she said.

“You really shouldn't be talkin', Ms. Quill.” Kraglin chuckled. “Least of all to waste your breath insultin' the cap'n.”

Meredith laughed, then cried out as her ribs and stomach jolted with pain.

“Worth it,” she breathed.

Peter had been given a very important task by Yondu. That task was to feed Peter's mom, and Peter was taking it very seriously. He brought in a bowl full of broth and set it next to her bed. She raised one eyebrow.

“Gef made it,” Peter said, “and he says thanks for being alive. He needed the units.”

Meredith grinned. Peter picked up the bowl and dipped a spoon in it.

“Open,” he said.
Meredith closed her eyes and opened her mouth. Peter tilted the spoon in. They continued that pattern in silence. Meredith was consumed with shame, and Peter was completely focused on taking care of his mother.

“Stop, baby.” Meredith grabbed his wrist.

Peter looked at her face; she was blinking back tears.

“I can't do it,” she said, “I just can't do it.”

“Mom?” Peter dropped the spoon and held her hand. “What's wrong?”

“You shouldn't be doin' this,” she said, “I shouldn't be like this. I'd rather be dead than like this.”

“Don't say that.” Peter's eyes began to sting. “I don't want you to go. You can't. I don't want to be alone. I love you, I'll miss you too much.”

Meredith watched her son cry. His eyes were so clear, so green. They reminded her of the grass that spread out off her papa's front porch, of the green leaves in the peach orchard. All the greens she loved were in Peter's eyes. She put an arm around him and hugged him close. Her arm erupted in sharp pain, as if someone was clawing at her muscles, but she needed this. It didn't matter how much she hated herself. The shame was irrelevant. Her baby wanted her around, and if this is what it took for her to keep living, fine. She'd take it.

“As long as you need me,” she said, “I'll be here.”

When his mother finished eating, Peter carried the spoon and empty bowl to the kitchen. His mom had eaten every last bit of it. Peter opened the portal and handed the empty dishes to Gef.

“How's she doin', boy?” Gef took the dishes and dropped them in the soapy water.

“She's hurting real bad,” Peter said, “but she'll be okay soon.”

Holdon took a huge pot off the stove with one hand.

“She's tough,” he said, “tougher than most.”

“She's a skinny little Terran with a brain tumor.” One of the pilots was sitting on the mess hall bench, scowling. “She's just crazy.”

Holdon weighed the pot in one hand. “Do you want a cracked skull?”

The pilot flinched. “No.”

“That's right.” Holdon put the pot back down. “Don't get pissy because you lost units on the bet. Should have listened to Kraglin.”

“Captain's little prodigy,” the pilot muttered.

“Leave Krags alone.” Gef brandished a soapy spoon threateningly. “He's a good Ravager. One o' the best, if you ask me.”

“No one asked you, Gef.” Holdon chuckled and grabbed a broom.

“They should ask me,” Gef said, “I've known that boy since he joined up. Ravager, through-and-through.”
“I think he's goin' soft,” the pilot muttered, “on account of that Quill woman.”

“You meet him in the air and tell him that.” Holden whacked the pilot with the broom handle. “You won't last three seconds. Kraglin's ruthless, no doubt about it.”

Peter left the kitchen and went to the bridge. He went straight past Yondu and sat at the front of the ship, staring out the windows. His mom had made him take his Walkman back; he put his headphones on and pressed the play button. The starting notes of Redbone's *Come and Get Your Love* hit his ears like a warm hug. Peter's shoulders relaxed. This music was his mother.

Yondu watched the Terran. What was it, he thought, with those goddamn tape boxes? Yondu had listened to it once. It wasn't complete shit, but he couldn't imagine listening to it over and over again. He scowled. Crazy Terrans.

“Cap'n?” Kraglin pointed to the holoscreen. “Looks like that kornerupine could go for a fair price now, if we can make it to that junk ship by Contraxia.”

“Algon's place?” Yondu grimaced. “I hate that Saurid.”

“Maybe so, cap'n, but he's paying fifty units a pound. It's the best deal we're likely to get,” Kraglin said.

Yondu set course to Contraxia, gritting his teeth. Crazy Algon; just who Yondu didn't want to deal with today. That big bastard was always a hassle to deal with. Selling the kornerupine would be easy; it would be getting away that was the problem. Yondu checked the weapons systems and ran a diagnostic. Good; if nothing else, they could always blast their way out.

“Ahahahaha, Yondu Udonta!”

Yondu barely had time to scowl before the big scaly arms wrapped around him and lifted.

“I missed you so much,” Algon said, “so much I could just die!”

“Put me down you big chartreuse piece-of-shit!” Yondu's hand was already on his arrow.

Algon chuckled and set him down. They were standing at the loading ramp of the Eclector, which had docked onto Algon's ship. Yondu had instructed everyone to remain on the ship, but Peter had tagged along anyway, and all the threats and insults in the world didn't seem to make him want to leave.

“I forget, you don't like hospitality. Too bad, ha!” Algon put a huge claw on Yondu's shoulder. “You're in my house now, my friend, and I house my friends.”

Peter stared up at Algon with wide eyes. He had never seen anyone so big. Algon's entire body was stacked with thick muscle; his stance and head were both wide, but he stood nearly seven feet tall. Spring-green scales covered his body, and yellow fins jutted out around his head and calves. Algon turned his rusty-orange eyes on Peter.

“Well well, who have we here?” Algon kneeled down and grinned, showing row upon row of sharp white teeth.

Peter screamed and grabbed onto Yondu's leg.
“Don’t let him eat me,” Peter sobbed, “please please don’t let him eat me!”

“Terran.” Yondu’s face flushed. “He’s... cargo.”

Algon laughed, standing up. “Right. Cargo. That is why he clings to you like moss to a rock.”

Yondu shook his leg, trying to be rid of Peter.

“Get off me,” he snarled.

Peter clung tighter and shook his head.

“It is no matter, really.” Algon waved a huge claw. “Bring the boy along, by all means. I adore children of all species. Even little scared ones.”

“Are you...” Peter swallowed. “Are you going to eat me?”


Peter glanced at Yondu.

“I can think of some people,” Peter said.

Algon laughed again.

“I like this Terran, he makes me laugh. Come, come.” Algon gestured to the large steel door that led into his ship. “You must see my ship. I’ve gathered so much more since the last time you came, Yondu.”

Yondu led Peter through the door. Inside the ship it was warm and damp; Peter saw huge pools of water cut into the floor. Around the pools were vendors of all shapes and sizes, although most were finned and scaly. The ship was one cavernous expanse; the ceiling was taken up by dwellings hanging from the rafters, and the floor was shops and water. The entire place smelled like Peter’s grandpa’s pond.

“Algon’s Amphibious Market,” Algon said proudly, “the only free-flying completely amphibious-friendly market in the galaxy.”

“Amphibious...” Peter’s eyebrows contracted slightly. “Like frogs?”

“Like frogs, ha!” Algon put a claw to his gut and laughed. “Boy, you make me laugh. What is your name?”

“Peter Quill.”

“Tell me, Peter Quill, can you swim?”

Peter nodded.

“Then you are amphibious.” Algon chuckled. “Are you a frog?”

Peter shook his head.

“Exactly.” Algon gestured to all the different aliens that were bartering. “And neither are we. Come, come, I must show you what I have.”
“We're here to sell, not buy.” Yondu scowled. “How much for the kornerupine on my ship?”

“For you, fifty units a pound,” Algon said, “but if you shop here, I will pay sixty units a pound.”

Peter squinted. “Won't you lose money?”

“Not in the long run. My customers are always satisfied, and satisfied customers talk about where they received their satisfaction. I may lose units now, but the marketing strategy is more important.” Algon grinned. “The more people shop, the more people know. The more people know, the more they shop.”

Peter couldn't wrap his head around it, so he just nodded. Algon chuckled.

“What a smart Terran you have, Yondu,” he said, “is he for sale?”

“Not for anything less than five-hundred-thousand units,” Yondu muttered.

“I am not for sale.” Peter crossed his arms and tried to look fierce. “Don't even think about it. My mom would kill you stone-dead.”

“Your mother?” Algon's eyes flicked to Yondu. “Is this Terran yours, Yondu?”

“What?” Yondu's eyes boggled. “No, you goddamn idiot, he's hers. Just hers. I ain't got a damn thing to do with it.”

Algon sighed. “I see. Well, come along then.”

Yondu wouldn't look at Peter. That was fine; Peter had a lot to look at. A group of blue-skinned little girls were buying roasted seaweed. One of them had pearls in her hair; she waved to Peter, and he waved back. A man with a fish's tail and long, stringy hair was swimming in one of the pools, tapping on an underwater interface.

“Wow,” he breathed.

“It is amazing, isn't it?” Algon made a satisfied sound in his throat. “It wasn't always this successful, but my marketing strategy of making good deals and leaving customers satisfied has pulled through.”

“What kind of stuff do you sell,” Peter asked.

“Everything,” Algon said, “and anything, from everywhere and anywhere.”

“Do you sell stuff from Terra?” Peter's eyes widened.

“A little,” Algon confessed, “not as much as I'd like, what with the blockade. Terran things are so interesting.”

“Terrans,” Yondu said, “are goddamn crazy.”

“You're one to talk, Yondu Udonta.” Algon lifted a huge net of woven grass, letting Yondu and Peter cross under it. “I remember many tales of your adventures that left me wondering if you were right in the head. That business with the Shi’ar Empire, remember?”


“How did you get out of there alive,” Algon marveled.
“Stakar shut down the outer defenses and I sneaked in. Found Kodis brushin' his teeth in the bathroom. Shot him dead before he had time to spit foam,” Yondu said.

Algon shook his head. “Insane. Brilliant, but insane.”

There was a small hut made from scrap metal and wood; Algon ducked into it, and Yondu and Peter followed. The hut was packed with Terran paraphernalia; everything from road signs to snowglobes. Peter's eyes widened.

“Mom would love this,” he said.

“Anything in particular you would like?” Algon was sorting through boxes with surprising gentleness.

Yondu scratched his chin.

“What about them tape boxes,” he said.

“Cassette tapes,” Algon corrected, “and yes, I have quite a few.”

Algon pulled a cardboard box out from under a shelf; in it was no less than fifty cassette tapes. Peter sat on the floor and sorted through them.

“I used to have a cassette player, but I traded it to a Kree miner.” Algon sighed. “Not my best trade, but he did end up bringing quite the party with him the next time he came.”

Yondu bared his teeth.

“I see you, Yondu. Not every Kree is a slave-hauling mercenary. Some of them are enslaved by their own people,” Algon said.

“Yondu, look!” Peter held up a cassette tape. “My grandpa has this one, it's his favorite. Can we get it for mom, please?”

Yondu scowled. “Did you check the price?”

“Oh.” Peter looked at the label. “Seven units.”

“And did you check if it worked?”

Peter shook his head. Algon chuckled and gestured.

“Go on,” Algon said, “I don't mind.”

Peter plugged it into his Walkman. Algon pulled a large black box down and offered him a cord.

“Terran speaker,” Algon explained, “pulled from a Terran vehicle we found floating through space.”

“How the hell did a Terran vehicle end up in space,” Yondu asked with a scowl.

“Wormhole, I believe.” Algon sat back down in the saucer hair. “You know, Terra's been put under blockade by the Nova Core.”

“I know. We had to smuggle ourselves in to get cargo here,” Yondu said, gesturing towards Peter. “You know why it's roped off?”
“There's been a lot of interference with Terra lately.” Algon shook his wide, flat head. “I've heard they even landed themselves an Infinity stone.”

Yondu let out a low whistle. “That shit's dangerous. Is it still there?”

“No,” Algon said, “but there's still foreign interference, so the planet's been declared off-limits.”

Guitar notes rolled through the air; Peter had gotten the music playing. They listened to the guitar's melody pitch and slide, and then a Terran began singing; Peter sang along.

“On a dark desert highway,” he sang, “cool wind in my hair. Warm smell of colada, wafting up through the air.”

“Colada?” Algon chuckled. “I think you mean colitas, which is a Terran slang term for an herb often smoked for recreational purposes.”

“No, it's colada, like pina colada.” Peter's face was serious. “My mom told me so.”

Leave it to Meredith Quill to cut drug use out of song lyrics, Yondu thought. Peter kept sorting through the cassette tapes, keeping the ones he recognized. Algon carefully wrapped up each one in a soft, grass-like packaging.

“How much is this going to set us back,” Yondu growled.

Algon chuckled.

“Why is it always money with you? If you purchase these, you lose... let me see, about seventy-eight units. If you sell me more than eight pounds of kornerupine today, then you have turned a profit.”

Algon grinned, showing all his sharp white teeth. “And I should hope you brought more than eight pounds, if you flew all this way.”

Yondu tapped his interface, instructing Kraglin to bring the kornerupine on board Algon's ship. Algon gathered all the cassette tapes and placed them in a small brown bag. Peter took them.

“Thank you,” Peter said.

“You are very polite.” Algon put his big claw over Peter's head and ruffled his hair. “Your mother must be very proud of you.”

Peter puffed up. “My mom is the coolest.”

“I would very much like to meet her.” Algon looked at Yondu. “Could I perhaps?”

“No,” Yondu snapped, “she's sick and she don't need seven-foot-tall lizards scarin' the shit out of her. She just came back from surgery for fuck's sake.”

“Oh.” Algon's face fell. “Well, if you insist. Another time then.”

“We oughta go.” Yondu transferred Algon the units for the cassette tapes. “Transfer the units once you've got the cargo counted.”

“You're not staying for lunch?” Algon gestured with both arms. “At least some tea?”

“No,” Yondu said.

“What about the food market,” Algon said, “I'm sure your Terran would love a snack.”
“Wow, can we get a snack?” Peter's face lit up.

“No, dammit.” Yondu shut down his interface. “Let's go. Grab your tape boxes, boy.”

Peter held up the brown bag. Algon shifted from foot-to-foot.

“You could go for a relaxing dip in our clay bath? Perhaps the sick lady would like to relax in our artificial hot springs? It's excellent, so I'm told,” Algon said.

“No.” Yondu grabbed Peter's sleeve and dragged him out of the hut.

Algon followed. “You could look at our selection of weapons?”

“No.”

“You simply must view our clothes and apparel merchants. Their stock is phenomenal.”

“No.”

“Perhaps you would like to browse our fine gemstones? I know there's a ruby down by vendor twenty-eight that sparkles with a particular flair.”

“No.” Yondu went to the door out of the ship. “This is why I hate comin' here.”

“You hate coming here?” Algon's voice was small.

“I liked it,” Peter said.

Algon's frills spread in joy, and he grinned widely at Peter.

“I like this Terran,” he said, “this Terran is the best Terran I've ever met.”

“How many Terrans have you met,” Peter asked.

“One,” Algon said.

Peter laughed. Yondu scowled and dragged him off Algon's ship. Algon was still yelling offers as they climbed the ramp of the Eclector.

“When you return, we must dine together! I know you are partial to laukha, Yondu, so I will have the finest one roasted for you. Little Terran, Peter Quill, was it? When you return I shall have more Terran eccentricities for your perusal!” Algon waved, his face taken up by a huge needle-toothed grin. “Next time, my friends, next time!”

“I like him,” Peter said as the ramp closed.

“I hate him,” Yondu grunted.

"You hate everybody," Peter said.

Yondu looked down at the green-eyed tagalong. Peter was always getting underfoot. The boy toted along the brown paper bag like he was carrying diamonds; he gave furtive looks towards the Ravagers, as if expecting one of them to try and take his Terran garbage. Yondu chuckled.

"Not everybody," he said.
“Mom!”

Meredith opened her eyes. She'd taken a nap while Peter was out; when she woke, she was pleasantly surprised to find him standing there.

“How are you feeling, Mom?” Peter grabbed her hand.

“Much better, baby. Pain's much less sharp.” Meredith smiled. “Still there, but real dull-like. I can barely feel it.”

“Really,” he asked.

“Really. So what did you and Yondu do?”

“We went shopping on this big ship full of water and fish-people and frog-people and stuff,” Peter said, “and Yondu's friend was seven feet tall and he was yellow and really big and had teeth, big white teeth.”

“Sounds exciting,” she said.

“Yeah, and then Yondu's friend took us to this little house and inside was all this stuff from Terra. You would have loved it, Mom.” Peter held up a brown bag. “So I brought you back some stuff.”

“Oh, baby, that's so sweet!” Meredith sat up in bed, wincing slightly at the dull pain that was throbbing through her body. “What did you find?”

Peter poured the cassette tapes in her lap. Meredith's eyes widened.

“Peter, this is wonderful,” she breathed.

“Isn't it cool?” Peter picked up one of the tapes. “The Eagles, see? Hotel California.”

“Your grandpa's favorite album.” Meredith took the tape gently in her hands. “How did a copy get all the way out here?”

“Probably a wormhole,” Peter said sagaciously.

Meredith laughed. She kissed his forehead, then stared down at all the tapes.

“Guess you've got more to listen to than just Awesome Mix,” she said.

Peter hugged her.

“Awesome Mix is my favorite album,” he said.

He crawled into her lap, and she wrapped her arms around him. One by one, they listened to each cassette tape together. The sounds of Earth filled a tiny cargo room billions of miles away from the actual planet. Meredith closed her eyes and took a deep breath. They'd make it home somehow. They just had to.
Drunk Terran

Chapter Summary

After an altercation in a Contraxian bar, Meredith gets a little tipsy on the Eclector.

Kraglin was starting to think Dr. Mareet had screwed something up. Since the second surgery, Meredith had been subdued. Even after she was strong enough to get out of bed, her smiles were sad and her movements were small. Even her voice, usually so bossy and clear, was quiet. It was as if everything she did was one resigned sigh. It just wasn't right. Finally, Kraglin could stand it no longer. After dinner, he put his hands on the table and scowled.

“Ms. Quill, you're comin' off the ship with us this time.”

Meredith looked up. “Excuse me?”

“You've been mopin' all week,” Kraglin said, “and I just can't stand it no more. You've got to get off this ship and have a damn good time.”

“Kraglin, honey, that's sweet, but someone has to stay here and watch Peter.”

“Already took care of it.”

“How?”

“I gave Gef a hundred units,” Kraglin said, “and told him to teach Peter how to use the comm lines. That'll keep Pete occupied for hours.”

“You think Gef can take care of Peter?” Meredith shifted. “He's awfully busy.”

“Not really, Ms. Quill. He just pretends to be busy. Gef'll keep a weather eye on Peter, don't you worry.” Kraglin grinned. “You should be more worried about the Contraxian club we're docking at.”

“Club?” Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Honey, I don't club.”

“Course you do, it'll be fun!” Kraglin lit up. “You like music and whiskey, right? This place has both.”

“Awfully tempting,” she said, “but I'm not feelin' it.”

“Ms. Quill,” he sighed, “what's the point of stayin' alive if you ain't livin' a little?”

Meredith rubbed her arms. “I don't know, Kraglin.”

“I'll pay for your drinks,” he said, “and keep the creeps off you.”

She looked at his hopeful expression. Kraglin had helped her so much, with Peter and Yondu and absolutely everything. All he was asking for was one night of her time. Meredith took a deep breath.

“You promise Peter will be okay?”
“Cross my heart and hope to die, Ms. Quill.”

“Okay,” she said, “I’ll give it a shot.”

Kraglin’s impassioned whoop made her jump.

“You won’t regret it, Ms. Q!” He was grinning ear-to-ear. “Wow, just wait until I tell the cap’n.”

“Do you have to tell the captain,” she said.

“Of course,” he said, “cap’n's got to know who's on and off the ship, Ms. Quill. I'd hate for him to not know you were off, and then fly away without you.”

Meredith chuckled. “He tried that before. Bad idea; he's got the scar on his neck to prove it.”

“Speakin’ of scars, how are yours healing up?” Kraglin sat down across from her.

Meredith showed her arms; thin veins of silver were visible in some of the scars.

“Healed,” she said, “but it's strange. I don't feel stronger. I mean, not more than I used to be.”

“Limb actuator just makes the muscles you have more energy efficient,” Kraglin reminded, “and the fast-twitch muscle enhancer just makes you faster. You ain't any stronger, not really. If you had more muscle, the difference might be noticeable, but you ain't exactly a bodybuilder, Ms. Q.”

“So, I'm still a weakling.” Meredith sighed. “Great.”

“You'll get stronger once that tumor ain't feedin' off you, Ms. Quill. You'll get there,” he assured, “one step at a time.”

Meredith smiled. “Thanks for the vote of confidence, honey.”

“No problem, Ms. Q. By the way, thanks.” Kraglin grinned. “I earned thirty-thousand units off that last betting pool.”

“In that case,” Meredith chuckled, “I think I'll let you buy tonight.”

On the outside, the Contraxian club wasn't much different from how Meredith remembered Terran clubs. Drunk laughter and booming music poured out of the establishment. Intoxicated patrons and scantily-clad women were strewn around the place, lingering by their drinks. Most of them were Contraxians. They resembled Terrans, except that their entire left sides were darker than their right. It was as if someone had laid them down in a pit of dye, leaving that sharp line of contrast straight down the middle. Several had tattoos and fierce expressions.

Meredith swallowed. “Do I look like a scary person, Kraglin?”

“Not with that expression, no.” Kraglin scratched his chin. “Think of somethin' that really pisses you off, Ms. Q.”

“Yondu,” she said immediately.

Kraglin laughed. “You gotta be angry, Ms. Q, not just annoyed.”

“I don't know what makes me angry,” she said.
“Alright. Close your eyes and imagine a big Kree bastard. That always works for me.”

“Nice try, Kraglin.”

“Seriously, imagine one. Some big blue bastard with black eyes. Slaver type. He's got one of those noses,” Kraglin said, “that looks like it could use a good punch.”

Meredith closed her eyes. “Okay. Big Kree thug, got it.”

“Now imagine he just hit Peter.”

Meredith’s eyes shot wide; she started to laugh.

“Oh no,” she said, “no, that wouldn't be good for him. I bit Yondu in the neck just for taking Peter away; if anyone hit him, I'd...”

Meredith took a deep breath, clenching her fists. Kraglin raised his eyebrows.

“Bad things,” she finished, “I would do some very bad things.”

“There you go, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin chuckled at Meredith’s flashing eyes and locked jaw. “Now you look like a Ravager.”

“Good.” Meredith looked at the club. “Oh goodness.”

“Nervous, Ms. Q?”

“Very.”

“Why?”

“I tend to attract the wrong sort of people,” she admitted.

Kraglin laughed and put his arm around Meredith's small shoulders.

“You're with Ravagers, Ms. Q.” His grin stretched from cheek to cheek. “We're the right sort of wrong people.”

She grimaced, but allowed Kraglin to lead her inside. The club was packed. The main room was taken up by a huge dance floor that glowed, and four wide windows dominated the walls. Each window had holographic designs that flashed and swirled around. The bar was packed with people, so Meredith and Kraglin ordered their drinks and hung out close by. There were three Contraxian men loitering by the very end of the bar. She could tell, out of the corner of her eye, that one of them was staring at her.

“Kraglin?” Meredith tapped his shoulder. “Who are those guys over there?”

“Contraxian gang,” Kraglin muttered, “arrogant bastards. Think they're the toughest sons-of-bitches in the galaxy.”

Meredith looked over at the Contraxians. “Think they'll be a problem?”

“Don't look at 'em!”

It was too late. As soon as he made eye contact with Meredith, the staring Contraxian moved forwards. He was wearing a long, dark grey coat fringed with metal barbs, and the silver spurs on his
shoes jangled. A lit cigarette burned in his hand. Kraglin cursed and lowered his head.

“Hey.” The Contraxian's voice was smooth and oily. “I like your jacket.”

Meredith smiled. “Thank you, it was my aunt's. Keeps me warm, and it's got loads of pockets.”

“I like your shirt, too.”

She looked down. “This? It's just something I borrowed from-”

“I think I'd like it better if it were off, though.” The Contraxian took a deep draw from his cigarette, then let the smoke spill from his lips.

Meredith snorted. “Ha. No.”

“What, you're too good for me? Do you know who I am? Seracles Jax,” he said, “the best smuggler in Eldra. Fastest man in the Milky Way galaxy.”

“So that's why you can't get a hook-up,” Meredith said.

Kraglin snorted into his drink. Seracles gave him half a glance.

“Ravagers, huh?” Seracles took another drag from his cigarette. “You like screwing animals, then. They're disgusting trash-hoarding mercs.”

“Watch your goddamned mouth.” Kraglin put down his drink. A ringing was growing in his ears.

“Kraglin, don't.” Meredith put her hand on his elbow. “I've got this, honey. He's just upset because he couldn't bone a drunk goat with a hammer.”

Kraglin had no idea what Meredith had just said, but he laughed anyway. Seracles scowled, and Meredith turned her back on him. He was just looking for a fight, she figured, and she wasn't going to be the one to give it to him.

“Terra can go to hell,” the Contraxian muttered.

Unless the ugly bastard insulted Terra. Meredith turned around.

“Young man.” She got right in Seracles' face. “There are two ways this ends. One, you walk away with all your teeth still in your mouth. The other? I'm draggin' your ass out in a body bag, you shit-sucking scum-bucket.”

Meredith saw the Contraxian's hand move in slow motion. For the first time, she understood exactly what fast-twitch muscle enhancers did; as the adrenaline spiked, the world seemed to slow down, and Meredith seemed to move twice as fast. She reached her arm out and blocked his hand as it moved to strike her face. Meredith swelled with confidence; she'd never been able to do that before. For the first time in a long time, she felt a little powerful.

“Boy,” she said, “don't do something you'll regret.”

Seracles scowled. Kraglin let out an impassioned whoop.

“You kick his ass, Ms. Quill!” A huge grin was splashed across Kraglin's face.

There was a blur and a crack. Kraglin's head snapped back. Blood spilled from his lips, and he spat something into his hand. Meredith looked at it; it was a tooth. The Contraxian pulled his fist back,
“Smile like that again, you'll lose more than one,” he said.

Meredith's blood was fire.

“Boy,” she said, “when you get to hell, say hello to Hitler for me.”

Everything had been going perfect for Yondu. The cute little Contraxian at the bar was exactly his type; dumb, rich, and wanting a good night out with a bad man. Yondu had lured her out into the hall, where he could still keep an eye on his crew through the huge glass window. Not that Yondu was really paying attention while he had a little Contraxian wound around his finger. She was leaning against the wall, giggling. The old catch-and-release strategy always worked; pretend to be disinterested, then pull them close, then let 'em go. Repeat until satisfied. Yondu had learned that the only way to get a woman was to confuse the hell out of them and leave. The corners of Yondu's mouth turned upwards. It was almost too easy.

The window exploded in a terrific crash that sent shards of glass through the air. A Contraxian male in a long gray jacket slammed onto the floor, sliding a good three feet. The little Contraxian Yondu had been winding up screamed and bolted; Yondu threw open his trench coat, freeing his arrow and ready for anything. A lithe form jumped through the hole where the window had been; the Contraxian male screamed and started to scramble away. The woman who'd jumped through the window lunged forwards and grabbed the Contraxian by the tail of his grey jacket. Yondu watched as she yanked him back; the Contraxian fell on his hands. Shards of glass pierced them; the Contraxian screwed up his face in pain.

“Crazy bitch!” He kicked at the woman.

She kicked him between the legs; the Contraxian fell to the ground, howling. The woman wiped the blood off of her cheek; a shard of glass had cut her. She glared at Yondu.

“What are you looking at,” Meredith Quill said.

Yondu didn't have an answer. He honest-as-hell had no idea what he was looking at. This wasn't Meredith Quill. There was no way that the woman dragging the screaming Contraxian across the ground was Meredith Quill. Yondu watched in utter disbelief as Meredith picked up the Contraxian and pushed him against the wall.

“Listen, boy!” Meredith's face was burning scarlet. “I gave you a goddamn chance to walk away with your teeth in your mouth! And you – fucking – threw – it – away!”

With each word, she drove her knee into the Contraxian's stomach.

“Ms. Quill!” Kraglin was stepping through the window now. “Holy shit, Ms. Quill! Stop!”

“Put him down, Quill,” Yondu barked.

Meredith let go. The Contraxian slid to the ground and wheezed. Meredith turned; the expression on her face was something Yondu and Kraglin had never seen, nor ever wanted to see again.

“He hit Kraglin,” she said.

“I only lost one tooth!” Kraglin held it between his fingers. “I've lost more than that fixing a artificial
“He hit Kraglin,” she repeated.

All they could hear were the concerned mumbles of the other bar patrons and the Contraxian as he got to his feet and dragged himself away.

“You crazy bitch,” he kept saying. “you fucking crazy bitch.”

Meredith's leg shot out, catching him hard in the stomach. The Contraxian doubled over; vomit splattered on the ground. Kraglin and Yondu looked at Meredith.

“Okay,” she said, “now I'm done.”

A roaring laugh tore out of Yondu's throat as the Contraxian curled up on the ground and twitched.

“Goddammit, Quill.” He bared his broken teeth in a huge grin. “And you say you ain't no Ravager.”

“I'm not.” Meredith shifted her weight and crossed her arms. “I just... I don't like it when people hit my people.”

Kraglin blinked. “Your...”

“You're one of my people, Kraglin.” Meredith smiled. “People I care about.”

Kraglin blushed and sucked on the spot where his tooth used to be. The grin on Yondu's face fell slightly. If he'd been in there watching his crew, looking over them like Meredith did, this wouldn't have happened.

“And that,” Meredith said, “is why I'm not a Ravager. Too soft.”

“Too soft.” Yondu gestured at the vomit and broken glass on the floor. “Right. You're just an innocent goddammed butterfly.”

“Yep.” Meredith lifted her shoulders, smiling, then let them fall. “Guess I'm just not cut out for this rough-and-tumble Ravager life.”

“Don't play dumb with me, Mery.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “Thinkin' I might have some more jobs for you, now that you ain't a complete weaklin'.”

Kraglin frowned. “She's still sick, cap'n. She shouldn't be doing anythin' dangerous.”

Yondu bared his teeth. “Shut up, Kraglin.”

Meredith crossed her arms. “Yondu, I'm not built for Ravager life. I'm not any stronger than a normal Terran. I'm a little faster, but I still can't even properly fly a ship. This was a one-time thing, you know that.”

“One time' can happen again,” he said, “and I'm thinkin' it'd make a lot more units than scrubbin' dishes or makin' coffee.”

“At the risk of probably killing me,” she said.

“Peter'd be workin' less.”

Meredith's expression changed, and Yondu almost grinned. He had her now.
“Cap'n!” Kraglin couldn't help himself. “That ain't right!”

Yondu and Meredith stared at Kraglin. He swallowed.

“Cap'n, I just gotta say it this one time. That ain't right. She's got a kid to raise and she's sick and she gets tired real easy and sometimes she can't see right.” Kraglin couldn't keep the pleading note out of his voice. “If somethin' happens to her, what do we do with Peter?”

Yondu scowled. “Did I ask you for your goddamn opinion, Kraglin?”

“Leave him alone.” Meredith's voice was crisp and assertive. “This isn't about him. This is between me and you, and the answer is no. If I die, Peter's an orphan.”

“Peter's a goddamned Ravager.” Yondu bared his teeth.

“Furthermore.” Meredith continued as if he hadn't spoke. “If I'm out there punching people and flying a ship, the odds are that something's going to happen. My vision's going to shut down, or I'm going to collapse. I've seen you guys at work, Yondu. It's not easy. You all rely on each other, and I just can't be that person. If something goes wrong with my health, a lot of people could die. Ravagers. Your people.”

Yondu scratched his chin. “Fair point. You ain't reliable.”

Kraglin let out a sigh of relief.

“Not as long as you're sick,” Yondu added.

Meredith sighed. “I don't see that going away until someone dies and leaves me three-hundred-thousand units.”

Kraglin looked at the sobbing Contraxian. He tapped his bracer and scanned him.

“Well,” he said, “this one's worth one-thousand, five-hundred on Elidra.”

Yondu picked up the Contraxian and dragged him through the blood, vomit, and glass. Exchanging a look, Meredith and Kraglin followed. Yondu confronted the owner of the bar; understandably, the owner was angry. Yondu traded him Seracles Jax as payment.

“Bounty's one-thousand, five-hundred,” he grunted, “so it should pay for the window.”

“Fine, fine.” The owner snapped his fingers and two bouncers dragged Seracles away. “But you Ravagers, you get out of here.”

Yondu herded the Ravagers back onto the Eclector. It wasn't easy; the rest of the Contraxians were glaring daggers at them, and the Ravagers were only too happy to get into a fist fight. Yondu had to beat, threaten, and shove them out of the bar and back onto the ship.

“Idjits,” Yondu scowled as he watched the Ravagers file back into the quarters.

“Bad luck with clubs, huh, Ms. Quill?” Kraglin looked at her.

Meredith sighed. “Sorry, y'all. So much for a relaxing evening.”

Kraglin lifted his jacket; three bottles of whiskey were stowed in his coat.

“Night ain't over yet, Ms. Q.” Kraglin winked. “Saved you a present.”
“Terran whiskey!” Meredith laughed. “Well heck, Kraglin, you just made my day.”

Kraglin pulled the bottles out of his coat.

“Three of these,” he figured, “and three of us. What do you say, cap'n?”

“You got into a bar fight, smashed up the place, and lifted their liquor while you were at it.” Yondu chuckled. “Goddamn it, Kraglin, what kind of crazy-ass Xandarian are you?”

Kraglin grinned. “A Ravager through and through, cap'n.”

Kraglin was already asleep. Half a glass of Terran whiskey had proved to be too much for the Xandarian. He was slumped on the table, his mouth open slightly.

“Ravager through and through, huh?” Yondu snorted. “Xandarians can't hold liquor for shit.”

“He looks like Peter,” Meredith giggled, “when Peter's asleep.”

Yondu grunted and poured more whiskey into his glass. “This Terran stuff ain't bad.”

“No, this is really good.” Meredith tilted her head back, letting the liquid burn her throat.

Yondu grinned. “Watch it, Quill. That's your second glass.”

“You watch it. I'm dying anyway, might as well drink while I'm here.”

“And you say you ain't a goddamn Ravager.”

“I'm not,” she said, “I'm a momma. Momma's can't be Ravagers. We have to be soft and kind and loving.”

“And wipe the floor with Contraxians what punched your people?”

“Exactly.” Meredith grinned. “Now you're getting it.”

“Cookin' stew and breakin' teeth...” Yondu chuckled. “If that's what bein' a momma's all about, you got it down pat, Quill.”

Meredith smiled. “Thanks.”

“Used to think you were turnin' this ship of sons-of-bitches soft.” Yondu swirled his whiskey in his glass. “But damn it all if you ain't been whippin' 'em into shape, instead. Ship's never stayed so goddamn clean.”

“That's how it works.” Meredith tipped her head back slightly, closing her eyes. “You yell at them and make them do work, and I talk nice and make them do work. At this point, we're pretty much parenting the fuckers.”

Yondu grinned. “You cuss when you're drunk.”

“I cuss when I ain't around Peter,” she said, “and I ain't drunk.”

“Right.” Yondu poured himself another glass. “Sure you ain't.”

“Oh, oh no.” Meredith laughed. “I grew up in Missouri. We can drink.”
"I don't care if you grew up in misery, you can't out-drink me." Yondu swallowed some whiskey, enjoying the burn. "I grew up in goddamn slavery. I didn't get a proper drink until I was already a man."

"How did you get out of slavery," she asked.

"Stakar Ogord."

The name felt foreign coming out of Yondu's mouth. It had been years since he'd uttered it; it had become almost a personal taboo.

"Stakar Ogord..." Meredith blinked. "A friend?"

"Used to be." Yondu watched the whiskey in his glass move about. "Not anymore."

"He passed away?"

"I did somethin' he didn't like, and so he dropped me for it."

Meredith frowned. "But friends understand that people make mistakes."

"I made a pretty big goddamn mistake, Mery."

Yondu couldn't look at her. He was still making the mistake. She and Peter were the mistake.

"Everybody makes mistakes, Yondu." Meredith tilted the bottle, pouring more whiskey into her glass. "What matters is owning up to them and working to overcome them."

"I trusted the wrong goddamn person is all." Yondu tilted more liquor into his mouth. "Lost a lot because of it."

"Did you ever try to reach out to him? Your friend, I mean."

"Once," Yondu confessed, "and he nearly took my goddamn head off."

"That's awful." Meredith curled up in her chair, frowning. "I'm sorry that happened to you."

"Shit happens," Yondu grunted.

"I hope you make up with him one day," Meredith said, "and that you get your friend back. If he saved you from slavery, he must mean a lot to you."

Yondu opened his mouth to argue, but Meredith filled his glass with whiskey. He thought it was a better use of his mouth to just knock the whole glass back.

"Fill 'er up," he said, "I have a feelin' I'm going to need it."

Meredith poured him more liquor.

"You're going to get drunk," she warned.

"Am not."

"Are too."

"Am not."
“Are too,” she said, “and I'll make another bet with you.”

“Hell no.” Yondu scowled. “After the last time? No.”

Meredith laughed. “That bad, huh?”

“The worst,” he growled.

“Peter loved it.” Her eyes looked past the top of her glass. “I worry about him.”

“Oh course you do, you're his momma.”

“I ain't much good at being a mom. I don't know what I'm doing out here. No idea where I'm going, why I'm going there. I'm just coasting, making it up as I go along. I'm a terrible mom,” she said.

Yondu fixed her with his crimson eyes.

“Is that why you been mopin' all goddamn week,” he asked.

She nodded. Meredith couldn't quite make herself say it, but she was scared. Yondu, she figured, would just laugh at her. He didn't understand the fear of making a mistake. She just couldn't live with herself if she didn't raise Peter right. It was the most important thing.

Yondu looked at the whiskey still sliding around the bottom of his glass. He knocked it back down his throat.

“You ain't a bad mom,” he said.

“How would you know?” Meredith's eyes were distant.

“I don't know anythin' about parentin', but you didn't sell your kid or nothin'. You jumped a son-of-a-bitch you barely knew and sunk your teeth into his neck not five minutes after you kicked the bucket. You're doin' okay in my book,” Yondu said.

Meredith grinned. “Not sorry about that bite.”

“You're damn lucky I didn't get infected, what with all your Terran germs.”

“Terran germs? What are those compared to this grubby rust bucket?”

“It's clean.”

“Because I cleaned it,” she said, “with the help of your laziest friends.”

Yondu chuckled. Meredith sipped more of her whiskey.

“You're still drinking,” he noticed.

“I like whiskey,” she said, “it's my favorite. My papa's favorite, too.”

“You told me that.” Yondu looked at his empty glass. “It ain't bad.”

Yondu reached for the whiskey bottle.

“I miss him,” she said.

Her voice was nearly inaudible. Yondu paused, then looked back at her. Tears were dropping down
her face already.

“Goddamn it woman,” he said, “why are you always cryin’?”

“Because I miss my papa,” she said, “and I miss Earth and I have no idea what I'm doing or where I'm going or why I'm here.”

Yondu shifted. He still hadn't told her about Ego.

“Look,” he said, “everybody's lost somebody, alright? Your papa wouldn't want you getting tears in your goddamn whiskey, would he?”

Meredith shook her head.

“He'd want you to be tough for Peter, wouldn't he?”

She nodded.

“So there you go.” Yondu grabbed the bottle. “So stop cryin' like a goddamn three-year-old and get your shit together, dammit. You've got a boy to take care of.”

Yondu poured himself more whiskey. Meredith drained the rest of her glass and slammed it on the table. Yondu raised his eyebrows; she hiccuped. Her eyes were unfocused. Yondu's stomach flipped; the Terran was plastered.

“Can I ask you a question?” She stood up and leaned her hip on the table.

“You just did, idjit.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. “A real question.”

“Fine.” Yondu poured himself more whiskey. “One more goddamn question.”

Meredith squinted down at him. “Why do you say things like that? Things that aren't completely rude.”

“None of your business,” he said.

“No, no no no.” Meredith dropped into his lap. “You're not leaving until you tell me. I will sit right here and you can't move. You're pinned down.”

Her speech was slurred; she was definitely drunk. Yondu shifted; her weight was uncomfortably satisfying in his lap, and the alcohol had brought a rosy tint to her face. She was less curvy than the little Contraxian he'd been flirting with earlier, but she was still a woman. Wisely, Yondu kept his hands to himself. Drunk or not, this was Peter's mother. She was cargo. She was off-limits.

“Get off,” he said.

“Okay.” Meredith stood back up.

Yondu grinned. So much for pinning him down. Meredith wobbled, then sat back down in her chair.

“Yondu,” she announced, “I am drunk.”

Yondu laughed. “You just now figured that out?”
Meredith frowned. “I couldn't tell if it was the alcohol or the tumor, sorry.”

The grin slid off Yondu's face.

“How's that goin',” he grunted, “you feelin' alright?”

Meredith tilted her head. “Are you asking me if I feel okay?”

“That's what I said, goddamn it.”

“That's very nice of you to ask.” Meredith beamed. “I am so happy we're friends.”

“Friends?” Yondu's eyes widened. “Since when the fuck were we friends?”

“We got drunk together,” Meredith said, “and that makes us friends.”

“I ain't drunk, you're drunk.” Yondu scowled and sipped his whiskey. “Told you that you couldn't out-drink me.”

Meredith giggled. “You were right, you win.”

“And you lose,” Yondu said.

“No.” Meredith snorted. “Kraglin loses. If this was a race, he didn't make it over the starting line.”

Yondu laughed; Meredith giggled. She brushed her short, messy curls out of her eyes; they were just long enough to dangle over her eyebrows. Something was wrong here. Yondu was actually enjoying drinking with the Terran, and that wasn't okay. She was cargo, he reminded himself, useful cargo.

“Yondu?”

“What, Mery.”

“We're friends, right?”

“What the fuck gives you the idea that we're friends?” He bared his teeth.

“You tell me stuff,” she said, “and I tell you stuff. Stuff I don't tell other people.”

Yondu turned his head to look at her. “Like what?”

“I told you that I was scared about being a bad mom,” she said, “and that I missed Earth and I told you about my papa and how I worry about Peter and how I don't know what I'm doing.”

Yondu grunted.

“And you told me about Dal-Char and being a slave and what your parents did,” she continued, “and you told me about Stakar.”

“And that makes us friends?” Yondu couldn't look at her.

“Doesn't it?”

Yondu snapped, “Who'd want to be friends with you?”

Meredith leaned on her arms, smiling. “Would you like to be friends with me?”
“No.”

Her face fell. “Really?”

Yondu opened his mouth to snap at her again, but her eyes were wide and hurt. That shouldn't have mattered, but he found himself scowling at the floor. They weren't friends, obviously. Friends did things like... well, drink together, fight Contraxians, share near-death experiences, and tell each other things. Yondu set down his glass, his hands numb. When had this started happening, goddamn it? He woke up one day and they were friends? Shit. He needed this to stop immediately.

“You need to get to sleep before you give yourself alcohol poisonin',” he grunted.

“Okay.” Meredith held her arms up. “I can't stand. Help me.”

Yondu grabbed her arms and wrenched her into the air; he misjudged her weight and she went right into his arms.

“Hi,” she said.

Yondu stiffened. Her body was soft and warm against him, and in her drunken state she leaned on him for support. Yondu felt his face heat up.

“Damn it, woman. Can't you stand?”

Meredith shook her head.

“Can you walk?”

Meredith nodded.

Yondu bared his teeth. “Babysittin' a goddamn Terran...”

“I'm sorry,” she said in a small voice.

“Don't be sorry. Be walkin'.”

Yondu helped her leave the kitchen and escorted her to her room. She leaned against the wall next to the door with a dopey smile on her face. Yondu crossed his arms and scowled.

“Don't know why I put up with your shit, Quill.”

“I know why,” Meredith said.

“Why?”

“Because we're friends,” she said, “we are so friends right now.”

“We ain't friends!”

“Yes we are.” Meredith reached up and straightened the lapel of his Ravager jacket. “We are friends now, Yondu. Friends.”

He swatted her arms down. “No we ain't. Stop sayin' that.”

“Why not?”

“I don't want to be your goddamn friend,” Yondu said, “and you don't wanna be mine!”
Her forehead hit his chest with an awkward thud.

“It's because you're a Ravager, isn't it?” Her voice was small. “Ravagers can't be friends with Terran mommas. I'm not cool enough to be your friend.”

“That ain't it,” Yondu said through gritted teeth. Not cool enough? She'd wiped the floor with a Contraxian right in front of his eyes. Even by Ravager standards, that was cool.

Her small body started shaking.

“No. Damn it, no.” Yondu put his hand over his face and sighed. “Goddamn it, Mery, are you crying again?”

“No,” she sobbed, “I ain't.”

“Damn it, woman.” Yondu tried to pull her up straight, but it was like trying to move a sack of wet sand. “Why you always cryin’?”

“I don't know,” she said, “I'm sorry.”

Yondu looked down at her and felt that awful feeling swell in his chest. He looked around. No one was there. Meredith would probably be too drunk to remember it anyway.

“Alright, goddamn it.” Yondu's face was burning; he muttered it so quiet that Meredith could barely hear him. “We can be friends.”

“Really?” Meredith's head popped up with wide eyes. She looked so much like Peter that Yondu's chest tightened painfully.

“Only if you stop your goddamn crying.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “I'm goddamn embarrassed to be seen with you.”

“Okay, okay.” Meredith wiped her eyes and blinked away the tears. “I'm not crying. Really, I'm not.”

“Good.” Yondu pushed her into her room. “Now sleep, dammit.”

Meredith obediently crawled into bed, smiling. She pulled the covers over her shoulders and smiled up at him. She really did look just like Peter.

“We're friends,” she giggled.

“Shut up,” he grumbled.

He turned away and closed the door behind him. Friends with a goddamned Terran. Yondu wasn't much of a praying man, but he hoped with everything he had that the next morning Meredith wouldn't remember a thing about it. He might have to blast himself in the face if she did.

Yondu went back to the kitchen. He had to throw Kraglin over his shoulder; Xandarians really couldn't hold liquor for shit. He put Kraglin on his bedroll and dragged a blanket over him. Kraglin's mouth was open slightly, his expression relaxed. He was doing well as first mate, Yondu thought, if he could only get a hang on commanding. Commanding required confidence, and confidence was hard to come by. Yondu had it in spades, of course, but Kraglin wasn't Yondu; he wouldn't be a good first mate until he stopped trying to be Yondu. Kraglin had to be Kraglin, and he had to believe that was good enough.
Yondu crawled into bed, then laid there, staring at the ceiling. What a day. Kraglin got punched and stole some liquor, Quill wiped the floor with a Contraxian and got blitzed, and Yondu made friends with a Terran. Yondu scowled. What a goddamn day.
A terrifying incident that makes Yondu seriously reevaluate his stances on the Quills. Peter gets into trouble (again) and Meredith is hungover. Holdon can't cook, and Peter learns how to make sushi. Sort of.

Meredith hated everything about everything. Her muscles were trembling, her head was pounding, she could barely see, and her thoughts were moving like molasses. She was face-down into her pillow, doing her best not to move at all.

“I don't have a hangover,” she said into her pillow, “I don't have a hangover. I don't have a hangover.”

“Keep tellin' yourself that, Ms. Q.” Kraglin had come in. “Cap'n sent me to check on you. It's nearly noon.”

“Where's Peter,” she mumbled.

“He's workin' on the flight simulator with the cap’n.” Kraglin leaned against the wall. “Kid's getting good. Cap'n's taken over his training from now on.”

“That's great,” Meredith said through her pillow, “I'm so proud of him.”

Kraglin looked at her languishing form.

“You've got to get out of bed, Ms. Quill.”

“No.” She pulled the pillow over her head. “I don't.”

“Yes you do,” he said, “because you signed up to cook lunch.”

Meredith groaned. She slid her legs off the side of the bed and wobbled as she stood.

“My legs feel like jello,” she said.

Kraglin chuckled. “That's what happens when you overexert yourself wipin' the floor with a Contraxian smuggler, Ms. Q.”

“Ha.” Meredith grinned. “Forgot I did that.”

Kraglin snorted. “How could you forget that?”

“I drank a lot of whiskey last night, Kraglin.”

“So I heard. When I came back to the kitchen, all three bottles were empty.” Kraglin chuckled. “You and the cap'n polished that stuff off, didn't you?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Meredith blinked and rubbed her throbbing head. “I don't remember coming back to my room.”
“Cap'n walked you here. Dumped me in my bedroll, too.” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “That Terran stuff's stronger than I thought.”

Meredith chuckled. Kraglin left the room, and Meredith got changed. Her arms felt weak, too. Kraglin had been right; the implants made her faster, but at a cost. She'd need to bulk up before she really came into her own, and that wasn't an option while she was still sick.

In the kitchen, Lunis was chopping a pile of dried seaweed. He was clearly struggling.

“Hey, Quill.” He bared his teeth as he tried to force the knife through. “This. This is hard. I don't like it.”

“It's dry, honey.” Meredith picked it up and snapped it between her fingers. “Snap, don't cut.”

“Oh.” Lunis blinked.

“You'll get it,” she said.

“Mom!” Peter came bounding into the room. “Mom, come see, come look!”

Meredith turned around. “What is it, baby?”

“They're moving all the big crates on the ship, come look! It's really cool.” Peter grabbed Meredith's hand and started pulling.

“Honey, I've got to make lunch.”

“Lunch later, look now!”

Meredith started laughing. “Okay, okay!”

She let Peter drag her down to the loading bay. Yondu was standing in the middle of the chaos, directing Ravagers around as they repositioned the cargo. Crates twice as big as Meredith were being lifted and transported by enormous chains.

“Where's all this goin', cap'n?” Holdon yelled from the balcony above. “Five-hundred pounds a crate, fifty-eight crates; that's a lot of dirt.”

“Headin' to Xandar.” Yondu called back, “and they're sendin' it to some goddamn rock planet. Bourosk, probably.”

“Aye, captain.” Holdon threw a quick salute and went back to work.

Yondu watched the crates move. This was no small feat; each one was worth quite a lot of units to the Xandarians and took a lot of manpower to move. Luckily, Yondu reflected, he had Ravagers, and Ravagers were manpower. Yondu put his hands on his hips and looked around.

“No bad,” he muttered.

He should have kept his big mouth shut. Almost immediately, there was a scuffle and some cries of alarm.

“Look out!”

At the sound of the panicked cry, Yondu looked up; a crate of dirt had broken free of its chains. It was sliding off the palate. Yondu's eyes flicked down to where he approximated its landing.
Quill was standing there, looking up and frozen. A horrible feeling shot through Yondu's body.

Yondu was moving before he realized it. His muscled body slammed into Peter, shoving the boy a good two yards away. Peter skidded on the floor; his head snapped up. Yondu met his eyes. Goddamn, that kid had some green eyes.

“Yondu!” Peter screamed.

Yondu looked up. The crate was already in midair. Yondu closed his eyes. *Fuck.*

Something large slammed into Yondu from behind and limbs wrapped around his body. Pain shot through his hips and shoulders as they hit the steps of the stairs. His back slammed against the floor. He opened his eyes. Gray eyes were staring back at him. Meredith's limbs were wrapped around him; their faces were less than three inches apart. He could see her individual eyelashes. Yondu could hear his heartbeat in his ears. Meredith crawled off him.

“Are you okay,” she panted.

Yondu sat up, his mind racing. The goddamn Terran had saved his life.

“I'm fine,” he said, “where's the boy?”

“He's fine,” she said, “you saved him.”

“You?”

“Fine,” she said.

He scowled at her. “The truth, goddamn it.”

“Alright, so I'm shaking a little.” Meredith chuckled. “Really, I'm just a little bruised up. Payback for Arazine, I guess.”

Meredith was grinning; a bruise was blossoming on her jaw. He reached forwards and touched it, frowning.

“Banged yourself up,” he said.

She looked at his hand. “Yeah. That's what happens when you nearly get crushed to death.”

Yondu let his hand fall. The two looked at the crate, which had smashed to pieces. Black dirt was spilled all over the floor; nearly five-hundred pounds of it, Yondu remembered. He wouldn't have survived that impact.

“What's with savin' my life, Quill,” he asked.

“You saved Peter's.” She stood up and rolled her left shoulder. “Peter is my life. Consider it even.”

“Cap'n!” Frightened faces ran to the banisters, looking down. “Is the captain alright?”

“He's fine,” Meredith called up, “now get down here and clean up your mess, boys.”

Yondu grinned slightly. “Givin' orders now, huh?”

Meredith lifted her hands as if in mock surrender.
“Go ahead,” she said, “I ain't the captain.”

“You idiots!” Yondu barked. “Get your asses down here and clean this shit up.”

“Aye, cap'n.” The crew scattered, grabbing whatever supplies they could use to clean the mess.

Yondu stood up and put his hands on his hips. Meredith was rubbing her arm; another bruise was swelling up. The area under her eyes was still tinged slightly lilac, but she stood straight and strong as usual. Yet again, Yondu had forgotten that Terrans didn’t mind near-death situations.

“Mom!” Peter climbed over the dirt, his eyes wide. “Mom, are you okay?”

“Fine, baby.” Meredith raised a hand from the bottom of the stairs. “You’re okay?”

“I'm fine.” Peter clambered down the stairs and hugged her. “That was close.”

“Yes, it was. Those boys up there better pay more attention to how those crates are moved. Somebody could have gotten hurt,” she said.

Meredith picked Peter up and held him close.

“I'm so glad you're okay,” he said.

She squeezed him gently. “And I'm glad you're okay, baby.”

Yondu shifted. Being around the Quills felt like being an intruder spying on some happy family. Peter smiled at Yondu.

“I'm glad you're okay, too,” he said.

Yondu bared his teeth to cover up the tightening of his chest. “Don't play around while we're movin' shit, boy.”

“I wasn't playing, honest.” Peter frowned. “I was showing mom.”

Meredith kissed Peter's forehead. “He's just upset because you scared us, baby.”

Yondu swallowed. She was right. When Yondu had seen Peter, that horrible feeling had cours ed through his entire body. How long had it been since Yondu had felt total terror like that? Years, at least. And all for a goddamn Terran boy?

“I'm sorry,” Peter said.

“It's okay, baby, it was just an accident.” Meredith looked down. “Oh no, look what I've done. See, this is the downside to pain inhibitors. I don't even know when I'm bleeding.”

Yondu and Peter looked at Meredith's leg; it was scraped and bloody.

“Here, hold him for a second.” Meredith held Peter out.

Yondu took the boy in his arms. Peter weighed less than Meredith did, so Yondu put the boy on his shoulders. Peter grinned and grabbed Yondu's head to keep himself steady.

“Wow,” Peter said, “you're tall.”

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. Meredith sat down, pulled out a handkerchief and bound
her leg.

“You alright, Quill?” Yondu watched her tie the handkerchief.

“Oh, this isn't too bad. I had worse than this back on the farm,” she said.

Meredith yanked on the knot, then stood up.

“Here.” She offered to take Peter again.

“I got him,” Yondu grunted.

Peter was grinning. Meredith raised her eyebrows, but she smiled.

“If that's what he wants,” she said.

The crew had come down to start cleaning. The wooden wreckage of the crate was removed first, and the dirt collected to go into a new crate. Yondu, Meredith, and Peter watched them work for a second.

“Lunch, boys?” Meredith looked at them.

“Yeah, I'm hungry.” Peter pointed in the direction of the kitchen. “Mush, Yondu!”

“You want mush for lunch?” Yondu scowled. “Mushed what?”

Meredith chuckled. “It means go.”

Yondu grunted and started walking. He'd gone from directing cargo movements to being directed by a child. Meredith smiled at him, and his chest tightened.

“How you feelin', Quill,” he said, “after all that goddamn whiskey.”

“Sore and weak,” she said, “and that tumble down the stairs back there didn't help any.”

“We'll get you some ice,” Peter said.

Peter, Yondu, and Meredith went to the kitchen. Inside, Lunis was snapping the dried seaweed with ease. He dropped it into a pot of boiling water.

“What are we making, Lunis,” Meredith asked.

“Soup. Needs some of these.” Lunis held up a bunch of wilted scallions.

Meredith picked up the knife Lunis had been using earlier.

“I'll chop,” she said.

While Lunis and Meredith worked on lunch, Yondu put Peter down and sat on a mess hall bench. Peter immediately scrambled to sit on the bench next to him.

“You almost became a pancake,” Peter said.

“So did you, idjit.” Yondu scowled. “When things are gonna fall on you, you're supposed to move out of the way.”

Peter fiddled with his shoe strings, unfazed. “How fast do you think mom can move now?”
“No goddamn idea.”

“Does she have superpowers now?”

Meredith slid the chopped scallions into the boiling water with a smile.

“No,” Yondu said, “she's just a Terran.”

Peter's eyes widened. “A really fast Terran?”

“A sort-of-fast Terran,” Meredith corrected, “who should not be beating up any Contraxians anymore.”

“Why not?” Yondu frowned.

“All my muscles are wobbly. Kraglin says that's what happens when I overexert myself. Then, on top of that, I can't even remember how I got back to my room last night.” Meredith looked at Yondu. “By the way, we need to discuss that.”

Yondu swallowed. “Discuss what?”

Meredith looked at Peter. “Baby, put your Walkman on.”

“Okay.” Peter plopped the headphones over his ears.

Meredith waited to talk to Yondu until she knew Peter wasn't listening.

“Was I trouble,” she asked, “I get a little stupid when I'm drunk.”

“You're always stupid,” he replied.

She rolled her eyes. “Was I any trouble?”

Yondu scratched his chin.

“No,” he said, “nothin' I couldn't handle.”

“Good.” Meredith put the rest of the chopped ingredients in the soup. “Glad to hear it.”

Peter was dancing along to his music. Yondu snorted; Terrans were so goddamn weird sometimes.

“I'll get the boys. Be right back.” Lunis scuttled away.

Meredith stirred the pot once, then sat down next to Yondu.

“You're being unusually docile,” she noted, “you haven't even made fun of his dancing yet.”

“Kid nearly died.” Yondu couldn't look at her. “Kind of puts things in perspective.”

“How so?”

Yondu shrugged. They watched Peter dance around.

“Why didn't you let that crate crush me,” Yondu asked.

Meredith blinked. “Because you saved Peter. I told you that.”
“If I was dead,” he said, “you'd have an easier time of it.”

“Not really.” Meredith crossed her arms. “You're a big jerk, but Peter likes you.”

Yondu looked up, alarmed. “He what?”

“He likes you.” Meredith laughed. “You couldn't tell?”

Yondu's face was scorched with heat.

“Why,” he asked.

“Probably because you're a gun-toting, arrow-shooting, ship-flying space-pirate-captain,” Meredith said, “and he's a little boy. To him, you're cool.”

Goddamn it, Yondu wasn't blushing. Ravager captains did not blush. It was a goddamn impossibility.

“Why did you save him,” she asked softly.

“He's cargo.” Yondu bared his teeth. “He's valuable.”

“Worth more than your life?” Meredith's cool gray eyes were fixed on Yondu. “If you'd saved him from something minor, I'd believe you. I assumed that was why you'd pulled the safety rig on him during that crash you two had. But you just risked your life for him. Why?”

“He's a kid,” Yondu muttered, “and ain't nobody like watchin' a kid die.”

“Ravagers don't kill children?”

“Not unless they're trying to kill us,” Yondu said, “and even then, we ain't comfortable with it. Code's clear; we don't deal in kids.”

Meredith nodded. ‘I'm starting to like your code.”

Yondu snorted. “You'll end up a Ravager one day.”

“Will not,” she said.

“Will too,” he said.

Meredith closed her eyes. “We're not starting this again.”

Yondu chuckled. The two watched Peter dance around.

“Boy can't dance for shit,” he said.

Meredith covered her grin with both hands.

“He's got enthusiasm,” she said, “and that counts for something.”

Yondu grunted. Meredith smiled and linked her fingers together, resting her hands on the mess hall bench. Yondu glanced down at them.

“You're bleedin',” he said.

“What?” Meredith looked down. “Oh no.”
She'd scraped the side of her hand and not noticed. Meredith looked around for something to bind her hand with. Yondu made a point of scowling at her before he whipped a blood-stained cloth out of his back pocket. She eyed it warily, and he bared his teeth.

“It's sterile, goddamn it.”

She made as if to take it, and he whipped it out of her reach.

“How the hell do you expect to bind your hand with one goddamn hand?” Yondu gave her an incredulous look. “You are eight kinds of stupid.”

“And you're nine kinds of stupid. Give me the bandage,” she said.

“Hold your damn hand still.”

“Give me the bandage.”

“Hold still, goddamn it!”

“Give me the bandage!”

Yondu reached for her wrist; she moved with alarming speed.

“You're gonna hurt yourself, goddamn it.” Yondu reached for her hand again. “Just hold still for a second.”

“No.” Meredith reached for the bandage.

As fast as she was, she managed to snag a corner, but Yondu's superior strength pulled it right out of her hands. They glared at each other.

“We seem to be at an impasse,” Meredith said.

Yondu squinted. “What?”

“Impasse,” she said, “it means neither of us can win this. You're too strong. I'm too fast.”

“Neither of us can win, huh?” Yondu snorted. “You must think I'm stupid.”

Meredith raised an eyebrow. “I mean, I wasn't going to say it out loud, but...”

Yondu scowled. He snapped his fingers and bellowed, “Boy!”

Peter immediately took his headphones off.

“What is it,” he said.

“Your momma's bleedin',” Yondu said, “now get over here and hold her still so's I can put this bandage on.”

Peter eyed the bandage. “Is that clean?”

“It's sterile,” Yondu snarled.

Peter walked over. Meredith glared at Yondu.

“This is cheating,” she said.
“Ravager.” Yondu grinned, showing his crooked teeth. “We don't play fair.”

Meredith huffed and held out her hand. Peter took her arm gently, patting her elbow.

“It's okay, mom,” he said, “we'll fix it.”

Meredith couldn't refuse aid with Peter watching. Yondu wrapped the bandage around her hand with trained efficiency. He'd been learning a little about Terran physiology; after the last surgery, Dr. Mareet had sent him a load of information about how to keep Terrans alive. Most of it was garbage about nutrition and health, but some of the life-saving things had been worth the read. As he bound Meredith's hand, Yondu found himself remembering her as she was on Terra; a woman running barefoot across the parking lot, sick and desperate and very nearly dead. Yondu had just shoved her on her back, hoping some other Terran would show up. Now, he knew what he should have done. Terrans weren't all that hard to keep alive. They'd both lived this long, hadn't they?

“There,” he grunted.

He tied the final knot. Meredith looked down at his work, her eyebrows contracting slightly.

“Where’d you learn to do that,” she asked.

“Mareet.” Yondu crossed his arms, glancing around. Lunis was still gone and the room was empty. Good; no one had seen him help the Terran.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Don't say that.” He scowled. “How many times we gotta tell you that?”

“I don't tell you not to curse,” she said, “so don't tell me not to say 'thank-you'. It gets irritating after a while.”

Yondu leaned his crossed arms on the table. Peter touched the bandage and smiled.

“He did a good job,” Peter said.

“Yes, baby.” Meredith took Peter's hand with her bandaged one. “Shouldn't we be watching that soup?”

Peter frowned. “Do we have to?”

Yondu chuckled. Meredith kissed Peter's forehead.

“Yes, baby. Remember, we get paid for making lunch.”

Meredith stood, and the two Terrans kept track of the soup. Meredith stirred; Peter taste-tested and requested additional spices. Yondu turned his head so that he could just see them over his shoulder. Picking them up off Terra... Yeah, he remembered it all right. There was dew on the grass. Cold kinda night. No moonlight. That parking lot outside the Terran facility had been cracked and gray. The boy had screamed and ran for it every chance he got. Quill had been frantic and aggressive. Yondu snorted. That much hadn't changed. Yes, Yondu remembered everything about the beginning of this job; now he was waiting to see how it would end.

For a moment there, back on Terra, Yondu had thought about calling the whole damn thing off. He really had. He'd tell Ego to piss off, leave the Quills alone, and face Stakar empty-handed. But then, Meredith had started dying again. Kind of distracted him, he thought, having a dying Terran on his
hands. Yondu was used to having dying people around; Hala had been full of them. But back then, he hadn’t been able to do anything about it. Couldn’t do anything about it on Terra, either. Mareet's information was worth giving another read, Yondu thought. Watching Meredith die had been uncomfortable; watching that boy die would be unbearable.

A shudder went through Yondu. Don't think about that boy dying. Don't think about Ego. He's not coming. He never leaves his goddamn planet. If he wanted the boy that badly, he would have come for him by now. Yondu took a deep breath. The boy would be fine. If he wasn’t...

Yondu's hands curled into fists. The boy would be fine, or Yondu would cave Ego's skull in with a blunt object. Planet or not, that jackass could suck Yondu's big blue –

“Cap'n?”

Kraglin’s voice snapped Yondu out of his thoughts. Kraglin was standing in front of him, his eyebrows knit together slightly.

“You alright, cap'n?”

“Why wouldn't I be,” Yondu grunted.

“You got that face on.” Kraglin gestured to his own face. “That face what says, 'I'm feelin' like killin' somebody in some kinda creative way'. Usually ain't a good sign.”

Yondu snorted. “I'm fine, idjit. Report.”

“Crates all loaded and ready for transport, cap'n.” Kraglin threw a smart salute. “The traders are inbound and ready to pick 'em up. Nice to have someone come get our cargo for a change, instead of havin' to lug it around.”

Yondu scowled as his previous thoughts returned to him.

“Have we gotten a call from jackass,” he asked.

“No, cap'n, not a word.”

“Good.” Yondu stood. “I hate dealing with that smug little fuck.”

Yondu glanced over his shoulder. Meredith was singing to Peter as she stirred the soup.

“Oo-oh, child, things are gonna get easier. Oo-oh child, things will get brighter.” Her voice had gotten very strong and clear. “Oo-oh child, we'll get it together and we'll get it all right.”

She hadn’t heard them talking about Ego. Good; Yondu didn't want any more goddamn questions. He strode out of the kitchen with Kraglin on his heels. He kept the Quills out of his thoughts all day; Yondu had the strangest feeling that if he thought about them too much, Ego might show up. It was a stupid thought, but it kept rattling around in his skull.

Dinner was a hasty affair; Meredith had avoided signing up for it so that she could rest all evening, so Holdon ended up serving the Ravagers some barely-seared fish. It was slimy on the inside, and Yondu found himself wishing Meredith was the official cook. Judging by the mutters around him, he wasn't the only one.

“Big green bastard,” Gef muttered, “I can't believe this. It's still slimy.”

Holdon cracked his knuckles and rolled his enormous shoulders. Gef scowled and forked the fish
into his mouth. Peter sat next to Yondu and stared at the fish.

“Is this sushi,” he asked.

“What's sushi,” Yondu asked through a mouthful of fish.

“Not cooked fish,” Peter said, “in a little roll.”

“Do it look like it's in a roll?”

“No.”

“Then it ain't sushi.”

Peter carefully rolled the fish onto itself, making a tight little coil. Then he sliced it into little rings. He stabbed a ring and put it in his mouth. The consistency was awful, but the taste wasn't bad.

“My mom says Terrans get sick eating raw fish,” he mentioned.

A slam to the back made Peter spit the fish back up and wheeze.

“Goddamn it!” Yondu kept pounding Peter's back. “Don't swallow. Spit it back up for fuck's sake!”

The Ravagers jolted in alarm. Yondu turned around and grabbed Holdon by the front of his shirt.

“You fuck-forsaken idjit!” Froth was coming from Yondu's mouth. “Raw fish kills Terrans, you stupid son-of-a-bitch! You tryin' to poison the cargo?”

“I didn't know, captain, honest!” Holdon was a foot taller than Yondu, but he whimpered in fear. “I swear, I didn't know! I'm not trying to poison anyone, captain, I swear!”

Yondu let go of the front of Holdon's shirt. He was purple in the face, and held his jacket open to expose his arrow.

“Don't you ever try to poison that boy again,” Yondu said, “or else.”

“Aye, captain.” Holdon swallowed. “I'll throw the fish back in the water.”

Holdon took up the plates and put them back into a pot of water. He boiled them until they were completely cooked, then redistributed them. The Ravagers sighed in relief. Peter's eyes were wide; he'd never seen Yondu get so angry so fast.

Yondu bared his teeth as he sat down. “Now eat, boy.”

Peter ate. Yondu looked around at the Ravagers, then picked at his fish. He couldn't keep flying off the handle every time someone got close to hurting the boy. Yondu gritted his teeth as he chewed. The Quills were just cargo, just cargo. The sound of a hiccup made him look over. Peter hiccuped again, then swallowed some more fish. The image of a crate descending over the boy made Yondu's fist clenched suddenly. He closed his eyes and saw Meredith wrapping her bleeding leg. He'd risked his life to save the boy. She'd risked hers to save him. Yondu opened his eyes and stared at the light gray flesh of the cooked fish.

Fine, he told himself, they weren't just cargo.
Meredith woke up to a flashing red light. It pulsated in the darkness; a siren was wailing in the distance. She tore off the blankets and pulled on her shoes. She peeled the pillowcase off her pillow and began filling it with the most important things; cassette tapes, her jacket, the datapads she was collecting. With her pillowcase sack in one hand and her jacket dangling from the other, Meredith went sprinting up to the bridge. Ravagers went rushing past her, pulling jackets on.

“What's going on,” she yelled.

“Breach,” Lunis said, “breach in the hull.”

“Are we going to crash,” she asked.

Next to her, Holdon laughed. “Crash? Something’s crashed into us, more like. Punched a hole in the hull. The air pressure and temperature are dropping.”

Meredith’s blood went cold. “Are we going to die?”

“No,” he replied, “not today. We’re all heading to the main part of the ship. Cargo bay, loading bay, hangar bay; all those are being blocked off.”

“Why?”

“Energy needs to be saved,” Lunis said, “I think. Easier to power one part of the ship. Not a lot. Just going to be cold. Huddle tonight.”

Kraglin was at the door, pushing Ravagers up the stairs into the main part of the ship.

“Go, go!” Kraglin grabbed Meredith and pulled her aside. “Not you, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith was pulled out of the horde of Ravagers. She pressed against the wall, panting slightly.

“Why not,” she asked.

“Head to the quarters. Peter's there with the cap'n. Bay workers are kippin' bunk in the halls tonight; you’re no bay worker.” Kraglin gave her a small grin as he shoved a few pilots through the door. “You're Pete's momma.”

Meredith breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thanks, Kraglin.” She rubbed his shoulder fondly. “Keep up the good work, honey.”

“Thanks, Ms. Q. Now go on, go!” Kraglin pushed her back into the horde.
The Ravagers were still moving like a stampede of cattle, spurred on by the relentless screaming of the siren and the flashing red lights in the hall. Meredith could see the door to the quarters up ahead; Yondu was standing in the doorway.

“Quill,” he barked.

“Coming!” She ran up, panting. “Where’s Peter? What’s going on?”

“Some goddamn chunk of rock went and busted a hole in the hull,” Yondu said, “so we’ve got a damn breach on our hands. Boy’s fine; I told him to stay in bed.”

“Good idea.” Meredith looked at the flashing red lights. “Does this happen often?”

“No,” he said, “but we've got protocol.”

There was a hissing sound, and all the vents began blasting cold air. Meredith hugged her pillowcase bag and jacket to herself as the cold air bit into her skin.

“Come on,” he grunted, “it's about to get goddamn cold in here.”

“What's happening,” she asked.

“Hull breach means the entire exo of the ship is space-temp.”

“What?”

“The hull of the ship is as cold as goddamn space,” he said, “so it's taking a lot of energy just to keep the inside of the ship from freezin' solid. Vital systems have to be kept goin’.”

“So the temperature drops in the halls and quarters to combat the energy expense.” Meredith nodded. “I get it.”

“Not as dumb as you look, Quill.” Yondu pulled her in by her arm. “Now shut up and get inside. I don't need any frozen Terrans.”

Meredith stumbled inside. Peter was curled up in his bedroll, shivering. Meredith put down her pillowcase bag and pulled on her jacket.

“How're you feelin', baby,” she asked.

“Cold,” Peter said.

“Aw, baby.” Meredith sat down and pulled him into her arms. “It's okay, honey.”

“You're jacket is cold.” Peter shivered.

Meredith looked down at the leather, her brow contracting slightly. She slipped the jacket off and held Peter. His shivering stopped, but she could feel the temperature in the quarters decreasing. The fine hair on her arms stood on end. She squeezed Peter tightly and waited. The quarters were lit only by the flashing red lights; she saw everything as if it were in strobe.

“When do the lights come back on,” she asked.

Yondu's answer was to toss her an emergency light.

“It ain't in a goddamn chip bag,” he said, “but it'll have to do.”
Meredith grinned. “Are you still mad about that plasma thing?”

Yondu's response was a low growl. Meredith laughed and turned on the emergency light; immediately, soft blue light filled the air. It cast deep black shadows on everything in the room.

“Pretty,” Peter said.

“Here, honey.” Meredith gave the light to Peter. “You hold it.”

More people came running through the open portal. First it was the entire bridge crew, who came in all at once and had a big bottleneck scuffle at the door. Then it was Drazkar, followed by a panting, red-faced Gef. Finally, Kraglin came skidding to a stop in front of Yondu and threw a smart Ravager salute.

“Everyone here and accounted for, cap'n. Cargo bay is lined up in hall 2-A. Hangar bay, 2-B. Loading bay, 1-A. Systems control, 2-C. Maintenance, 1-B, although most are already workin' on fixin' the hull. Auxiliary support, 1-C.” Kraglin looked around. “Er, and bridge support, quarters.”

“Good,” Yondu grunted as he slammed the portal shut.

“Are we conservin' heat, captain?” Gef frowned.

“Yep. Huddle up,” Yondu said, “it's gonna be a long night.”

There was a great dragging of bedrolls and blankets. Meredith watched in disbelief as the Ravagers piled together, pressing their bodies together closely. Kraglin patted a spot on Yondu's bed.

“Come on, Ms. Q,” he said, “and don't worry. We keep our hands to ourselves.”

“Mostly,” Drazkar snickered.

“That's sweet, Kraglin honey, but no.” Meredith looked at the bed warily. “We'll be fine down here.”

“You'll be dead down there,” Yondu grunted, “ain't neither of you got the body weight to keep the other alive. Get up here.”

Meredith swallowed. The last time she'd been on that bed, Yondu had almost killed her in his sleep. Yondu read her trepidation and sighed.

“Dammit, Quill,” he said, “this ain't a joke. Get up here. The boy won't last the night if you don't.”

Peter shivered. Meredith picked him up and carried him to Yondu's bed. She retrieved her jacket and pillowcase bag and hung them both on one of the metal post corners. Yondu laid down on one end of the bed, and Kraglin laid on the far other. Peter was already snug between them.

“Scoot over,” Meredith said, “I gotta get in there, baby.”

Peter scooted closer to Yondu, who scowled. Meredith laid down between Kraglin and Peter, then scooped Peter up in her arms. Yondu and Kraglin pulled an enormous fur blanket over the four of them. The siren and the flashing red light had stopped; now, the room was lit by the emergency light Peter still held in his hands.

“Let's put that out, baby,” Meredith said.

Peter looked up at her. “Will you sing me to sleep first?”
“I’d love to,” she said, “but I don’t think the other Ravagers would like that very much.”

There was a chorus of protests against her claim.

“Wouldn’t mind it,” Gef grunted.

“I mean, if you felt like it, Ms. Q.”

“Sing! I like to hear it.”

Meredith’s face flushed. Yondu growled.

“If the captain’s okay with it,” she said.

Meredith looked up at him with her big gray eyes. Yondu gritted his teeth. In the light from the emergency lantern, he could see Peter’s hopeful face and Meredith’s hesitant expression.

“Whatever,” he said, “I don’t give a fuck.”

The Ravagers immediately snuggled deeper into their blankets with large grins.

Meredith took a deep breath. “You boys want the same one as last time?”

There was a murmur of affirmation. Meredith’s voice swelled through the room, filling the air with the song. The lilt and reverberation of her voice was beautiful; she sounded so much stronger than she had before.

_Darling dear, don’t you fear,_

_All your worries disappear_

_Soft the sky, up so high_

_Stars sing you a lullaby_

_See them shine in velvet night_

_Sweet their song and bright the light_

_Soft the sky, you and I_

_Will sing them back a lullaby_

Peter curled up, his head on her shoulder and his eyes closed. Meredith stroked his hair as she sang softer. Yondu turned on his side, his back to the Quills. Meredith glanced over as she sang; at least he wasn’t complaining.

_Songs of freedom, songs of joy_

_Music no one can destroy_

_This song is meant to share my love_

_Stars sing to you high above_

_Close your eyes, say good-night_
Stars will burn like candlelight
As many stars as are in the sky
That's how much I love you... good-night.

Meredith's voice got softer and softer until she could hear the snores of the Ravagers. Her own eyelids were heavy. She turned off the emergency light and snuggled deeper into the fur blanket, holding Peter close.

“I love you, baby,” she whispered.

Peter's soft breathing was his only response. The cold air was seeping through her short hair, making her head cold. She held Peter; he was warmer than she was. Yondu's back was still towards the Quills. Meredith cautiously edged a little nearer and pressed Peter's back to Yondu's, then let go of him. Without Peter to hold on to, Meredith's chest became cold. At least Peter would be warm, she thought, although he'd probably wake up smelling like Centaurian sweat and fur blankets. Meredith took a deep breath; the cold air shot into her lungs and she shivered.

“Just one night,” she whispered, “come on. I can tough it out for just one night.”

“You'll freeze to death,” a deep voice muttered.

Yondu turned over, being careful not to crush Peter. He bared his jagged teeth and looked down at Meredith.

“Peter's warm,” she said.

“Are you tryin' to kill yourself,” he said, “or are you really just this goddamn stupid?”

Meredith smiled wryly.

“I guess it's the second one,” she said.

“You're cargo. I keep you alive. Death ain't an option.” Yondu reached over and put a large hand on her waist. “Get over here before you freeze to death, idjit.”

Meredith's eyes widened. Yondu pulled her close, sandwiching Peter between them. He slid his hand off her waist, scowling.

“Don't move,” he said, “or I'll kill you.”

“Was that a threat?”

“That was a goddamn promise.” Yondu closed his eyes. “Now sleep, dammit.”

Meredith took Peter in her arms again. The sheer heat off Yondu's body was warming the blanket on this side, keeping the temperature tepid. Meredith scooted a little closer.

Yondu's eyes shot open.

“What the fuck did I say about moving,” he said.

“I'm cold,” she hissed, “shut up.”

“Goddamn it.” Yondu gritted his teeth; they stuck out like pieces of broken bone. “Why the fuck
can't you just go to sleep?"

“I'm not used to sleeping in a four-person pile, okay? I know it's survival,” she said, “but it's just...awkward.”

Yondu closed his eyes again.

“Get over it,” he grunted.

Meredith huffed. She waited until Yondu's snores chorused along with the rest of the Ravagers, then closed her eyes. The warmth pressed down around her, and she faded to sleep.

When Peter woke up, he was very warm. He tried to move, but a pair of arms were snaked around him. His mother, he thought. Peter looked up; Meredith was snuggling him close, and an additional pair of large blue arms was wrapped around them both. In the middle of the night, she had gotten cold. Now, her head was on Yondu's shoulder, and the captain was holding them both tightly. The three of them were slammed to one side of the bed; Kraglin had sprawled out on the other half, his limbs preventing anyone from getting near him. Peter could hear Kraglin snore.

Peter wiggled out of his mother's arms and shook her gently.

“Mom,” he said, “wake up.”

Meredith rolled her shoulders, her eyebrows contracting slightly.

“Baby,” she said, “what's...you awake so early?”

“You have to get up.” Peter tried to pull off Yondu's arms. “Yondu's trying to hug you.”

“What?” Meredith jolted awake. “He's what?”

Meredith froze. Yondu had stretched one arm around her; she'd been using his shoulder as a place to rest her head. His left arm was wrapped firmly around her waist; she could see the gap where Peter had been lying.

“Oh dear Lord.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Peter, what do I do?”

Tell him to let go.” Peter went to shake Yondu.

“No, baby, don't.” Meredith stopped Peter's hands. “Just... give me a second.”

Meredith slowly unwound Yondu's hand from her waist, carefully transferring it to the bed.

“Why are you moving so slow, mom,” Peter asked.

The memory of Yondu throwing her onto her back and pressing an arrow to her throat flashed through Meredith's mind. She swallowed.

“No reason,” Meredith said.

Yondu snorted and turned, pulling his hand onto his own chest. Meredith sighed with relief and sat up.

“He was hugging us,” Peter said.
Meredith put one finger to her lips.

“He was just keeping us warm,” she said, “because we’re valuable cargo.”

“Oh.” Peter nodded. “Okay.”

Meredith and Peter crawled out of the bed, being careful not to wake Yondu or Kraglin. The air was still crisp, but much less cold than it had been earlier.

Peter rubbed his arms. “Do you think they fixed the hull, mom?”

“I think so, baby.” Meredith shrugged. “Maybe they fixed it in the night. What time is it?”

Peter looked at the clock on Yondu’s bedside.

“6:32,” he said, “in the morning.”

“I bet we’re the first ones up.” Meredith kissed Peter's forehead. “Think we can make some breakfast?”

“Can we have pancakes,” Peter asked, “please please please? It's been so long since we had pancakes! Nearly three months!”

“Pancakes, huh?” Meredith ran a hand through her short curls. “I could try, but I don't know if we have everything we need.”

“Please try,” he begged, “I miss pancakes.”

If Peter missed anything about Earth, then Meredith was going to provide it for him. The hallways were incredibly cold, but once Meredith was in the kitchen, the kitchen warmed up significantly. She found a kind of soft white flour, some eggs, and what could possibly pass for syrup. It was alcoholic, though, so she simmered it over a low heat to evaporate the alcohol, adding sugar as she did to thicken the mixture.

“How many pancakes do you want, Peter?” Meredith stirred the batter.

“Twenty!”

Meredith laughed. “How about we start with two?”

“Aw, come on.” Peter dropped onto the mess hall bench and pouted. “You can eat twenty.”

“I ate twenty once,” she said, “and that was before I was sick.”

“I could eat twenty,” Peter said, “I can eat more than Yondu!”

“Yondu polished off a whole vat of your momma's stew,” Meredith said, “I don't think anyone can eat more than Yondu.”

“I bet I could,” Peter said.

Meredith stopped. She turned around with the spoon in her hands, her gray eyes wide.

“Peter,” she said, “you're a genius.”
Yondu woke up with the oddest feeling that he was missing something. He looked over; the Terrans were gone. He sat up and looked around, rubbing his eyes.

“Kraglin,” he muttered.

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin was already up and going about his business.

“Where's the Terrans?”

“In the kitchen, holdin' a competition, cap'n.”


“No, cap'n. Eating.” Kraglin chuckled. “Ms. Quill done ate twenty pancakes, and all the boys are tryin' to out-eat each other. Ten units a pancake, and the pot is half of what she's raking in.”

“She ate what? Twenty what?”


“Pancakes,” Yondu repeated.

“Aye, cap'n.”

“And she ate twenty of 'em.”

“Aye, cap'n.”

“What's the pot up to now,” Yondu asked.

“Last I checked,” Kraglin said, “it was about four-hundred units. But that was about a half-hour ago. If it's still going, which I think it is, it's probably twice that now.”

Yondu snorted and got out of bed.

“Whatever it is,” he said, “I'll bet your ass I can win it. If Quill can eat twenty of the goddamn things, I can eat two thousand.”

“Careful, cap'n, that Terran food's real rich stuff.”

“If I can eat a vat of stew, I can eat a hundred goddamn pancakes,” Yondu said, “whatever the hell a pancake is.”

A pancake, Yondu found out, was a circular fluffy disc made of flour and eggs and a whole bunch of other Terran garbage. The entire mess hall bench was packed with Ravagers stuffing their faces, transferring units to Meredith as they hollered for another round. Peter kept track of the units while Meredith focused on cooking. She was grinning, and the heat from the griddle had set her curls to fluffing around her face.

“Quill,” Yondu snarled, “what the hell are you doing?”

Her response was to hand him a plate of the pancakes.

“You can have the whole first stack for free,” she said breathlessly, “if you don't fly off the handle
and shut this down. I've already made... Peter, baby, how much have we made?"

“After we split it for the prize?” Peter looked at his interface. “Almost two thousand units.”

Yondu's eyebrows raised slightly.

“Damn,” he said.

“Look, I'll pay you back for all the supplies I used. I've already cranked out about twenty-four batches of these things.” Meredith's gray eyes were big and pleading. “Just let me do this. They're still eating. I don't know how, but they're still doing it.”

Yondu looked at the Ravagers who were still stuffing their faces in the competition. Gef was forking huge stacks of the fluffy Terran breakfast into his mouth.

“Goddamn gluttons,” Yondu muttered.

“Please,” she said, “just... one time, let this slide.”

“One time, huh?” Yondu put his hands on his hips and scowled. “And what do I get out of it?”

“I'll cut your price down to five per pancake. You sit down, and you eat. I know you can pack away more than any of these guys, and if you win, you win about two thousand units.”

Meredith had a bit of pancake batter on her cheek; it streaked down, ending at the bruise on her jaw. She was still healing from her fall down the stairs. A fall, Yondu remembered, that she took saving his life.

“Fine,” he scowled, “one goddamn time. But I ain't doin' no goddamn competition, you hear?”

“Thank you,” she breathed.

“Don't,” he said.

“I know, I know, don't say please, don't say thank you.” Meredith rolled her eyes and forced the plate of pancakes against his chest. “Just eat, okay?”

Yondu growled, but he sat down next to Peter.

“Pancakes are my favorite,” Peter offered.

“I don't give a fuck.” Yondu scowled and stabbed the fluffy pastry.

Meredith had poured syrup and butter over the pancake; Yondu fought the urge to pick up the plate and throw it across the room. Sweet stuff, he thought to himself, goddamn sentiment on a plate. He put the forkful of food into his mouth and chewed. It was soft and buttery and kind of like bread.

“This,” he said, “ain't too bad.”

Meredith came by and put a glass of water on the table next to him.

“Good,” she said, “glad to hear I'm not completely worthless cargo.”

He opened his mouth to snap at her, but remembered the incident with the raw fish. Not just cargo, he'd told himself. Yondu scowled and stuffed his face with pancake to avoid having to reply. Meredith gave Peter a small stack of two pancakes and kissed his cheek.
“I love you,” she said.

Peter smiled up at her.

“I love you too, mom,” he said.

Yondu had the sudden urge to stab himself with the fork.

“Goddamn sentiment.” He ripped open a pancake with undeserved force. “That boy’s supposed to be a Ravager.”

“And I’m a Terran momma,” Meredith said, “and he's my baby first.”

“We’ll see about that,” Yondu grumbled.

Meredith plunged a fork down onto Yondu's hand. The fork went right between his fingers, stabbing into the wood. Yondu froze; Meredith's voice was soft in his ear.

“Don't forget,” she said, “I still haven't ruled out killing you in your sleep.”

Holy fuck. Yondu swallowed; the pancake struggled to make it down his dry throat.

“Mom,” Peter said, “I don't want to be rude or anything but usually Yondu kills people who threaten him so maybe you shouldn't do that.”

Meredith's soft giggle made Yondu's skin crawl.

“It was a joke, Peter.” Meredith poured syrup over Peter's pancakes. “He knows I don't mean it. Look at me, honey, I can barely stir this batter. He's nearly killed me in his sleep before; I wouldn't stand a chance, even if I tried.”

Peter's eyes shot wide. “He tried to do what in his sleep?”

“Nothing, baby.” Meredith kissed his hair. “Forget I said anything.”

Yondu looked at her in complete disbelief. She tilted her head.

“I threatened you once before,” she said, “remember? Poked a finger in your chest and told you Peter wasn't getting into any space battles? Look how that turned out, huh.”

Yondu remembered; he'd laughed in her face. That was before she'd pulled that death stunt on Arazine, he thought, before she'd bludgeoned that Contraxian smuggler. She'd been a skinny bald waste of oxygen back then. She was still skinny, but now she saving him from certain death and tricking an entire ship full of cold, hungry Ravagers into coughing up units for hot, buttery Terran pastries. He thought about Holdon's terrible cooking and how the rest of the Ravagers had wished for Meredith's food. That was her goal, her game. She'd found a niche on the ship and made herself invaluable. Smart Terran, Yondu thought, damn smart Terran.

“Don't do that again, Quill,” he heard himself saying, “or you'll find out what happens to people what cross me.”

“I won't cross you, you big blue asshole.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “You've got that arrow; I wouldn't stand a chance.”

Yondu gave a whistle; the arrow wound a tight spiral around her before returning to his hand.
“Don't you damn forget it,” he warned.

“Wouldn't dream of it.” She went back to cooking. “Eat hearty, boys.”

By the time Meredith was finished cooking, there were several Ravagers complaining of stomach pains. Two had vomited. One, a pilot that Meredith vaguely recognized, had passed out on top of his pancakes, his cheek sticky with syrup. In the end, Gef took the pot; nearly three-thousand units.

“Pleasure doing business with you, boys.” Gef suppressed a belch. “If anyone needs me, I'll be on the bridge, not moving for the next eight hours.”

Meredith laughed. “Good job, Gef.”

Gef tipped his head towards her and waddled towards the door.

“Oh no you don’t.” Meredith crossed her arms, smiling. “You're forgetting something, Gef.”

He turned, confused. Meredith pointed towards the list of duties that hung over the sink.

“You're up on dishes,” she said.

The counter was loaded with stacks of syrupy plates and the bowls of batter. Hundreds of used forks and knives littered the table. Gef swallowed.

“Say, little missy,” he said, “you wouldn't happen to be willing to lend your ol' pal Gef a hand with these?”

“For five units a pop,” she said.

“Five? I thought it was two,” he complained.

Meredith's eyes glittered with a mischievous light that the Ravagers had often seen in Peter.

“Supply and demand, Gef.”

The Ravagers roared with laughter; Gef turned scarlet.

“Alright, you damn thief, let's get this over with.” Gef rolled up his sleeves. “Real kind o' you, Quill. Fatten a man up until he can barely move and rob his pockets while he's lying there.”

“You sound almost proud,” she said.

Gef swelled up, his face red, then broke out into laughter.

“Aye, little missy, almost.” Gef grabbed a sponge. “We'll make a proper Ravager out o' you one day, won't we boys?”

There was a great thudding sound as all the Ravagers did a mocking salute. They broke out into laughter; the pilot lifted his head from his pancake pillow to chuckle. Meredith's face flushed and she threw a rag at the lot of them.

“Get out of here,” she said, “go on! Don't you have work to do?”

Chuckling, the crew dispersed. Meredith and Gef got up to their elbows in soap suds as they washed the dishes. Peter sat in the corner next to Yondu, tallying up the units and trying to figure out how they'd make it stretch to three-hundred-thousand units. Yondu had his arrow out and was twirling it
between his fingers, staring at the mess hall bench.

Yondu had been keeping an eye on the crew and the Quills. It was clear; the crew had gotten used to having the Terrans around. They considered Peter a proper Ravager-in-training, and Meredith had somehow managed to carve herself a niche on the ship. Yondu gave them credit; the Terrans were smart. The crew favored the Quills, Yondu thought, but did they favor them more than five-hundred-thousand units? If Yondu chose not to sell the Quills, and he still hadn't decided whether or not he was going to do it, would the crew react well? If they didn't, he could have a mutiny on his hands.

Yondu held the arrow in front of his eyes and chuckled. If he did have a mutiny, he thought, this damn thing was going to be awful busy.
Drunk Centaurian

Chapter Summary

Yondu finally makes a decision on keeping the Quills, then tries to drown the emotional fallout in a bottle.

(Three fluffy chapters in a row; I'm going to rot my fingers off with this sugary nonsense.)

...

(Who am I kidding, I live for this fluffy shit.)

Three days later, it finally happened. The hull had been repaired and all things were normal; Yondu was leaning back in his pilot's chair, messing with a small blue glass frog. He'd picked it up from Algon years ago; he liked the color and shine. Terran junk, he remembered. Kinda nice, this Terran garbage. He vaguely wondered what Terra was like. Goddamn mud planet, last time he checked, but he hadn't stayed for longer than a few minutes. A planet full of death-defying psychos; maybe he should have looked around a bit more. Planet like that had to have some trouble to get into.

“Captain!” Gef's voice came over the comms.

Yondu grunted, “You're right behind me, Gef. Keep your voice down.”

“You've got a call, captain.” Gef's voice was uneasy. “From Ego.”

The blinking light didn't lie; Ego was finally calling him. Yondu's finger hovered over the call indicator. To tap it was such a small motion, but it would set into motion a lot of change. Yondu would get paid; five-hundred-thousand units for each Terran made this a one million unit job. The very thought made his pulse quicken and his greed ignite. But, he reminded himself, Ego would win over Peter and Meredith. That jackass had a way of persuading people; Yondu of all people understood that. And once Ego got hold of the Quills, there was no telling what might happen to them. Yondu stared at the indicator. A rising flame burned in his chest; he bared his teeth and swiped the indicator clear off the screen.

“Go to hell,” he muttered, “and stuff those goddamn units up your ass.”

“Cap'n?” Kraglin frowned.

“Don't ask no goddamn questions.” Yondu slammed the controls, taking over piloting the ship. “Go get the Terrans.”

Kraglin swallowed. “Aye, cap'n.”

Kraglin didn't speak to the Quills as he marched them to the bridge. As they passed, curious Ravagers exchanged meaningful looks. Meredith held tight onto Peter's hand; something was definitely wrong here, and she had no idea what was about to happen. She had a sinking feeling in
her chest. Had the Quills done something wrong? Were they not earning enough? She took a deep breath and tried not to panic.

The portal to the bridge opened, and Kraglin let them inside. Gef wasn't at his normal post, and the usual three or four Ravagers that scuttled around were nowhere in sight. Kraglin let the door shut and left them. It was just the Quills and Yondu. Yondu put his hands on his hips and looked between the two Terrans. Meredith held her breath.

“We need to talk,” he said, “about the cargo thing.”

Meredith and Peter exchanged looks.

“I thought you'd forgotten about that,” Peter said.

“I started thinking it was just a running joke.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “We never found out where we were going, so I started to assume you'd given up trying to get rid of us.”

“I did,” Yondu said.

Meredith's heart leapt. “So... we're going home?”

Yondu scowled. “I didn't say that, goddamn it. You're still a couple thousand units in the hole, not to mention you ain't got that cerebral core yet.”

“But once that's done, we're going home?” Meredith grabbed Peter's shoulders, her voice rising. “We're going home, Peter! Isn't that wonderful?”

“Yeah, mom, that's great!”

Meredith hugged Peter. From over her shoulder, Yondu could see the boy's face. The grin didn't quite meet his eyes. Something caught in Yondu's heart, tugging it slightly. It was impossible, but maybe Peter didn't want to go back to Terra. The boy had a taste of Ravager life, of the freedom of the galaxy; Terra had to be pretty goddamn boring compared to this.

“That's the other thing I gotta talk to you about.” Yondu crossed his arms. “There ain't no goin' back to Terra, not for a while.”

“What?” Meredith shot straight up. “Why not?”

Yondu shrugged. “Terra's off-limits, mostly.”

“Off-limits?” Meredith frowned.

“Terra's just now getting into space travel,” he explained, “and they've got a no-interference rule. There's a Nova Core blockade in the Milky Way that prevents anybody from getting to Terra. We had to smuggle ourselves in and out; they patched up the loophole we used. We go back there, they'll clap our asses in irons and drag us off to the Kyln. Strictly off-limits, Terra. You couldn't pay me enough to go back there.”

Meredith's heart sunk. “So there's no way back.”

“Nope,” Yondu said, “not until that blockade goes down. That could take decades.”

“Then I'll wait decades,” she said.

Yondu frowned. Meredith's chin was lifted slightly, and her eyes were clear and bold.
“Might never get back, Mery.” Yondu crossed his arms.

“Do you ever get tired of telling me what can't be done?” The corners of Meredith's mouth curved up. “Because I don't get tired of provin' you wrong.”

“Let's see how tired you are in a goddamn decade,” he muttered.

Meredith took Peter's hand. She was smiling softly.

“We'll make it back, baby,” she said.

“I know, mom.” Peter swallowed. “We will.”

“Until then, it's just paying Dr. Mareet.” Meredith's eyes were sparkling with hope. “Then I'll get a job somewhere, a real job, and we'll start saving up. The blockade will end, and we'll have enough units to pay our way home. We can do it, baby.”

Peter smiled. “You should go tell Kraglin. He'll be really happy that we're free.”

“He will, won't he?” Meredith kissed Peter's forehead. “I'll be right back, baby.”

Meredith left the bridge. Peter looked at Yondu and frowned.

“We're not cargo anymore,” he said.

“No, boy.”

“Where were you going to take us?” Peter's green eyes were oddly shrewd. “And why? Who wanted us? For what?”

Yondu walked forwards and put both of his large, heavy hands on Peter's shoulders. His expression was grim.

“Boy,” he said, “for your own damn sake, never ask me that. It's best you don't know.”

“Why,” Peter asked.

“It'll only make you and your momma unhappy,” Yondu said.

“Oh.” Peter nodded. “Okay.”

The complete trust in Peter's eyes was like a shotgun blast to Yondu's chest. He gritted his gnarled teeth, ignoring the hot guilt pouring through his veins.

“Right.” Yondu stood back up and crossed his arms. “Glad we're clear on that, boy. Now get. I've got some important shit to do.”

Peter ran off to find his mother. She was in the kitchen with a large group of Ravagers.

“So,” she was saying, “I guess we're not cargo anymore.”

There was an even mix of grins and frowns.

“Aawful lot of units we could have made off of you,” a pilot sighed.

“We'll make more by not selling them.” Gef stirred his coffee with a fat finger. “After all, look at how much they've already made. Bunch o' bull, selling these two. Useful Terrans.”

The Ravagers laughed; Holdon popped his knuckles and glared at Lunis, who shrugged.

“Hey, Holdon. It's just the truth.”

“Don't worry, Holdon.” Meredith smiled up at the big green Ravager. “I'll teach you to make proper sushi.”

“Raw fish kills Terrans,” Holdon said immediately, “and if I poison you two, the captain will riddle me with arrow holes faster than you can say, 'Oops'.”

“Raw fish can make Terrans sick,” she admitted, “but you can make it in such a way that it won't. But as dirty as this ship is, you're right. Cooked is better.”

“Hey.” Gef frowned. “We cleaned this.”

Meredith grinned. “You cleaned it once, Gef. Keeping things clean is a process, honey, you can't just one-and-done it.”

“Well now that you're on board,” Gef said, “you can clean it.”

“I ain't your mother,” she said with her hands on her hips.

“You're my mother,” Peter said.

Meredith scooped him up and kissed his cheek.

“That I am,” she said, “and I'm a very proud mother.”

The Ravagers shifted uncomfortably. The Quills were just full of that sugary Terran sentiment. They were awfully soft and unfamiliarily emotional. Maybe it had been a mistake to keep them.

“So,” Meredith said, “who wants lunch?”

Nevermind. The Ravagers slammed their fists on the table and roared for food. With a grin on her face, Meredith got to cooking. Kraglin sat on the mess hall bench and smiled. They were keeping the Quills; Kraglin couldn't pretend he wasn't relieved. His eyes traveled over the scars on Meredith's cheek, the bruises on her arms and jaw, and the thin silver lines lacing over her body. She was one tough Terran.

Her hands grabbed the counter and she began blinking rapidly, her face screwed up in pain.

“Mom,” Peter said.

“Just my vision, baby.” Meredith kept her voice low. “It's okay. I still blur out sometimes. It'll go away.”

Over on the bench, Kraglin's smile faded. He kept forgetting; Ms. Quill was dying, and dying fast. If the Quills didn't keep working, they'd lose Ms. Quill anyway, cargo or not. Kraglin turned back around and put his linked hands on the table. He stared at them, unseeing, trying to formulate a plan to help the Quills. When Ms. Quill set a plated sandwich in front of him, he smiled weakly at her and stared at it. He couldn't think of a single thing. Kraglin sighed and bit into the sandwich. No use worrying about it now; the cap'n would think of something. That was it, Kraglin decided.

Somewhere, right now, Yondu Udonta's mind was moving like a clean steel machine, formulating a fool-proof plan to keep Ms. Quill alive.
Yondu Udonta was drunk.

He was fed up with emotions. There had been too goddamn many of them lately, and Yondu was done with them. If he had it his way, he'd just cut them out of his body. But no, here he was, sitting in a storage room and drinking. When he was drunk, he didn't have to think about what the Quills would do if they ever found out he was going to sell them to Ego, or what the crew would do if they lost the Quills. He didn't have to think about what would happen if Ego suddenly showed up, or what Yondu would do if he lost the boy.

Yondu scowled and tipped the last of the bottle down his throat. No, dammit, he wasn't thinking about that. He was drinking, drinking until he couldn't think another thought. The liquor burned down his throat, washing away the guilt, the confusion, and most of his autonomy. He let the empty bottle slip out of his hands and unscrewed another. The portal door opened; he looked up. Meredith Quill was standing in the doorway, frowning.

"Shit," he said.

"Yondu? Peter said you'd been gone all afternoon." Meredith put her hands on her hips. "What's wrong with you?"

"Drunk," he said.

"Drunk?" Meredith looked around at all the bottles. "Oh no. You're kidding."

Yondu shook his head.

Meredith pressed a hand to her forehead. "How drunk are you?"

He shrugged.

"How many fingers am I holding up?" Meredith held up three.

Yondu squinted. "Trick question. That's your hand."

She had to cover her mouth to prevent herself from laughing.

"Wow," she said, "you really are drunk."

"Don't tell nobody." He kicked a bottle. "Captains don't get drunk. Ain't good for leaderin'."

"Right. Leadering." Meredith backed out of the door. "I'm going to go get Kraglin."

Yondu scowled. Meredith let the portal close, then went and found Kraglin. She dragged him to the storage room.

"He's drunk," she said, "totally drunk."

Kraglin frowned. "The cap'n don't get drunk, Ms. Q. He hates bein' drunk; it makes him emotional. Cap'n don't do well with emotions."

"I'm telling you, he's drunk." Meredith pointed at the portal. "He's in there, and he's wasted."

"Can't be." Kraglin opened the portal. "Cap'n?"
Yondu looked at Kraglin and blinked. He had to think of something fast to tell Kraglin. Something he usually said. Something subtle, believable.

“Go fix some shit,” he said.

“See?” Kraglin let the portal close. “Not drunk.”

Meredith sighed. “Kraglin, honey, there have to be at least eighteen bottles on that floor.”

“Cap'n can process liquor pretty fast,” Kraglin said, “so if he drank ’em slow, he wouldn't be drunk. Number don't mean much, Ms. Q.”

“Kraglin, I'm telling you he's drunk.”

“Ms. Quill.” Kraglin put his hands on her shoulders and sighed. “Do you know what the crew would do if Yondu was drunk? You know what would happen?”

“No, what?”

“Chaos,” he said, “chaos and goddamn havoc. Yondu's the law around here. So if he's drunk...”

“The Eclector turns into a madhouse,” Meredith finished.

Kraglin nodded solemnly. “So. Repeat after me. Yondu ain't drunk.”

“Yondu ain't drunk,” Meredith said.

“Good.” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “Guess I gotta keep an eye on him now.”

“No, honey, you go ahead.” Meredith looked at the portal. “You keep the crew away from Yondu, and I'll keep Yondu in here.”

“You sure, Ms. Q? He's awful weird when he's drunk.”

Meredith smiled. “I've handled drunk Missouri rednecks; I can handle a drunk Centaurian. Besides, I owe him for that night after that Contraxian bastard.”

“Alright. If you need anything, just hit me up on the comms.” Kraglin smiled. “Thanks for doin' this for me, Ms. Quill. I know it ain't your responsibility, but it sure does help me out.”

“No problem, honey.”

Meredith watched Kraglin leave, then took a deep breath. She hit the panel; the portal slid open. Yondu was standing in the middle of the room. When he blinked, it was one eye at a time.

“Told you not to tell anybody,” he said.

“I didn't. I told Kraglin, and he's supposed to know.”

“If the crew finds out, we're fucked,” Yondu said, “all fucked to hell.”

Yondu stumbled; Meredith got under his arm and supported him.

“You are so heavy.” Her teeth were gritted. “Why are you so big?”

“I eat lotsa stew,” he slurred, “and panned cake.”
Meredith snorted. “Stop making me laugh, you big dumb jerk. I thought you were supposed to hate me.”

“Hate you?” Yondu's voice was barely audible. “Hate m'self more than I hate you, Mery.”

Meredith's shoulders sagged. “Stop doing that.”

“Doin' what?”

“Making me want to mother you,” she said.

Yondu was squinting. He leaned back against the wall and slid to the ground. Meredith ran a hand through her hair and chuckled.

“I know, it's pretty surprising to me, too. But when I see someone who needs help, I want to take care of them. It's what I do,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because my mama died.”

It was out of her mouth before she knew she was saying it. Meredith clapped both hands to her mouth, eyes wide.

“I didn't mean to tell you that,” she said.

“Why not?”

“I don't know,” she said, “I just don't talk about it.”

Yondu shrugged. Meredith leaned against the wall, then slid down it, coming to sit right next to Yondu. She hugged her knees, just like Peter.

“I haven't told anybody about that,” she said.

Yondu took a swig from his nearly-empty bottle. “About your mom kickin' the bucket?”

“No, about the mothering thing.” Meredith pressed a hand to her forehead. “I guess I grew up taking care of my papa, so now I just do it to everyone.”

“Not me,” Yondu said.

Meredith chuckled. “You'd kill me if I tried mothering you, Yondu.”

“True.” Yondu picked up a bottle and tilted it back into his throat; not a drop came out, so he let it roll out of his hands.

Meredith watched the bottle roll along the ground. “You're not the type of man who wants to be mothered. You're too... too much of a papa.”

Yondu made a face; Meredith laughed.

“I'm serious,” she said, “I've noticed it. You're always watching out for your Ravagers and keeping them in line. You're like a big daddy.”

Yondu looked at her. “What did you just say?”
“You're a big daddy.”

Somewhere in Yondu's drunken mind, he was processing the way she said that. If any other girl called him that, it would sound cheap and trashy. But with the way her Missouri accent lil ted, the slight blush to her cheeks, and the way her lips moved when she said it, Meredith could pull it off. He liked it.

“Say that again,” he said.

Meredith blinked. “Big daddy?”

“You can call me that,” he decided, “but nobody else, you hear?”

Meredith grinned. “What makes me so special?”

“You're Mery,” he said.

Her face heated. “What's that supposed to mean?”

“You're Mery.” Yondu said it like it was an explanation in itself.

“Yeah, okay.” Meredith sighed, “and you're drunk.”

Yondu nodded.

“Why are you drunk, Yondu?”

He shrugged. Meredith pressed a hand to her forehead.

“Great,” she sighed.

Yondu whistled; his arrow came out, did a funny little warble, and then shot into a glass bottle. It pushed the bottle along the ground. Meredith watched it, chuckling.

“Having fun,” she asked.

“Drunk,” he said.

She laughed and hugged her knees tightly. He whistled low, and the arrow whizzed over their heads. It slowly descended; Yondu reached for it, then squinted.

“Which one is mine,” he said.

“The one in the middle,” she laughed.

He swiped for it again and missed. His eyebrows knit together.

“You sure?” Yondu's eyes were unfocused.

“Here, you big stupid lug.” Meredith grabbed his hand and curled his fingers around the arrow. “That one's yours.”

Yondu pulled it back and put the arrow away.

“Thanks,” he muttered.

She blinked. “Did you just... wow. You're downright pleasant when you're drunk.”
His head hit her shoulder.

“I'm an asshole,” he muttered.

“That's my line.” Meredith frowned. “Come on, don't make me feel bad for you. That ain't fair.”

Yondu sighed. His eyes were lidded, and his mouth was twisted in a frown. Meredith had seen a similar expression on her father; it was the face of a man who didn't know what to do anymore. She'd seen that face so many times after her mother had passed away; it tugged at her heartstrings. Meredith huffed, put an arm around his shoulder, and pulled him into a half a hug. His eyes flicked up to her.

“Don't read into it,” she said, “I'm just bein' nice.”

He grinned crookedly. “Sure, sweetheart.”

Meredith glared at him. “I will crack this glass bottle over your head.”

Yondu's chest shook with laughter.

“Was that another threat,” he asked.

“No,” she said, “that was a promise.”

His head hit her shoulder, grinning. Meredith wasn't exactly pretty, but her eyes were that cool gray. He liked them, he decided.

“You ain't too bad, Mery. We're friends.” His eyelids sagged. “You're alright.”

Meredith's face was flushed with heat.

“You're drunk, you big daddy,” she said softly.

“I'm drunk,” he confirmed.

With that, he slumped against her and started breathing deeply. His head rested on her shoulder. Meredith looked at his eyes; they were shut. Yondu had fallen asleep. This was good, Meredith told herself, this made him easier to keep out of trouble. His heavy frame threatened to pull him down and onto the glass bottles; Meredith wrapped her thin arms around him to prevent him from falling.

“This isn't a hug,” she muttered.

While he slept, the curve of his mouth twisted up; it was as if he was saying, Sure it ain't, sweetheart. Meredith's face burned.

“I should've just let you be drunk alone,” she said, “and not done a thing about it.”

Yondu's body was uncomfortably warm. Meredith hadn't held anyone except Peter in a very long time. Not since Jason, at least. She looked at Yondu's cobalt skin and scarred face.

“I can't think of anyone who looks less like Jason than you.” Meredith thought for a moment. “Alright, maybe Drazkar. But he's furry, and that's completely different. You're just... You are a very different kind of man, Yondu.”

He breathed deep in his sleep.
“That wasn’t a compliment,” she huffed.

He was warm, and the floor wasn't entirely uncomfortable. Meredith could feel her eyelids sagging as sleep threatened to enclose her.

“Oh no,” she said, “I'm not sleeping here.”

Meredith made to move her arms, but as she did, Yondu's arms wrapped around hers in his sleep. She closed her eyes.

“Shit,” she muttered.

Meredith sighed. When she'd gotten drunk, he hadn't just left her in the kitchen. He'd gotten her back to her room. He'd been downright respectful. Leaving him to sleep with a bunch of glass bottles sounded like a Poor way to pay him back. She bit her lips together, her eyes closed. She couldn't just leave him.

Meredith Quill was stuck.

Kraglin had a successful time of it. He had given orders as if they were straight from Yondu, and no one had questioned him. No one had even asked where the cap'n was; Kraglin had kept them away very easily. He felt like a proper first mate. With a proud spring in his step, he paced down to where he'd left Ms. Quill and opened the portal.

Ms. Quill and the cap'n were asleep on the floor. The cap'n had fallen asleep on her shoulder; Ms. Quill's cheek was resting right next to his crest. She'd wrapped her arms around the cap'n, and he'd locked his arms over hers. Both were breathing gently.

Kraglin swallowed. This was not what he had expected to find.

“Er, Ms. Quill?” Kraglin nudged her with his foot. “Sorry to interrupt your... cuddin', or whatever, but the crew's asleep now. Peter's askin' for you.”

Meredith muttered in her sleep, but didn't wake. Kraglin decided to try Yondu.

“Cap'n? Cap'n Yondu?” Kraglin knelt down and snapped his fingers in front of Yondu's face. “Rise and shine, cap'n. Crew's asleep; it's safe to come out now.”

Yondu snorted a snore, then went back to his deep breathing.

“Shit.” Kraglin stood and put his hands on his hips. “How do I... hm.”

He tapped his foot against the floor for a moment, then touched the comm link in his ear.

“Gef,” he said, “can you get hold of Peter for me?”

“Mom, Yondu!” Peter was screaming in panic. “Come quick, it's an emergency!”

Meredith and Yondu's eyes shot open. Both of them lunged forwards, then slammed into each other's shoulders. They toppled to the ground, then jumped up wildly.

“Where’s Peter,” she screamed.
“How the fuck would I know,” he bellowed, “he's your goddamn son!”

“He's in bed.” Kraglin was standing there with a jerry-rigged speaker. “I asked him to yell for me, sorry. Figured it was the fastest way to get both of you awake.”

Both of them looked at Kraglin with wide eyes.

“I'm gonna kill you,” Yondu said.

“Kraglin.” Meredith's voice was sharp. “Never. Again.”

“Sorry,” Kraglin said, “but y'all were real asleep. I came in and you were... well...”

Kraglin swallowed and didn't finish the sentence. Yondu grabbed him by the front of the shirt.

“You,” he snarled, “didn't see shit.”

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin threw a salute against his chest. “Not a thing, cap'n.”

Yondu staggered out of the room. Kraglin looked at Meredith.

“So why were you two...”

“Not a goddamn thing, Kraglin.” Meredith stalked out of the room, her face scarlet.

Kraglin leaned out the portal doorway to see Meredith and Yondu leave. Yondu was staggering; Meredith came up under his arm and helped him walk. Her arm went around his waist. As the two walked away, Kraglin scratched his chin. Did the cap'n have a soft spot for...?

“No, no.” Kraglin chuckled and shut the portal. “I'm bein' stupid.”
Chapter Summary

Kraglin is given his first solo mission; rob a Quo Modarian vault of inter-species translators. Peter must go along and serve as the tiny bomb-depositing tool, which means Peter will be leaving the Eclector for an entire week.

Meredith is not pleased.

Gef and Kraglin were called onto the bridge. Yondu was standing with his feet shoulder's width apart and his arms crossed, every inch the image of a man with a plan.

“Boys,” he said, “we got a job.”

“A big one, cap'n?” Kraglin climbed the stairs.

“A damn big one,” Yondu replied.

“What kind o' job is it this time, captain? A heist,” Gef asked, “or a bounty?”

Yondu grinned widely; his crooked teeth shone.

“A good ol' fashioned bank robbery,” he said.

Gef chuckled. Kraglin let out a whoop.

“What bank, cap'n?” Kraglin broke into a huge grin. “A'askivariian again?”

“Nah,” Yondu said, “that ain't worth all the goddamn power to use those lasers. We're headin' to Modaria.”

“Quo Modarians,” Gef said, “bloody purple pacifists.”

“No weapons on the planet. Everything they've got is under rock, lock and chain.” Yondu pulled up a series of holograms over the table. “They've got a bank vault with a couple hundred thousand inter-species translators in there. Technology like that'd go for a lot on the open market.”

Gef let out a low whistle. Yondu switched up another map; it showed a huge vault surrounded by rock; there was a tiny crevice that touched the wall of the vault. Yondu pointed to it.

“That's our entry point. We send the boy in with a high-level explosive and blow the wall,” he said, “and then Kraglin, you snag the goods.”

Kraglin frowned. “What do you do, cap'n?”

“I give you the explosives, the co-ordinates, and the boy.” Yondu turned around with his hands on his hips. “About time you pulled off a job without me, Kraglin.”

Kraglin's breath caught in his throat. Being trusted with his own mission was no goddamn joke.
“Really, cap'n?” He took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. Okay, cap'n, whatever you need. I won't let you down.”

“I know you won't, idjit.”

Yondu turned around; Kraglin's chest swelled with pride.

“Captain, that's Modarian steel.” Gef squinted at the diagram. “How do you plan on breaching that?”

Yondu pulled out a drawer; nestled inside were glowing green tubes.

“The plasma tubes from Maorda-4?” Gef frowned. “Didn't think I'd ever see those again. I thought you sold 'em, captain?”

“Didn't sell 'em,” Yondu said, “I keep the best shit for myself. Get on it.”

Gef chuckled. “Aye, cap'n. I'll have the boys rig you up something.”

Gingerly carrying the plasma tubes, Gef left the room. Yondu grabbed Kraglin's arm and pulled him aside.

“Best you don't mention this to the boy's momma,” he grunted.

Kraglin swallowed. “We ain't tellin' Ms. Quill?”

“You think she'll be happy that we're sendin' him to rob a goddamn national bank? Hell no,” Yondu said, “she doesn't hear shit about this, you hear me?”

Kraglin's eyebrows furrowed as he turned that order over in his head. Yondu kept flicking through the holographic displays. The canyon, the caves; it all added up. This would be an easy heist. The boy and Kraglin could pull it off alone.

“Cap'n,” Kraglin said slowly, “why's it matter if Ms. Quill knows?”

“Because she'll be pissed as fuck, you idjit.”

“Why does that matter, cap'n?”

Yondu turned around. Kraglin's eyes darted between his. Yondu could practically see the Xandarian's mind moving.

“Cap'n,” Kraglin said, “why does it matter what Peter's mom thinks?”

Shit. Yondu scowled and turned back around.

“It don't,” he said, “just makes things easier without her screamin' at me all the damn time.”

Kraglin didn't respond. Yondu kept flicking through data displays, ignoring the queasy feeling in his stomach. Yondu didn't give a fuck about what Meredith Quill thought about anything. Yondu didn't give a fuck about what anyone thought about anything.

Behind him, Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz. First, there'd been the teasing on Emris. Then, the flying on Arazine. The whole issue with the dead Orloni; Kraglin had figured that one out as soon as Peter had shown him the “adoption” form. The bar fight in Contraxia and getting Ms. Quill back to her room. The incident with the crate. Giving up on selling the Quills. Ignoring Ego. Yondu getting drunk and ending up passed out next to Ms. Quill. Now, it was keeping details of Peter's work away
from her, just so she'd feel better.

Kraglin squinted. If he didn't know any better, he'd think the cap'n had a soft spot for the Quills, particularly the lady one. That didn't make any goddamn sense. The Quills had been cargo for the longest time. They were units, that was it. Kraglin liked them okay, but Kraglin was allowed to like them. Kraglin wasn't the cap'n. The cap'n never got attached to anyone; he barely put up with Kraglin.

Kraglin looked at the back of the cap'n's jacket. If Yondu had a thing for Ms. Quill, then things could get out-of-hand. As future-first-mate, Kraglin felt it was his duty to ask. He had to keep it casual, yet direct.

“Cap'n?” Kraglin cleared his throat. “Say, uh, I was wonderin' about somethin’.”

“What is it, Kraglin.”

“What is it with you and Ms. Quill?”

Slowly, Yondu turned his head and glared at Kraglin. “What?”

Kraglin shifted. “It's just... you... her... both of you... y'know. I heard some talk around the ship that maybe you two were a...thing.”

Yondu flicked open his jacket, exposing his arrow.

“From who,” he asked.

“Nobody specific, I just...” Kraglin swallowed and rubbed the back of his neck. “She's a real nice lady, cap'n.”

“Yeah, and?”

“I think... we all think that she deserves somebody who's really gonna love her, cap'n,” Kraglin said, “that's all.”

Yondu stared at Kraglin. He wasn't sure what the Xandarian was trying to say. Was he saying that Meredith deserved someone like Yondu? That seemed like an insult to Meredith. Or was it a subtle warning that he'd better love her if he got involved? That seemed like a threat to Yondu. Yondu decided to go with a safe answer.

“Shut up, Kraglin.”

“Yes, cap'n.” Kraglin swallowed.

So much for casual and direct; Kraglin stared at his feet. The cap'n and Ms. Quill? Hell of an idea. Yondu was solid blue mercilessness, a scurvy Ravager cap'n, and Ms. Quill was... well, Ms. Quill. She was clean and kind and motherly, and Yondu was definitely not any of those things. Yondu could punch through a door panel; Ms. Quill was strong in a different way. Kraglin had never met two people more different. Except, he reasoned, that both were crazy, stubborn, and fierce. They had that in common, at least.

Yondu turned around and handed Kraglin a datapad.

“Details of the job are all on here,” Yondu said.

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin took the datapad. “You can count on me.”
“I know that, idjit.” A ghost of a smile played around Yondu's mouth. “Fly safe.”

Kraglin's heart was in his throat as he threw another sharp Ravager salute.

“Aye, cap'n,” he said.

Meredith was walking down the hall when Peter came up with his backpack full. She leaned over and looked; his backpack was packed with a week's worth of clothes, his toothbrush, and his Walkman. Meredith chuckled.

“Where do you think you're going,” she asked.

“I'm going on a top-secret mission.” Peter hoisted his backpack up onto his shoulders. “Yondu said I'll be gone all week.”

“All week?” Meredith's eyes widened. “Where are you going?”

“Classified,” Peter said proudly.

“Young man,” she said, “you tell me right now.”

“I don't know, mom. Kraglin just told me that if anyone asked any questions, I should just tell them that it was classified,” Peter said.

“Kraglin, huh?” Meredith stalked to the hangar bay with a fire in her eyes. “We'll see about that.”

Peter followed his mother to the hangar bay. She strode right up the loading ramp and rounded on Kraglin.

“Kraglin Obfonteri,” she said, “you tell me where my baby is going right now.”

Kraglin cringed and swallowed.

“I can't actually do that, Ms. Q,” he said.

“Like hell you can't.” Meredith crossed her arms and glared at him. “Where's he going, Kraglin?”

“Classified,” Kraglin muttered.

There was a fire in Meredith's eyes.

“Boy,” she said.

“You sound like Yondu,” Kraglin chuckled weakly.

“Don't change the subject,” Meredith snapped.

“Fine,” Kraglin said, “I'll tell you a little, but you can't tell the cap'n I told you.”

“Deal,” she said.

“We're headin' to a planet called Modaria. Home of the Quo Modarians; they're a bunch of pacifists. There's not a single weapon on the whole goddamn planet,” Kraglin said, “so there's no way Peter's going to get hurt. We're just headin' there to do some dealings that have to do with some inter-species translators. If it were really that big of a deal, the cap'n would be comin' with us, but he ain't.”
Meredith's shoulders relaxed.

“No guns,” she said.

“None except the ones we're taking with us,” Kraglin said.

“Not even that big of a deal?”

“Shucks Ms. Q, it's barely even worth mentionin’.”

“Then why all the secrecy?” Meredith frowned.

Kraglin sighed.

“Cap'n's orders,” Kraglin said, “and I don't pretend to always understand why he gives 'em.”

“I understand.” Meredith smiled. “Thanks for telling me, Kraglin.”

Kraglin thought about all the things he'd omitted and swallowed.

“No problem, Ms. Q.”

Meredith stalked to the bridge. She punched the door panel and looked around.

“Where's Yondu,” she demanded to know.

Gef didn't even look up from his comm station.

“Gef. Gef.” Meredith walked up and whacked him on the head. “Gef.”

“Ow, hey!” Gef rubbed his head. “What's with you, little missy?”

“Where's Yondu,” she repeated.

“Down in the hangar bay.”

“No he isn't, I just came from there.”

“Then check the loading bay.”

Meredith huffed. She pressed her finger to the comm link in her ear and shouted, “Where's Yondu?”

The comm link's proximity to the station created a painful feedback. Gef yowled and tore off his headset and covered his ears.

“Down in the kitchen, don't ask me what for!” Gef screwed up his face in pain. “Crazy Terrans.”

“The kitchen?” Meredith scowled. “What the heck is he doing in there?”

“I said don't ask me, didn't I?” Gef put his headset on. “Go figure it out yourself; I've got a job to do.”

Meredith ran to the kitchen. Running was a mistake; she ended up with both hands to the wall,
breathing heavily and unable to see. Her vision pulsed a million different patterns over her eyes. Meredith could feel her limbs shaking and her thoughts grow faint.

“Mery?”

Meredith turned her head towards the sound of Yondu's voice, but she couldn't see him.

“Can't see,” she breathed, “feel faint.”

“Goddamn it, woman.” Large hands pressed her down, making her lie on the ground. “Stay down, wait a second.”

The cold of the floor leaked through Meredith's shirt. Her chest rose and fell with fluttering breaths. The patterns kept swirling around her eyes as large hands lifted her ankles into the air.

“What are you doing,” she breathed.

“You're blackin' out,” Yondu grunted, “I'm getting' more blood to your head.”


“You're dyin' on the goddamn floor and you still take the time to mouth off.”

Meredith grinned.

After a moment, her vision began to clear. Her head felt uncomfortably warm, so she laid her face onto the cool tile floor. She could see Yondu kneeling down, holding her ankles up.

“Better,” he grunted.

“Better,” she said.

Slowly, he set her ankles down.

“What the fuck did you do this time,” Yondu said, “fight somebody? Try and climb a goddamn mountain?”

“Ran,” she said

“Fuck, you can't even run?”

“Nope.” Meredith closed her eyes. “I have my good days and my bad days. Today is a bad day.”

“No kiddin'.” Yondu bared his teeth. “What you runnin' for?”

“Trying to find you, asshole.” Meredith opened her eyes and glared at Yondu. “Why is Kraglin flying my baby away for a week?”

Yondu shifted.

“Classif– ”

“If you finish that word,” she said, “I will do my best to hurt you.”

“Hurt me?” Yondu snorted. “I just saved your life.”

“No you didn't, you just provided basic medical assistance. I am still lying on the floor dying,”
Meredith said, “and you still have to tell me why Peter is going away for a week.”

“He's on a job.”

“Why didn't anyone tell me?”

Yondu bared his crooked teeth.

“Because it ain’t none of your goddamn business,” he said.

“None of my business?” Meredith sat up, her temper flaring. “He's my son!”

“He's a Ravager.”

“He's my son first.” Meredith's voice darkened. “Remember what happened the last time you tried to take him away from me. I was dying then, and I'm dying now. I could still bite through that thick neck of yours.”

Yondu ran his fingers over the scar from her bite.

“You couldn't kill me,” he said.

“Arazine. Nearly crashed you into a wall.”

“You would have been killing yourself too, idjit.”

“Didn't have to save you from that crate, either,” she said.

“That was my damn choice.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Didn't have to save that kid.”

“The point is,” Meredith said, “if you try to take my baby away from me, I'm going to kill you.”

Meredith had propped herself up on her arms. Her soft blonde curls were long enough to swirl around her ears now. Her large gray eyes held a dangerously bright glare.

“How would you do it,” Yondu asked.

“I'd poison you. Wouldn't be hard.”

“How'd you get the poison?”

“Kraglin keeps a bottle of poison in the laundry room for Orloni.”

“What would you do after I died?” Yondu crossed his arms. “Everyone would know it was you.”

“No they wouldn't, because I'd serve stew.” Meredith's eyes sparkled dangerously. “I'd serve everyone from the same vat, but you'd be the only one who died.”

“Why,” Yondu growled.

“Because I'd poison your silverware instead of the stew.”

The corners of Yondu's mouth turned up.

“And if I got sick,” he said, “I'd still have to eat on the way back. You could poison me pretty easy if I couldn't even move.”
“We would end up at Dr. Mareet's. Peter and I would steal everything we could off the ship and sell it; those units would pay for the final surgery.” Meredith hugged her knees. “While I was put under, I'd have Peter sabotage the Eclector's stabilizers. By the time they figured out I'd poisoned you, I'd be in your ship and headed to Terra.”

Yondu was grinning.

“And that's how you'd do it,” he said.

Meredith's silver eyes glittered dangerously.

“Yes,” she said.

“Damn,” Yondu said, “and you say you ain't no Ravager.”

“I'm not.”

“Really?” Yondu sat back and crossed his arms. “Dealing with pirates, selling stolen plasma, breakin' me into a hospital.”

“Those things weren't right, but I didn't really have much of a choice.” Meredith frowned. “It was that or death.”

“Couple weeks ago on Emris,” Yondu said, “you told me that you wouldn't go murdering anyone to get back to Terra.”

Meredith swallowed.

“And now you're sittin' on this floor describing a perfect murder plot.” Yondu grinned. “Somebody just stopped you from clockin' out like a light, and you've got his death planned all the way down to the escape plan. Damn, Mery.”

“I wouldn't do it,” she mumbled.

Yondu's crimson eyes bore into Meredith's.

“Wouldn't you,” he said.

Meredith's blood went cold. She stared down at the tile floor.

“If anyone took Peter away from me,” she said slowly, “I'd kill them. I don't like saying that's what I'd do, but... I'd do it.”

Yondu stood up. He offered Meredith a heavy blue hand.

“You protect your own,” he said.

Meredith looked at his scar-laced hand, then gripped it firmly. Yondu pulled her up on her feet. Meredith's head swam for just a second, but she stayed up. She let go of his hand; it was sweaty.

“You should have told me that Peter was leaving,” she said.

Yondu scratched his chin.

“Next time,” he said, “I will.”
“And I'm not going to poison you or anything, so don't go making anyone lick your silverware before you use it.” Meredith crossed her arms. “Killing you is counterproductive. Peter still thinks you're cool.”

Yondu shifted, crossing his arms.

“Cool, huh,” he muttered.

Meredith grinned. “Are you hungry?”

“For anythin' that don't got Orloni poison in it, yeah.”

“Want lunch?”

“No time. I came down here lookin' for you.” Yondu started pacing down the hall. “Boys are about to leave.”

“Already?”

Meredith hurried to keep up, and Yondu turned with a ferocious glare.

“What the fuck you runnin' for, you goddamn idjit? What the fuck did you just learn?”

“Oh, right.” Meredith slowed to a walk. “Sorry.”

Yondu bared his teeth, but slowed his pace to walk with her.

“Thanks,” she added, “for keeping me down back there.”

“Don't say that,” he muttered.

Meredith closed her eyes.

“If I had a unit for every time someone told me not to be polite, I could have paid for my surgery in the first month,” she said.

“Maybe you should start charging, then.”

That made her laugh. Yondu and Meredith paced down the stairs and to the hangar bay. Yondu opened the portal and they walked in.

“Mom!” Peter waved across the bay. “Up here!”

Meredith waved back. “Hi, baby!”

“Everythin's goin' just fine, cap'n.” Kraglin was loading crates onto the ship.

Yondu scowled as he and Meredith climbed the metal stairs.

“Just fine? Like hell,” he said, “you ain't even got any photon torpedoes on that thing yet.”

“They're expensive, cap'n. I'm not authorized to load those unless we're in a combat situation,” Kraglin said.

“Listen, idjit.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “I'm the goddamn captain, and I authorize you to put photon torpedoes on whatever goddamn ship you well please.”
“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin's ears turned red. “Right away, cap'n.”

Kraglin and Yondu grabbed a crate of photon torpedoes and loaded it onto the ship. Meredith held Peter close, stroking his hair.

“Are you sure you want to go,” Meredith asked.

“I'm sure, mom. Kraglin's with me. It's no different than the time we went to the arcade.” Peter squeezed his mom in a tight hug. “I will be okay.”

Meredith nodded. Her arms were locked around Peter; she couldn't let him go.

“I'm sorry, baby, I just get a bad feeling every time you leave. I know you're a... Ravager," she forced herself to say, "but you are my baby first, you hear?"

"I know, mom," Peter said.

"Good." She closed her eyes. “Just come back safe, okay?"

“I know, mom.” Peter pulled out of the hug and smiled. “I feel like that every time you go to the doctor's, but you always come back okay.”

Meredith kissed Peter's forehead.

“My little Star-Lord,” she said.

“I love you, mom.”

“I love you too, Peter.” Meredith looked at the ship and swallowed. “Just... please stay safe, baby. Promise me you won't do anything dangerous and that you'll do exactly what Kraglin tells you to do.”

“I promise,” Peter said.

Meredith and Peter hugged again. Kraglin came down the loading ramp.

“Time to go, Pete,” he said.

Peter looked up at his mother.

“It'll be okay,” he said.

“I know, baby, I know.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “It'll be fine. Kraglin, you keep an eye on my baby.”

“Aye, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin grinned. “I won't let him out of my sight.”

Meredith smiled; at least she could trust Kraglin to watch over Peter. Yondu came stalking down the loading ramp with a frown.

“Everything's ready to go,” he said, “but don't take any goddamn chances.”

“I'll be the soul of caution, cap'n.”

Kraglin threw a Ravager salute; Yondu almost smiled.

“Get goin', idjit,” Yondu said.
Kraglin looked at Peter. “Come on, Pete.”

Peter smiled at his mother, then ran up the loading ramp.

“I want to sit in the co-pilot's seat,” he called.

“No, idjit, you don't.” Kraglin made a face. “I fly the ship, you sit down and be quiet. That's how this is gonna work.”

“Mom, Kraglin's being mean to me!”

“I ain't bein' mean, I'm bein' responsible!”

Meredith grinned and pressed a hand to her forehead.

“Play nice, boys,” she said, “and take care of each other.”

They both grinned at her, then paced up the ramp.

“Bye, mom, bye Yondu!”

“See you later, Ms. Quill. We'll be back as soon as we're done, cap'n.”

Meredith and Yondu watched the loading ramp shut. The M-craft roared to life, and the ship pulled out of the hangar bay. The hangar door opened, and it soared out into space. Meredith watched the ship until it vanished. She blinked back tears, then looked to the right. Yondu was leaning against the banister with his arms crossed, watching the stars.

“You're still here,” she said.

“Course I am,” he scowled, “I had to make sure they got out of here, dinnit I?”

Meredith looked back at the closing hangar door.

“You worry about them,” she said.

“Shut up.” Yondu turned and stalked away, the tails of his coat fluttering behind him. “Damn Terrans.”

Meredith smiled.
Heat

Chapter Summary

Kraglin's first job is a nightmare baking in the desert sun. He's got a problem here, and for once, he doesn't know how to fix it. Peter struggles with the remaining moral streak he has left in him, caught between helping his mother and making her proud.

Without Peter for her to focus on, Meredith slips deeper into pining for Terra; her homesickness threatens to overwhelm her. Yondu makes a horrible mistake and plays with fire. The resulting burn changes his entire perception of Meredith Quill, as well as lighting another, rather more uncomfortable fire.

(Long chapter is really long; I was going to split this into two updates but I was looking at it and it really doesn't flow right if I cut it in half, so have an extra-long update to tide you over until Monday!)

It had been two days since Peter and Kraglin had left the Eclector. Peter was sitting back in his chair with his feet up on the control panel, headphones on. Kraglin came by and pulled them off his head.

“Listen up, Peter,” Kraglin said, “we're inbound.”

Peter took his feet off the panel and looked out the window. Modari, a desert planet, was quickly becoming larger as the ship approached.

“Why is it purple?”

“Cause it's covered in purple sand,” Kraglin answered.

“Why is the sand purple?”

“The rocks are purple, idjit, and rocks make sand.”

“Why are the rocks purple?”

“Because they're made of sugulite,” Kraglin said, “which is a kind of cyclosilicate material.”

“Oh. So what are we doing here,” Peter asked.

“I am flyin' a ship.” Kraglin grinned. “You are robbin' a vault.”

Peter's mouth fell open. “I'm what?! I'm a pickpocket, not a master thief!”

“If you pull this off, Pete,” Kraglin said, “we'll have enough units left over after cut to look at a cerebral core for your mom. This could be the last heist, if you don't fuck it up.”

Peter could hear his heart in his ears. His blood was uncomfortably warm, as if he had suddenly gained a fever. He dragged his tongue across the roof of his mouth; it was dry. He pulled his headphones on and hit the play button.

Listen baby. Ain't no mountain high, ain't no valley low...
Peter looked down at the purple planet and tried to keep his heart out of his throat. If robbing a vault is what would save his mother, then Peter was going to do it.

Peter looked at the foot-wide crevasse. “I’ve got to go in there?”

Kraglin had led Peter down to the base of a great gorge. On the other side of the canyon was a desert metropolis, complete with holographic trees and fifty-foot fountains; Peter had seen them on the way in. But now he was facing a slim black crack in the dusty lilac wall.

“Just keep goin' until you get to a steel wall,” Kraglin handed Peter what looked like a mat of green tubes topped with a mass of wires. “And then set the plasma charges.”

Peter took the green tubes very carefully. He remembered these. They’d blown up a whole lot of ships and almost killed Kraglin.

“I can't do this,” he said.

Kraglin frowned. “Why the hell not?”

“My mom made me promise not to do anything dangerous,” Peter said.

“You also promised her that you'd do exactly what I told you,” Kraglin said, “and I'm tellin' you to go set them plasma charges.”

Peter looked at the glowing green tubes. He'd somehow gotten into the space between his two promises, and they were pulling him either way.

“Remember, Pete.” Kraglin poked Peter's chest. “What does the cap'n always tell you before a job?”

Peter grimaced.

“You pull this off, you save your momma's life. You fail,” Peter said, “you're dead.”

“No pressure,” Kraglin added.

Peter swallowed. “So I just find the wall, stick on the plasma, and run like heck?”

“Just like that. Easy!” Kraglin grinned.

Peter forced himself to walk into the dark crevasse. The temperature in there was much cooler, and the plasma tubes lit the walls with an unnatural green light. Peter looked back at the crack of sunlight. How was he supposed to be able to see his way out after he left the plasma charges? Maybe Kraglin hadn't thought this all the way through. Peter looked down at the plasma charges and decided it didn't matter. If he traveled in a straight line, it wouldn't matter if he couldn't see on the way out. After all, it wasn't like Kraglin would detonate the charges with him still in the caverns... hopefully.

Peter had made it to the steel wall. The boy crouched in a dark corner; he'd stuffed the plasma tubes under his shirt to dampen the light. Having explosives that close to his organs wasn't comfortable, but Peter had no choice. He peered around the corner. No one knew that the rock had eroded around this part of the bank, and no one would know that Peter had been here. He ran forwards, pulled the plasma tubes out from under his shirt, and stuck them on the wall. The adhesive straps were a little finicky, but he made them work. He turned around and ran.

“Kraglin,” he yelled, “I did it!”
Peter bolted down the crevice in the dark, heading for the sliver of light he could see. He burst out of the crevice; the white blinding light hurt his eyes. He covered them and groaned.

“Too much sun,” he said.

“So,” Kraglin said, “you done set the charges?”

“Yeah.” Peter rubbed his eyes. “I stuck them right to the wall.”

“Alright, here goes.” Kraglin lifted the detonator.

Peter reached up for the detonator.

“Let me push the button,” he said.

“No. Get off, this is my job.” Kraglin swatted his arms down. “You plant the bombs, I push the button.”

“Let me push it!”

“No!”

Kraglin’s thumb slammed on the detonator button. Nothing happened.

“Let me do it!” Peter grabbed the detonator out of Kraglin's hands and mashed the button.

Nothing happened. Kraglin's brow furrowed.

“The fuck,” he said.

“Maybe the detonator's broken,” Peter said.

Kraglin took the detonator from Peter and examined it.

“No, it's fine,” Kraglin said, “but maybe there's something wrong with the bomb?”

“I'll go check,” Peter said.

Kraglin winced.

“Take a rain check on that, Pete. That bomb is primed and ready. Could blow at any minute, and I don't want you in there when it does,” Kraglin said.

“So what do we do?”

Kraglin sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Guess we wait,” he said.

Peter and Kraglin sat down. Peter put his Walkman on and stared at the crevice, waiting for the explosion to kick off. Kraglin fiddled with the detonator, his brow furrowed. This was an important job for him. Something wasn't right here, and Kraglin was determined to find out what.

It was nearly nightfall before he figured it out. Peter had taken to drawing pictures in the sand; an M-craft, a tree, some people. Kraglin could clearly pick out which drawing was Ms. Quill; she had the curly hair and was drawn very pretty. Kraglin suspected the one with the grossly exaggerated teeth and the angry eyebrows was Yondu. The detonator itself had yielded no secrets, so Kraglin had
taken to messing with the signal transmitter.

“Well fuck,” he said, “there’s our goddamn problem.”

“What is it?” Peter looked up from drawing himself next to his mother. “Did you fix it?”

“The transmitter signal, that’s the problem.” Kraglin sighed and tossed it up into the air. “Goddamn cyclosilicates won’t transfer the signal through.”

“What?”

“The bomb signal can’t get through all the rock.”

“Why not?”

“Well,” Kraglin said, “cyclosilicates are made up of silicate groups which form a ring. I’m guessin’ that the silicate structure is arranged in such a way as the free atoms can’t move quite enough to get this kind of signal through.”

Peter blinked.

“So... it's the wrong kind of signal,” he said.

“Yeah.” Kraglin sighed. “Wrong kind of signal.”

“What do we do?”

Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck, staring up at the long dark crevice. He took a deep breath; this was not supposed to happen. For a split second, he thought about calling the cap'n, but thought better of it. Yondu sent Kraglin on this mission because he believed Kraglin could handle it. That meant handling all the little unexpected things that came along. Kraglin looked down at the detonator, his mind racing. He could think of a million different things to try, each one more unlikely than the next, but all mechanically feasible.

“Let's head back to the ship, Pete,” he said, “and you get some shut-eye.”

“What are you going to do, Kraglin?”

Kraglin tossed the detonator up and caught it, a slight smile playing around the edge of his mouth. “Fix shit,” he said.

Meredith woke up with her heart aching. She sat up and wiped the tears off of her face.

“Crying in your sleep now, huh?” Meredith sniffed. “Some tough Terran you are.”

The berating didn’t work; Meredith’s heart throbbed with a dull ache that made her eyes sting. She’d dreamed of Terra and of her papa, a dream of soft green grass and rolling hills. When she closed her eyes, she could see the setting sun licking the cloud-dappled sky; the colors blazed in her mind, a thousand different shades of fire. Her papa would sit on the front porch swing in his old straw hat and his blue jean shorts. She knew the sounds of it all; the chorus of bugs, the chirping birds, the soft clinks of ice hitting the side of his whiskey glass, the long creak of the rusty swing hinge as her papa rocked back and forth. It was preserved in her mind as if crystallized.
Meredith curled up on her side and hugged her knees. Her body shook with sobs she couldn't control. Thank God Peter wasn't here to see her now, she thought, curled up like a child and homesick half to death. She did her best to steady herself, but random pangs of emotion would set her off again. She missed her papa. She missed soft grass. She missed the sound of the wind through the peach trees. She missed Dairy Queen and the radio and hearing the daily news. She missed seeing friendly faces and waving at people at red lights. She missed Terra so much that the feelings poured out of her eyes and stained her pillow.

Meredith lay there until she became fed up with it. She threw her legs over the side of the bed, stood up, and ruffled her curls.

"Come on, Meredith," she said, "pull yourself together. Breakfast. Come on."

In the kitchen, she chopped some potatoes up. She wasn't one-hundred-percent sure that they were actual potatoes, but they were close enough. Meredith fried them in a little oil and mixed them with some leftover sausage. The savory scent brought Ravagers into the kitchen.

"What's cooking, Quill?" Holdon sat down at the mess hall bench. "Smells like meat."

"Sausage and potatoes," she said, "hot and ready for you."

She poured the mix onto a platter and set it down; the Ravagers scooped it onto their plates and scarfed it down.

"Good," Holdon said.

"Thanks."

Meredith put the pan back on the oven and poured more oil in before tossing in the potatoes. The oil snapped and popped around the potatoes as she stirred.

"You're looking tired, Quill." Holdon swallowed his food. "Feeling bad?"

"Just the tumor acting up again," she lied. No one needed to know she'd woken up crying.

"How many units do you need to get that last surgery?"

"Oh, only a little." Meredith's voice dripped with sarcasm. "Just about two-hundred-forty-thousand to go."

Holdon shook his head.

"Hope you last long enough to get it," he said.

"Me too," she said, "me too."

Gef came into the kitchen holding a small white box.

"Quill. Message for you."

"Message, what message? Who out here would send me a..." Meredith's eyes widened. "Jason?"

"Don't know who the fuck Jason is, but this one is from Dr. Mareet."

Meredith fought the sinking feeling in her chest.
“She sent this,” Gef said, handing Meredith a datapad and the white box, “and she said you’d need the medical kit.”

“Please don't tell me she's asking for one of my organs.” Meredith pressed a hand to her forehead. “I need my organs.”

Gef chuckled. “No, it's not about one o' your organs. I know that much.”

Meredith took the datapad and the medical kit and set it on the counter. She went back to cooking. When she had served all she could, she sat down and ate herself. The potatoes, she reflected, were a bit too sweet; the recipe would have better suited to salted pork. As she ate, she read the datapad. Her expression went flat as she read.

“Something wrong, Quill?” Holdon paused as he carried his dishes to the sink.

“Not really. Dr. Mareet's got a small job for me. I'll get about two thousand units,” Meredith said, “but only if I can pull it off.”

“Difficult job?”

Meredith made a face.

“The worst,” she said.

An hour later, Yondu stood in the doorway of Meredith's room, scowling.

“Why the fuck am I here,” he said.

“Dr. Mareet sent me a message saying that you hadn't had your yearly physical.” Meredith held up a white medi-scanner, a stethoscope, and a datapad. “So she sent the physical to you.”

Yondu bared his teeth. “You're shittin' me.”

“Nope.” Meredith sighed, putting a hand on her hip. “I'm not pleased about it either, but a job's a job. Come on, get in here and take your shirt off.”

Yondu's eyebrows raised, and the ghost of a grin crossed his face.

“For the physical, you weirdo.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “I have to check your heart-beat.”

Yondu pulled his shirt over his head and let the portal close behind him. He sat down in the backless desk chair. Meredith put the stethoscope in her ears, then pressed the metal circle to his muscled chest. He flinched; she looked up at him.

“Cold, dammit,” he said.

Meredith listened for a moment.

“Well I'll be damned,” she said, “you've actually got a heart.”

“Har har,” he grumbled, “just do your damn job.”

Meredith stood. “I'm getting one-thousand, eight-hundred units for doing this, I'll have you know.”
“Where’s my cut?” Yondu squared his shoulders indignantly.

Meredith grinned and turned her back to Yondu. “You can have a piece of candy when you're done. That's your cut. Now put your shirt back on.”

Yondu scowled as he put on his shirt. “Damn Terrans.”

While Meredith typed in the data, Yondu looked around the room. The bunk was made neatly, covered with one of Kraglin's old quilts. A few pillows of assorted sizes had been stacked on it. Meredith had hung her clothes from a pipe that curved through her ceiling. Yondu could see the hospital gown in the very back. Yondu remembered picking Meredith up off Terra; he rubbed the scar on his neck from where she'd bitten him. Just come back from the dead, and she came back fighting. Yondu grinned.

“Damn Terrans,” he repeated.

“You already said that.” Meredith looked up. “Why are you smiling?”

Yondu scowled. “I ain't smiling.”

“You were smiling,” she pointed out.

“Well I ain't now.”

Meredith used the medi-scanner on him. He frowned.

“Where did you learn to use one of those,” he asked.

“Dr. Mareet sent a very concise and understandable user's manual along with it.” Meredith grinned. “Step-by-step, nice and easy. Sometimes I think she thinks I'm an idiot.”

“You are an idiot,” he muttered.

Meredith rolled her eyes and transferred the data to the datapad. Her curls were long enough to graze against her jaw now. The lilac color under her eyes had faded, and she was beginning to gain her weight back. Her arms were still slender and thin. They were stronger than they looked, though, Yondu remembered. They'd held his drunk ass up off the ground, carried Peter, flew a ship. Terrans were a lot stronger than they looked, especially this one.

Kraglin had asked Yondu what was going on between him and Meredith. Yondu's eyebrows knit together slightly. Hell, there wasn't anything going on. She was distracting and irritating, that was all. Not very pretty. Crazy, though; he had to admit he liked that about her. She'd make a hell of a Ravager, if they could just get her to stop pining for Terra.

But Meredith and Yondu? Hell of an idea. Yondu almost started to chuckle. Stupid idea, that's what it was, goddamn stupid. But maybe, he thought, worth teasing her about. A little fun, why not? Not like it would mean anything, and making her a little uncomfortable was always funny. Play a little catch-and-release, just for fun.

“So, when we gonna do somethin' about this.” Yondu looked down at her as she scanned through the readouts on the datapad.

She didn't look up. “About what?”

He moved, closing the short gap between them. “This.”
That made her look up; her face of confusion made him chuckle.

“I think I like you better when you're drunk,” she said, shoving the datapad at his chest.

Yondu grinned as she walked away.

“I'll keep that in mind,” he said.

“Don't you start messing around with me.” Meredith rolled her eyes “Bonnie and Clyde we ain't.”

“Who?”

“Bonnie and Clyde. Terran outlaws,” Meredith said, “who robbed banks and made a ton of money.”

“Sounds good to me,” he said.

“They died in a hail of gunfire after bein' run down most of their lives. I don't flatter myself.”
Meredith shook her head. “You can get a lot prettier women than me. If you want anything to do with me, it's either about bragging rights, units, or something to do with Peter.”

“What?”

Meredith gave him a half-lidded look. “Yondu, the only reason you ever do anything is bragging rights, units, or something to do with Peter. So which is it?”

Yondu didn't answer. When did he start doing things just because of Peter?

“Bragging rights then,” Meredith sighed as she put down the datapad.

“Ain't that,” he said.

“Did you make a bet?” Meredith fiddled with the medi-scanner. “Do I get a cut? How many units are on the line?”

“Nobody'd be that stupid.”

“So it has something to do with Peter?”

Yondu scowled. “No.”

“Then someone must be stupid enough to have made a bet with you.” Meredith turned a dial on the tool. “Give me your hand.”

Yondu held out his hand; it was laced with rough blue scars. Meredith held it gently as she scanned his wrist, checking his blood pressure.

“How is Peter?” Her voice was quiet.

“Kraglin says he's bein' a snippy arrogant little piece of shit,” he said, “but he's doin' alright.”

Meredith half-smiled. “He did learn from the best.”

Yondu's chest tightened. She turned his hand over, scanning the veins that ran over top it. The corner of her mouth was turned up, but she wasn't really smiling. Her eyes were a little distant, a little sad. He frowned; something was wrong with one of his Terrans, goddamn it.

“What's with you,” he grunted.
“Nothing.” Meredith turned around and transferred the data from the medi-scanner to the datapad.

Meredith's shoulders sagged as she sighed. Yondu's temper flared. There was something wrong and he wanted to know what it was, dammit. This was his ship; if anything was going on, he was going to know about it. Large blue hands pressed down on the counter as Yondu came up behind her, his mouth right by her ear.

“What's wrong, Mery.” His voice was like granite.

“I miss my home,” she said in a small voice, “I miss Terra. The galaxy is beautiful, I know, but I miss Terra. I miss Earth.”

Terra again? She was always pining for Terra. Yondu bared his teeth.

“How would you know, you've never been there!” Meredith whipped around, tears in her eyes. “It's a beautiful planet full of wonderful people, and every day Peter grows up, he grows up out here instead of on Terra, where we belong.”

They stood, nearly nose-to-nose. He could see the tears on her eyelids. Meredith pushed past him and sighed. He watched her go.

“I don't get why you let him go without me. I could have gotten on that ship and gone with them.” Meredith crossed her arms and turned away. “It's like you don't want me around him, or you don't want him around me, or somethin' crazy like that.”

“Maybe I want you all to myself,” Yondu said, sliding one arm around her waist and pulling her close.

Meredith rolled her eyes and pushed on his chest; Yondu let her take a few steps away from him. The catch-and-release strategy he'd used on other women didn't work on Meredith; she decided when she was caught and when she wanted to be released, and he wasn't stupid enough to argue it with her. Teasing didn't work with her. Nothing that usually worked ever worked on her.

Meredith was different. Not like anyone on Terra, and not like anyone Yondu had ever met before. Something in him warned that he might be in danger of making some very stupid decisions. She hadn't been much to look at when he met her, and maybe she still wasn't, but she'd gained back some of her lost weight and the color in her lips. Meredith sat up on the desk, kicking her legs slightly, just like Peter did. Blond curls were tickling the base of her jaw. Her eyes shone silver. Meredith Quill; Yondu was starting to see why Ego was so obsessed with her. She had a certain sort of glimmer in the way she did things, a kind of steel-shine; tough, bright, and resilient.

“He's the light of my life, Yondu,” Meredith said, startling Yondu out of his reverie, “and he's getting older every day. Soon he's not gonna want to be around me; he's gonna be starting his life. I just want this time with him before he goes. On Terra, on the Eclector... it doesn't matter where he grows up, but I just can't stand not knowing where he is. I'm his mother; I'm supposed to be raising him. Peter being out there without me... it just makes everything in me feel wrong.”

“You want me to call him back,” Yondu said. It wasn't a question.

She looked up at Yondu. “Can you do that for me, big daddy?”

Big daddy.
How the hell had he forgotten about that? He'd been so goddamn blitzed when it first happened that it'd slipped his mind. Her goddamn pet name for him. That's what it was, a pet name. The same words with the same lilt to her voice; he still liked it. He liked it a lot; it was soft, sweet, with that slight tone of desperation. Meredith Quill needed someone to take care of her for a change, and Yondu was the one to do it. She looked up at him with those big, silver-gray eyes and tear-stained eyelashes.

Yondu swallowed. This time, it wasn't only his chest that went tight; a familiar feeling in his trousers tipped him off that he was definitely in very, very real danger. He cleared his throat and put his hands on his hips.

“Maybe. It'll be a hard-ass hassle, but...” Yondu paused, focusing on her expression, “I can make it happen. You'll see your boy. Tomorrow.”

Meredith's eyes lit up, and her whole body straightened. Her expression of unbridled joy and gratitude was exactly what he wanted to see; he drank it in, and it burned sweet. She threw her arms around him and planted a big kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you,” she bubbled, “thank you! I'll make it up for you, I'll... I'll clean the whole bridge, all by myself!”

Yondu didn't even have time to register the satisfying weight or feel of her body before she was skipping out of the room. He watched her leave, then went directly to the kitchen. Holdon and Drazkar gave him an odd look as he grabbed a bottle, ripped the cork out with his bare teeth, and started guzzling the contents. The liquid seared down his throat and warmed his belly. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and threw the half-empty bottle across the room; it shattered into a hundred shards, sending crimson liquid rolling along the tile. Yondu looked at Holdon and Drazkar; they didn't meet his eyes.

“Clean that up,” he panted, then paced back to his quarters with Holdon and Drazkar jumping up as soon as he left the room.

Big daddy.

He had been teasing her, goddamn it, it wasn't supposed to mean anything. He flirts with her, teases her a little, and then she turns around and floors him? Since when had she had him wrapped around her little finger? She said two goddamn words and suddenly he was pulling people off jobs? That wasn't right. Shit.

Yondu scowled as he walked down the hallway. He ought to go back in there, he thought, and tell her that it didn't matter if she was the boy's mother or not. When Yondu said the boy was on a job, the boy was on a job. She'd complain, of course, and she'd get all huffy and goddamn stubborn about it. Yondu would have to sit her down and tell her the goddamn rules. He was king on this ship, dammit. And then she'd get all emotional and cry because that's what Terrans do, and he'd have to calm her down. She'd end up sobbing all over him, and he'd have to get her to lie down before she tuckered herself out. Then she'd end up glaring at him with those big silver-gray eyes of hers.

That'd be it. He'd have to hold her, he thought, or she'd get real violent. That Terran had pepper, no doubt about it. She'd get real embarrassed and snap at him; she always did. He'd have to talk her down. He'd hold her so she didn't get angry, ask her about Terra, talk to her about the boy. She'd like that. She seemed to like it when he took care of her; small wonder, seeing as how she wouldn't stop taking care of everybody else. It wouldn't go far; she'd try to kill him if he touched her any way she didn't like. Yondu liked that about her. He'd treat her right, no question about it. Get a little taste of that pepper, he thought, just a little. He'd show that little momma who big daddy was on this ship.
Fuck. That train of thought was moving way too goddamn fast.

It was Meredith Quill for fuck's sake. She was the boy's momma. She was a skinny little Terran who looked like one bad flu could kill her stone-dead. She sure as hell wasn't sexy. Yondu needed to stop thinking about her right the hell now, because that train of thought didn't go anywhere good. As he entered the bridge, he shoved Meredith Quill firmly out of his head.

“Report,” he snapped.

“Everything's goin' a-OK, captain.” Gef looked at all the cameras and comm lines. “Nuthin' special out of place.”

“Good.”

“Something wrong, captain? You're making quite the face,” Gef said.

“Trying not to think of something,” Yondu sat down in his pilot's seat. “Don't ask.”

“Careful, captain.” Gef adjusted the headset he was wearing. “If you don't think about it now, it'll just come back in your head when you least expect it.”

Yondu swallowed. Fuck.

“Motherfucking son-of-a-bitch! Fuck this goddamn cyclosilicate! In the ass, with a goddamn white-hot fuel shaft extension!”

Peter's eyes were wide as he watched Kraglin work. Kraglin had been tinkering with the detonator signal all night, and now, in the heat of the hot desert, nothing was working. Kraglin was getting angry; Peter had never seen Kraglin angry before.

“Fuck this shit,” Kraglin snarled, “fuck it in the goddamn ass.”

Peter looked around at all the tech.

“Can I help,” he said

“Go get some fuckin' water before I fry to death.” Kraglin snipped some wires. “I will fix this goddamn thing if it kills me.”

Peter swallowed, but obediently went to the ship and got a canteen of water. He brought it back and handed it to Kraglin. Kraglin immediately drained it.

“Get back on the ship,” Kraglin said, “before you die of heatstroke out here.”

“I want to help you,” Peter said, “I don't want to be on the ship.”

Kraglin wanted to punch the kid, but he knew Peter was only trying to help. Rubbing the sweat off his neck, he surveyed the tech splayed around him.

“Allright,” he said, “we can work together on this.”

Peter's face lit up.

“I want you to take these wires here and link 'em up to the signal carrier.” Kraglin handed Peter a
mass of brightly-colored wires. “Now, each wire connects to a certain tether. They're all color-coordinated, see? Just match the colors. Can you do that?”

“Yeah.”

Grinning, Peter sat down and started connecting the wires.

“Red... here. Blue with white stripe... here.” Peter mumbled as he worked. “Green with red stripe... um... oh, here.”

Kraglin took a deep breath. At least the kid would be occupied for the next hour. Kraglin went back to work. He couldn't seem to find a way to alter the kind of signal that the carrier would send. He'd tried scrambling it, changing the frequency, even reversing it, but nothing passed through the sugilite. A large chunk of sugilite had been rolled over to where he was working; Kraglin kept trying to send signals through it to the reader on the other side. So far, nothing had worked.

The desert sun seared Kraglin's skin. His head felt muddy; none of his ideas were working, and as he racked his brain, nothing came up but self-loathing. He was the worst goddamn Ravager that ever lived. The only thing he was good at was fixing machines, and it turned out he couldn't even do that right. He'd let the cap'n down. He tried to control it, but the feelings of failure and worthlessness boiled to the top of his mind, filling him with pain and rage.

“Fuck!”

Kraglin's foot slammed into the chunk of sugilite; it flew threw the air and landed with a thud. He was breathing heavy and red in the face. Peter could see sweat on his brow mix with tears from his eyes. Kraglin sat down and put his head in his hands.

“Fuck,” Kraglin said.

“No, Pete. It ain't okay. This is my goddamn job,” Kraglin said, “and I can't do it. I fuckin' can't do it.”

Peter crawled over and sat next to Kraglin.

“Cap'n sent me out here to do a job. Trusted me to do a job.” Kraglin's voice was thick with tears. “And I fucked it up like usual. I can't do anything right. Some goddamn first mate I'd be.”

“You didn't fuck it up, Kraglin.” Peter hugged his knees. “Gef gave you the wrong kind of signal thing.”

“And I couldn't fix it,” Kraglin said.

“Your job isn't to fix the signal thing, Kraglin,” Peter said, “your job is to rob the stupid vault.”

Kraglin looked over at Peter through reddened eyes.

“What are you sayin',” Kraglin said.

“When Yondu stole those plasma tubes, I messed everything up, right? Did Yondu just keep trying to take tubes with Kree fighters everywhere? No. He drew the fire away and let you try. He changed the plan. So the signal carrier doesn't work. That's okay.” Peter smiled. “We'll change the plan. We can get into the vault a different way.”
Kraglin blinked. He looked at the crevice.

“You're right, Pete,” he said.

“Of course I am.” Peter smiled just like his mother. “What's the new plan?”

It was like someone had flipped a switch in Kraglin's head; his brain began pumping out plans with feverish speed. He stared at the crevice until one plan rose to the surface. It was dangerous. It was risky. The cap'n would have done it. Kraglin broke into a wide grin.

“Pete,” he said, “go get that goddamn plasma. Tomorrow we're robbin' that vault.”

Yondu Udonta had a dirty mind; nobody in the galaxy would argue against that. But when he woke up the next morning, drenched in sweat and in desperate need of a cold shower, even he was surprised. He'd had dirty dreams before; what Ravager hadn't? But this was... damn.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed and put his face in his hands. The dream itself had been disturbing enough. Having a hot vision of the boy's momma felt wrong in ways Yondu didn't fully understand. But the worst part was that in every frenzied fantasy his sick mind could imagine, and he could imagine quite a damn bit, Meredith Quill was the one on top.

The very thought made Yondu's stomach flip. Ravagers were the ones on top. They fucked and they left, and they tied themselves down to no one and nothing. Getting off on the idea of a Terran in control felt wrong. It felt like some kind of goddamn fetish. Yondu wasn't into that shit, dammit. He was into one-night-stands and cheap, fast women, just like every other Ravager.

Meredith's different, some small part of Yondu reminded. Meredith isn't some unit-a-dozen artificial fuck-bot. But that was the problem; Yondu didn't know what to do with different. Every alarm in his head told him to throw her out the airlock and just let Peter kill him when he came back. Kraglin could take over the ship, Peter would never know his jackass father, and Meredith would be better off dead than in the arms of a son of a bitch like Yondu. Not that he cared. She was just...distracting.

It's just a damn dream, he reminded himself, they happen. It wasn't real. There was no danger. She was just the cook, just a Terran, just one more woman in a long line of female distractions. There was nothing wrong here. Yondu could handle this. It was just a dream; he wasn't hot for that Terran any more than she was hot for him. Yondu stood and went to the showers. He stripped down and tossed his clothes at the hole in the wall; they dropped down to the laundry room. He grabbed the hard block of soap and wrenched the shower on. Cold water slammed over him, biting into his skin.

“Son of a fuck!”

Yondu slammed the temperature control back up; the water warmed.

“Just a dream,” he said, “just a goddamn dream.”

Yondu pressed his face into the hot, soothing spray, letting thoughts of Meredith Quill get washed away.
Meredith Quill had washed a lot of things away. The bridge was, as she'd promised, clean. It had taken a lot of elbow grease and more strength than she thought she had; she'd ended up falling asleep in one of the pilot's chairs. Gef found her the next morning, her mouth slightly agape.

He hesitantly poked her. “Er, Quill?”

Her eyes shot open. “What.”

“Holy hot bullet!” Gef jumped back about a foot.

“Sorry.” Meredith sat up and rubbed her eyes. “Am I in your chair?”

“Actually, you're in the captain's chair.” Gef grabbed her and pulled her up. “And seeing as how you don't want to get airlocked, little missy, maybe you should stay out of it.”

Meredith straightened her spine, her hands on her hips. “Oh, right. He's sensitive about that.”

“A little bit, Quill.”

Meredith chuckled, but it turned into a yawn. “Wow, I was more tired than I thought. How long was I out?”

“All night,” Gef said.

Meredith lifted her shirt and sniffed. “I smell like Yondu.”

“Do you?” Gef leaned over her and inhaled. “Yeah, you do.”

Meredith made a face. “I'm going to grab some clothes from my room and go take a shower.”

When Meredith made it to the shower room, she could hear water running inside. She huffed and leaned against the wall, hugging her fresh clothes to herself. The guys could all wash together as much as she pleased, but Meredith only felt comfortable showering alone. The sound of the shower stopped. Meredith waited. The door to the shower room opened, and she looked up.

The first thing she saw was a broad chest of corded muscle. When he rolled his shoulders, she could see the muscles of his arms. Huge arms, she noted, very strong and capable arms. Her eyes flicked down; a stack of abs was visible above the towel wrapped around the waist. Meredith's eyes traced over the muscles rippling under the veneer of blue skin. Her cheeks warmed.

“What're you lookin' at?”

Meredith's eyes flicked up to Yondu's face. His disgruntled expression and jagged teeth broke the spell.

“Waiting for the shower,” she said quickly, “that's it.”

“Oh.”

They stood, staring at each other for a minute. Meredith kept her eyes on his. Looking anywhere else was dangerous. His eyes flicked up and down; she reddened.

“What are you looking at,” she asked.
“Nothin’,” he said, “but ain't those the clothes you were wearin' yesterday?”

“I slept on the bridge,” she said.

His eyebrows knit together. “What the hell did you do that for?”

“I didn't do it on purpose,” she said, “I fell asleep cleaning.”

Yondu grunted. He took a hand and rubbed the back of his neck; Meredith watched the muscle move. He was still wet from the shower; she could see his skin glisten. Meredith swallowed, stood up straight, and walked into the shower room without another look. Looking was dangerous.

Meredith locked the door behind her, then took a deep breath. For some reason, she felt like she'd just been interrogated. Meredith hadn't seen muscles like that since Jason. In fact, she thought guiltily, since before Jason. Jason had never been that strong-looking, that solid, that damn big. She rubbed her warm face and shook her head.

“Quit bein' stupid,” she told herself, “and stop blushing like a fool.”

Meredith locked the portal and stripped down. She turned the shower dial on hot, but all that came out was mildly tepid water. She scowled.

“Big blue asshole,” she said, “used all the hot water.”

Meredith cleaned herself up, then stepped out of the shower. She towelled off her hair; one good thing about having short curls, she thought, was how low-maintenance they were. She dried off the rest of her body, then changed into her fresh clothes. Meredith unlocked the door and went pacing down the hallway.

By the time she made it back to her room, she'd decided to permanently forget all about her run-in with Yondu. After all, she reasoned, Jason was still out there somewhere. She just knew it. Meredith had no business looking at other men while her heart still belonged to Jason. And it did, she assured herself, it definitely did. She thought of Jason's warm smile, the way they danced, the way he laughed. Yes, she was unquestionably in love with Jason; anything else was just a temporary distraction.

“Just a distraction,” she said out loud.

Not that Yondu was that distracting. He was a big blue asshole who threatened to eat her son. He was rude, crude, and completely insensitive. Peter did like him, Meredith admitted, but that was because Peter was a little boy and Yondu was a space pirate and that was cool to Peter. And maybe Yondu had started to take Peter under his wing a little; teaching him to shoot, to fly, to work hard. But still, she told herself firmly, he was not exactly a great person. He killed people and robbed places and did terrible, unlawful things. He was no Jason, that was for damn sure.

Meredith laid on her bed and stared at the ceiling. Jason.

“Where are you, Jason,” she asked the empty room, “and why haven't you found us yet?”

Peter walked up the stairs of the Quo Modarian bank with a tube of plasma in his hands. The plan was clear; threaten the Quo Modarians, get into the vault, plant the timed detonator, and run out. Once the detonator was in the vault, all that separated it from the plasma was the steel wall, and Kraglin was sure that the signal would pass through. Peter went up to the door.
“Good day, sir,” the guard said.

“Hi,” Peter said, “is this the bank?”

“It certainly is. Here, let me get the door for you.”

The guard opened the door for Peter, smiling warmly at him. Peter swallowed and entered the bank. His shoes tapped on the sparkling purple floor, and a great white holographic chandelier hung from the vaulted ceiling. The Quo Modarians were tall and lilac-skinned, with soft white eyes and bushy white eyebrows. They all smiled at him.

“Excuse me,” one of them said, “I rather like your shoes, young man.”

Peter's eyes shot wide.

“Please don't steal my shoes,” he said.

The Quo Modarian chuckled.

“Wouldn't dream of it. I scarcely think they'd fit on my feet, hm?” The Quo Modarian tilted his head. “I am Yakeel. How can I help you?”

“Everyone is awful nice here,” Peter said.

“We have no reason to be cruel. The galaxy is filled with liars, thieves, and murderers,” Yakeel said, “but we believe in being kind, loving, and peaceful.”

Liars, thieves, and murderers. Peter swallowed. Yakeel had such a warm smile.

“What would you do if somebody tried to rob this bank,” Peter asked.

Yakeel's face fell.

“We would be defenseless, but we would hope that no one was hurt. The thief, whoever they were, would be pardoned. We would impeach the great all-Spirit for their forgiveness,” Yakeel said, “but we would be very sad. This bank holds inter-species translators; it is the vault by which we touch the world, by which we gain a deeper understanding of other species in the galaxy. This vault is a beautiful thing. I cannot fathom the evil someone could stoop to in robbing it.”

“But suppose that person had no choice,” Peter said, “suppose they needed to sell the translators to the guy he works for because that money goes to save his mom from dying of cancer.”

Yakeel blinked.

“In that case, the thief would surely have our compassion and pity. But of course, if he had simply asked for the translators, we would have given them up,” Yakeel said.

Peter's eyes widened and his jaw dropped.

“Really?!” Peter's eyes widened. “Just like that? No fighting, no plasma bomb, nothing?”

“Of course,” Yakeel chuckled, “one life is worth more than all the technology we offer. Life is a beautiful thing. Money can be earned again, technology can be re-made, buildings can be put back together, but a life? A life cannot be regained; once lost, it is lost forever.”

Peter had tears in his eyes.
“Yakeel?” Peter handed him the plasma tube. “This is Maordian plasma.”

Yakeel's milk-white eyes shot open.

“There's a whole bunch of it stuck to the steel wall of your vault. On the other side there's a crevice where the stone's worn away. You didn't know it was there, so I stuck the plasma there. There's a detonator, but the signal can't get through the rock.” Peter was crying now. “I was gonna blow it up and take your translators.”

Yakeel took the plasma gently.

“Why,” he asked.

“Because my mom's dying of cancer,” Peter sobbed, “and if I don't get the money real soon she's gonna die. We don't have enough to pay for the cerebral core because Yondu keeps cutting everything I earn in half and I'm gonna lose my mom!”

There was a small crowd of Quo Modarians around Peter now. They looked at each other with apprehension.

“Where is the detonator,” Yakeel asked.

“I've got it here,” Peter sniffed, “in my pocket.”

Yakeel swallowed.

“Can you turn it off,” he asked.

Peter nodded. He took it out of his pocket and disconnected the wires from the signal transmitter.

“There,” he said softly, “you're safe now.”

A Quo Modarian came up with a long yellow rod. He waved it over Peter; the glowing yellow color didn't change.

“The boy tells the truth,” he said.

The Quo Modarians sighed in relief. One of them, a slender female wearing a thick gold necklace, stepped forwards.

“What is your name, little boy,” she asked.

“Peter.” Peter sniffed. “Peter Quill.”

She knelt down; her long fluffy white hair dusted her shoulders.

“You did the right thing,” she said, “and that is honorable. Thank you, Peter Quill.”

Peter sniffed.

“You're welcome,” he said.

“You said your mother was dying?” The Quo Modarian woman frowned. “She needs a cerebral core?”

Peter nodded. The Quo Modarian with the yellow rod waved it over him again.
“He’s telling the truth,” he said, “the boy’s mother is dying.”

The Quo Modarian woman stood. Her expression was fierce and confident; it reminded Peter of his mother.

“Yakeel, escort the boy to his ship. Tassin,” she said to the Quo Modarian with the yellow rod, “please get security to open the vault.”

“Gora?” Yakeel frowned. “Gora, what are you doing?”

Gora put her lilac hands on Peter's shoulders.

“This boy did the right thing. He has admitted to his plan and diffused the danger. What he did, he did out of love for his mother.” Gora's chin tilted confidently. “There is no greater force for good in this world than love. This boy has done the right thing; we must do the right thing as well.”

Yakeel smiled. “Yes, Gora.”

Gora looked down at Peter with soft eyes.

“Tell me, Peter Quill. How much did you stand to gain from the vault today?”

“One-thousand units,” he said.

Gora smiled.

“You will get one-thousand units worth of inter-species translators,” she said.

Peter's eyes widened. He broke out into tears and hugged Gora. She froze for a minute, then hugged him tightly.

“Terrans are emotional,” she observed.

“Thank you.” Hot tears were coming from under Peter's eyes. “Thank you so much.”

Peter and Kraglin had received the inter-species translators. The Quo Modarians had given them boxes of them, as well as returned the plasma bomb. Peter had told the Quo Modarians to keep the tube he'd given them; if something bad happened, he reasoned, they could throw it at the bad guys. The Quo Modarians were pacifists and would rather die than hurt someone, but they kept it as a show of good faith. Gora and Yakeel had left them with a fond farewell, leaving the boxes of inter-species translators behind. Kraglin surveyed the boxes, his hands on his hips.

“Well, Pete,” he said, “we did it.”

Peter laughed and hugged Kraglin's legs. Kraglin stiffened, then patted Peter's back awkwardly.

“Yeah yeah,” Kraglin said, “we're all very happy about this. Come on, we got work to do.”

Peter let go and started dragging the boxes onto the ship. Kraglin went to the ship controls and noticed a message waiting for him from the cap'n. He tapped the indicator and read the message. His brow furrowed as he read.

“That's weird,” he muttered.
“What's wrong?” Peter walked up holding a box.

“Cap'n said if we'd done the job, we had to get back to the ship pronto. Otherwise, I was supposed to take you back and finish it myself.” Kraglin scratched his chin. “Weird.”

“How is that weird?”

“Cap'n never pulls a man off a job. Never. Not unless they're dyin' or incompetent, and you're neither. Must be somethin' goin' on on the Eclector that we don't know about,” Kraglin said.

Peter frowned. “Do you think my mom's okay?”

_Ms. Quill_. Kraglin's blood iced over. If she had died, Yondu would want the boy back on the ship. He swallowed.

“I'm sure she's fine,” Kraglin lied.

Peter went back to moving boxes. Kraglin sunk into the pilot's seat, his heartbeat pounding in his ears. Ms. Quill was dead; there was no other explanation. Kraglin put his head in his hands, staring down at his boots. The cap'n had decided not to give the Quills up, but with Ms. Quill gone, no one could take care of Peter. They'd give him up to Ego for sure. Or would they? The kid made units, Kraglin reasoned, and they'd made him a Ravager. They'd just have to take care of Peter from now on. Kraglin took a deep breath, his jaw set. That's what Ms. Quill would want.

Kraglin went to the loading ramp and loaded the translators as if on auto-pilot. Images of Ms. Quill flashed before his eyes; standing with her hands on her hips, bald, scrawny and angry; flashing a grin as she landed on the Eclector after Arazine; worried, eyes wide as Peter and Yondu walked off on Emris; asleep, curls in front of her eyes with her arms around the cap'n. Kraglin set down a box and wiped the tears out of his eyes. If he was right and Ms. Quill was dead...they'd lost a good one. At least she wasn't in pain anymore, he thought, and she got to live a little before she left. She belonged in a better place with better people, much better than the rotten Eclector and a bunch of scummy space pirates. No, Ms. Quill was a downright angel, and she deserved better than this life. Kraglin blinked rapidly.

“Kraglin, are you okay?”

Kraglin looked at Peter's wide, concerned eyes. They were a shade of deep emerald; Kraglin remembered the color as the dappled leaves on Yazkin-8.

“Yeah kid,” Kraglin said through a thick throat, “I'm okay. Let's go.”

Yondu's voice snapped through the intercom.

“Quill! Bridge, now!”

Meredith leapt out of bed and speed-walked to the bridge. When she got there, Yondu was pacing back and forth on the bridge, his teeth bared.

“What is it,” she said.

“The boys are back.” Yondu kept pacing.
Meredith lit up.

“You brought them back,” she breathed.

Yondu swallowed and glanced around; no one had heard her. Good. It couldn't get out that Yondu had done the Terran a favor. After those rumors Kraglin had told him about... it was best if nobody suspected anything was going on. Because nothing was going on, he told himself firmly, not a goddamn thing.

“Told you I would,” he said gruffly, hands on his hips.

Meredith looked out at the expanse of space. “Are they okay? Have you talked to them?”

Yondu shook his head.

“Kraglin's on comms,” Gef said, “want me to patch him through?”

“Now, dammit,” Yondu snapped.

Kraglin's voice came over the comms; it was frosted with static.

“Cap'n,” he said in a panicked voice, “where's Ms. Quill?”


“Oh thank God.” They heard Kraglin sigh in relief. “Fuck, Ms. Q, you scared me shitless. Here I was thinkin' the cap'n had called us back because you kicked off.”

Meredith laughed. “No, I'm fine. Where's Peter?”

“He's fine,” Kraglin said, “but you gave me a goddamn heart attack.”

“Thank you for worrying about me, honey.” Meredith smiled.

Yondu growled. “Report, Kraglin.”

“Good news and bad news, cap'n,” he said.

“Give me the bad news,” Yondu said.

“The bomb turned out to be a dud. Sugulite cyclosilicate stopped the blast signal from coming through. Freak mistake,” Kraglin said, “no one could have seen it coming. We couldn't exactly detonate it right next to us, so we abandoned the plan.”

“Fuck.” Yondu grimaced. “The good news?”

“We got the goods anyway. Peter landed himself some inter-species translators for god-knows-what.” Kraglin laughed. “He went right up to them and asked if he could have some, so they went ahead and gave him a few.”

Meredith's eyes widened. “He talked them into giving him free tech?”

“He cried and made up a big ol' sob story,” Kraglin said, “and damn it all if he didn't get those Quo Modarians sobbin' along with him.”

Yondu closed his eyes.
“You're shittin' me,” he said.

“Nope. Kid pulled through. We're comin' back with about a hundred-thousand units worth of free technology,” Kraglin laughed, “because Peter cried.”

Meredith pressed a hand to her forehead and laughed. “Terran crybabies, huh?”

“You are crybabies,” he grumbled.

“So that was the job, cap'n. Sorry we didn’t call sooner, but all the feedback from this tech is makin' comms a bit difficult,” Kraglin said.

“Where's the boy,” Yondu asked.

“Sittin' in the back playin' around with the translators,” Kraglin said, “tryin' to translate his music with them.”

“That sounds like Peter.” Meredith smiled. “Bringing the sweet sounds of Terra to the rest of the galaxy.”

“So,” Kraglin said, “anything interesting happen while we were gone?”

Yondu and Meredith's eyes flicked to one another. Meredith's large gray eyes were as soft and silver as ever; Yondu swallowed. As he did, Meredith looked at the neck of his shirt and immediately thought of everything below it. She took a deep breath and crossed her arms.

“No,” Yondu said, “nothin' really.”

“Yeah, it was pretty boring.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “We'll be glad to have you two back.”

The M-craft appeared in front of the window, leaping out of hyperspace. Meredith could vaguely see Peter waving at her through the window. She grinned and waved back.

“Hi baby,” she said.

“Hi mom,” Peter's voice echoed over the comms.

“Little angel,” Meredith sighed.

“Little shit,” Yondu corrected.

“He talked some people into turning over near a hundred-thousand units worth of tech,” she said, “and you're not just a little bit proud of that?”

Yondu grumbled indistinctly. Meredith smiled.

“You're proud,” she said.

“Shut up,” he said.

Meredith rubbed her arms, staring out at the star-speckled expanse of space.

“Hey,” she said.

Yondu bared his teeth. “What?”

Meredith's head was tilted slightly to the side; her curls could just touch the top of her right shoulder.
Her eyes, large and silvery-gray, reflected the lights on the bridge. The shadow of a smile passed over her face.

“Thank you,” she said, “for bringing my baby back.”

Yondu swallowed.

“What do I get in return,” he said.

“What, a clean bridge isn't good enough for you?” Meredith laughed. “I cleaned until I passed out, Yondu. I can't work any harder than that.”

“You passed out?” Yondu's eyebrows knit together. “The fuck? I thought you said you fell asleep!”

“Fell asleep, passed out, whatever.” Meredith lifted her shoulders, then let them fall. “I'm dying, it happens.”

A growl tore out of Yondu's throat.

“Don't do it again,” he said.

“I can't stop myself from passing out. It just happens.”

“Don't fuckin' push yourself to it, idjit! You're dying. For fuck's sake,” he said, “take it easy.”

Meredith tilted her head again, smiling.

“Are you telling me to take care of myself,” she asked.

“Yes, because ain't nobody got the time to take care of you.” Yondu crossed his arms.

“You're sweet,” she said, “I'm glad we're friends.”

The compliment made his chest tighten and his face warm. Dammit. Yondu gritted his teeth.

“Friends with a goddamn Terran,” he grumbled.

Meredith laughed. Yondu scowled and gestured to the door.

“Go on,” he said, “the boy'll be down in the hangar.”

She turned and left. Gef looked up from the comm lines; he was trying not to smile.

“Sweet, huh captain?”

A shrieking whistle pierced the air; the arrow pressed against Gef's forehead, hovering in deadly anticipation.

“Gef,” Yondu said, “how would you like an express ticket to hell?”

“Didn't hear a thing, captain.” Gef swallowed. “Won't hear a word out o' me about it, captain.”

Yondu walked forwards, letting the arrow push Gef against the wall. Yondu let him stew in fear for a few seconds, then snatched the arrow out of the air. Gef could see the scarlet light of the arrow reflecting in Yondu's merciless eyes.

“Don't make the mistake of thinkin' I won't kill every last one of you sons-of-bitches,” Yondu said.
“Aye, captain.” Gef’s voice shook. “I didn’t hear a thing, captain, I swear.”

“Good.”

Yondu stowed the arrow back in his jacket and left the bridge. Gef sat back down at the comms station, his heart pounding. His hands shook as he pulled out a datapad and drafted a betting layout. Glancing left and right, Gef paused a second before continuing. He swallowed and typed in a title; *Odds of the Captain and Quill Getting In the Sheets.*

Despite his fear, Gef was always a man of opportunities.
Partial Truths

Chapter Summary

After an accident involving Ego, Peter's trust in Yondu is put to the test. Yondu does the dad thing magnificently. Meredith confronts Kraglin about the BOMB HE FAILED TO MENTION and he deflects as only a young man in trouble with his mother can deflect.

(I listened to "Boy" by Lee Brice while I was writing this chapter and I think it really shows.
Just...someone listentothatsongsotheycanimaginethisfictoitwithmebecauseI don't even like country music)

(We made it to twenty chapters. At almost a hundred thousand words, ten thousand hits, and a thousand kudos, all I can say is thank you. From the bottom of my heart, thank you. I never expected this kind of positive feedback, but I want each and every person reading this to know that I appreciate you. When Meredith and Peter got sucked up on that spaceship, they didn't realize that they were taking nearly ten thousand Terrans with them! Thank you so much for rocketing away on this journey with us! <3 )

Peter pushed the box of inter-species translators across the table in front of Yondu.

“One-hundred-thousand units, please,” the boy said.

“What about Kraglin's cut?” Yondu raised his eyebrows.

“All he did was fly the ship.” Peter scowled in a nearly-perfect imitation of Yondu. “Pay him as a pilot, not as a partner.”

Yondu stifled the laugh in his throat.

“That so?” Yondu took the translators. “You're turnin' into quite the cutthroat dealer, boy.”

Peter puffed out his chest and tried to look tough.

“I'm Star-Lord,” he growled.

Yondu laughed in his face.

“You're Peter goddamn Quill,” Yondu said, “and you're goddamn crazy.”

“I am not!”

“Are too.”

“Am not!”

“Are too.”

“Am not!” Peter's face was turning red.
Yondu chuckled.

“You're just like your momma,” Yondu said, “stubborn as hell.”

That made Peter smile.

“I missed her while we were gone.” Peter hopped into the chair next to Yondu. “Did she miss me?”

“Course she did,” Yondu grunted, “it's your goddamn momma. She bawled her eyes out and wouldn't shut up about you, same as usual.”

“She cried?” Peter frowned.

“Your momma cries so goddamn much I'm surprised she ain't dehydrated,” Yondu said.

“She misses Earth.” Peter sat next to Yondu. “She misses Earth a lot.”

“What's so goddamn special about Terra,” Yondu grumbled.

“It's really pretty and full of good food, and my grandpa is there. My grandpa raised my mom all by himself,” Peter said, “and they're really close. Mom said grandpa is like her best friend. When I was a baby, my mom had trouble taking care of me. Grandpa helped.”

“Her pop,” Yondu remembered, “the guy who likes whiskey.”

“Yeah, he likes whiskey.” Peter laid his cheek on his knees. “Mom misses him a lot.”

“Everybody misses somebody,” Yondu said.

“Who do you miss, Yondu?” Peter blinked. “Your parents?”

“Hell no,” Yondu snarled.

“Then who?”

The question was so goddamn stupid that Yondu found himself actually thinking about it. There was no one he really missed, he reasoned, except...

“I had an old friend,” he said, “who don't talk to me anymore because I made a deal with some jackass.”

“And you miss him?”

“He's a hell of a guy.” The corners of Yondu's mouth turned up. “Taught me almost everythin' I know about bein' a Ravager. Ruthless. Calculatin'. Brilliant son-of-a-bitch. Goddamn flirt, too, but he landed himself a full-time woman.”

“He's married,” Peter said.

“Yep, to some psycho named Aleta. Damn, she was nuts. Him too. Both of 'em, crazy as hell.” Yondu chuckled. “No wonder they ended up together.”

“Have you ever been married,” Peter asked.

“Me? Hell no, fuck no, goddamn no.” Yondu scowled. “You think I'm that stupid?”

Peter laughed and hugged his knees.
“Have you ever had a girlfriend?” Peter was grinning.

“Couple times,” Yondu admitted, “before I figured out women are goddamn crazy.”

“My mom's a woman,” Peter said, “and she's not crazy.”

“Your momma's a woman alright,” Yondu muttered.

Peter blinked. “What?”

“Nothin'. Hey, ain't you supposed to be helpin' Kraglin today? Go on, get, shoo.” Yondu shoved him off of the seat. “And don’t let me hear you causin’ any trouble or your momma'll be cookin’ Terran for supper, you hear?”

Peter sulked as he stomped away.

“My mom wouldn't cook me,” he muttered.

“She wouldn't know.” Yondu bared his teeth. “I'd dice you up, let her stir-fry you.”

Peter paled and darted out of the room as fast as he could. Yondu chuckled; that boy was jumpier than a spring-loaded Orloni. The comm link in Yondu's ear buzzed, and he frowned. “Captain?”

Gef's voice came through the link. “You've got a call.”

“From?”

“Ego. He left a messsage.” Gef sighed. “Captain... you might want to come up and hear this one.”

“Greetings, Captain Udonta.” Ego's holographic image had a voice like bad oil. “You neglected to answer my previous two calls, so I am leaving this message for you. I want to know that the boy is alive and well. You told me it would take you four months to reach me; it has been months since that call and you have had no contact. I will not be ignored; call me immediately, or I will come and find you myself.”

The holographic image snapped out. Yondu bared his teeth.

“Goddamn son-of-a-bitchin' jackass,” he said.

“Do you think he'll do it, captain?” Gef frowned. “Do you think he'd come take the Quills?”

Yondu didn't move. Gef watched his captain's shoulders rise and fall with angry breaths.

“Call him,” Yondu said.

“What?”

“I said call him, you fuck-forsaken idjit!” Yondu turned with a snarl. “Lock the doors. I don't want anyone comin' in.”

Gef initiated the magnetic locks on the portal doors, then connected a call to Ego's planet. Yondu stared at the place where his hologram would appear. His blood was pounding; he could hear the steady drum beat of his heart. He'd ignored Ego for too long, played it too close to the edge. Yondu couldn't risk Ego showing up and taking the Quills. There were too many questions that would be asked, and he didn’t have answers for all of them. Peter and Meredith's confused faces appeared in
his head; he clenched his fists. They didn't need to know everything yet, he assured himself, Yondu could still handle this. He was Yondu Udonta; he could handle anything.

Ego appeared before him, a frown marring his face.

“Udonta,” he said.

“Ego,” Yondu replied.

“You've been ignoring my calls.” Ego's eyebrows contracted. “Why?”

“Listen fucknuts, we've been here, there, and everywhere tryin' to make up for all the units your stupid cargo has lost us.” Yondu bared his teeth. “You know he nearly blew my ship to fuckin' smithereens? Son-of-a-bitch was runnin' around with Maordian plasma.”

“Handle it.” Ego crossed his arms. “I didn't hire you because you were faint of heart.”

“You hired me because I'm the only one goddamn stupid enough to work for you. But don't change the subject. That little fucker has lost us more units than he's worth,” Yondu growled, “and don't get me started on the shit he's broken around here.”

“I'll pay you for damages. Just hurry up and get here,” Ego said, “I grow tired of waiting.”


“Who spit in your coffee?” Ego scowled. “You're always unpleasant, but never this hostile.”

“Your piss-pourin' dirt-brained meat-headed kid is drivin' me up the wall! I ain't never hated anything like I hate that little son-of-a-jackass,” Yondu roared, “and if he don't earn back what he cost me, I'm throwin' him out the goddamn airlock!”

“Fine, fine.” Ego rolled his eyes. “Earn back your petty money, but I expect you here in a month. Don't test me, Udonta. I am not to be trifled with.”

“Don't flatter yourself, punk-bitch,” Yondu growled, “I've met tougher than you.”

Ego sniffed, and the call ended.

“I hate that smug-ass motherfucker.” Yondu held up a fist. “One of these days I'm gonna break his jaw so many goddamn times his teeth'll look worse than mine.”

“Um... captain?” Gef's voice was low. “We have a probem.”

Yondu turned with an ugly expression. “What?”

“Peter came up and tried the doors while you were talking, and I...” Gef swallowed. “I think he might have heard the 'piss-pourin' dirt-brained meat-headed kid' part.”

Yondu's face went slack.

“So he's crying and running to cargo bay.” Gef adjusted his headset. “Probably going to cry all over his mother. Terrans; so emotional.”

Yondu was out of the bridge before Gef finished his sentence. Striding along, he gave an agitated whistle; the arrow shot ahead. Dammit! Yondu cursed at himself. He had no idea how much the kid
had heard, or even if he'd heard Ego, but he'd definitely heard Yondu threaten to throw him out an airlock. Yondu's heart beat a frantic pace. He wasn't going to airlock that stupid kid, didn't he know that by now? Sooner airlock his goddamn self.

Peter came into view, bolting down a set of stairs. Yondu gave a shrieking whistle, and the arrow pierced through the back of Peter's shirt, tugging him into the air.

“Hey!” Peter flailed wildly as the arrow zoomed him through the air. “No! No no no!”

“Shut up, idjit.” Yondu snatched him off the arrow and pressed him to the wall. “How much did you hear?”

“Let me go!” Peter's emerald-green eyes were wide with fear and panic, tears streaming down. “Don't airlock me!”

“I ain't gonna airlock you goddamn it!” Yondu slammed his elbow onto the kid's chest, stowing the arrow in his quiver. “How much did you hear?”

Peter just sobbed. His face of complete anguish made Yondu's chest tighten. Yondu closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

“Boy,” he said, “just... just calm down, okay? Ain't nobody gonna airlock you.”

“But, but you said!” Peter's voice came out in broken sobs. “You said you were!”

“I didn't mean it.” Yondu set the boy down, putting both hands on Peter's shoulders. “Come on, boy, you know I wouldn't do that. Calm down. Deep breaths.”

Peter's deep breaths were marred by his chest heaving with dry sobs, but Yondu waited.

“Better,” he asked.

Peter nodded.

“Come on, kid.” Yondu took Peter's hand. “Let's talk.”

Yondu led Peter into the old parts of the cargo bay, right down to the flight simulator. He sat Peter down on a crate, then pulled up another one and sat across from him. Peter's green eyes were wide; there was a sliver of fear in them that Yondu hadn't seen for three months. Yondu swallowed and his fists clenched. People were supposed to fear Yondu; that was what made being a Ravager captain easy. Why did it bother him that the kid was afraid of him?

“You said you hated me.” Peter's voice quavered. “You said that.”

“Didn't mean it.”

“Then why'd you say it?” Large tears threatened to pour out of Peter's eyes. “You said that! You called me a piss-pourin' dirt-brained meat-headed son-of-a-jackass!”

“I didn't mean that either. And watch your language,” Yondu added.

“Then why'd you say it!”

“Boy, I swear I'll explain.” Yondu leaned forwards, putting his elbows on his knees. “But first, you gotta tell me everything you heard. It's important.”
Peter sniffed and rubbed his eyes on his sleeves.

“You said I'd lost more units than I was worth and I'd broken things. Then somebody said they'd pay for damages and that they were tired of waiting for you. Then...” Peter's eyebrows scrunched together. “You said the person was a planet? And he said someone had spit in your coffee and that you were always unpleasant.”

Yondu swallowed. The kid had heard more than he thought, but maybe not too much.

“And then you said 'Your piss-pourin' dirt-brained meat-headed kid is drivin' me up the wall! I ain't never hated anything like I hate that little son-of-a-jackass and if he don't earn back what he cost me, I'm throwin' him out the,” Peter sobbed, “o-out the goddamn airlock!”

Peter broke out into body-shaking sobs again. Yondu reached out and grabbed him, pulling the boy onto his lap.

“It's okay, boy.” Yondu enveloped the boy in his large blue arms. “I didn't mean it. I promise, I didn't mean it.”

Peter cried onto Yondu's shoulder. Yondu closed his eyes, feeling the boy hug him tightly. What the fuck have I done, Yondu thought. The kid thought Yondu hated him.

“I don't hate you. I don't hate you at all.” Yondu's voice was a gentle growl. “You ain't a piss-pourin' dirt-brained meat-head, and you earn more units than anybody I know. You ain't a son-of-a-jackass and you ain't goin' out no goddamn airlock.”

“But why'd you say it,” Peter sobbed.

Yondu's heart beat a tattoo against his chest. He could tell Peter about Ego, about his pop being a planet and paying Yondu to come find him. But Peter would tell Meredith, and Meredith would demand to see Ego. Yondu's arms tightened around Peter's small frame. There was no way in hell that Yondu was letting Ego take this kid. Looking down at Peter's face, Yondu settled on a part of the truth.

“I lied to the man you heard me talkin' to,” Yondu said, “because he collects kids.”

“He what?” Peter's eyes widened. “Are you gonna give me to him?”

“Hell no,” Yondu growled, “not in a thousand million goddamn years.”

Peter hugged Yondu in relief.

“But this jackass thought you were one of his kids, see? And so he... well, he thought I was gonna bring you back to him.” Yondu swallowed. “But I ain't because I don't want to.”

“Am I one of his kids,” Peter asked.

“Fuck no,” Yondu said, “you're a Ravager.”

“Oh.” Peter frowned. “So you said those bad things so the guy wouldn't want me?”

“Yes. I lied and said lots of bad things about you so he'd leave us alone.” Yondu hugged Peter tight. “Because I'd rather throw my goddamn self out of an airlock then let that fuck-forsaken jackass lay a finger on you.”

Peter closed his eyes, cuddling up to Yondu. At any other time, Yondu would have stood up, let
Peter fell to the ground, barked some orders at him and left, but today was different. If the kid had heard anything more, if come up to that door thirty seconds earlier... Yondu shuddered. He'd have had to tell Peter that he was hired. He'd have to explain everything. A cold wave of fear crashed over Yondu. No one was ready for that yet. The Quills would know the truth one day, Yondu promised himself, but today wasn't that goddamn day.

“You're my favorite,” Peter muttered.

Yondu tried to swallow the wad of emotions that shot up his throat. With his eyes closed, Peter looked like a sleeping angel. Yondu took a deep breath, then chuckled.

“Thought your momma was your favorite,” Yondu said.

“Mom is my favorite lady.” Peter smiled, his eyes still closed. “You're my favorite guy.”

Yondu looked up at the ceiling, fighting the tumult of emotions that bashed itself against the walls of his chest. He could feel them practically breaking ribs, biting into his heart and beating his lungs black and blue. He let out a pained sigh.

“You're my favorite kid, you little idjit.”

“Really?” Peter opened his eyes, beaming up at Yondu. “I am?”

“Ain't exactly a lot of competition in that area, boy,” Yondu chuckled. “But yeah. Now, can you promise me somethin’?”

“What?”

“Don't tell your momma about what you heard today.” A muscle twitched in Yondu's jaw. “Not a goddamn word, you hear?”

“Why?”

“Because if she finds out somebody was tryin' to buy you, she'll get real upset. She don't need to know, okay? You'll only make her unhappy,” Yondu said.

“Oh.” Peter frowned. “Isn't that lying?”

“Technically it's obscurin' the truth,” Yondu grunted.

“Oh. Okay,” Peter said.

“You promise?”

“I promise,” Peter said.

Yondu's crimson eyes darted between Peter's emerald-green ones. The complete trust in them was right back where it had always been, and it gouged at Yondu's heart. He swallowed, nodding.

“Good,” Yondu said. “good.”

“Kraglin?”
Kraglin lifted his head from under the hood of the M-craft. Ms. Quill stood there, her arms crossed.

“Hey, Ms. Q.” Kraglin smiled. “Just fixin' these coolant distributor tubes. How are you feelin' today?”

“I had a blackout at breakfast,” Meredith said coolly, “thank you for asking.”

The smile slid off Kraglin's face.

“Somethin' wrong, Ms. Q?”

“Kraglin, do you remember what you told me before you put Peter on that ship?”

Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck.

“Not really,” he confessed.

“You said that there were no guns on that planet besides the ones you were taking with you,” Meredith said, “so there was no way Peter could get hurt.”

“And that's completely true,” Kraglin said.

Meredith's grey eyes squinted.

“Then why, I ask myself, did you mention a bomb to Yondu while you were talking on the bridge?”

Kraglin's mouth formed the word *fuck*. He scrambled to his feet, dropping his omnitool.

“Ms. Quill,” he said, “I can explain.”

“Please do, because a bomb sounds like exactly the kind of thing that would hurt Peter.” Meredith's eyebrows raised. “And then, to top it all off, he told me that it had plasma in it. Maordian plasma. The exact same plasma that Peter stole to begin with. The plasma that I *specifically* told him not to touch anymore.”

“Ms. Quill, Modarian steel can only be breached by a couple things in the galaxy, and Maordian plasma is one of them.” Kraglin ran a hand through his cropped hair. “I'm sorry, but the cap'n told me specifically not to tell you any details of the job.”

“And you listened to him.”

“He's my cap'n, Ms. Q. What he says is what I do, no question about it.”

“Did he say why you weren't supposed to tell me?”

“He... sort of,” Kraglin admitted, “but I'll admit I was a bit fuzzy on his reasonin'.”

Meredith closed her eyes, crossing her arms tightly over her chest.

“Are you mad at me, Ms. Q?”

Kraglin's voice was soft and wounded. Meredith's eyes snapped open. The Xandarian's expression of guilt and apprehension softened her heart.

“Oh honey, I can't be mad at you.” She sighed. “I'm just a little disappointed that you didn't tell me anything, but I know how much you want to be a good first-mate, and a first-mate follows orders.”
“I really am sorry, Ms. Q.”

“I know, honey.” Meredith smiled slightly. “It’s okay.”

She hugged him. Kraglin froze up for a second, then patted her back.

“Besides,” she said as she leaned back, “now I’m just pissed at Yondu and that ain’t much of a change from normal.”

Kraglin laughed awkwardly, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Take it easy on the cap’n, Ms. Quill. He ain’t as bad as he acts sometimes, honest.” Kraglin dropped down and kept working on the M-craft’s coolant system. “Shucks, only reason he didn’t tell you anything was because he knew it’d make you upset.”

“So he chose not to tell me so I wouldn’t be upset,” she said, “and then I found out anyway and now I’m twice as upset.”

Kraglin winced.

“The cap’n ain’t always good with honesty, Ms. Q.”

“So it seems,” she said coldly.

Kraglin kept his head low and just focused on repairing the M-craft. If Ms. Quill and Yondu were fighting, that was their business. Meredith stomped away. Kraglin disconnected a coolant tube, holding it in his mouth as he examined its induction port. That had gone better then he expected, he reasoned, but the problem wasn’t completely fixed yet. Kraglin felt like he’d just dodged a lightning bolt, and he had a sinking feeling in his stomach that that thunderstorm was now rolling over Yondu Udonta.

Yondu came up from the cargo hold, holding Peter’s hand. Peter walked along with him, chatting. He was so much like Meredith, Yondu thought, once the kid stopped crying, he just ran his goddamn mouth.

“And so then the lady Gora, she told them to just open the vault and give me the translators,” Peter chattered, “and then they started carrying the boxes to the ship.”

Yondu grunted.

“Do you know why Quo Modarians are purple? It’s because their planet is purple,” Peter explained, “and so they evolved to blend in. Yakeel told me that.”

Yondu grunted again.

“I like Quo Modarians,” Peter said, “they’re nice.”

“Boy?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up,” Yondu said.

“Okay.” Peter hung onto Yondu’s hand. “Swing me.”

“I hold onto your arm and you swing me back and forth. Grandpa used to do it,” Peter explained.

“Ain't you a little big for that,” Yondu said.

Peter made a face.

“I thought you were strong,” he said.

“Alright, you little idjit.” Yondu's hand curled into a fist. “Hold on.”

Peter pulled his knees up, holding onto Yondu's arm. Yondu grabbed Peter under the knees and swung his arm back and forth. Peter laughed. Yondu's eyes darted around. No one could see this, or he might as well gouge out his throat with a fork. He heard footsteps on the stairs and cursed.

“Fuck. Peter, let go,” he mumbled.

“Nope!” Peter laughed. “Faster!”

Meredith Quill came up the stairs. When she saw them, her expression of annoyance faltered.

“Peter, what are you doing,” she asked.

“I got Yondu to play the swinging game with me.” Peter grinned. “He's really strong, look!”

Yondu squared his shoulders, but he couldn't quite meet Meredith's eyes. To his surprise, she wouldn't look at him either.

“Peter.” Meredith crossed her arms and sighed. “You're going to get Yondu into trouble.”

“What, me? How?”

“You think he wants the other Ravagers knowing he's playing games with you when he should be working?” Meredith walked up and held out a hand. “Come on, baby.”

Sighing, Peter let go of Yondu. He took Meredith's hand, and she knelt down.

“Go down and help Kraglin, won't you,” she asked.

Peter wouldn't look up at her.

“He's fixing a ship,” she said softly, “he might show you some things.”

Green eyes widened.

“Really?” Peter bolted off. “Wow, M-craft stuff!”

Yondu and Meredith watched him stomp down the stairs and race off.

“You didn't have to do that,” he lied, “I can handle the boys.”

“You've been keeping things from me.” Meredith's back was to Yondu. “Things I ought to know about.”

A million thoughts bolted through Yondu's brain. Ego, the other children, getting hired, the exile, the cargo thing; all the thoughts seared through his mind as she turned and glared at him.
“Have not,” he heard himself say.

“Don’t try to deny it; Kraglin told me.” Meredith's voice was as cold and hard as iced steel. “I already know everything.”

Yondu was going to kill that Xandarian.

“Look, Mery.” Yondu had never heard that pleading note in his voice before. “I can explain.”

“Really? You can explain why my son was handling a plasma bomb?” Meredith's eyes flashed. “Oh I'd love to hear you try and dance around this, Yondu.”

“Plasma?” Yondu breathed a sigh of relief. “You mean you know everything about the Modaria job.”

“Yes, I mean that stupid job!” Meredith threw her arms down, curling her hands into fists. “The one you sent Peter on out of nowhere, the one that had a bomb! A bomb, you big lummox.”

“Lummox?”

“It means oaf,” she snapped, “don't change the subject.”

“That bomb was a spring-protected series of combustible plasma tubes.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “Gef rigged it himself. That kid could have kicked that thing all the way to Modaria and it wouldn't have busted. Only thing that would set it off was the detonator, and Kraglin had that. You think Kraglin would let that kid get vaporized?”

“No,” she said, “but...”

“But nothin’.” Yondu bared his teeth. “You think I would have sent him on that job if I thought there was a chance in hell that kid would get hurt? Name one goddamn time I've ever put that kid in danger.”

Meredith opened her mouth.

“Me puttin' him in danger,” Yondu clarified, “not just him getting into danger of his own goddamn accord.”

Meredith closed her mouth, her eyebrows contracting.

“Exactly. So don't go preachin' to me about keepin' that boy safe. I know what the hell I'm doin', Mery, even if I don't always share every goddamn detail with you,” he said.

“Why didn't you tell me?”

“Because you're his momma,” Yondu said, “and you woulda freaked out and not let him go, and you wouldn't be at two-hundred-thousand units right now. One-hundred-thousand more and you're fuckin' healed, remember?”

“I remember. I'm sorry, but you should have told me anyway. I have to learn to handle this kind of thing.” Meredith rubbed her arms and sighed. “I can't go around snapping at everyone because no one tells me anything. If this is part of Peter's life now, I have to learn to handle it. You have to tell me.”

“Next time,” he said, “I will.”
“Thank you,” she mumbled.

“Don't say that,” Yondu said automatically.

Meredith looked at the ground, kicking her feet slightly. Yondu watched her; that tumult of emotions was attacking his insides again. He had a feverish desire to just tell her everything, about Ego and Peter and Stakar and everything, and he had no idea why. Yondu clamped his jaw shut. These were dangerous impulses.

“Look,” he said, “I know I ain't the most honest son-of-a-bitch in the galaxy, but you gotta believe that I do what I do for a goddamn reason. Everything I do is to keep that kid alive, alright?”

“You're getting attached to him,” she said.

“He's a sneaky little fucker,” Yondu mumbled, “kinda grows on you after a while.”

The corner of Meredith's mouth turned up.

“He likes you a lot,” she said.

“Apparently, I'm his fuckin' goddamn favorite,” Yondu said, “and ain't that a kick to the gut.”

“His favorite?” Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Thought I was his favorite.”

“Just his favorite Ravager.” Yondu couldn't meet her eyes again. “You're his favorite person.”

Meredith beamed.

“And don't you forget it. I might be small and dying and a crybaby,” she chuckled, “but if there's one thing I know how to do, it's take care of my baby.”

Yondu thought about Ego. If Meredith knew everything about him, there was no way she'd take Peter there. But if she knew everything about Ego, she'd have to know everything about Yondu, too, and there was no way she'd stay on board. Yondu's chest tightened. He couldn't tell her; he'd never see the boy again if he did.

“Then trust me not to do anything stupid to hurt the boy,” he said.

Meredith examined him for a second.

“I trust you not to hurt Peter,” she said.

There it was; that glimmer of faith in him, flickering from inside Terran eyes. It hit Yondu like a shotgun blast. He couldn't understand how Terrans could be so damn trusting. Meredith walked away, leaving Yondu stewing in his thoughts. Yondu had to figure out what he was going to do about Ego, and he only had a month to do so. He paced to the bridge, his head rapidly churning out lies and plots all designed to keep the Quills safe. Through it all, a creeping sensation ran up his spine. Something was coming, he decided, and it was coming fast.
Hot Shots

Chapter Summary

Yondu takes Peter shooting again, and Meredith tags along. Meredith with a gun; what could possibly go wrong?

Yondu had taken Peter down onto H-233, a sandy desert planet, to practice shooting. It was his way to apologize to Peter for saying shit about him on the bridge, although Yondu kept reminding himself that he had nothing to be sorry for. Peter was so good at shooting that he wanted to show his mother; surprisingly, Yondu was lenient enough to allow her to come. So now, as Yondu and Peter practiced weaponry, Meredith stood in the shade and watched. She had to admit, Peter was getting pretty good. She couldn't condone an eight-year-old having a firearm, of course, but Peter was completely practiced in gun safety, and Yondu made him recite every bit of it before he even picked up the gun. Peter's aim wasn't bad either, Meredith admitted, although he was still working on that. Peter took aim at a target Yondu had draw on some rock. Peter fired thrice; two of his shots hit the mark.

“Good job, Peter!” Meredith clapped, grinning. “That's my baby.”

Peter beamed; Yondu grabbed Peter's arm and straightened it.

“Keep focused, dammit,” he said, “do it again.”

Peter fired; this time, all of his shots hit the mark.

“Better.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “Go inside, get you some water, then come back out.”

Peter ran back up the ramp of Yondu's ship. Yondu rubbed the sweat off his forehead, walking towards where Meredith stood in the shade.

“Damn hot out here,” he grunted.

“You're telling me.” Meredith waved a hand in front of her face. “I've never been to the Sahara, but I bet this is what it feels like.”

“Sahara?”

“Famous Terran desert,” Meredith said.

Yondu grunted and peeled his shirt over his head. Meredith bit her lips together. Her eyes flicked to him, then to the ground, then back again. He looked at her, confused.

“Look, if you're performing a strip-tease,” she said, “I'm sorry but I don't have any units to give you.”

Yondu barked a laugh. He used the shirt to wipe the sweat off his forehead.

“It'd be a cold day in hell before anybody started payin' me to take off my clothes,” he said.

“Same here,” Meredith chuckled, “unless 'dying damsel' is somebody's type.”
“Might be somebody's type,” Yondu said.

“Are you kidding?” Meredith crossed her arms, grinning. “I've got about as many curves as a pair of parallel lines.”

“Maybe they'll like you for your shitty personality.” Yondu bared his crooked grin.

Meredith snorted.

“If shitty personality is what they're after,” she said, “I can't compete with you.”

“Ouch, Mery.” Yondu shook out his shirt, sending sand everywhere. “That almost hurt.”

“Almost, huh? I'll have to try harder,” she said.

“You're full of pepper,” Yondu chuckled, “I'll give you that.”

Meredith raised an eyebrow. “Pepper?”


“You mean attitude,” she said.

“Kinda.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“Don't say-”

“If you tell me not to say thank you I will charge you a hundred units,” she snapped.

Yondu's mouth clamped shut.

“Thank you,” she breathed, “I was getting so damn tired of that.”

“We ain't used to hearin' it. Ravagers don't do gratitude,” Yondu said.

“Yeah you do.” Meredith smiled. “You don't say thank you, but you do gratitude.”

Yondu scowled. “How d'you figure that?”

“The more nice things you do for a Ravager, the nicer they treat you. Not sure if it's gratitude or guilt, honestly, but there you go,” she said.

“Who the hell treats you nice,” Yondu demanded to know.

“Kraglin. Gef. Holdon, some days. You,” she said, “when you feel like it.”

“I ain't nice,” Yondu snarled.

“Remember that Orloni that didn't die?”

“That was so Peter wouldn't cry his damn lungs out.”

“You teach Peter to shoot and to fly, which just makes him so happy I'm surprised he doesn't burst from it.” Meredith looked out at the soft slopes of the sand dunes. “And you're still taking me to the doctor when I need to go, even though I'm not cargo anymore.”
“I sure as hell don't want to take care of your kid,” Yondu grunted.
Meredith turned her head to look at him. Her silver eyes twinkled.
“But you would take care of him, wouldn't you?”
“He’s a Ravager.” Yondu shifted. “We take care of our own.”
Meredith’s smile widened.
“You helped me back to my room when I was drunk,” she said, “the night you said we could be friends.”
“Fuck.” Yondu's shoulder sagged. “You remember that?”
Meredith laughed at Yondu's expression of complete distraught.
“I know, I acted really weird that night.” Meredith chuckled. “I'm a bit of an emotional drunk.”
“Emotional drunk? Goddamn, woman,” he said, “when ain't you emotional?”
“We can't all be the stoic Yondu Udonta,” she said.
Yondu threw his shirt over his neck, squaring his shoulders. Stoic; that was a word he knew. Not a bad one, either.
“Who is also an emotional drunk,” Meredith added with a grin.
“I am not,” Yondu snapped.
“Are too.”
“Am not.”
“Are too.”
“Am not.”
“Yondu, you are one of the most emotional drunks I've ever met,” Meredith said.
“Prove it,” he snapped.
She turned her big gray eyes on him.
“You said thank you when you were drunk,” she said, “and not even in a sarcastic way.”
“I did not,” he mumbled.
“Yondu.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “There's literally no one on this planet but us and Peter. Who do you think you're fooling?”
Yondu turned that over in his head for a second.
“Fine,” he said, “I get a little stupid when I'm drunk.”
“I told you, I like you better when you're drunk.” Meredith smiled. “You stop posturing and actually talk to me.”
“Posturin’?” Yondu bared his teeth. “Who says I'm posturin’?”

“I do. You're an asshole on the Eclector,” she said, “but you act like a completely different person when you're around Peter.”

“Don't gotta be a captain when I'm around Peter.” Yondu crossed his arms. “Gotta stay tough on the Eclector. Every one of those unit-hungry bastards would slit my throat as soon as look at me.”

“You really believe that?”

“Have to. I didn't get this far by bein' naïve. Ravagers are feral,” Yondu explained, “if they smell weakness in one of the pack, they'll tear the fucker to shreds.”

“Why am I still around, then,” she asked.

“Because I'm here.” Yondu squared his shoulders. “As long as I'm around, ain't no one laying a hand on you or the boy.”

Meredith studied him for a minute.

“Why,” she asked.

“Because I said so, goddamn it.”

“But why is that you want to protect us specifically,” she asked.

“Are you complainin’?”

“No, but...”

“Then shut up,” Yondu growled, “and don't question the way I run my ship.”

“Fine.” Meredith sighed. “Keep your secrets.”

“I will,” he assured her.

Meredith rubbed the sweat off her arms. Yondu's eyes lingered on the soft slope of her shoulders, but he forced himself to look down. The blaster Peter had been using was still strapped to his side.

“Speakin’ of protection,” he said, “don't you know how to shoot?”

“A rifle, not a pistol.” Meredith looked at the blaster. “And sure as heck not one of those things.”

“Come on.” Yondu walked back out into the sun. “About time you took a crack at it.”

“Wait, me?” Meredith hesitated. “Yondu, I haven't shot anything since I was peggin' raccoons with my papa's .22.”

“Get over here.” Yondu fiddled with the blaster, a small smile on his face. “Stubborn woman.”

Meredith walked up. Yondu pointed at the target he'd drawn on the rock.

“That's your target, see?” Yondu held up the blaster, pointing to each part in turn. “Trigger. Pull it to shoot. This is the action. Pull it back first; turns it on. Little switch here, that's the safety. Keep it on.”

“Okay.” Meredith took the blaster. “Okay. So...”
A blue-white bolt of light shot out of the blaster; Meredith shrieked and dropped it. The blaster fired again in rapid succession; the Terran screamed and jumped behind Yondu. Meredith clung to Yondu, her eyes wide.

“Oh my God I almost died.” Her heartbeat was thrumming. “Oh my God please don't make me do that again.”

Yondu howled with laughter. He reached down and picked up the blaster, his whole body shaking with mirth.

“Got ya,” he said with a grin.

The dry heat had made Meredith's curls frizz up, and the excitement had them blown all about her face. She gave Yondu a look of wide-eyed indignation.

“What did you do?”

“Put it on automatic,” he chuckled, “and squeezed the trigger before I handed it over. Fires a five-round burst.”

“You asshole!”

Yondu laughed. He put the blaster back on manual and offered it to her.

“Go on,” he said, “for real this time.”

Meredith's eyes narrowed.

“Don't you trust me,” he asked.

Meredith rubbed her arms. “No tricks?”

“No tricks. Promise.”

Gingerly, Meredith took the blaster in her hands. She held it the way she'd seen her pap hold a pistol, cupping her right hand with her left, left elbow bent, right arm straight.

“Good. You done this before,” Yondu observed.

“I've seen it done. I told you,” she said, “I'm shit with a pistol.”

“Shoot, dammit.”

Meredith squeezed the trigger tightly; a bolt of blue-white energy bashed into the sand, a good three feet off the target. She sighed and lowered the pistol.

“You're too tense.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “Relax. Try again.”

Meredith raised the pistol and took a deep breath. As she let it out, she pulled the trigger. The shot hit a foot away, but she at least hit the rock.

“Still too tense,” Yondu said.

“I'm holding a space gun blasting at a rock three gazillion miles from home,” she said, “of course I'm tense.”
Yondu came up behind her. He lowered his head so he could speak low into her ear.

“Relax,” he muttered.

Meredith had never been less relaxed in her life. Her whole body was attuned to his, pulled taut by some unspoken kinetic energy. Her shoulders tensed up, and she swallowed. Meredith looked down the sights and focused on the target; anything to distract her from his voice in her ear.

“Now shoot,” he said.

Meredith’s finger squeezed the trigger; the bolt missed the target and flew past the rock.

“Damn,” he chuckled, “you can't shoot two feet in front of you.”

“I told you,” she said.

Yondu took the blaster from her. He pulled off the stun pack and attached a glowing orange box to it.

“Here.” He handed it back. “Try it now.”

“Okay.” Meredith picked it up and aimed; the pistol was much heavier now. “What did you do?”

“Fun little bonus. It packs a helluvah kick though,” Yondu said, “so you probably want me doin’ this.”

Yondu pressed his bare chest against Meredith's back and wrapped his hands around her wrists. Meredith inhaled; in the desert sun, the heat coming off Yondu was almost unbearable.

“Go ahead,” he said in her ear, “shoot.”

Meredith closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and squeezed the trigger.

A gigantic orb of crackling orange energy shot out of the gun like a cannonball. Meredith screamed as the recoil slammed her back, throwing her arms in the air. The orange energy sphere landed on the rock and exploded into crackling energy, vaporizing the rock and the sand around it. Yondu roared with laughter at Meredith's wide eyes. The sand filled in the hole she'd blasted. Meredith looked down at the blaster; Yondu could see the whites of her eyes.

“What,” she asked, “was that?”

“Kallusian energy grenade.” Yondu took the blaster from her, still grinning. “Can't really miss, can ya?”

“Not with that, heck no!” Meredith ran a hand through her curls. “Wow.”

“That was so awesome!”

Meredith and Yondu turned. Peter was running towards them with wide green eyes, a huge grin splashed across his face. He rushed Meredith, hugging her tightly.

“That was so cool,” he said.

Meredith laughed and picked him up. “Thanks baby.”

Meredith looked at Yondu, then back at Peter. Yondu could see her turning something in her head.
“He's probably too little to fire that, isn't he,” she asked.

Yondu's eyebrows raised.

“You're shittin' me. Miss Don't-touch-that-it's-dangerous wants her boy to fire a Kallusian energy grenade?”

“I mean, if he wanted to and it was safe, I mean... is it safe or is that something he's just not ready for,” she said, “because if you think he shouldn't then that's a completely different story.”

Yondu looked at the blaster he held in his hands.

“What the hell,” Yondu said, “it ain't that big of a kick. He'll need help, though.”

Peter lit up.

“Mom, mom!” He squeezed her tightly. “Mom will you do it with me?”

“Oh baby, I don't know.” Meredith eyed the blaster. “It's got an awful big kick. Maybe Yondu should help you do it.”

“Boy don't want me,” Yondu said, “he wants you.”

Meredith had no resistance against Peter's pleading green eyes. She sighed.

“Okay,” she said, “let's do it.”

“Awesome,” Peter exclaimed.

Yondu grinned, showing his jagged teeth. He flipped on the safety and pointed to the leg of a rock formation.

“There's your target,” he said.

Peter's eyes lit up. There was a destructive tendency in kids, Yondu thought, that was actually pretty goddamn cool. Yondu helped Meredith brace Peter and lined up the shot for them. Her hair kept blowing in his face, hitting him with the scent of soap and leather.

“Sorry,” she said, “the dry air just makes it go everywhere.”

Yondu hooked his chin over her head, pressing them down.

“Got it,” he grunted.

Yondu lined up the shot and stepped back.

“Take off the safety,” he said.

Peter hit the little switch.

“Fire,” Yondu said.

Peter pulled the trigger. Another gigantic orange sphere came rocketing out of the blaster; the recoil knocked Peter and Meredith over backwards, leaving them sprawled out in the hot sand.

“Shit!” Yondu ran forwards and grabbed their upper arms. “Come on, get up.”
“That was huge!” Peter sprang up and watched the orange ball. “Wow, look at it go.”

Meredith got to her feet, shaking the sand out of her curls. The orange ball smashed into the leg of the rock formation, vaporizing it. There was a great crack, and the entire rock formation lilted to the side. It crumbled before them, sending great boulders of rock rolling through the sand. The sound boomed through the desert air.

“Wow,” Meredith said.

“That was so cool!” Peter looked up at Yondu. “Can we go blow up more stuff?”

Yondu was so goddamn proud of that destructive little idjit.

“No,” Yondu said, “we gotta get back to the Eclector.”

Peter's face fell, and Yondu had to admit he was a little disappointed, too. But neither of the Terrans needed to be in this kind of heat for so long, especially not the dying one. Yondu herded them back onto his ship. Meredith dropped into the co-pilot's seat. Yondu's eyes flicked over to her, but he didn't say anything. He primed the ship's computer, ignited the thrusters, and the ship rose off the surface.

“Thanks for letting him fire that orange globe thing,” Meredith said.

“You let him do it.” Yondu kept his eyes trained on the skies as they flew through the atmosphere. “Usually you flip your shit about that kind of thing.”

“I told you. If Peter's going to be a Ravager, I'm going to have to deal with this.” Meredith took a deep breath. “Peter's Jason's son.”

Yondu stiffened at the mention of Ego's alias, but Meredith continued.

“Peter's not one-hundred-percent Terran. Part of him belongs out here in space, and I... I don't know how to do all this space stuff. You do,” she said, “so I trust your judgment on this kind of thing.”

Yondu's brow contracted slightly, and a frown marred his mouth.

“You trust me,” he said.

“It was pretty dicey for a while there,” she warned, “with the automatic-blaster-prank.”

“Come on, Mery.” Yondu snorted. “That's a classic.”

“But,” she continued, “the answer is still yes. On all things space-related, I trust your judgment more than mine. I have a tendency to overreact to this kind of thing, and you don't.”

Yondu shifted in his seat.

“You trust me,” he repeated.

“Yeah.” Meredith stared out the window. “That's what I said, genius.”

Yondu gripped the steering mechanism so hard that his knuckles paled.

“When did that start,” he said.

“I saw you playing on the bridge with Peter, swinging him on your arm like my papa used to do.”
Meredith's mouth curved into a smile. “You wouldn't hurt him. I can trust you.”

Hot guilt was oozing through Yondu's veins. Fire burned against the window as Yondu's ship exited the atmosphere. They soared through the sky, headed to the Eclector. Peter came up front and watched the stars go by; Meredith stroked his hair, smiling. Yondu kept his eyes on the Eclector, seeing it and yet not seeing it. The ship docked in the hangar bay, and Yondu dropped the loading ramp. With his hands on his hips, Yondu watched Peter and Meredith leave.

That was it, he thought. Yondu took a deep breath and exhaled. There was no way in hell Ego was getting his goddamn Terrans.
Yondu needs to get his hands on a signal scrambler to buy himself more time. This proves to be remarkably more dangerous than he expected, especially when the Terrans get involved.

(Everyone but Kraglin gets shirtless. The Kree get involved. Meredith took a wilderness first-aid/CPR class in college. Meredith can in fact hit the broad side of a barn.)

Yondu leaned back in his chair and stared at the starscape. Gef knew that that was how Yondu got all of his best ideas. The captain would stare at the stars, and through the void, ideas would come to him. Right now, as the Eclector orbited the Xandarian outpost of Neoke, Gef could practically see the gears turning in Yondu's mind. The captain was a genius, no doubt about it, and Gef knew exactly what problem the captain was solving; Ego.

Gef let a breath out, shaking his head. Damn. Ego was threatening to come get the Quills, and that just couldn't happen. It made Gef uneasy, keeping the truth about the Quills' destination from them, but that was the order, and Gef followed it. A blinking light got Gef's attention.

“Captain?” Gef called from the comms station. “You've got a call.”

“From jackass?” Yondu bared his teeth.

“No, captain, this one's from crazy Algon. He says he's got something there he wants you to take a look at,” Gef said, “says you're the only person he'll sell it to.”

Yondu's curiosity was piqued.

“What is it,” he asked.

“He won't tell me. Says it's for your ears only.”

“Fine.” Yondu stood. “Patch it in.”

Almost as soon as it appeared, Algon's holographic image tried to hug Yondu. Yondu bared his teeth as the holographic arms swooshed through his body.

“Oh.” Algon's face fell. “I forget.”

“What the fuck you callin' me for, you great lemon-colored lummox,” Yondu said.

“Lummox?” Algon's fins twitched in interest. “Is that a kind of weasel?”

“No, you idjit, it means big stupid oaf,” Yondu snapped.

“Where'd you hear that one, captain,” Gef asked.

“Mery called me that,” Yondu muttered.
“Mery?” Algon's frills spread wide in joy. “Is this the Terran woman? She is Peter Quill's mother, yes? Is she there? Can I meet her? Does she like to shop?”

“Goddamn it.” Yondu put his hand over his face. “Yes, Meredith is Peter's momma. Yes, she's a Terran. No, she ain't here. No, you can't meet her, and she ain't got the money to shop.”

Algon's frills drooped in disappointment.

“All women should have money to shop,” he said.

“She's savin' it up for a cerebral core. Ain't got any extra to fool around with,” Yondu said, “so don't go tryin' to talk her into buyin' anything. Now what do you have that's so goddamn important?”

“Ahaahaha!” Algon clapped his large claws together, grinning so wide that Yondu could see the rows of his sharp white teeth. “Yondu Udonta, I have something spectacular for you. Behold!”

Algon flourished dramatically, holding out a small chunk of what looked like stone between his claws.

“A rock.” Yondu snorted. “Shit, Algon, I think you've been on that ship too long. Rocks still exist, idjit.”

“This is not rock, it is metal.” Algon threw it up in the air and caught it, flashing a knowing grin. “A very special kind of metal. *Yama* metal.”

Yondu's face went slack.

“Ahaahaha!” Algon leapt for joy, stomping with his huge clawed feet and vibrating his frills in ecstasy. “Yes! Yes, that is precisely the face I thought you would make! Ahaahaha! See, now you must visit me and I must meet the nice Terran woman and you must shop here!”

“How the fuck did you find it?” Yondu's eyes were wide. “I thought the Kree got it all.”

“Find it, find it? Who said anything about finding?” Algon chuckled, giving Yondu a roguish wink. “I stole it.”

Yondu couldn't help it; a huge grin spread across his face.

“Algon you son-of-a-bitch. You stole from the fuckin' Kree Empire.” Yondu chuckled and shook his head. “Damn, you're crazy.”

“No crazier than you,” Algon reminded. “So, when can I expect you?”

“Tomorrow,” Yondu said, “after I'm done with this business on Neoke.”

“Tomorrow?” Algon nearly dropped the yama. “So soon? But I have to roast the laukha and I must decide what I am going to wear to meet the lovely Terran woman and I haven't cleaned and what if she wants to meet a vendor and they aren't scheduled?”

“It's Mery,” Yondu said, “she'll be happy just to meet you.”

Algon's rust-orange eyes widened.

“Really,” he asked in a small voice.

“Really.” Yondu grunted. “Damn woman's happy to meet almost anyone.”
“That is so kind. That is the kindest. I must meet this woman,” Algon said with a quaver in his voice, “and she must shop here.”

“She's broke,” Yondu said.

“Irrelevant!” Algon's frills snapped out in sudden anger. “Does this woman love to shop?”

“She's a woman,” Yondu said, “don't all of 'em love to shop?”

“And is she kind and loving and beautiful,” Algon demanded to know.

Yondu turned slightly purple.

“I guess,” he muttered.

“Then she will shop here,” Algon said firmly, “and that is it. I am surprised you have not brought her already. She is sick, is she not?”

“Dyin’,” Yondu said.

“Nothing beats death like retail therapy.” Algon puffed out his chest with pride. “And Algon's Amphibious Market is a medical paradise for retail therapy.”

“Shoppin' don't beat death, idjit.” Yondu scowled. “We'll be there tomorrow; try not to scare her to death when you meet her.”

“I will try not to,” Algon promised.

“See you then, idjit,” Yondu said, ending the call.

The holographic image of Algon disappeared. Yondu rubbed his jaw.

“Damn,” he said, “the son-of-a-bitch robbed the Kree.”

“Think we'll have trouble, captain?” Gef frowned. “Kree probably tracked Algon down.”

“All the more reason to get there fast.” Yondu turned and went down the stairs, the tails of his coat swinging. “Chart the course.”

“Where are you going, captain?”

“Neoke.” Yondu hit the door panel. “I'll be back in two hours.”

The portal slid shut behind him. Gef raised his bushy eyebrows.

“Captain's a wee bit touchy today,” he noticed.

“It's Ego. Always puts the captain on edge.” Drazkar handed Gef a box of broken comm links. “Hey, fix these.”

“Ach, these'll be the busted ones,” Gef said.

Gef examined the broken comm links, then glanced up at Drazkar.

“Say Draz,” he asked, “how crazy are you?”

Drazkar grinned and crossed his huge furry arms.
“I'm a Ravager,” he said.

“Good.” Gef gave furtive looks from side-to-side, then pulled out a datapad. “Take a look.”

“Is this another one of your bets, Gef?”

“Yeah, but this is the big one. The motherload. The masterpiece.” Gef covered the datapad, giving Drazkar a serious look. “If you look at this, you're givin' your word that the captain won't hear a word of it.”

“We're betting on the captain?” Drazkar shook his head. “That's stupid, Gef.”

“Trust me.” Gef's eyes sparkled with a light that belied his age. “This is the wager of the age.”

Drazkar's eyes darted from Gef's serious face to the datapad.

“Alright,” he said, “you've got my word as a Ravager. Split my stomach if I do you wrong!”

Gef turned over the datapad. Drazkar read the title and went completely rigid.

“I know,” Gef said with a wide grin, “I'm flirting with death here.”

“You're nuts.” Drazkar's voice had dropped to a frantic whisper. “What do you think you're doing? If the captain finds out, you're dead!”

“He won't find out.” Gef picked up a broken comm link, lazily turning it in his fingers. “The only people who've seen this are people who've sworn an oath not to tell him. It's the wager o' the age, Draz. High-stakes, and the odds change every day.”

“The captain and Quill?”


Neoke was a hot, tropical planet filled with ocean resorts and expensive living. That had also given rise to a rather seedy fringe of alleyways and pawn shops that clung to the uglier parts of the planet like some giant lichen. It was in that fringe area that Yondu had business, and so Peter and Meredith Quill coming along was not an option.

“I told you no the first fifty goddamn times.” Yondu spotted Peter following him. “Get back to the ship, idjit.”

Peter pouted. Meredith came speed-walking behind him, her hair frazzled.

“Peter, if you don't get on the ship this instant you are in so much trouble,” she said.

“Listen to your momma, boy.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “This ain't no place for you.”

Peter stared at the ground, his shoulders slouched. Meredith picked him up, sighing.

“Sorry,” she said to Yondu, “he's just excited about the beach.”

Meredith tilted her head towards the sandy strip of land that was dotted with vendors and tourist
types. Yondu grimaced.

“Fine,” he said, “but stay in view of the ship. Don't want no one kidnappin’ you both, understood?”

Peter nodded; Meredith sighed. Peter took off like a rocket towards the beach.

“Last one in the water's a rotten egg,” he yelled.

Meredith took another deep breath and chased after Peter. Yondu watched her catch up with him, hovering around the boy like a nervous Terran satellite. Yondu chuckled and turned towards the alley. He found his way to a corner pawn shop. A scrawny purple Kallusian was behind the counter; he leered at Yondu when he came in.

“Yondu Udonta,” the Kallusian said, “you've got a lot of nerve coming in here.”

“Shut your mouth before I put my foot in it, Ortiz.” Yondu scowled. “I need a scrambler.”

Ortiz scrolled through a datapad lazily.

“Why would I help you? Stakar Ogord banished you,” Ortiz said.

A trilling whistle brought the arrow to Ortiz’s forehead; he swallowed.

“You were always great with words, Yondu.” Ortiz pointed to a shelf. “Scramblers are there.”

Yondu grabbed a couple scramblers, testing their capacity and merit. While he did, he kept up a warbling whistle that pressed the arrow to Ortiz’s forehead. Finally, Yondu grabbed the largest of the scramblers and came to the counter. He pushed the scrambler across and took the arrow out of midair.

“How much,” he asked.

“For you, exile, three-thousand units.” Ortiz scowled. “I liked you better when you were just Stakar's little pet archeology project.”

Yondu turned around and walked out of the shop with the scrambler in hand.

“Hey, hey!” Ortiz put both hands on the counter. “You have to pay for that!”

A whistle pierced through the air. Ortiz fell face-down on the counter, blood pooling from the hole through his chest. Yondu whistled, returning the arrow to his hand, and then stowed it in his quiver. He cracked a wide grin and snagged a bag of chips on the way out.

“See you in hell, Ortiz.”

The door slammed shut. Ortiz lifted his head, gritting his teeth. He knew he didn't have much time. Ortiz grasped for something under the counter. His fingers curled around the datapad. He took a few painful, gasping breaths, then laid on the floor with his datapad. He drafted a one-word message, then sent it along with his specific location.

“Ha.” Ortiz laid his head back and took a last, shuddering breath. “See you in hell, Udonta.”

Deep in the thralls of the city, the Kree were planning to take over Neoke. The warriors stood, grim and prepared. They had been holed up here in this dark, dingy lair for months. There was only one
small group currently infiltrating Neoke, but the Kree were not worried. There would be much glory in defeating the Xandarians, and time was not an object. The Kree commander, Tel-Dar, picked up the blinking datapad that laid on his desk. A message had arrived from one of his contacts; the disgusting Kallusian who provided them with weapons. The message was one location and one word.

_Udonta._

Tel-Dar grinned, showing blackened teeth.

“Mobilize.” He turned around and snapped at the warriors. “We have a rebel to eliminate.”

Yondu tossed the scrambler up in his hands, grinning. This would buy him more time. The scrambler would send out thousands of dummy signals of the Eclector; Ego would have to personally travel to each location to search for the Eclector. Planet or not, Yondu knew that would take months. And then, when the signals ran out, Yondu would just buy another scrambler and start the process over again. He stowed the scrambler in his jacket and opened his bag of chips. Ego might never find the Quills; the thought was immensely gratifying.

Grinning, Yondu munched on his chips. No more jackass, no more problems. Meredith and Peter would never have to know about the deal or about his exile. Yondu paced down an alley, coming to a four-alley intersection. He heard footsteps fall in behind him, and a prickling chill went up his spine.

“Yondu Udonta!”

Yondu turned around. A lone Kree stood in the alley. Glinting on his chest was the mark of a commanding officer. Yondu bared his teeth.

“Havin’ a fun day shoppin’,” he asked.

“Yondu Udonta, you have committed crimes against the Kree Empire,” the commander said, “what say you in your defense?”

Yondu sucked the chip dust off his middle finger and showed it to the Kree.

“Suck my dick,” he said.

Gunfire rang around Yondu, hitting with bolts of green. The shots came from the four alleys; the Kree had surrounded him. Yondu cringed, falling to one knee as some of the blasts made their mark. His chip bag fell to the ground, scattering chips everywhere. He gave a whistle; the arrow shot through the air in a criss-cross pattern, shooting through the narrow alleys and eliminating all of the Kree warriors. The commander watched in disbelief as his entire contingent fell. He heard little footsteps coming from his left, but they were too small to be Kree. Focusing on the commander, Yondu pursed his lips, hearing his heart thrum with rage.

“Yondu?”

Yondu's head snapped to the left. Peter stood amongst the Kree corpses, staring with wide green eyes. He dropped the little stick of seaweed he was holding. The rage in Yondu's heart faltered, and the arrow hesitated.

With a snarl, the Kree commander threw himself at Peter. Yondu's whistle shrieked, but the Kree
commander held Peter up as a shield. The commander shuffled about, doing his best to keep Peter between him and the arrow. Yondu's heartbeat doubled; he couldn't take the chance that the boy would get hurt.

“I am Tel-Dar, commander of the Neoke Kree! Lay down your weapon,” the Kree commander roared, “or I split this Terran's belly!”

A cold grip clenched Yondu's heart. He whistled; the arrow lodged itself in the wall. Tel-Dar snatched it and held it to Peter's throat.

“You're coming with me, Udonta.” Tel-Dar bared his horrible teeth. “Or this boy dies.”

“Yondu?” Peter's voice trembled.

“It's okay, Peter.” Yondu was struck by how calm and reassuring he sounded. “It'll be just fine, boy. Relax. I've got you.”

The fear passed off Peter's face, and he relaxed in the arms of the Kree. The complete trust in his eyes was like a shot of whiskey; Yondu felt his chest warm, his mouth curling into a smile. The boy knew Yondu could handle this; he could handle anything.

“Boy,” he said, “kick.”

Peter's legs shot out, kicking wildly. He rammed the back of his heel between the Kree's legs; Tel-Dar howled and dropped him. Peter bolted towards Yondu, who pushed the boy behind him.

“You're bleeding,” Peter said.

“I'm fine, boy. I've had worse.” Yondu kept his eyes on Tel-Dar. “Just stay behind me.”

Tel-Dar roared and launched himself at Yondu. The Centaurian shoved Peter out of the way, taking the full force of the Kree. Yondu let out a growl as a sharp pain punctured his chest.

“You have committed crimes against the Kree Empire,” the Kree commander hissed, “now pay with your blood!”

Tel-Dar held Yondu's jaw shut, preventing him from whistling. Yondu struggled as Tel-Dar pulled the arrow out of Yondu's chest, making as to stab down at his neck.

“No,” Peter screamed, “no!”

Three green bolts of light slammed into the Kree. His expression faltered, and then his lifeless body crumpled to the ground. Behind him stood Meredith Quill. Her silver-gray eyes were wide as she slowly lowered the Kree blaster. Yondu chuckled, a trail of blood coming out of his mouth.

“Well fuck,” he said, “you can shoot two feet in front of you after all.”

“Peter!” Meredith dropped the Kree blaster and fell to her knees, scooping the boy up in her arms. “Oh God, baby are you alright?”

“I'm fine, I'm fine!” Peter pushed out of the hug. “Yondu's hurt, he's hurt!”

Meredith's eyes slid over the length of Yondu's body. She grabbed Peter's hands and pushed them to the largest blood spot on Yondu's leg.

“Press hard, Peter,” she said in a sharp voice, “and don't stop.”
“Okay mom.” Peter pressed with all his might.

Meredith grabbed the combat knife out of Yondu's boot and started slicing open the thick fabric of his shirt. Yondu grunted.

“This is a good shirt,” he said.

“I'll sew it back together later.” Meredith grabbed the plastic bag of chips. “Right now you need help.”

Yondu watched her dump the remainder of the chips on the ground.

“The fuck,” he said hoarsely.

“Exhale,” she said.

Yondu exhaled, and Meredith watched the wound. No bubbles came to the surface.

“That's good, you didn't hurt a lung. I figured there'd be a pretty good chance we'd be dealing with a gaping chest wound.” Meredith laid the empty plastic chip bag over the wound and placed Yondu's heavy hand over the bag. “Press hard.”

Yondu pressed down, gritting his teeth. Meredith tore off her jacket and threw it to the side.

“I know, I know it hurts. Come on, just press down and we'll get that bandaged right away.” Meredith slipped her arms through her shirt sleeves. “It's okay, I know what I'm doing.”

Yondu watched Meredith peel her shirt up over her head, revealing the soft white expanse of her stomach, the fabric of her dark grey brassiere, and just the top curves of her small breasts. Yondu instinctively swallowed.

“Sorry,” she said, “but I need bandages and this'll have to do.”

Yondu was incapable of looking anywhere else.

“Well shit,” he said, “I died and made it to heaven.”

Meredith rolled her eyes as she tore her shirt into strips, binding them together with quick knots.

“And his last words were meaningless flattery. Wow, what a way to be remembered. After valiantly defending his Terrans, Yondu Udonta thought it was a good idea to waste his last breath hitting on an invalid.” Meredith wrapped the makeshift bandage around his chest, carefully threading it under his back and over the plastic baggie. “The Terran woman, when questioned, admitted this was the only situation in a million years that she would ever take her shirt off in front of him.”

Yondu moved his hand as she bound the bandage so that his hand wouldn't be caught under it. He bared his jagged teeth in a grin.

“Figured hittin' on a dyin' person while I'm dyin' ain't such a bad gig,” he said.

Peter looked back and forth between them in utter confusion. Meredith picked up the cut remains of Yondu's shirt. Meredith tried to slice the shirt into strips, but the fabric was too thick.

“Damn it,” she said.

Peter's eyes flicked up to his mom. He'd never heard her curse before.
“Peter,” she said, “I'm sorry but your shirt has to go.”

“What?” Peter's eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

Meredith tore up the back of Peter's shirt and slit down the arms, ripping the shirt right off her son's back. She quickly cut the shirt into long strips, which she used to bandage the cuts along Yondu's legs and arms. Peter watched in complete disbelief. His mom was shirtless. Yondu was shirtless. Now Peter was shirtless. He'd never been so confused in all eight-and-a-half years of his life. His mother cut the leg of Yondu's pants around where Peter had been pressing.

“Let go, Peter.”

Peter moved his hands; with lightning speed, Meredith examined the wound and bound it quickly.

“It's not that bad. The blast went just in and out right through the skin. Looks worse than it is,” she said, “despite all the blood.”

Peter looked down at his hands; they were coated in Centaurian blood.

“Baby, go get Kraglin. Then, wash your hands and come back.” Meredith continued to deal with Yondu's injuries, moving from the most serious to the least serious. “Run, Peter, go!”

Peter took off like greased lightning. Yondu watched him go, his chest rising and falling in short, jagged motions.

“Good kid,” he said hoarsely.

“He'll get help, don't you worry.” Meredith's eyes snapped from injury to injury as she worked. “How are you feeling? Any strange sensations?”

“Besides pain?”

“Besides pain.”

“No,” he said, “nothin' like that.”

“Are you short of breath?”

“No. Deep breaths hurt.” Yondu gritted his teeth. “But I can take 'em.”

“Do it.” Meredith got under Yondu and rolled him over on his side, keeping his spine straight as she could. “Take a deep breath after every four normal breaths, okay?”

“Where the fuck did you learn to do this,” he grunted.

“Remember how I bound my leg on the Eclector after that fall? I've always been able to do this,” she said, “I learned it in college. CPR, first-aid, wilderness survival, all that stuff. Worked as a lifeguard for the ladies' pool for a while.”

“That's a job I'd kill to have,” Yondu said.

Meredith grinned.

“I don't doubt it. Young, stupid girls wearing not enough clothes, and if one of them drowns you get to kiss her.”
“What?” Yondu’s eyebrows knit together. “You kissed girls?”

“No, that was a joke.” Meredith laughed. “The rescue breath step of CPR is mouth-to-mouth.”

Through his pain, Yondu's mind flashed back to Dr. Mareet's manual for Terran care. There had been a section on rescue breathing, something about punching Terrans in the chest to get their heart started again. Yondu vowed that if he lived, he would give it another read. And not just because he might have a chance to do that mouth-to-mouth thing to Meredith, either.

“Hey, keep taking those big breaths,” Meredith said, “they'll help your lungs.”

It hurt, but Yondu took a deep breath. He blinked a few times.

“Vision's goin' out,” he said.

“Hold on, Yondu, hold on. Kraglin's on the way. We'll get you to Dr. Mareet's.” Meredith checked all the bandages again. “You're not losing any blood, so you should be able to stay conscious.”

“Pain,” he grunted, “I'm blackin' out from pain.”

“Come on, don't do that. Stay focused. Here.” Meredith grabbed Yondu's hand and squeezed it tight. “Focus on this, okay? Your hand doesn't hurt. Focus on this.”

Her grip on Yondu's hand was surprisingly strong; he could feel her pulse. Meredith leaned over him slightly, her soft blonde curls hanging around her face. The soft white slope of her shoulders blocked the light from above. He grinned.

“What are you smiling at,” she asked.

“Got me an angel watchin' over me,” he said.

Her cheeks flushed scarlet, and he felt her pulse quicken.

“Here you are dying and all you do is tease,” she muttered.

“You took your shirt off,” he said, “and I'm the tease?”

“I took my shirt off to bind your chest so you didn't bleed to death. That is the only reason, you hear?” Meredith rolled her eyes. “Ain't much here to stare at anyway, so don't worry. This is a one time thing; you won't be seeing any of this again.”

“Don't jinx yourself, Mery.” Yondu grinned. “One time' can happen again.”

Meredith gave him a withering glare. He laughed, then licked some blood off his lips. Footsteps sounded in the alley.

“Grab the gun,” Yondu breathed, letting go of her hand.

Meredith snatched up the Kree blaster and aimed it, then lowered it as long legs came into view. Meredith knew that gangly stride anywhere.

“Kraglin.” Meredith dropped the blaster. “Kraglin, he's banged up pretty bad. Chest wound, multiple punctures.”

“Help's on the way.” Kraglin knelt down, studying Meredith's work. “Not bad.”
“Did the best I could with what I had.”

“We have some insta-heal gauze and other medical equipment on the ship.” Kraglin examined Yondu's chest wrapping. “The boys'll bring it.”

“That would be fantastic.” Meredith breathed a sigh of relief. “My shirt isn't exactly medically sterile.”

“Your... oh.” Kraglin blinked, then steadily blushed blue. “Sorry Ms. Quill.”

“Give her yours,” Yondu breathed, “you stupid sack of shit.”

Kraglin yanked the slate blue t-shirt over his head and handed it to Meredith. She pulled it on, ruffling her hair.

“Good,” Yondu said, “now the boys don't get a free show.”

“You keep being nice to me, I'm going to start thinking you've gotten a brain injury.” Meredith checked the bandages again. “Still breathing okay?”

“Yeah. Hurts like hell, but it's okay.” He held out his hand. “Pain's got my eyes goin' dark.”

Meredith gripped his hand.

“How'd you get here so goddamn fast,” Yondu asked.

“I was looking for Peter. When I heard the blasters go off, I ran,” Meredith said.

“I meant him.” Yondu's eyes flicked to Kraglin. “How?”

“Ran, cap'n.” Kraglin was completely calm. “Ran the whole damn way.”

“You can run that goddamn fast?”

“Long legs, cap'n.”

Yondu laughed, then cursed as pain clawed into his chest.

“Fuck,” he breathed, “don't make me laugh.”

With that, Yondu Udonta passed out. Meredith and Kraglin jumped in alarm.

“Yondu? Yondu?” Meredith gripped his hand. “Yondu, can you hear me?”

“What do we do,” Kraglin asked.

“Check his bandages. All of them,” she said, “especially the ones on the head and chest. Check that leg wound, too.”

Meredith and Kraglin examined the bandages, but Yondu wasn't losing any blood.

“Must've been from the pain. Damn,” she said.

There were more footsteps; Holdon and Drazkar came up, carrying a makeshift stretcher between them. Meredith helped them move Yondu onto it.

“Less talking, more walking. Move,” Kraglin said.

Yondu came into the Eclector on a stretcher, carried by Holdon and Drazkar. Kraglin directed them to take Yondu to the quarters. They slid the captain onto his bed and looked at Kraglin.

“What do we do,” Drazkar asked.

Kraglin pressed the comm unit in his ear. “Gef, I want a line to Dr. Mareet five fuckin' minutes ago.”

“On it,” Gef said over the comms.

“Holdon, keep them boys in the loading bay moving the cargo. Draz, you're with me. We check everything. We keep these boys moving. Ship keeps running as normal.” Kraglin's voice was clipped and assertive. “Cap'n will be up and at 'em by the time we reach port. I don't want him wakin' up to a ship full of shit, got it?”

“Aye,” they all chorused.

“What do I do?”

Kraglin turned around. Meredith was standing with a med-scanner in her hands. Her eyes were a little wide, and she swallowed.

“Can I help,” she continued, “or should I just get out of your way?”

“Ms. Quill, you stay with the cap'n. If anybody gets it into their head to do him harm, I want you to unleash a full crack-open-can of whoop-ass on them.” Kraglin chuckled. “Just like that fucker you blasted, you hear?”

Meredith nodded.

“Can do,” she said.

“You really think Quill's the right person to guard the captain?” Holdon raised a skeptical brow. “Not that I don't trust her, but look at her; she's a walking twig. She's not much of a deterrent.”

“She'll be fine.” Kraglin smiled at Meredith. “We trust you, Ms. Quill.”

“I won't let you down,” she said.

Kraglin handed her Peter's blaster.

“Shoot first,” he said.

She took it, feeling the cold metal of the grip. Kraglin and the rest of the Ravagers left the room. Meredith took a deep breath and set the blaster down. Yondu was laid out, eyes closed and breathing softly. She got a bowl of cold water and a small rag, setting them down on the floor by his bed. Yondu's arrow was sitting on the side table; she picked it up. It was still tipped with Yondu's blood.

“Could have been Peter's,” Meredith said softly, “if you hadn't done what you did, Yondu.”

Yondu groaned, screwing up his expression in pain, and Meredith set the arrow down.

“Yondu? You awake?”

“Who's there,” he grumbled, “what the fuck is goin' on?”
“It's me, Meredith.” Meredith sat on the edge of the bed. “You clocked out, big daddy.”

“Clocked out, huh?” Yondu opened his eyes and blinked rapidly. “I don't remember.”

“Kree showed up,” she said, “and you killed most of them. Then they got Peter, and you surrendered. The big one cut you up pretty bad.”

“I remember. How’s the boy,” he asked.

“A little shook up, but he's okay. Got a bruise or two,” she said softly, “but he's got ice on it. I've got him lying down with his Walkman. He's okay.”

“And me,” Yondu said, “what did they do to me?”

“Busted your leg up pretty good, and that cut in your chest barely missed a lung.” Meredith sighed. “And then there's what they did to your face.”

Yondu grinned. “How bad is it?”

“Yondu, you were already ugly as sin. If anything,” she said, “they dolled you up.”

Yondu barked a laugh, then cringed.

“Ribs, I know. You're going to want to breathe by moving your stomach.” Meredith pressed two fingers to his diaphragm. “Trust me, it'll hurt less.”

“Thought you couldn't feel pain,” he grunted.

“Not anymore,” she corrected, “but I still picked up a few tricks.”

Meredith reached down and wrung out the cold washcloth. She began wiping some of the blood off his face, but he winced.

She stopped. “Does it hurt?”

“Cold, dammit,” he said.

Meredith grinned and kept dabbing the blood off his face.

“I saw what you did,” he said.

“You saw me kill that Kree,” she asked.

“Freaked you out, huh?”

“No,” Meredith said quickly.

“Liar.” Yondu chuckled as Meredith wiped some of the blood off his upper lip. “I saw your face.”

“Fine, it was a little weird. I saw him go for Peter so I picked up the gun. When I realized he was going to kill, I guess...” Meredith sighed. “Fast-twitch muscle enhancers kicked in. I just pulled the trigger. It happened so fast I can scarcely believe it.”

“There's only two kinds of Ravagers,” Yondu said, “the quick and the dead.”

Meredith took a deep breath.
“What,” he said.

She didn't meet his eyes as she wrung the washcloth out again.

“Thinking about Peter,” she said.

“That boy?” Yondu snorted. “If I was as quick as that kid, I wouldn't be laid out like this. Boy
moves like a greased Orloni.”

Meredith laughed and rubbed the washcloth on Yondu's cheek.

“He is pretty quick, isn't he? Must've learned it from you,” she said.

Yondu snorted. “Like hell. You know when we picked him up on Terra, he ran goddamn circles
around me and the boys?”

“Really?” Meredith grinned as she dabbed some blood off of the corner of Yondu's mouth. “Was
that before you picked me up?”

“Didn't pick you up,” he reminded, “you hitched a ride. Bit me in the goddamn neck, remember?”

“Yep. And here we are over three months later. You're still bleeding,” she said, “and I'm still dying.”

“No difference, huh?”

“There's a difference.” Meredith smiled. “We weren't friends three-and-a-half months ago.”

“Friends with a goddamn Terran.” Yondu sighed, then winced. “Damn.”

“Ribs?”

“Yeah.”

Meredith gave him a sympathetic look. He scowled and looked around.

“Where the hell is everybody else,” he asked.

“Keeping the ship running until you're ready to do it yourself, of course.” Meredith grinned. “You
didn't expect Kraglin to miss the chance to show off what a good first mate he is.”

“He ain't first mate yet,” Yondu said.

“Then hurry up and promote him.” Meredith wiped the last of the blood off of his chin. “Who else
could run this madhouse if you dropped dead?”

Meredith dropped the washcloth back into the bowl of water, then dried her hands on her shirt.

“You alright,” Yondu asked.

“Why do you ask?” Meredith ran a hand through her hair.

“You just shot somebody. First kill shakes people up,” Yondu said.

The Terran took a deep breath. Yondu knew it; there was no way she could have blasted someone to
death and not be emotional about it. He was surprised she wasn't already crying. Meredith sat next to
the bed, hugging her knees and staring at the floor.
“I thought about something my papa said about war once, and that's kind of helping me deal with this.” Her voice was soft and quiet. “He was in Vietnam, see, and he had to kill people.”


“It was a country that my country went to war with a long time ago, and my papa went overseas to fight in the 60s. On his fifteenth night in the field, he was marching and his unit got attacked. He was in this hole and the Vietnamese were coming over. His gun jammed, and one of them dropped down in the hole.” Meredith sighed. “So, my papa pulled the combat knife out of his boot and stabbed the man over and over. He said it was like someone else was moving his arm; he just watched the man bleed to death in front of him.”

“Fuck,” Yondu said.

“Yeah.” Meredith laid her chin on her knees. “But he was really shook up about it, he wouldn't stop cursing and yelling. So his best friend, I think his name was Watson, he grabbed my papa and made him look at the man he'd killed and he asked him, ‘Would you rather it was you? Would you rather it was you?’ And my papa said no, he didn't want that to be him, and so Watson gave him a cigarette and told him, ‘Good job, you did your duty. Sleep tight tonight, Quill.’”

“And that story makes you feel better?”

“Yeah, it does.” Meredith took a deep breath. “Kind of puts things in perspective. If it was either that Kree or Peter, the answer is Peter. If it's that Kree or you, the answer is you.”

Yondu stared at the ceiling.

“I killed a guy when I was eight years old,” he said, “same age as Peter.”

“Who was it?”

“Never knew. They'd line us all up and put some poor fucker on the other side. Bags over their heads, gagged, bound. Then they'd tell us to kill them, or they'd kill us. We figured out pretty quick that it wasn't no idle damn threat, either.” Yondu closed his eyes. “Never knew who it was. After a while, it didn't really matter. Bodies hit the ground whether you know the fuckers or not.”

“So you can kill without feeling,” Meredith said.

“Mostly. Couple times it's been hard,” Yondu said, “but mostly I don't even feel it anymore.”

“I don't want to get to that point.” Meredith took a deep breath. “I don't want to get to the point where I don't even feel it when I end someone's life.”

“You won't,” Yondu said.

“How do you know?”

“You're Mery,” he said.

“What does that even mean?”

“You're Mery.” Yondu said it like it was an explanation. “Ain't it goddamn obvious?”

“No, no it's not!” Meredith scowled at him, turning around and putting her elbow on the bed. “What does that mean, 'you're Mery'? I know I'm me, dammit, that's not reassuring.”
“You're Mery, you're...” Yondu's eyebrows furrowed. “Soft ain't the right word for it. You care too goddamn much, you know? Nothin' stops you from givin' a fuck. It's easier to just not give a shit, but you give a shit anyway. That takes a certain kind of toughness.”

“Really?” Meredith's voice was soft.

“Just think of all the goddamn things you've done, Quill. Fly spaceships. See other planets. Make first contact with another species. Terra might be the galaxy's goddamn crown jewel to you,” Yondu said, “but think about all the shit that's out here. And you fuckin' dealt with it all. What you've seen, things you've done... Only other Terran what understands that is the boy.”

Meredith leaned her head on her hand.

“You're pretty tough yourself. You took your own arrow to the chest but you're still kicking,” she said.

The corner of Yondu's mouth twitched up.

“That's because I'm un-fuckin'-stoppable,” he said.

Meredith laughed.

“I'd better get out of here,” she said as she picked up the bowl and rag, “and let you rest. Don't need to protect you anymore. One whistle and the whole Eclector'd be a tomb.”

“They put you in charge of protectin' me? Goddamn it,” Yondu said, “I thought Kraglin was fuckin' intelligent.”

“He is. You told me that Ravagers were feral. If they smelled weakness, they'd finish you off. So Kraglin put me here as a deterrent.” Meredith shrugged. “I'm not going to kill you, and at least I'd deter them long enough for you to wake up.”

Yondu grunted.

“Hey, by the way, thanks for saving my boy.” A smile was playing around Meredith's lips. “I owe you one.”

“You stopped all this goddamn blood from spurtin' out of me. We're even,” Yondu said firmly, “I don't want to hear another word about it. You don't owe me shit.”

Meredith's comm link lit up.

“Ms. Quill?” Kraglin's voice echoed through the room. “Is the cap'n awake yet?”

“I'm here, idjit.”

“Cap'n? Hey, that's great.” Yondu could hear the grin in Kraglin's voice. “Happy to hear it, cap'n. We're headin' to Mareet's, that alright?”

“No.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Take me to Algon.”

“Algon?”

“That's what I said. I don't need a damn doctor.” Yondu stared at the ceiling. “I'll be fine.”

“You'll be fine? Yondu, you're not just going to heal from a two-inch-deep puncture wound
overnight.” Meredith crossed her arms. “You are going to the doctor.”

“Like hell I am,” Yondu said. “I'm goin' to Algon. Kraglin, set the course.”

“Aye, cap'n. We'll be at Algon's as soon as we can,” Kraglin said.

The light on the comm link went out; Meredith adjusted it in her ear and huffed.

“You should be going to the doctor,” she said.

“I'll be fine.” Yondu closed his eyes. “I've had worse done by better.”

Meredith sighed.

“Guess I should be going,” she said.

Meredith made for the door.

“Hey.”

Yondu's hand grabbed Meredith's wrist. His crimson eyes were serious, but the ghost of a smile lingered around his mouth.

“Good job,” he said, “you did your duty. Sleep tight tonight, Quill.”

Meredith smiled so wide that her eyes crinkled. She leaned over and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

“You too, big daddy,” she said.

Yondu watched her go. There was a tightness in his chest that had nothing to do with the bandage. He stared up at the ceiling, trying to ignore the feelings in his chest. Damn it, Yondu hated feelings. They were so goddamn irritating and sentimental and... feelings were like the curse of the Quills, Yondu decided. The Quills just made them happen. Yondu squinted at the ceiling. Maybe that was a Terran defense mechanism; instill emotions in surrounding life forms to ensure Terran survival. If that was it, Yondu thought, it was goddamn diabolical.

His jacket was hanging off the post of the bed; Yondu could see the bulge in the pocket where the scrambler was. Hopefully the Kree bastards hadn't damaged it. If they had, Algon could surely patch it up; that Saurid was a miracle worker with junk. Scrambling the signal would buy him time, but Yondu had no goddamn idea what he was going to do with it. He couldn't tell the Quills the truth; he didn't even know where to start. Emotions and truth and that kind of bullshit wasn't exactly his forte. Yondu scowled at the ceiling, fighting the sinking feeling in his chest. If he wanted to keep the Quills, he couldn't tell them the truth. Meredith would just hop on a ship and take Peter away, and that woman wouldn't last five minutes without Yondu there to protect her. He'd tell them one day, he thought, but for now, Yondu needed time.
Meredith was woken up the next day by someone throwing a shirt in her face. She jumped and tore it off, eyes wide. Yondu Udonta was grinning down at her with crooked teeth.

“Rise and shine, idjit,” he said, “you're goin' shoppin’.”

“How are you already moving?” Meredith swung her legs over the bed and stood up. “How are you already up? You had a chest wound, multiple punctures!”

Yondu shrugged. “Insta-heal gauze, good night's rest,” he said.

Meredith's expression of incredulity made him laugh. “I can't believe it, you're... take off your shirt,” she said, crossing her arms.

Yondu rolled his shirt off. His chest wound was nothing more than a thick scar, shaped roughly like the head of a hammer. Meredith put a hand on her forehead, her cheeks red.

“How on Earth did you heal that fast,” she asked.

“How on Centauri-IV, more like. Hyperactive scar tissue.” Yondu went to pull his shirt back on. “Some species ain't weak as shit, Mery.”

“Terrans aren't weak,” Meredith said.

“I didn't say Terrans, you did.” Yondu hit the door panel. “Get ready. We dock in an hour.”

“Where exactly are we going again?”

“Shoppin','” Yondu called back.
“Ahahahaha! Yondu Udonta!”

This time, Yondu was ready for the big yellow arms that swooped in for a hug. Yondu picked up Peter and held him in the air as a shield; Algon wrapped his arms around the boy instead.

“Hi Algon,” Peter said.

“Hello, Peter Quill!” Algon hugged him tightly, then put him down. “It is a pleasure to see you again.”

Meredith edged out from behind Yondu, her eyes a little wide. Peter had told her that Algon was huge, but she hadn't expected a seven-foot body-building lizard. She took a deep breath and waved at him.

“Hi,” she said, “I'm Meredith Quill.”

“The long-awaited Mrs. Quill!” Algon's yellow frills sprung wide with joy. “Ahahaha, such a pleasure!”

“It's Ms. Quill, actually.”

“Ms.?” Algon grinned widely. “I see. My mistake.”

Yondu didn't like the way Algon's eyes were flicking between Yondu and Meredith. Yondu scowled and crossed his arms.

“We're just here for business,” Yondu reminded, “we ain't staying long.”

“Of course, of course. Here.” Algon pulled the chunk of ore out of his pocket and tossed it to Yondu. “There it is.”

Yondu caught the yama ore in surprise.

“You... Wait a second.” Yondu squinted. “Nothin's free.”

“It's completely free.” Algon chuckled. “Keeping it increases the likelihood of the Kree attacking. Besides, what on earth am I going to do with it?”

“I don't know, I guess you could...” Yondu's head snapped up; Algon was quickly leading the Quills off the Eclector. “Oh, you sly son-of-a-bitch. You bring my goddamn Terrans back right the hell now!”

Algon laughed nervously, quickly opening the portal to his ship.

“Whatever do you mean, Yondu?” Algon pulled the bewildered Quills onto his own ship. “I am not doing anything wrong.”

“Dammit, you chartreuse piece-of-shit!”

Yondu stomped down the ramp with a fire in his eyes. Algon quickly closed the portal and locked it. The portal shut, and Meredith could hear Yondu's fists pounding on the other side.

“I'm so sorry,” Meredith said, “I don't want to be rude, but... Is it okay to lock Yondu out?”
“Oh, don’t worry.” Algon chuckled. “He’ll get that door open, I’m sure. Meanwhile, let me introduce you to my life’s work.”

Algon gestured to the cavernous interior of his ship; the place was filled with vendors, pools of water, and music. The air was warm and damp, and smelled like a freshwater pond. The vendors were of all sorts of species. Meredith looked around in wonder at the dwellings hanging from the rafters.

“Amazing,” she breathed.

“She called it amazing. You called it amazing.” Algon’s frills vibrated with emotion. “That is the nicest thing anyone from Yondu’s ship has ever said about my market. Thank you so much.”

“Are you kidding? Thank you! This is fantastic,” she said, “just look at all this! How many species of people do you have here.”

“Over six-hundred.”

“Six-hundred?” Meredith ran her fingers through her hair. “Wow... What kind of things do you sell?”

“Everything and anything,” Algon said proudly, “from everywhere and anywhere.”

“Do you sell stuff from Terra,” Meredith asked.

“Ha! Your son asked me the same question. I do sell some things from Terra,” Algon admitted, “though I confess my inventory is not nearly as expansive as I would like, what with the blockade. Terran things are very interesting.”

“Thank you so much for saying that.” Meredith beamed. “Most people just call Terrans crazy and emotional.”

“By most people,” Algon said, “I assume you mean Yondu Udonta.”

“Yes.” Meredith glanced at the locked door; she could hear Yondu pounding and yelling on the other side. “Maybe we ought to open that?”

“I will gladly open that door,” Algon said smoothly, “if you and Peter will agree to have lunch with me. I would love to hear more about Terra.”

“Lunch? That sounds great,” Meredith said.

“Yeah!” Peter grabbed Meredith’s hand. “Lunch sounds awesome.”

“Excellent!” Algon reached out and unlocked the door.

The portal opened, and a purple-faced Yondu Udonta came barreling through. He gave a fierce whistle, and his arrow spun in front of Algon’s face.

“You have such a temper, Yondu.” Algon chuckled. “Can’t you take a light-hearted practical joke?”

“Not if it involves takin’ my goddamn Terrans,” Yondu snarled.

“Your Terrans?” Algon’s eyes widened innocently. “I thought you said the boy wasn’t yours, Yondu.”
Meredith shifted, her cheeks warming. She was used to Yondu being a little protective of Peter, but this was much more than she'd ever seen. Yondu was breathing heavy, his expression nothing less than ferocious. She reached forwards and slid her hand on Yondu's shoulder. His head whipped around, but when he saw her face, his shoulders dropped. He took a few deep breaths and scowled.

“It ain't like that, Algon.” Yondu snatched the arrow out of the air. “Don't ever take them from me again or it'll be the last goddamn thing you do.”

Meredith took her hand off his shoulder and rubbed her arm. Algon's orange eyes darted between her, Peter, and Yondu.

“Your Terrans have agreed to have lunch with me,” Algon said.

“What?” Yondu groaned. “Goddamn it, Mery, what'd you go and do that for?”

“He was kind enough to offer,” she said, “and it'd be rude to refuse.”

“Rude indeed. You know, Yondu never has lunch with me. Or tea. Or dinner. Even when I make laukha it's not good enough for him,” Algon said.

“Not good enough?” Meredith put her hands on her hips. “But he loves laukha.”

Algon's frills flicked in interest.

“She knows the food you eat,” he observed.

“She's the goddamn cook, you pus-filled maggot.” Yondu bared his teeth. “It's her job to know what I do and don't eat.”

“Then she knows you love nothing more than a roast laukha.” Algon grinned. “And I happen to have one roasting now.”

“Not true,” Meredith said.

Algon and Yondu looked at her. Meredith crossed her arms, a small smile on her face.

“He likes it in stew better,” she said.

Algon grabbed Yondu by the shoulders.

“Yondu,” he said, “why did you not tell me this. It is my job to cater to my customers, Yondu. You must inform me when your preferences change.”

“How the hell would you make Mery's stew, you brain-dead scum-scaled mud-lickin' toad-fucker?” Yondu pushed Algon off. “You ain't Mery!”

“So it's just her stew? Well then.” Algon straightened. “I shall have to learn the recipe.”

“That ain't happenin',” Yondu said.

“It's a secret.” Meredith put her finger to her lips, smiling. “Special Terran recipe. Can't share it for less than a hundred thousand units.”

Yondu cracked a grin. “I see what you're doin' there, Quill.”

Algon's eyes narrowed shrewdly. He rubbed his chin, then checked his interface, then shook his
“Unfortunately I can't pay that kind of money, even for such a valuable secret as this,” Algon chuckled and spread his arms wide. “At least you will have lunch with me for free, yes?”

“Of course,” Mery said.

“Five units,” Peter piped up.

Yondu and Algon laughed; Meredith turned scarlet.

“Peter, no. You don't charge people for the pleasure of their company,” she said.

“Actually,” Algon said, “I believe pleasurable company is quite the extensive market in some sections of the galaxy.”

Algon's frills dropped under Meredith's withering glare.

“Careful, Algon.” Yondu chuckled. “This Terran's got pepper.”

“Pepper? Terran pepper?” Algon's frills shot open in interest. “What's that taste like?”

“Wouldn't know,” Yondu muttered.

“I will have to procure some. For now, come, come.” Algon led them along. “We must lunch together!”

Lunch was laukha. Yondu and Peter tore into it avidly, savoring the hot, savory juices. Meredith took time to savor it; it was nice having a delicious meal that she didn't have to cook first. After lunch, Algon led them to a small bar by the pools of water, insisting that Meredith try some of his healing broth. Yondu and Peter went wandering away, letting Meredith have some peace and quiet. Peace she could do, she thought, but with Algon around, there was no such thing as quiet. She took off her jacket, folded it, and tucked it between her back and the counter to provide a soft cushion for her to lean against while Algon talked.

“I have known Yondu for many years,” he said, “many many years.”

Meredith smiled and took a sip of her broth.

“He was a slave with me,” Algon said.

Meredith nearly choked on her seaweed broth. She coughed slightly, then looked up at Algon with wide gray eyes.

“You were a slave,” she asked.

“You didn't think Centaurians were the only race the Kree enslaved?” Algon raised one scaly brow. “Oh no, we Saurians were prosecuted alongside them. I knew Yondu when he was only a lad.”

Meredith's eyes widened.

“I can't even imagine Yondu as a kid,” she confessed.

Algon chuckled. “It is rather difficult to imagine, isn't it? But no, he was a child once same as you.”
“What was he like?” Meredith pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them.

“Small and angry,” Algon said, “and very... very raw.”

“Raw?”

“He was so strong, but so imprecise. Everything about him was savage. I thought he was nearly mad, but he was smart.” Algon shook his head. “So very smart. Many enslaved fell to the hands of the Kree; either they died or their spirits were broken. Not Yondu. Never Yondu.”

Meredith wasn’t sure her eyes could widen any more.

“How did you meet,” she asked.

A sad smile spread across Algon's face; he hung his head slightly.

“He killed my wife, Kidahet.”

Meredith's mouth dropped open.

“What? How? Why? I mean,” she said, “if it's not too rude to ask. I really don't want to make you relive anything painful, but...”

“But?” Algon chuckled.

“But I really want to know,” Meredith finished, hugging her knees tightly.

“I believe that, in many ways, Kidahet wanted to die. We had lost our daughter, Sikatesh, in the raid. Sikatesh was our pride, our joy,” Algon explained, “and losing her broke our hearts. Kidahet took to taking care of the children we came into contact with. One of those children was Yondu; he was her particular favorite. I see why now; he is strong and brash, just like Sikatesh.”

“And he killed Kidahet?” Meredith's eyebrows contracted.

“One of the ways that they trained us to be ruthless and unemotional was making us kill the ones we became attached to.” Algon's rust-orange eyes held an abyss of sadness. “Each day I awoke fearing that would be the day they would force me to fight Kidahet. Instead, they forced Kidahet to fight Yondu, and simply let me watch.”

“And Kidahet couldn't kill him,” Meredith finished.

“She would rather have died than hurt any child,” Algon said, “and so he killed her quickly. She died as painlessly as falling asleep. I had never met Yondu myself; Kidahet was kept in a separate series of cages. I only learned later, from Yondu, the good she had done for those children.”

“And you believed him, just like that?”

“I knew Kidahet,” Algon said firmly, “and the things he told me of were exactly the things Kidahet would do and say. I forgave him the moment I knew the kindness he had done my wife in killing her so gently. It was more than the Kree would have done.”

“So Yondu killed her out of mercy.” Meredith rested her chin on her knees. “Wow. He sounds so much different than how he is now.”

“Is he?” Algon chuckled. “I see the same boy. That is the curse of age; I can never forget people as I first meet them.”
“Same boy, huh?”

“Undoubtedly.” Algon watched Yondu lead Peter along the edge of the pools. “I see the same small Centaurian slave. I can see his ribs under his ashen skin and the brace anchored around his neck. His eyes seemed so large, so red, so angry. There is a rage within him that I have never seen quenched.”

“Can you blame him? What he had to go through, what both of you had to go through...” Meredith sighed. “It's awful beyond imagination.”

“You are a very compassionate woman, Ms. Quill.”

“Call me Meredith.”

“Meredith.” Algon smiled. “Are you finished with your broth?”

“Oh darn, I completely forgot about it. It really is good, though.” Meredith took the bowl in her hands and sipped it. “What's that kind of tangy taste at the end?”

“Sickle root,” Algon said, “do you like it?”

“Yeah, it's kind of like ginger.”

“I will send some back with you.”

“Oh, you don't have to do that.”

“I insist,” Algon said.

“Thank you very much.” Meredith smiled. “You are a very generous Saurid.”

Algon’s frills expanded with joy at the compliment. Meredith finished her broth and slid the bowl down with the rest of the dirty dishes. She hugged her knees again and looked out over the ponds. Peter and Yondu were on the other side; she watched them shop.

“Your boy, Peter Quill.” Algon chuckles. “See how he follows Yondu.”

“He thinks the world of him, that's for dang sure,” Meredith said.

“Why is that?”

“Yondu's saved Peter's life at least three times.”

“Saved his life?” Algon's orange eyes widened. “Tell me more, I must know!”

“Yondu pulled the safety rig on Peter when Peter was too weak to do it himself. He saved Peter from a falling crate of dirt. And just yesterday,” she said, “he saved Peter from a Kree commander on Neoke.”

“He risked his life to save the boy,” Algon said quietly, “that's very interesting.”

“So now Peter thinks he's the galaxy's greatest hero.” Meredith sighed. “Starting to think Peter's got a new favorite parent.”

Algon's frills shot completely open.

“Ahaahaha! I knew it, I knew it!” Algon leapt off the stool. “Parent, you said parent! So the boy is
Yondu's, isn't he! Ahahaha, and you are his mate!"

"Whoa, no!" Meredith's eyes were wide as she waved her hands wildly. "No, no no no, no no no. I am not Yondu's girlfriend, and Peter is not his son. It was just a figure of speech. Yondu and I... No."

"You..." Algon's frills sagged. "You are not his mate?"

"No, Algon, I'm not his mate."

"Fiddlesticks," Algon grumbled, "I was so excited."

"You thought Yondu and I... Why," Meredith asked.

"He is nicer to you than he is to me," Algon said, "and he is nicer to me than he is to most everyone else."

"Is he?"

"He has no choice." Algon gave a wide, roguish grin. "I know too much about him."

"Oh yeah?" Meredith laughed. "Okay, like what?"

"He is allergic to dogs," Algon said.

"I knew that."

"Aha, so you know that, do you?" Algon chuckled and leaned his elbows back on the table. "His favorite color is red."

"So's mine," Meredith said.

"Ah, and I learn a new fact about the lovely Terran woman." Algon linked his claws together. "Let us play a game; every time I tell you something about Yondu, you must tell me something about yourself."

"Deal." Meredith grinned. "He's sure as heck not going to tell me anything."

"When Yondu was very young, he had a tendency to speak in whistles and clicks instead of normal speech," Algon said.

"When I was a kid, I used to sing everything because I thought my talking voice wasn't pretty," Meredith replied.

"Nonsense, your speech voice is excellent." Algon watched Yondu help Peter over some fishing nets. "Yondu's teeth are terrible because a Kree named Dal-Char used to break his jaw. It altered the bone so much that his teeth came in crooked."

"I always thought it was because he didn't brush." Meredith frowned. "Well, I won't make fun of him for that anymore."

"A fact about you, Meredith?"

"Oh. Um," she said, "I used to be afraid of balloons."

"Balloons?" Algon chuckled. "I must ask why."
“Tell me what Yondu's afraid of and I'll tell you why I'm afraid of balloons,” she said.

Algon closed his eyes, exhaling through his nose.

“That is a more difficult question than I would like, Meredith.” Algon turned his wide yellow head to look at her. “How do you measure a man's fear? In shocks, in struggles, in sleepless nights?”

“If it's too personal, you don't have to answer.” Meredith frowned. “I'm not trying to pry or anything, I swear. Don't tell me anything that he'd be upset with you for saying.”

“Thank you, Meredith, but even if I wanted to answer, I'm not sure that I could.” Algon squinted. “Yondu doesn't feel fear like the rest of us. For most of us, fear is a river that either rushes along or lays still. Not Yondu; Either it shoots through him in great waves, or it laps gently at him, eating away at him over time.”

“So if he's afraid of something,” Meredith said, “he's afraid either totally or constantly.”

“Yes, Meredith.”

“Oh.” Meredith stared at the pools. “I'm just afraid of balloons because this mean neighbor kid named Billy Edison used to come up and pop them in my face.”

“What an unpleasant boy.”

“When I was eight I popped him in the face with my right fist,” she said, “and that was the end of that. Still don't much like balloons, to be honest.”

“I will avoid bringing any near you in the future,” Algon assured, “lest the trials of Billy Edison once again come to the forefront of your mind.”

Meredith laughed. Yondu and Peter came pacing around the bend. Yondu looked between Algon and Meredith's grinning faces and squinted.

“What are you two idjits smilin' at,” he asked.

“You,” they replied.

Yondu inhaled sharply, turning slightly purple.

“Algon you scaly fuck,” he snarled, “what have you been tellin' her?”

“Nothing that you wouldn't have told her yourself.” Algon shrugged lazily.

Peter ran forwards; Meredith pulled him onto her lap.

“It was really nothing, Yondu,” she said, “just little things I didn't know.”

“Such as,” Yondu said through gritted teeth.

“Your favorite color, the way you used to talk, why you have a glare that could bore holes through stone,” Algon chuckled, “although it looks like that hasn't changed.”

Yondu was vividly purple, his crimson eyes locked on Algon. His hands were on his hips and a muscle was jumping in his jaw.

“Don't,” Meredith said, “it's okay.”
Yondu's eyes snapped to Meredith; she was smiling softly.

“Did you know we have the same favorite color,” she asked.

“We...” Yondu squinted. “What?”

“And I'm scared of balloons because my neighbor Billy Edison used to pop them in my face. And,” she added, “I used to sing everything because I thought my talking voice was ugly.”

Meredith wrapped her arms around Peter. The series of facts and the calm, spirited way she said them threw Yondu off. His anger faltered, replaced by mild confusion.

“Who the fuck was Billy Edison,” he asked.

“Her neighbor when she was a child.” Algon grinned winningly. “Don't you know anything about your Terrans, Yondu?”

“I know more than you think,” Yondu grunted, stalking up the bar.

“Oh really?” Meredith raised her eyebrows and set Peter down. “Like what?”

“Already knew your favorite color was red.” Yondu reached over and grabbed a bottle of cola. “You like them pants you wear.”

Meredith looked down at the red leather pants she was wearing.

“Got me there,” she said.

“You got a pop and an aunt on Terra. Couple cousins, too. You went to college, learned medical shit there. You sing.” Yondu popped the bottle cap off with his bare hands. “Your jacket, that's your aunt's. Your pop's a whiskey man, owns a farm in some place called Missouri.”

Meredith's eyebrows raised.

“You pay attention,” she said.

“That's what captains do.” Yondu guzzled half the bottle of cola, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “We know shit.”

Meredith and Peter laughed; the corner of Yondu's mouth turned up.

“Color me impressed, Yondu.” Meredith laid her chin on Peter's head. “I thought you just ignored us.”

“Kinda hard to ignore somebody as goddamn annoyin' as you two,” Yondu said.

He took a swig from his cola, ignoring Algon's curious gaze.

“Mom.” Peter tugged on Meredith's shirt. “Mom, where's the bathroom?”

“No idea, Peter. Algon,” she asked, “where's the bathroom?”

Algon lifted a claw, pointing to a series of doors laid into the wall. Peter hopped off Meredith's lap and walked to the doors; Meredith followed him.

“Kid can go to the shitter by himself, Mery,” Yondu said.
“He's been kidnapped before,” she said, “and I'm not letting it happen again.”

“Kidnap...oh.” Yondu blinked. “Right. That was me. Right.”

Meredith flashed a grin at him, then kept on after Peter. Algon's orange eyes slid between Yondu and Meredith.

“She is very nice,” Algon said with a grin.

“Yeah, she's alright.” Yondu swirled the cola in his bottle. “Talks too damn much, cries a lot. Kinda snippy.”

“Pretty, though.” Algon was grinning so much that Yondu could see almost every row of his sharp white teeth. “Lovely conversation.”

“Speakin' of, don't you go tellin' her nothin' about me.” Yondu pointed at Algon. “Last thing she needs to know is anything you tell her.”

“She seems to have made an effect on you. You were angry, and then you were not.” Algon blinked slowly. “I have never seen you be disarmed like that.”

“Dis...what?”

“You were angry at me. Livid, in fact. And then,” Algon said, “she spoke rationally and calmly to you, and you listened.”

Yondu bared his teeth.

“Listen, you scaly scum-suckin' shit-brick,” he said, “I am more than fuckin' capable of bein' goddamn rational.”

“Not when you're angry.” Algon chuckled. “You're a machine when you're angry. Nothing stops you. You are pure ruthless rage.”

“Damn right,” Yondu said.

Yondu took the cola and guzzled the entire bottle. He threw it into the trash with so much force that it shattered at the bottom of the metal tin. Algon winced.

“Someone has to clean that up, you know,” he said.

“I don't give a fuck,” Yondu said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve.

Algon looked at the jacket Meredith had left on the counter.

“I think you've found another family, Yondu.” Algon smiled. “About time, as they say.”

“You're fuckin' crazy.” Yondu bared his teeth. “They're just Terrans, idjit.”

“I hate it when you lie to yourself.” Algon's frills drooped. “You broken, angry child. Do you still think you have to be alone? You still want someone close, yet you push us all away.”

“I don't want anyone. I don't need anyone.” Yondu wouldn't meet his eyes. “You're fuckin' crazy, Algon.”

“It is a universal constant that sentient life seeks disclosure. We seek understanding. We want to
connect with someone, to feel that we are not alone in this universe.” Algon pressed a fist to the center of his chest. “All life seeks life. We seek to completely disclose ourselves to someone who will understand, who will hold our broken pieces in their hands and kiss them. Someone who will whisper to us that we are perfect, that we are important, that we are needed and loved.”

Algon stood and gestured, his voice gaining power and strength.

“We seek to be that person for others. We want to be trusted, to be cherished, to be relied on. We seek a connection that fills our heart with a serenity,” Algon continued, “that cannot otherwise be achieved. We want someone to need us, Yondu, and we always will.”

Yondu closed his eyes. A broiling rage was pulsing through his veins, but this time it didn't make any sense. He'd heard this speech before, but this time it slipped under his skin like thousands of hot needles.

“Some of us don't want that shit,” he said.

“We all want 'that shit',” Algon said, “whether we are brave enough to admit it to ourselves or not.”

Yondu scowled.

“Don't give me that face,” Algon said, “and don't you dare deny it. A universal constant, Yondu. That means you, too.”

“Don't need it. Don't want it. Don't have it,” Yondu said.

Algon crossed his arms.

“All three of those statements are lies,” Algon said, “particularly that last one.”

Yondu's brows knit together. “What are you goin' on about now, you big stupid lizard?”

“The boy loves you. You can see it in his eyes. And the woman, she wants to know you.” Algon closed his eyes, shaking his head. “Can you even understand how beautiful that sentence is when it applies to you? Someone wants to know you, Yondu. She wants to understand.”

Yondu couldn't meet Algon's eyes. His heartbeat was pounding in his ears; he could scarcely hear what Algon was saying. That couldn't be true. Peter just paddled around Yondu because he was a stupid kid, not because he loved him. And Meredith, she was just a Terran. All Terrans were curious, Yondu told himself firmly, it didn't mean shit.

“Can you understand that, Yondu,” Algon asked, “or are you still deaf to all that moves within the confines of your heart? Have the Kree won? Did they take your heart, your spirit, your chance for love and life and family and purpose?”

“They didn't break me.” Yondu's head lifted; there was a fire in his eyes. “No one breaks me.”

“You are brave, Yondu.” Algon's voice swelled. “You are brave and capable and strong. Please, please do not allow yourself to be blind to what matters. Do not let yourself believe that you are unworthy. Believe that you are allowed to have that, because you are.”

Yondu held Algon's gaze for a moment, searching his eyes. Something smoldered within them that reminded Yondu of Stakar Ogord.

“Why are you tellin' me this,” Yondu asked.
“Because you need to hear it,” Algon said simply, “and because I want to.”

“You're crazy,” Yondu said, looking down.


“Shut up, Algon.”

“You shut up.” Algon crossed his arms. “All I want is for you to be happy, and you constantly fight me on it. It's rude, Yondu. You are a very rude man.”

“Rude?” Yondu gestured to the entry door. “You locked me out of the goddamn ship!”

“Last time, you said you didn't like coming here,” Algon said coolly, “so I suppose I assumed that you did not want to come in.”

Yondu let out a warning growl, reaching for his arrow. Algon smiled innocently and pointed; Meredith and Peter were on their way back, hand-in-hand. Yondu scowled and threw his coat back over his arrow.

“Your bathrooms are super clean,” Peter said.

“Thank you.” Algon chuckled. “Aren't yours?”

“Only when mom cleans them.” Peter sat up on the stool.

Algon glared at Yondu.

“You make this ill woman clean? She is ill, she should be waited on hand-and-foot,” Algon said indignantly, “not forced to play maid to a bunch of scummy pirates!”

“I get paid to clean.” Meredith patted Algon's arm. “And making money is how I'll get better. I'm only one-hundred thousand units away.”

“Congratulations!” Algon's frills expanded with joy. “You must return when you are better, and we shall have a sale. A fabulous, wonderful sale! I shall call up all of my most interesting vendors.”

“Thank you,” Meredith laughed, “that sounds lovely.”

“For now, you must peruse my collection of Terran items!” Algon beamed. “I would very much like to show them to you.”

“And I'd love to see them.” Meredith hopped off her stool, eyes sparkling. “I miss home so much.”

“Then allow me to alleviate your suffering with the highest-quality Terran items this side of the Andromeda,” Algon said.

Algon led them to where he kept all of his Terran paraphernalia. It was a small hut made from scrap metal and wood, but it was packed to the ceiling with Terran objects. Meredith's eyes widened as she covered her mouth with both hands.

“Oh my God.” Tears gathered in her eyes. “Oh Peter, look.”

“You like it?” Algon gestured to it. “Feel free to browse for as long as you please.”

“I...wow,” she said.
Yondu's eyes flicked from the Terran junk to Meredith's wide eyes.

“You and the boy stay here,” he said, “roll around in as much Terran shit as you want. Algon and I gotta talk.”

“We do?” Algon blinked. “About what?”

“I'll tell you what in a goddamn second,” Yondu snarled.

“Fine, fine.”

“Are you sure?” Peter frowned. “We can't come, too?”

“Not this time, boy. You stay here with your momma,” Yondu said, “help her sort through all this garbage.”

“It's not garbage,” Meredith and Algon simultaneously snapped at Yondu, then looked at each other.

“I like her.” Algon pointed to Meredith. “I like your Terran, Yondu. This is a very good Terran. If you find any more Terrans like these two, I want them.”

Yondu growled. Meredith sat down and started sorting through all the Terran things, touching them lovingly and sighing. Peter looked around, handing her items he thought she'd find interesting.

Yondu dragged Algon out of the hut, far enough away that he could still keep an eye on the hut without being overheard by the Quills.

“So,” Algon said, “what do you need?”

Yondu took a deep breath.

“You know what Stakar did,” he said.

“I know what you did, and I know Stakar exiled you for it.” Algon tilted his head. “Let me guess, the boy's one of the planet's children.”

Yondu nodded.

“And now you've gotten attached,” Algon said, “and you want me to tell you to get rid of him.”

“No,” Yondu said, “I need you to help me keep these Terrans from Ego. I got a scrambler; that should buy me some time, but I need a permanent solution.”

“Have you, and this is simply a suggestion I might add, but have you considered, just possibly, maybe, just telling them the truth?” Algon shrugged his enormous shoulders. “It is merely a suggestion but I feel like you're avoiding that crucial step.”

“No. No, hell no, fuck no, a million goddamn times, no.” Yondu pointed a thick blue finger at Algon. “If Mery finds out she'll steal a ship and fly that boy away, and we'll find her dead in a ditch or sold to a Krylorian sex slaver or somethin’.”

“Yondu, you're overreacting. You are making these decisions based on a future that does not exist.” Algon linked his claws together. “She may take the news exceptionally well.”

“You don't know her like I do.” Yondu stared at the floor. “If she thinks I'm a danger to that kid, she'll bolt.”
“Are you a danger to him?”

“No, no, hell no!”

“Then perhaps you should tell her that.”

“Ego's the kid's father, idjit.”

“I realize that.”

“That means she slept with him. They were close.” Yondu tried not to think about that too much; he could feel an unfounded rage burning under his skin. “She won't believe a word I say against him.”

“Why?”

“Because she's in love with him, idjit.”

“Is she?” Algon chuckled. “You know, if I were a woman, and I was knocked up by a man and then didn't see him for eight years, I would not be in love with him. In fact, I could not think of a man I would be less in love with.”

“You're you,” Yondu said, “she's Mery. She won't give up on her people.”

“Then trust that she will not give up on you.”

“Dammit, Algon, I ain't...” Yondu took a deep breath. “I ain't one of her people.”

“Then here is my advice.” Algon leaned against a wall. “Remind her that this man did nothing for her for eight years.”

“And then?”

“Become exceptionally emotional, declare that lying to her is burning your heart with guilt, confess your trespasses to her, expound on your guilt and other emotions, and then declare your undying vow to never lie to her again.” Algon smiled. “And then, and this is the tricky part, never lie to her again.”

Yondu bared his teeth.

“I don't do emotional,” he said.

“Then get drunk.”

“I ain't an emotional drunk!”

Algon raised his scaly brow.

“Fine,” Yondu snapped, “I get a little stupid.”

Algon smiled.

“How the hell am I gonna tell her, even if I was drunk and stupid enough to do it? Hey Mery, your jackass boyfriend, Peter's pop, he's alive and he paid me to bring you to him. But, see, he's a goddamn Celestial planet and he kills all his kids so I ain't bringin' you there.” Yondu paced back and forth, agitated. “Because your fuckless boyfriend's a killer planet and I don't want you two dead because you're annoyin' and...kinda grown on me, I guess, and I just... I don't want you two dead!”
Algon blinked slowly, trying not to smile.

“See, those kids he killed, he paid me to traffic ’em to him and I did and I got exiled from the Ravagers for it, but... Fuck.” Yondu put his head in his hands. “She ain’t gonna believe me.”

“Not if you say it like that.” Algon frowned. “’Your boyfriend’s a killer planet’ is not exactly the most convincing statement.”

“It don’t matter anyway.” Yondu leaned his back against the wall, glaring at the floor. “No momma in her right mind is gonna keep a kid around some pirate what’s been trafficking kids for years.”

“Well, you’ve got me there.” Algon tapped his claws against each other. “Hm. So you need help keeping them from Ego? You’ve managed three months; what’s the rush now?”

“He’s pissed. Wants the boy there in a month,” Yondu said, “or he’s comin’ to get him.”

“How do you know,” Algon said slowly, “that this Ego is not bluffing?”

“He doesn’t bluff.”

“Doesn’t he? He was too lazy to fetch his own children, Yondu. A hard man would have demanded the boy be delivered as soon as possible. A hard man would not have accepted a four-month reprieve. Even when he threatened to arrive, he still allowed for the last month. No,” Algon said, “no I don’t believe he will come to take the Quills. It’s not in his nature to put forth that kind of effort. He doesn’t care about them as you do.”

Yondu breathed a sigh of relief, then jolted.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, ’as you do’,” he snarled.

“Yondu, enough of this. You risked your life to save the boy, and the woman is already attuned to that endless, idiotic rage of yours.” Algon put his claws over his eyes. “You care about those Terrans. A man who lies to himself becomes unable to see the truth in anything. Without truth, we have no principle. Without principle, we are as animals. Please, stop lying to yourself.”

Yondu stared at the ground, turning the question over in his head. With the boy, it was scarcely even a question. Yondu would rather take a blaster bolt to the temple than let that kid get hurt. Meredith; now that was a different story. She was stubborn and she mouthed off; he liked that about her. She was also prudish and suspicious, prone to snapping at anybody that crossed her. That, he figured, was just being a momma. Living out in the stars, a woman had to be a little untrusting. She was irritating as hell, but she trusted him, he thought, she'd told him that. She'd put her faith in him to keep her and Peter safe. Meredith and Peter trusted Yondu, and damn it all if he didn't care about that. Yondu put his head in his hands and groaned.

“The fuck have I gotten myself into, Algon,” he asked.

“Judging by what I see before me,” Algon said as he surveyed Yondu, “I think you've finally found people who trust you. You want to keep it that way, but you are afraid that they will abandon you like your parents did, that they will cast you out as Stakar did. You have no faith in people anymore.”

Yondu didn't move.

“Well, I for one have faith in the Quills.” Algon stretched. “And you owe them that luxury, at least.”
Algon watched as Yondu's chest rose and fell with a great sigh.

“They're gonna hate me,” he said.

“Maybe not. People can be surprising, Yondu.”

“People don't give sons-of-bitches like me second chances, Algon.”

“I did,” Algon said.

Yondu looked up at the Saurid.

“Guess you did, didn't you.” Yondu's brow contracted. “How'd you do it? How'd you get over what I did to you?”

“You did a very bad thing for a very pure-hearted reason.” Algon smiled sadly. “And for all these years, I have never been able to stop seeing that pure heart. No matter what you do, no matter what you say, I see the boy who killed my wife out of the goodness of his spirit.”

Yondu let out a sigh.

“Stopped bein' that guy for a while, didn't I,” he asked.

“For a while.” Algon blinked slowly. “You didn't visit. You didn't talk. Everything was an excuse to argue.”

“Exile'll do that to you, idjit.” Yondu scowled.

“If I may be so bold as to ask, what snapped you out of it?”

“Stupid Terran kid, what else?”

“Really?” Algon chuckled. “And how did that happen?”

“Teachin' someone to be somethin' requires bein' the damn thing yourself.” Yondu picked at his teeth. “Can't exactly be a good Ravager when you care more about money than freedom.”

“I see,” Algon said.

“These Quills, they're full of sentiment.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Soft, you know. Emotional. I swear if I had a unit for every time the woman's cried, I'd retire.”

Algon chuckled.

“But death don't scare 'em,” Yondu said, “and they don't give up. The boy's got a fire in him; you can see it in his eyes. He'll make a damn fine Ravager one day. And Mery, she's just hell on wheels. Dyin', bleedin', sick or hurtin'; she just keeps goin'. Never stops, never quits, never stops hopin'. It's easier to just not give a fuck, but these Terrans care. It makes 'em... I don't know, it's like they get off on it or something.”

“Emotions make them strong. Family makes them powerful. There are many species in the galaxy that feel that way,” Algon said, “including Saurids.”

“Not Centaurians,” Yondu grumbled, “that's for damn sure.”

“You don't know that. Perhaps in addition to having an outrageously fast heal time, marsupial pouch,
four lungs, and telekinetic whistle, they were also capable of being honest with someone and acting like anything other than an emotionally constipated child,” Algon said.

Yondu glared at Algon, throwing open his coat to expose his arrow.

“Was it something I said,” Algon asked innocently.

Yondu growled and crossed his arms.

“Scramble your signal. Buy yourself a little more time. Then,” Algon said, “you must tell them the truth, Yondu.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to do that?” The tails of Yondu's coat fluttered as he paced back and forth, agitated. “I don't know how!”

“Try using words,” Algon said, “and string them into coherent sentences.”

“Dammit, this ain't a joke!”

“I know it's not a joke. Just tell them your story, Yondu.” Algon lifted his enormous shoulders. “All of it. From Stakar to Terra. You're a good story-teller, they'll like that.”

Yondu's shoulders sagged.

“They're gonna leave,” he said.

“You don't know that.” Algon blinked slowly. “You don't know them. They will surprise you. People often do.”

Yondu looked towards the shack where Algon kept all his Terran junk.

“You know she's gonna wanna buy everything in that fuck-forsaken dump, right,” he told Algon.

Algon grinned and put his claws behind his head.

“If she does,” Algon asked, “who foots the bill?”

“Not me.” Yondu scowled.

“Oh come on!” Algon put his claws on his hips, scowling. “What do I have to do to get you to spend money here?”

“Maybe if you didn't give me shit for free,” Yondu said, pulling out the chunk of yama ore, “I would pay you more.”

“Oh ha ha ha, yes yes, you are very funny.” Algon's frills flicked in irritation. “You will return and eat with me again, yes?”

“Later, after this Ego thing blows over, and that's only if you don't piss me off.” Yondu stowed the ore back in his jacket and walked towards the Terran shack. “Right now we gotta get out of here. Scrambler's workin', but I don't want to be in one place too long for now.”

“This Ego has you on edge,” Algon noticed.

“No shit, dumbass. That's why we gotta get out of here.” Yondu stepped into the Terran shack. “Get your Terran asses up, it's time to go.”
Meredith looked up, her grey eyes wide. Yondu stopped in his tracks. All the shelves were rearranged, items put together neatly and with delicate care.

Yondu stared at her.

“You fuckin' cleaned,” he said.

“Algon's going to be mad, isn't he,” she asked.

“Mad? Mad about what?” Algon ducked into the shack, his orange eyes widening. “Oh.”

“I'm so sorry, I just... I didn't like to see it messy.” Meredith swallowed. “It's not junk to me, it's... it's home. So I put it back together.”

There were tears in Meredith's eyes. Peter sat in the saucer chair, curled up and toying with a multicolored cube. He smiled at Yondu.

“Mom put it all back together again,” he said, “just like how it'd be on Terra.”

Algon looked around at the organized shelves, his brow contracting.

“You organized it. You made it feel like home,” he said.

Meredith nodded, her eyes downcast in guilt. Algon chuckled and put his claws on his hips.

“Yondu,” he asked, “are you sure these Terrans are not for sale?”

“No, dammit, they're not for sale. Come on,” he said to Meredith and Peter, “get movin’.”

Meredith gave the Terran shack one more wistful look, then took Peter's hand. Peter put down the multicolored cube, and the two Terrans followed Yondu out of the shack. Algon picked up the multicolored cube, tossing it up and down in his hands.

“Meredith Quill!”

Meredith and Peter turned around. Algon was crouching in the doorway, a wide toothy grin spread across his face. He tossed Meredith the multicolored cube.

“A Terran puzzle,” he said, “for you to entertain yourself with before your next surgery.”

Meredith caught the cube.

“How much do I owe you,” she said.

“Owe me? Ha!” Algon shook his head. “No, no. You and your son have done enough. Please, take that with my gratitude, and please come shopping again! Preferably with more buying next time!”

Meredith laughed and nodded.

“I will, thank you!” She waved, and then caught up to Yondu. “Wow, he's really nice.”

“He's a big yellow idjit.” Yondu scowled, then looked at the cube. “What the hell is that?”

“It's a Rubix cube,” she explained, “a Terran puzzle. You try to get all the sides to be one color. Want to try?”

“No.” Yondu hit the door panel, revealing the Eclector. “Terrans are a goddamn puzzle themselves,
who the fuck needs a plastic one?”

Peter laughed; Meredith grinned.

“I don't know, maybe one day you'll figure us out.” She pocketed the Rubix cube. “And maybe we'll figure you out one day, too.”

“I bet I know everything about Yondu,” Peter said.

“Oh fuckin' really? What am I gonna say next,” Yondu asked.

Peter thought for a moment.

“Shut up, idjit,” he quoted.

Meredith covered her laugh with her free hand, the other wrapped around Peter's.

“Peter, that's not very nice,” she said.

“It's what he'll say next,” Peter said.

“Shut up, idjit,” Yondu growled.

Peter and Meredith bust out laughing as they climbed the ramp to the Eclector. Yondu rubbed his jaw, doing everything he could not to smile.

"Damn Terrans," he said.

The loading ramp of the Eclector shut. The ship rose into the air and soared off. Algon watched it go, leaning in the doorway with his arms crossed. He shook his head and chuckled.

"Always such an angry boy," he said, "and always so very lucky."
Chapter Summary

Yondu takes the night shift flying the Eclector, only to find out Meredith's taken over co-piloting for the night. Dialogue ensues about Stakar, Ego/Jason, and Terran astrology folklore.

(Honestly this is nothing but chatty dialogue. I am not entirely happy with this chapter, but every relationship has that night they stayed up all night talking about random things.)

(For those of you who are missing Kraglin, he has a chapter almost entirely to himself next.)

The clock on Yondu's side table read 12:18. It was nearly time for the night shift. Yondu swung his legs over the bed and stood. He stretched his arms and back, feeling his muscles tighten and relax. He reached for the floor before remembering that Meredith had done his laundry. He opened the drawer of his metal dresser; inside, all of his shirts were neatly folded. He took one out, shook the folds out of it, and pulled it on. The smell of laundry soap filled his nostrils, and he sneezed. The shirt was soft and smooth, the oil stains and engine grease marks completely gone. Yondu couldn't remember the last time he'd had freshly done laundry; maybe when he'd first joined up with Stakar and Aleta had been taking care of him, but even she'd never folded it. Meredith folded it. It was kind of goddamn terrifying, he thought, how much she'd changed his ship. It was clean, shit got put away, and the food didn't suck anymore. As he pulled on some pants, Yondu thought back to three months ago. Fuck, he hadn't even been able to get a goddamn coffee on his own ship.

Shaking his head, Yondu made his way to the bridge. Music was booming on the other side of the bridge door.

"The hell is this," he said.

Yondu bared his teeth and hit the door panel. When the portal opened, the sound hit him like a shove to the chest. Meredith Quill was in the co-pilot's seat, singing along to some Terran music.

"There are stars in the Southern sky," she sang, "southward as you go. There is moonlight and moss in the trees, down the Seven Bridges Road."

"What in the everlastin' fuck do you think you're doin'?"

Meredith's head whipped around.

"Co-piloting," she said.

"Where the hell is Kraglin?"

"He's asleep. He hasn't slept since you got hurt."
“What do you mean, he didn't fuckin' sleep?”

“I mean that he didn't sleep. He stayed awake because you were hurt and the ship had to be run somehow.” Meredith turned back towards the front of the ship. “And then you were with Algon nearly the whole day, so he didn't have a chance to catch up on sleep until now.”

“He didn't sleep.” Yondu grimaced as he walked forwards. “Damn Xandarian.”

“Kraglin is paying me five-hundred units to take his place as co-pilot tonight.” Meredith pointed to the autopilot setting. “So far, I'm doing an amazing job.”

Yondu snorted.

“He also told me that if you weren't okay with it, then I was to wake him up immediately and we'd switch places.” Meredith sighed. “Please don't complain; the poor kid's exhausted and he deserves sleep. He's worked really hard lately.”

“It's fine.” Yondu dropped into the pilot's seat. “Don't care either way.”

Meredith hit play, and the music came back on. She looked so comfortable in the co-pilot's seat. Her long legs were sprawled out to either side of the seat. Yondu fought a smile. Kraglin did the same damn thing; that seat was too goddamn small for both of them.

“You can put your feet on the dash.” Yondu checked the thruster capacity. “Kraglin does it.”

Meredith's legs swung up, laying over themselves on the dash. She tapped her foot to the music, leaning her head back on the chair's headrest. A new song came on. Meredith hummed the notes of the smooth guitar intro, and then sang the lyrics.

“He was a hard-headed man,” she sang, “he was brutally handsome... and she was terminally brave.”

Yondu's eyes flicked over to Meredith.

“She held him up and he held her for ransom in the heart, of the cold cold city.” Meredith wasn't looking at him. “He had a nasty reputation as a cruel dude; they said he was ruthless, said he was crude.”

Yondu listened closely. The music wasn't too shitty, and her voice had gotten even stronger over the past week.

“They had one thing in common” she sang, “they were good in bed. She'd say, 'Faster, faster, the lights are turnin' red.'”

Yondu reached over and tapped her leg.

“Hey,” he grunted, “what is this?”

“The Eagles. 'Life in the Fast Lane','” she said.

“What's it about?”

“Just listen,” she said.

Meredith stopped singing, letting Yondu hear the original singer's voice. He listened to the lyrics. Both of them remained silent until the song ended.

“Why?”

“It expresses so much. I mean, imagine being so untrustworthy that even the doctor won't serve you until you pay him cash. The song's about two people who get so caught up in doing things the Bonnie-and-Clyde, life-in-the-fast-lane way that they eventually burn out and crash.” Meredith shrugged. “Life catches up to you, you know?”

Yondu stared out at the starscape.

“I like it,” he said, “play it again.”

Meredith rewound the song and hit play. They listened to it for it again.

“That one line, about blatant and firepower,” Yondu said, “I like that one.”

“Blatant...what?”

“Out e'ry evenin' until it was light, he was two times blatant; she was two times the firepower.” Yondu kept his eyes on the stars. “Ain't that what he said?”

“No, it's 'out every evening until it was light. He was too tired to make it; she was too tired to fight about it,'” Meredith said.

Yondu gave a grunt of disappointment. Meredith watched out the window.

“I think I like your lyrics better,” she said.

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up.

“Play another one,” he said.

“That was the end of this cassette. Do you want...” Meredith held up two cassettes. “Frank Sinatra or George Thoroughgood?”

“Whatever will get you to stop talkin' faster,” Yondu said.

Meredith pushed a cassette in. Some opening notes played over the sound system, a mix of guitar and Terran vocals.

“You talk too much, you talk too much.” The voice that came over the sound system was brash and male. “I can't believe the things that you say. Every day. If you keep on talkin' baby, you know you're bound to drive me away.”

Yondu broke into a grin.

“Now this is music,” he said.

“Yeah, I thought you'd like this.” Meredith chuckled. “It's your kind of music.”

“Whatvs that supposed to mean,” he said.

“Sometimes you'll hear a sound and you just think, 'Wow, wouldn't so-and-so really like this.' When Peter brought me this, I knew you'd like it.” Meredith smiled at him. “It's your style.”
“Style, huh?” Yondu reached down and hit the thruster adjuster.

“Everybody's got a style. You strike me as a classic rock kinda guy,” she said, “but I bet I could get you to listen to country.”

“Country?”

“My favorite. I like country, pop, and rock n' roll.” Meredith stared up at the ceiling. “My papa's like you; classic rock, a little hard rock in there somewhere.”

Yondu glanced over at her.

“What is it with Terrans and music,” he asked.

Meredith shrugged.

“And dancing, why the fuck do Terrans dance so goddamn much?”

“Music makes us move,” she said, “inspires us, fills us with emotion.”

“Damn Terrans.” Yondu shook his head. “Emotional as hell.”

“Don't Centaurians have music?”

“Wouldn't know,” Yondu grunted, “never heard any.”

Meredith leaned her head to the side. She studied his profile for a second.

“I bet Centaurian music was beautiful. All those whistles, all together? I bet it was breathtaking,” she said firmly.

Yondu's large shoulders shrugged.

“Do you know if Centaurians danced?”

“I don't dance,” he said, “so I bet they didn't either.”

“Oh I bet they did.” Meredith grinned. “If they had music, they danced. Guaranteed.”

“Guaranteed, huh?” Yondu bared his teeth. “What the hell makes you so sure?”

“I've never heard of a species that had music that didn't dance,” she said, “have you?”

Yondu racked his brain for a second.

“No,” he admitted.

“Then who's to suppose Centaurians were the only ones.” Meredith leaned back, staring at the ceiling of the bridge. “I bet they had dances and music. Probably some percussion of some sort to keep the beat.”

“Would you stop,” Yondu snarled.

Meredith's eyes snapped over to him. His knuckles were pale blue; he was gripping the steering mechanism and breathing audibly.

“I'm sorry,” she said softly, “I didn't know you didn't like talking about them.”
“It ain't that.” Yondu took a deep breath, letting the air out of his nose. “You... that talk reminds me of somebody.”

“Family?”

“Stakar,” Yondu said.

“Stakar... the friend who freed you, right? Was he Centaurian,” Meredith asked.

“No, he's Arcturan. But that shit,” Yondu explained, “talkin' about other species, what they might have done, how they lived. That's his kind of thing.”

“A history buff, huh?”

“Yeah.” Yondu let out a half-hearted chuckle. “That's him.”

Meredith tucked a hand under her cheek, leaning against the headrest.

“So I ask you more about him, or is this one of those, 'shut-up-Mery' topics?”

Yondu's crimson eyes were locked onto the starscape. He swallowed.

“Just don't tell anybody,” he said, “or I'll kill you.”

Meredith grinned. She was getting used to the death threats; they usually meant that he was trusting her a little more.

“He's got a thing for dead cultures. Anthropology, archeology. all them 'ologies,” Yondu said, “in particular lookin' at any species the Kree wiped off the map. After he picked me up, Centauri-IV became his new pet project. Deciphered the language, learned cultural shit... the ol' son-of-a-bitch was obsessed. He's got a planet called Ilyth where he keeps all he collects. Old man could go on for hours about it.”

“Tell me about how he rescued you,” she said.

Yondu rubbed his jaw.

“Hala was where they kept and trained us. But sometimes they'd load us up on these big-ass warships and drag us to some fuck-forsaken planet, where they'd have us kill everything we saw. It was easier to throw us down as shock troops than risk Kree warriors.” Yondu's mouth turned down in a frown. “So we ended up conquerin' planets for them.”

“Sons-of-bitches,” Meredith muttered.

“We were comin' back from... fuck, I don't even remember. Another goddamn planet, another goddamn day. I'd gotten the shit beaten out of me for doin' somethin', I don't remember. Think I fought the commander or some shit.” Yondu shrugged. “Anyway, the ship starts shaking. Kree start flippin' their shit, everything's goin' to hell.”

“And here come the Ravagers?”

Meredith's eyes sparkled like cut glass. Yondu smiled.

“We're the good guys sometimes,” he said.

She had the same wide-eyed wonder as Peter did. Terrans loved to tell stories, Yondu noticed, but
they loved to hear them too.

“Then what happened,” she asked.

“I'm kneelin' in my cell, starin' at the floor. Suddenly, door opens. Man's arm reaches out, grabs me, and drags me out into the hall. I come up fightin'; plow my first right into that fucker's jaw. He goes down, and six of his friends grab me. They put blasters in my face, you know the drill, talkin' about how they're gonna kill me, but I ain't hearin' em.” Yondu grinned, shaking his head slightly. “Because the fucker I punched, he just starts laughin’.”

Meredith grinned.

“He grabs the nearest fella's blaster, and busts those chains to pieces in one hit.” Yondu mimed the shot with his hand. “He looks at me and says, 'No man should live a life under the thumb of another'. And damn, I just...”

Yondu took a deep breath and let it out, shaking his head.

“Goddamn poetry,” he said, “that was what it was.”

“He sounds amazing,” Meredith said.

Yondu shrugged.

“Son-of-a-bitch turned me from that scrawny Kree-hatin' psychopath into the man I am today,” he said.

“When was the last time you saw him,” Meredith asked.

“Watched him get onto a QuadX bound for Knowhere,” Yondu said, “and searchin' for anyone there's like trying to find chocolate in a shit-stack.”

“Do you think I'll meet him one day?” Meredith's voice took on a hopeful tone.

“No, Mery.” Yondu shook his head. “The moment he found out who you were, he'd want you as far away as goddamn possible. Anybody who's got anything to do with me is black-listed.”

Meredith frowned.

“Don't ask me what I did to piss him off, okay?” Yondu wouldn't meet her eyes. “Just... don't.”

For a moment, Meredith stared at his profile.

“You don't want to talk about it, then we won't talk about it.” Meredith put her hands behind her head, tapping her foot along to the quiet music in the background. “It's that simple.”

Yondu breathed through his nose. For once, the Terran wasn't going to argue; that was a relief. He swallowed and glanced at her tapping foot. Algon had told him to break it to her slow, starting with Ego.

“Mery?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell me about the boy's pop.” Yondu kept his eyes forward. “The son-of-a-bitch who abandoned you for eight goddamn years.”
“Jason?” Meredith blinked. “What about him?”

“You don’t say shit about him.”

“I mean, there's not much to say. We met when I left college. I had just come back from Nashville, Tennessee. I'd done pretty well for myself there, and ended up taking a good gig in St. Louis.”

Meredith leaned her head back, staring at the ceiling. “One night, I'm driving home from a show in St. Louis and I see this big light in the sky.”

Meredith pointed up as if she could still see it, dragging her finger down to the ground.

“And it falls,” she said, “right into this big old field of dead cornstalks. And you know me, I'm curious so I drive right through it.”

“You drove on somebody else's goddamn land?”

“It's Missouri.” She said it like it was an explanation.

Yondu grunted.

“So I pull up to this big white egg looking thing, right? And out comes this man.” Meredith closed her eyes. “Brown leather jacket. Chestnut hair, just like Peter. A smile that just floored me.”

Yondu bared his teeth.

“Don't need them details,” he said.

“Well too bad,” she said, “you're getting them.”

Yondu growled and slunk back in the pilot's seat.

“And so he asks me what planet he's on and I tell him it's Earth and I ask him if he's okay. See, at this point I'm thinking I've fallen asleep at the wheel or something and this is just a dream. But nope.” Meredith chuckled. “He folded his whole ship up into a little white sphere and got into my truck with me.”

“You let some goddamn weirdo from space get into a vehicle with you?” Yondu's eyes boggled.

“Goddamn it, woman!”

“It felt right, okay? I drove him back to my papa's place and asked him if he'd be okay. He smiled, said he'd keep in touch. Next day I woke up thinking it was a dream, but he was at the second night of the show.” Meredith sighed. “And every show after.”

“So he was a goddamn angel, was he?” Yondu gritted his teeth together, feeling his temperature rising as a sourceless anger broiled to the surface. “Never pissed you off?”

“Well, he did talk a lot about himself,” Meredith chuckled, “but that's a lot of guys.”

“And it didn't freak you out that he was from fuckin' space?”

“Not really.”

“The hell is wrong with you, woman?”

“I know, it's weird. But...” Meredith sighed. “I liked him and he liked me. I didn't want it to get any more complicated than that. Course, it did. We ended up falling for each other right quick.”
“And he met your pop?”

“No.” Meredith's voice went quiet. “No, he... he didn't want to meet anymore Terrans. Said that made leaving that much harder.”

“So you knew he was leaving.”

“I suspected he'd go back to space for a little while,” she confessed, “but I didn't think it'd be for over eight years.”

“And he left you with nothin' but a boy to raise, huh?”

“He left one thing behind.” Meredith closed her eyes, picturing the strange flora in her mind. “He left a flower.”

“One goddamn flower?”

“It was a beautiful flower,” she said, “and it never wilted. Not in winter, not in summer; it just kept blooming all year round. Before I got sick, I'd go and stare at it and remind myself that I wasn't crazy and that Jason had really been from space.”

“But he left,” Yondu said, “your boyfriend left.”

“Yep. Left while I was two months pregnant,” Meredith said.

“Jackass,” Yondu snapped.

“Oh, like you've never slept with someone and just left them,” Meredith said cynically.

“I ain't never knocked nobody up,” Yondu said, “not once. Don't know what kind of bargain-bin stupid your boyfriend was, but there's a fuckin' bazillion ways to keep yourself from knockin' somebody up. Figures he was too dumb to use one.”

“He wasn't dumb. He was an angel, and he gave me Peter.”

“Fine,” Yondu grumbled, “one good thing.”

“And so seven months after Jason left, Peter was born. October 14th,” Meredith said, “and from then on, it's just been me and him.”

“So that's the boy's birth date.” Yondu made a mental note to remember that for later.

“Mine's July 9th.” Meredith made a wry face. “That makes me a Cancer.”

“What? If you're born on a certain day you get cancer?”

“No, no.” Meredith laughed. “There's this Terran folklore thing called astrology. People believe that the alignment of the stars, planets, sun, moon, and constellations have an effect on daily life. Especially your temperament.”

Yondu's brows knit together.

“Y'all use stars to see the future,” he said.

“More like...make some interesting guesses,” Meredith said.
“So when you're born matters?”

“Yeah. There are twelve zodiac signs, and your birth date determines which one you are. There's Aquarius, Sagittarius, Gemini, Aries, Pisces.” Meredith counted on her fingers. “Taurus, Scorpio, Virgo, Libra, Leo, Cancer, and Capricorn. And I'm a Cancer.”

Yondu looked at her.

“Yeah, I know, it's ironic.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “Don't laugh.”

“Who the hell laughs at cancer? It ain't funny,” Yondu said.

“No,” she said, “it isn't.”

For a second or two, all they could hear was the music in the background. Yondu pulled up a calibration calendar and typed in a universal year code.

“What are you doing,” she asked.

“Calendar translator. Takes any day, any minute, any second, and tells you what that would be on another planet.” Yondu looked up. “November. What the hell's a November?”

“It's a month.”

“Oh. Eighth of November,” Yondu said.

“That's your birthday?”

“Accordin' to Kree Empire records, that's the day I got sold.” Yondu shut down the calendar. “First recorded history of me ever bein' alive.”

Meredith reflected on that for a minute.

“That makes you a Scorpio,” she said.

Yondu made a face.

“So what's a Scorpio,” he asked.

“Scorpios are moody, obstinate, resentful, and easily provoked into jealousy. They're also secretive and stubborn,” Meredith said.

“Har har.”

“But,” she added, “they're also determined, relentless, passionate people who often have leadership qualities. They're emotionally intuitive and feel things deeply.”

Yondu gave her a sideways look.

“How do I know you just ain't makin' that up,” he said.

“Go on, look it up. I'm sure somebody's recorded Terran folklore,” Meredith answered.

Yondu opened up a search window and typed in “Terran astrology”. The amount of raw information that came up was astounding. Meredith frowned and stood up, coming closer to see it all.

“Wow,” she said, “I didn't realize people did so much research on Terra.”
“Y’all are kinda novel. Space-farin’ race protected by the Asgardians and blocked off by the Nova Corps. Kinda like the forbidden fruit.” Yondu scrolled through the information. “What am I lookin' at, here.”

“Right there.” Meredith pointed. “‘Traits of a Scorpio According to Terran Folklore Myth.’”

Yondu read the short passage. It was exactly as Meredith had said.

“Told you,” Meredith answered.

Yondu typed in, 'cancer'. Immediately images and studies on the Terran disease came to the forefront. Death statistics, trials, medicines, and medical information came rushing onto the screen. Yondu caught some of the numbers and swallowed. Meredith leaned over and typed in, 'cancer Terran astrology' and the medical information was replaced with Terran folklore.

“Cancer, huh?” Yondu looked at the readout. “Stubborn, clingy, moody, can't let go... holy shit, Mery, it's like lookin' at you on paper.”

Meredith laughed and kept reading.

“And loving, intuitive, emotional, cautious, protective, and loving. See? Some truth to these old folklore myths after all,” she said.

“Terrans are crazy,” Yondu said.

“Centaurians don't have anything like this?”

“You shittin' me? I swear, everything they did was some kind of spiritual somethin'.” Yondu scowled. “Couldn't take a shit without it bein' part of the cosmic plan.”

Meredith laughed as she sat back down in the co-pilot's seat. She put her feet up on the desk and leaned back.

“At least Centaurians didn't fight about it like Terrans do.” Meredith's eyes were closed. “We have wars based on our religious beliefs.”

“That don't make any sense,” Yondu said.

“Well, not everybody agrees. Religion is supposed to bring spiritual health,” Meredith said, “to a sense of cosmic fulfillment and a closer relationship with our divine creator, however one perceives that. What it's not supposed to do is function as an excuse to hate and kill people, or as a tool to get power or money.”

Yondu grunted.

“Terra sounds like it sucks,” he said.

“It doesn't suck.” Meredith sighed and opened her eyes. “I'm just hitting all the low points so I don't get homesick again.”

“You get homesick often?”

“I cried for three hours after we came back from Algon's,” Meredith said flatly.

“Three goddamn hours?”
“Seeing all that Terran stuff set me off.” Meredith tapped her foot along with the music in the background. “Don’t act like me crying is a big surprise.”

“It ain’t,” Yondu said, “but three hours?”

“What do you want me to say? I was tore up. Imagine if Stakar showed up with all this great and wonderful stuff from Centauri-IV,” she said, “and imagine if that stuff really reminded you of a wonderful and amazing time in your life and you had to just leave it all behind again because you can’t afford to bring it with you.”

“I wouldn't give a shit,” Yondu said, “I don't remember Centauri-IV.”

Meredith's eyes lowered.

“Sorry,” she said, “I didn't mean to....sorry.”

Yondu looked at her. She wouldn't meet his eyes, her cheeks pink. She honestly thought he was worried about a planet he couldn't even remember being on. It was typical Terran sentiment, but...damn, she really didn't want to upset him. It was pathetic, but it was kind of touching, too. Yondu swallowed.

“I know what you mean,” he said, returning his gaze to the starscape.

“You do?” Meredith looked up. “Really?”

“When Stakar kicked me off his ship, it was like losin' home.” Yondu's voice was a low, gravelly timbre. “I lost everything except the Eclector and a handful of assholes too stubborn to leave. Every time I end up talkin' to someone from back then, it reminds me of how it ought to be. Then, I gotta let it go and go back to livin' my life. You can't bring the past back, Mery.”

“You're right,” she said softly, “you can't.”

The Eclector soared along, the only sound on the bridge Meredith's music. Yondu swallowed. If he was going to tell her, now was the time. It didn't have to be hard, dammit, just start with the part about how he'd gotten mixed up with Ego. Then he could tell her about Stakar exiling him. Fuck, no. Yondu gritted his teeth. He couldn't start this with I'm-a-child-trafficking-exile; she'd get the boy straight out of bed and fly off with him. Start with the deal with Ego and how goddamn horrible he is, he told himself, and then just keep going.

“Mery?” Yondu took a deep breath. “Look, as long as we're talkin', there's somethin' you maybe oughta know about.”

She didn't say anything.

“Mery?” Yondu turned. “Oh. Damn.”

Meredith was curled up in the co-pilot's seat, her eyes closed. Her blonde curls stuck out in all directions from the back of the headrest. Her lips were slightly parted, and her whole expression was relaxed and innocent. Yondu swallowed and forced himself to look away.

The images of the information about cancer flashed in his memory. He looked back at her, drinking in her image. Yet again, Yondu had let himself forget that she really was dying. She was so goddamn brash, he thought, that it was easy to forget all that pepper and moxie was temporary. Meredith still had blackouts. She still fainted, couldn't see, passed out, and just plain got tired. Maybe Ego wasn't the most pressing thing on his plate right now; Meredith could be gone tomorrow, for
fuck's sake. The thought made Yondu's blood run cold, and he tightened his grip on the steering mechanism. Ego could go on the back burner for a while; first, Yondu needed to make sure Meredith was alive long enough for Yondu to tell her anything at all.

He wracked his brains for plans, but coming up with another hundred-thousand units wouldn't be easy. To make sure the boys didn't get suspicious, Yondu had to take half of whatever the job promised. There weren't many two-hundred-thousand unit jobs out there, and even less that would justify Meredith's involvement. Yondu gritted his teeth and cursed. He had to find a way. If he didn't get Meredith the money, who would?
Lottery

Chapter Summary

Kraglin makes it big time, but finds himself caught between being good man or a good Ravager.

(The Kraglin Chapter. <3 )

Kraglin Obfonteri was taking a day off. The Eclector had made port on the bustling Krylorian outpost of Heran-2, and Kraglin had stepped off the ship to have a little time to himself. The cap'n was working with Peter on the flight simulator, and Ms. Quill was working on dinner. With everyone else occupied, Kraglin figured an afternoon to himself wouldn't hurt nobody. After the cap'n getting hurt and running the ship nearly a whole goddamn day, Kraglin needed some solo time. The cap'n had given him the all-clear, and so he roamed the streets of Heran-2 by himself.

The streets were packed with pink-skinned, raspberry-eyed Krylorians of all shapes and sizes. Kraglin walked down to a brightly-colored building. Hundreds of stacks of colorful paper were showing in the window under a series of quickly-changing numbers. Kraglin walked in and looked at all the papers.

“I'll take that one,” he said, pointing to a stack, “for the big pot.”

The Krylorian behind the counter pulled out a slip of the paper and handed it to him. Kraglin transferred him fifty units and walked out with the slip in his fingers. He walked to the window and looked at all the lottery numbers. Kraglin glanced down at the lottery ticket in his hands.

“Here goes nothin',” he said.

Kraglin scratched off the little red strip with his thumbnail. Gambling was a habit of his, but he didn't ever bet much. Except, he thought, on Ms. Quill's surgeries, but those were the safest goddamn bets that Kraglin had ever made. A lottery ticket here, an Orloni race there... as long as he wasn't addicted, Kraglin figured a little risk was a little fun. The numbers under the strip were 17 71 39 04 20. He looked up at the day's winning numbers.

17 71 39 04 20.

Kraglin nearly choked on air. He frantically opened his interface and looked at his account; immediately, a hundred-thousand units appeared in his name. His pulse quickened, and he had one of his moments of extreme clarity. He knew exactly what he was going to do. He was going to walk down the street and purchase his own ship. Suzarra, he'd call her. Finally, his own ship, all to himself, just like the cap'n!

His long legs shot out as he strutted down the street, a huge grin plastered on his face. He'd won the lottery. It was unbelievable. He'd paint the ship green, green like Yazkin-8. He'd put a stereo in it and hype up the thrusters. There wouldn't be a faster ship in Yondu's army, not even Yondu's. Suzarra would be a work of art.
Kraglin came into the shipyard with a fire in his eyes.

“M-craft,” he said as soon as he walked through the door, “show me what you've got.”

The Krylorian woman behind the desk blinked. “What?”


The Krylorian led him out into the shipyard. Hundreds of ships were for sale; everything from discount A8 shuttles to eight-million-unit QuadX vessels. Kraglin's palms were sweaty. The M-crafts couldn't possibly be as expensive as a QuadX. He had his savings to dip into, but he had to be careful. Having a ship wouldn't be too useful if he couldn't pay for fuel.

“Here.” The Krylorian pointed. “Only one we've got. The boss won it from a Ravager in a card game. Take a look.”

The M-craft glimmered in the sun. Judging by the deep blue color and the rings of gold, it had belonged to one of Stakar's men. Kraglin's heart raced. Stakar Ogord was famous for spoiling his pilots; that thing had to be loaded with all sorts of tricks. Yondu was going to be so happy. Peter would piss himself from excitement, and Kraglin could take Ms. Quill out flying for practice.

Ms. Quill. Kraglin's heart dropped. She still didn't have the money for the cerebral core. Kraglin looked down at his lottery ticket; it flapped slightly in the wind. Kraglin looked at the gleaming ship, then back at the ticket.

“Shit,” he muttered.

One-hundred-thousand units. It was enough to buy the ship of his dreams. It was enough to get Ms. Quill her surgery. It wasn't enough to do both.

The Krylorian attendant looked at the craft.

“It's a beauty,” she said, “and a steal for one-hundred-and-three-thousand units.”

“It is,” he admitted, “it's goddamn perfect.”

“Want me to draw up the papers?” The Krylorian pulled out a datapad. “You could fly her out today.”

Kraglin swallowed. “Let me think about it. I'll be back before the hour's out.”

“Don't you want to know what it looks like inside?”

“I already know.” Kraglin scanned the craft, drinking it in. “I could fly that thing blindfolded.”

He wanted it so much that his heart ached. Taking a deep breath, Kraglin closed his eyes.

“I'll be back,” he said.

He stalked out, forcing himself not to look at the gleaming M-craft. It was like walking away from a smooth steel dream, but he had to do it. He paced down the street, his mind racing and his heart aching.

It was either the ship or Ms. Quill, and Kraglin didn't know what to do. His heart told him that the answer should be obvious. Ms. Quill was a kind person who deserved to live, and Kraglin could get her that surgery. Her clock was constantly ticking, and who knew how long she'd last. His head told
him that he was being an idiot. Ms. Quill was more than capable of taking care of herself. Kraglin had one shot to get the ship of his dreams. He might never have this opportunity again, and what kind of Ravager would he be if he let it slip? Then again, what kind of Ravager would he be if she died because of his lack of empathy?

Kraglin ducked into an alley. Leaning against the wall, he took a deep breath. The *smart* thing to do would be to take the ship. A good Ravager took advantage of opportunities while they glittered before him, and this was a one-time opportunity. Kraglin's brain was feverishly pumping out all the statistics on the ship, all the ways he could use it, all the plans he could make. He could make more money off a ship like that than he could dream of. That fast, that powerful; he'd be a force to be reckoned with, that was for damn sure. The other pilots on the Eclector would stop their sniggering about how he was getting soft. Kraglin knew exactly what it'd feel like, holding onto that steering mechanism. He *needed* it.

Kraglin took off speed-walking towards the shipyard, only to have his heart drop into his stomach like a lead brick. The *right* thing to do would be to help Ms. Quill. She was dying a million miles from her planet. It might take months for her to get the units, and by that time, she could be dead. Peter would be alone. Kraglin turned around and paced back towards the Eclector. He couldn't be this selfish. Ravager or not, spending this money just wouldn't be humane.

But Kraglin was a Ravager, dammit, he couldn't just let this opportunity get away. What about the money he'd make off using the ship? He could help Ms. Quill with that. It wasn't like she was going to die next week or anything. She'd made it this far, hadn't she? Kraglin's feet skidded in the dust as he turned around and paced towards the shipyard. If Yondu were in Kraglin's position, Yondu would buy the ship.

Or would he? Kraglin found himself pacing back towards the Eclector. Yondu had always told Kraglin that a Ravager protects their own. In that club on Contraxia, Meredith had fought that smuggler. She'd called Kraglin one of “her people”. Meredith thought of Kraglin as one of her own, and Kraglin thought about her the same way. She was kind, encouraging; with her around, Kraglin didn't feel like he had to pretend to be something he wasn't. He was a ruthless Ravager, there was no doubt about it, but he was also his parent's kid. He'd been raised on Yazkin-8 by parents that valued kindness, nobility, and honor. Ms. Quill made him feel like that was something to be proud of, not something to laugh at. But what kind of Ravager was worried about nobility? They were space pirates, for crying out loud.

Kraglin stopped in the middle of the street, pulled in two different directions by two different forces. His head told him to cut the sentiment, buy the ship, and make the money. He was being a fool, not a Ravager. His heart told him to do the right thing, help Ms. Quill, and be the man that his parents had wanted him to be. Kraglin stood there and groaned. He needed a drink.

Kraglin ended up sitting at a corner bar with his head in his hands. His jacket was hung on the back of the chair. The lottery ticket was burning a hole in his pocket; he couldn't think of anything else. He felt like his choice was about more than just a ship or Ms. Quill; this was about Kraglin. This choice was about what kind of man Kraglin wanted to be. He could give in to his logical, ruthless head or his sentimental, fiery heart. It was like simultaneously being frozen and burned at the same time. Kraglin put his forehead on the bar and sighed.

“Can I get you anything,” a voice asked.

Kraglin looked up. The bartender was a huge Taurian; he was rubbing down the bar.

“What,” Kraglin asked.
“Can I get you anything,” the Taurian growled.

“No,” Kraglin said, “I ain't decided yet.”

“Decide fast,” the Taurian said, “the galaxy isn't going to spin any slower.”

Kraglin nodded.

“Don't know what I want to buy,” Kraglin added.

“Just pick. There's always more units.”

Kraglin lifted his head with a serious expression.

“There are, aren't there? There's always more goddamn money,” he said, “I can always make more.”

“That's the nature of life,” the Taurian chuckled, “you can always make another choice.”

Kraglin turned that over in his head. If he didn't buy the ship, he could always find another. But if he didn't help Ms. Quill... damn, she really could be dead in a week. Kraglin's fist tightened. He couldn't let that happen. Kraglin didn't want to be the kind of man who let his own die; that wasn't Ravager, that wasn't right. If that made him a sentimental piece-of-shit, then fine. He had a heart, and he wasn't going to deny it anymore. Let the pilots on the Eclector talk shit; if he could beat their asses in that old rust-bucket he was flying now, he could beat them in anything. He didn't need no goddamn new ship; he was Kraglin Obfonteri, son of Jagar Obfonteri. He was the best damn Ravager pilot in Yondu's clan, and he was going to do what he wanted with his own money, and anyone who didn't like it could bite his Xandarian ass.

“You're right.” Kraglin slid off his seat and grabbed his coat. “I can always buy another goddamn ship, but she ain't gonna live forever.”

The Taurian bartender blinked.

“Who,” he asked.

“Ms. Quill, of course.” Kraglin threw open the bar door. “She's dying and I'm sittin' here thinkin' about a goddamn ship? The fuck is wrong with me!”

Kraglin strode out onto the street. The Krylorian ship attendant was leaning against the wall.

“So, have you decided,” she asked.

“Yes!” Kraglin threw both of his middle fingers in the air, directing them towards the ship. “Fuck that thing! Fuck all of it!”

The attendant was stunned.

“Not you,” he added, “you were a peach. Good job, sweetheart. Hope you get a raise.”

“I was a what,” the attendant sputtered.

Kraglin just waved and kept striding down the street. He felt so full of energy, and lighter than he'd felt in a long time. The loading ramp of the Eclector was down; he raced up it with a face-splitting grin. One of the loading crew, Holdon, picked up a box and looked at him.

“What are you so happy about,” he asked.
“I’m about to lose one-hundred-thousand goddamn units!” Kraglin threw his fists up in the air with a huge grin. “Ain’t it great?”

The box slipped out of Holdon’s hands. Kraglin went up the stairs two steps at a time, bolting through the loading bay and up to the ship proper. He pressed a finger to the comm link in his ear.

“Gef,” he said, “I need to know where Ms. Quill is.”

“Kitchen, o’ course, where else would she be?”

Kraglin’s long legs carried him straight down the hall and up the stairs. He walked straight past Yondu.

“Hey cap’n,” he said.

“Where the hell are you goin’,” Yondu grunted.

“I’m goin’ to the kitchen.” Kraglin turned around, walking backwards as he talked. “Gonna go lose a hundred-thousand units.”

“What?” Yondu’s eyes boggled.

“I’ll explain later, cap’n.”

Kraglin left Yondu behind in the hall, pacing up another short set of stairs before opening the door. Ms. Quill was slicing meat into long, thin strips.

“Ms. Q.” Kraglin came striding in. “Ms. Quill, put down the knife. This is important.”

“Kraglin?” Meredith frowned and laid the knife on the table. “Is there something wrong?”

“Nothin’s wrong, Ms. Q. Kinda the opposite.” Kraglin flicked open his interface and tapped at it. “I won the lottery.”

“You what?” Meredith broke out into a huge grin. “That’s great, honey!”

“Yeah, it ain’t that big of a deal. I can always make more units. Here you go,” he said.

“Here I go?” Meredith frowned. “What are you talking about, Kraglin?”

“Check your interface, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith pulled up her interface. Her heart shot into her throat as another one-hundred-thousand units appeared in her name.

“What?” she asked.

“No,” he said, “just the hundred thousand.”

Meredith shook her head and went to transfer the units back.

“No honey,” she said, “I can’t take this from you. It’s too much.”

Kraglin grabbed her arm, preventing her from finishing the transfer.

“Ms. Quill, this is a gift.” Kraglin’s voice was stern. “You don’t get to say no. It’s my damn money and I decide what to do with it.”
“But this is... Kraglin, this is yours.”

“Not anymore it ain’t,” he said.

“I... I don't even know what to say. Thank you.” Meredith blinked back tears. “This is the nicest, kindest, most generous thing anyone's ever done for me.”

“Yeah, well...” Kraglin kicked the tile floor. “If anyone asks, it didn't come from me, you hear?”

Meredith wrapped her arms around him tightly. Tears were streaming down her face. Kraglin stiffened in shock, then patted her back awkwardly.

“Um, Ms. Q? It ain't that big of a deal.”

Her voice cracked. “I am so proud of you.”

Kraglin swallowed. He couldn't remember anyone saying that to him since Yazkin-8 had become a cratered rock. He wrapped his lanky arms around her.

“Thanks, Ms. Quill.”

“Thank you, honey. You saved my life.”

Kraglin blinked back hot tears.

“It's a life worth savin', Ms. Q,” he said.

She gave a watery laugh and squeezed him tightly. Kraglin returned the hug. So what if he lost the money. This crazy Terran mother was going to live, he thought, and she was going to keep going and raising her son and smiling at people and making good food and making people happy. He buried his face in her soft golden curls. This was worth all the units in the world.

The kitchen portal door opened again; Holdon, Gef, and Yondu were standing in the doorway. Meredith beamed at them; Kraglin turned pink.

“Hello cap'n,” he said.

“What's this you're sayin' about losin' a hundred thousand units?” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “And why the fuck are you huggin' Quill?”

Kraglin quickly let go of Ms. Quill. He didn't know if all those rumors about the cap'n and Quill were true or not, but he didn't want to overstep an invisible boundary.

“Kraglin won the lottery,” Meredith said.

Gef and Holdon laughed, high-fiving each other.


“One-hundred-thousand units,” Kraglin said.

Yondu leaned his head back, crossing his arms.

“You gave it to Quill, didn't you,” he said.

“Sure did, cap'n.” Kraglin put his hands in his pockets, smiling. “Every last one of 'em.”
The smiles slid off of Holdon and Gef's faces.

“Are you insane,” Holdon asked.

“Ravager,” Kraglin answered.

“What kind of bloody Ravager shoves off one-hundred-thousand units onto a goddamn Terran? No offense, Quill,” Gef added.

“Ow, Gef.” Meredith put a hand over her heart. “That hurt a little.”

“It was my goddamn decision and I don't regret it.” Kraglin sat down at the mess hall bench. “What's for dinner, Ms. Q?”

“Sliced dikator meat tossed with herbs.” Meredith kept slicing the meat. “But Kraglin, honey, really. I can't thank you enough. You're saving my life.”

“Don't thank me at all, Ms. Q, and that'll be enough.” Kraglin smiled. “It's fine. I didn't really earn the money anyway; just got lucky.”

“You're insane.” Holdon shook his head. “You just gave up a fortune.”

“Ms. Quill's cookin' alone is worth five times that amount, sushi-boy,” Kraglin said.

Holdon scowled and walked away. Meredith turned pink and grinned.

“Honey, don't you get into the flattery.” She tossed the meat onto the skillet, where it sizzled and popped. “It ain't your style.”

“Ain't flattery if you can do it,” Kraglin said.

Yondu bared his teeth, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

“You're an idjit,” he told Kraglin.

“What would you have done, cap'n? Let her die? That ain't Ravager,” Kraglin said, “that's bein' a selfish goddamn wire-splicin' thick-skulled aft-headed jackass, that's what that is.”

Gef sat down at the dining table, his head in his hands.

“One-hundred-thousand-units, Krags. Dammit, mate,” he moaned, “do you know what that could have bought you?”

“Sure do.” Kraglin linked his long, skinny fingers together. “Coulda dropped it today on one of Stakar Ogord's pilot's ships.”

“No!” Gef's eyes shot wide. “The one in the shipyard is his?”

“One of his pilot's,” Kraglin admitted, “judgin' by how tricked-out it was. Could have been Suzarra.”

“Suzarra?” Meredith laughed. “Who's that, your girlfriend?”

“My sister's name.” Kraglin smiled softly. “Always said once I had the perfect ship, I'd paint 'er green and name her Suzarra.”

Meredith's shoulders dropped.
“That,” she said, “is the sweetest damn thing.”

“Kraglin.” Yondu's voice snapped as he stood there, arms crossed. “You said you saw his ship?”

“Just one of his pilot's ships, cap'n,” Kraglin repeated, “not his. The cute lil' attendant said the shipyard boss had won it in a card game.”

“Card game...” Yondu's eyes narrowed. “Martinex.”

“Who's Martinex,” Meredith asked.

“None of your damn business. Gef,” Yondu said, “get that scrambler recalibrated. I don't want him or anybody else getting wind of our location.”

“Aye, captain.” Gef stood and walked out of the kitchen, sighing. “One-hundred-thousand units, and he gives it up for a Terran...”

Kraglin grinned. Yondu sat down across from him, frowning.

“Are you mad at me, cap'n?” The grin slid off Kraglin's face. “You ain't mad, right?”

“Why'd you do it,” Yondu asked.

“Ms. Quill could be dead in a week, cap'n. We don't have time to be selfish. I ain't the kind of man who's gonna let my own die for the sake of a goddamn ship. That ain't right. If that makes 'em call me soft, fine.” Kraglin's eyes glimmered with a cold fire. “I'll beat their asses any time, anywhere, in any goddamn ship they can dig up. Anyone who don't like it can suck it, cap'n.”

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up.

“Sounds about right.” Yondu stood. “But you sure as hell ain't like me when I was your age.”

Kraglin blinked. “What do you mean by that, cap'n?”

“I was dumber than you.” Yondu hit the door panel. “Took me years to figure out my priorities.”

Yondu disappeared behind the door. Kraglin looked at Meredith, confused. She was smiling softly, leaning her back against the counter.

“What did he mean by that,” he asked her.

“He said he's proud of you,” Meredith said.

Kraglin's face flushed; he could feel the heat in his ears. He turned back around and stared at the bench, trying not to smile. Ms. Quill was going to live. Yondu was proud of Kraglin. Peter'd keep his momma. The entire Eclector would know he wasn't afraid to be who he was. Yep, Kraglin thought with a grin, he did good today.

And to think, he'd nearly blown it all on a goddamn ship.
Momma Ravager

Chapter Summary

As the Eclector makes port to let Meredith off, Peter gets into one last little bit of trouble. Meredith and Yondu discuss Peter's place in the galaxy, and Yondu realizes just how much he's gotten used to having Meredith around.

(Short, sweet chapter. Funnily enough, this is chapter 26 and is being posted on the 26th!)

Yondu woke up when his alarm blared at him. He smacked at it lazily, then swung his legs over the edge of the bed. He opened the drawer of his metal dresser, grabbed a fresh shirt, and pulled it on. Then, he grabbed a pair of dark grey trousers out of the bottom drawer. Hoisting them up, he grabbed his belt from the hook. After that, he fastened the buckle, which had been forged to look like the Ravager flame. Yondu squared his shoulders and took a deep breath; the faint scent of laundry soap filled the air. Finally, he threw on his jacket, letting his collar stick up however it wanted to, and strapped on his arrow and quiver. Fully prepared for anything, Yondu paced down clean hallways to the kitchen.

Meredith was already up, as usual. She bustled around the kitchen wearing a baggy t-shirt and drawstring pants. Yondu sat down in the corner of the mess hall, leaning his elbow on the table of the bench. Meredith held out a bowl of dry cereal and a filled coffee mug.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Is it,” he grunted as he took the cereal and coffee.

“It is.” She smiled and put the cereal box away. “We're almost at Dr. Mareet's.”

Yondu nodded, already munching on the cereal. Meredith set out cups of hot coffee and waited. The poor suckers of the late, late shifts came shuffling in. They sat down, and Meredith handed each of them a cup.

“Here you are, boys.” Meredith poured some sugar into one cup. “Medical reasons, right?”

“Right.” The Ravager who received the sugar gave her an appreciative look. “Thanks, Quill.”

“Don't say that,” the rest of the Ravagers chorused.

Meredith rolled her eyes. Yondu watched her serve breakfast to the late-shift Ravagers; she caught his eye and smiled. Not knowing why, Yondu immediately lowered his eyes. He stared at his cereal. Dry, just the way he liked it. Yondu gulped down some coffee; it was just hot enough to warm his throat, but not hot enough to burn his mouth. He leaned back against the wall. Clean clothes, good breakfast, and he didn't have to lift a finger. Damn, he was one lucky son-of-a-bitch.
Peter was going to do a good thing. His mom's last surgery was today, and he kept trying to think of a way to lift her spirits. He wanted to make her a card, but he couldn't find anything colorful to write with. He tried to get her a gift, but Gef told him he should save his units. Peter had finally resorted to helping his mom by doing his own laundry. He'd carried the cardboard box of his clothes all the way to the laundry room. The machines were nearly as tall as he was, but they were pretty clearly labeled. Peter was confident that he could figure it out.

He opened the round glass door of the washing machine, shoved all his clothes in it, and then shut the door. Peter looked at the soap nozzle, then looked around for the laundry soap. Peter'd seen his mother use it; it was a dingy white bottle with green bubbles on it. He found it tossed by the trash; it was completely empty.

“Rats,” Peter said.

If he didn't have laundry soap, he'd have to find some other soap. The hard brick soap in the bathroom wouldn't do, and Peter didn't want to shampoo his clothes anyway. He paced up to the kitchen. His mother was serving the late-shift Ravagers their breakfast.

“Crap,” he muttered.

Peter couldn't let his mother see him; it'd ruin the surprise. Peter saw Yondu sitting on the bench, eating his breakfast.

“Yondu,” Peter hissed, “Yondu!”

Yondu looked up from his dry cereal.

“The hell you whisperin' for, boy,” he said loudly.

“Shh!” Peter put a finger to his lips. “Can you get me the bottle of dish soap?”

“Get it yourself, idjit,” Yondu said through a mouthful of cereal.

“I can't. It's secret,” Peter said, “I can't let mom see me.”

Yondu snorted. He stood up, got under the sink cabinet, and pulled out a bottle of blue dishwashing soap. He threw it at Peter; the boy caught it. Meredith's back was turned; she didn't see a thing.

“Thanks,” Peter said.

“Don't say that,” Yondu said, returning to his cereal.

Peter ran back down the hall to the laundry room and poured the new soap into the washing machine. It wasn't a present or a card, Peter thought, but at least he could show her that he wanted to work hard for himself. Peter's mom should take care of herself first; Peter was a Ravager. He was learning to take care of himself. Doing his own laundry wasn't so hard; Peter bet he could do this all the time now. Peter set the dish soap down in case another Ravager wanted to use it, turned the machine on, and then waited for his clothes to be done. What a good thing he'd done.

After the late-shift Ravagers went off, Meredith gathered the dishes. She went to work scrubbing them, getting suds up to her elbows. Yondu's eyes traced over the metal lines in her arms; his chest
tightened. He stood up and took off his jacket, tossing it on the bench. Meredith hummed a tune Yondu had heard Peter listen to. She scrubbed the dishes hard, completely focused. Yondu put his hands on his hips.

“You need help,” he said.

He meant it as more of a question, but it came out like a growl. Meredith turned her head and shrugged.

“I can handle the washing,” she said.

“Fine.” Yondu shifted. “Got it.”

Meredith reached up and brushed the curls out of her face, getting suds in them.

“You can dry and put away if you'd like,” she said, “that'd be a huge help.”

Yondu grunted and grabbed a dish towel. As Meredith washed, Yondu took the dishes, dried them carefully, and put them away. After a while, Meredith started singing.

“Yes, I like pina coladas, and getting caught in the rain. I'm not much into health food,” she sang, “I am into champagne.”

Yondu leaned against the cabinets, watching her wash. The suds in her hair had popped, leaving a few of her curls damp. She reached to brush more of her curls behind her ear, wetting it further.

“Messin' up your hair,” Yondu said.

“I don't care.” Meredith rinsed a bowl. “It's just hair.”

Yondu took the bowl and dried it, keeping his eyes on Meredith.

“Any particular reason you're staring at me,” she asked.

“Why do you do it?” Yondu's brow contracted. “Why do you do the damn laundry, sweep the floors, keep shit clean, make us coffee, cook so goddamn well? Half the time you don't even get paid.”

“It's just what I do,” she said, “it's who I am.”

“When are you gonna stop?”

“What?”

“You heard me.” Yondu wrapped the dishrag around his hands. “When am I gonna wake up to clothes on the floor, no coffee, everythin' lookin' and tastin' like shit again?”

“Whenever there's nothing left to do.” Meredith scrubbed at some spoons. “Or whenever I leave the Eclector. Whatever comes first.”

“So if you just stayed on the Eclector the rest of your life,” Yondu said, “you'd never stop doin' this.”

“I like to take care of people,” she said.

“Why? We're space pirates,” Yondu growled, “we ain't exactly nice people.”
“Not always, but sometimes you are.” Meredith smiled and handed him the spoons. “And besides, I need the work. Keeps my mind off Terra.”

“Earth,” Yondu said.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“No,” Yondu said, “you said Terra.”

“Did I?” Meredith paused, her brow contracting. “Did I really?”

“Yep.” Yondu put away the spoons. “Gettin' used to space life, are we?”

“After this long, I'm not surprised,” Meredith sighed, “and Peter's got it even worse.”

“Got what?”

“Gotten used to this. All of it. He loves it out here.” Meredith rinsed her hands, staring at the water. “Sometimes I think he doesn't even want to go back to Earth.”

Yondu knew that the boy liked to press his face to the window and stare at the stars; he'd seen Peter's expression of complete and utter wonder. The boy was a Ravager, and the love for space travel and freedom had already taken root in his heart. There was no going back to Terra for that kid, Yondu thought, it'd break his little heart. Yondu hung the dishrag on a cabinet doorknob and sighed.

“You said his pop was from space.” Yondu sat back down on the mess hall bench. “You don't know where from, though.”

“No, just... out there somewhere, I guess.” Meredith sighed. “One of a gazillion places he could be.”

“The boy ain't Terran, Mery. He's only half-Terran. Half of him's always gonna want to be out here.” Yondu watched her expression. “You know that, don't you.”

“I think I'm starting to. I just can't understand it, I guess.” Meredith leaned her hands on the counter and sighed. “I'm just a Terran.”

“You ain't no ordinary goddamn Terran anymore. When you look at the stars,” he asked, “do you hear 'em singin'?”

“Are those song lyrics?”

“No, it's a goddamn question.”

Meredith looked at him a long moment. Yondu could practically see her mind working behind the mist of her gray eyes.

“I did once,” she said, “when I was a kid. After my mom died, I ran back to the woods. There's this lovely little place I liked to go when I was upset. You could see all the stars, every last one of them. I fell asleep looking at them, and I had a dream that they were singing. You know that lullaby I sing Peter?”

Yondu grunted an affirmation.

“I made that song up that day. Helped me sleep after my mom passed away.” Meredith gave him a wry smile. “Why, they sing to you, too? Better voice than me?”
“They don't sing, they whisper.” Yondu pulled out his arrow and examined it. “We call it starlust. It's what drives a man to leave his planet behind and search the stars, lookin' for somethin' he'll never find. We ain't ever happy until we've joined 'em.”

“Starlust,” she said softly.

“Starlust,” he confirmed.

“Guess that's why Ravagers never settle down, huh?”

“That's right. Bein' on one planet our whole lives would drive us fuckin' crazy.”

“Do you think Peter hears it?”

“Of course he fuckin' hears it, ain't you seen his face? When he looks out at that starscape, holy shit, it's like lookin' at a drug addict getting a fix.” Yondu chuckled. “That kid's got it as bad as anybody I ever met.”

Meredith stared at the bench. Yondu fiddled with his arrow, secretly watching her expression. Tears were gathering in the corners of her eyes.

“What is it,” he asked, “Terra or Peter?”

“Both.” She blinked rapidly. “He really doesn't want to go back home, does he?”

Yondu took a deep breath.

“No,” he said, “the boy don't want to go back.”

Meredith sighed and closed her eyes. A glistening tear ran from the inside corner of her eye along the edge of her nose, rolling over her lips.

“Damn it, woman.” Yondu sighed. “Can't you stop cryin' for two goddamn minutes?”

“Sorry,” she said through a thick throat, “I'm just...”

Meredith sighed and closed her eyes. Another tear streaked down onto her cheek. Yondu frowned, a crease appearing between his brows.

“Knock it off, Mery. You're one surgery away from you not dyin' anymore. Relax a little, dammit. The boy will make his own goddamn decisions,” Yondu said, “and you'll make yours. Doesn't matter either way. Terra or no Terra, you're still his momma.”

Meredith opened her eyes. They were tinged slightly pink, but the color of her irises was still that steely silver.

“You're doing it again,” she said.

“What,” he grunted.

“Being nice to me.” She smiled slightly.

“Don't rub it in.” Yondu pointed his arrow at her. “I could still kill you where you stand.”

“I know that, stupid.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “You could kill everyone on the ship just by whistling Dixie.”
Yondu cracked a grin.

“You know me too well,” he said.

“You can thank Algon for that.” Meredith laughed, standing up straight. “He knows an awful lot about you.”

“Big yellow fuck,” Yondu said.

“He thinks the world of you.”

“Still a big yellow fuck,” Yondu mumbled.

“Captain!” Gef's voice came on over the comms. “Headed into orbit, captain.”

Yondu pressed a finger to the comm link in his ear.

“Dock her down on the planet,” Yondu said, “I want to refuel while we're here.”

“Aye, captain.”

The comms clicked off. Meredith took a deep breath and rubbed her arms.

“Nervous,” Yondu asked.

“More like impatient.” Meredith sat down on the bench next to him, her hands in her lap. “I just want to get it over and done with.”

“What'll you do when you're done?”

“Get off the Eclector,” she said, “that's my first priority.”

Yondu's jaw tightened. He fiddled with his arrow, not looking at her.

“We're that goddamn bad, huh?”

“What? No,” she said, “it's not you, it's just that Peter needs to go to school. I have to find some stable environment to raise him in. That's what a good mother does.”

Yondu squinted.

“I could kidnap a tutor,” he said.

“No!” Meredith bust out laughing. “I am not raising my baby on a pirate ship. No, that's not happening. I'll find a planet that's near Earth with a good school system. I'll get a job, do my best, and save my money. When the blockade goes down, I'll pay for a shuttle to Terra. It's that simple.”

“And if the blockade don't go down? You gotta get home before your Terran family kicks the bucket,” Yondu said.

Meredith took another deep breath.

“Thirty years,” she said.

“What?”

“I've got thirty years to get home.” She pulled her knees up and hugged them. “My papa's fifty-five
years old. In thirty years, he'll be eighty-five. Terrans tend to start dying around that time.”

“You'll make it,” Yondu said, “you're goddamn stubborn enough.”

“Papa always said stubbornness put in the right direction was will,” Meredith said, “and where there's a will, there's a way.”

Yondu grunted an acknowledgment. Meredith stood up and stretched.

“I'm going down to check the odds on the bets for today,” she said, “wanna come?”

“Got nothin' better to do.”

Yondu stood and followed her out of the kitchen. As they paced down the stairs, Peter came bolting out of a portal in a flat run, slamming directly into Meredith. She tripped, shrieked, and pitched forwards; Yondu's fingers clenched the back of her shirt, preventing her from falling down the steel stairs.

“Watch it, boy,” he snarled.

“Peter?” Meredith steadied herself. “Peter, what's wrong?”

“Nothing,” Peter said, his wide green eyes darting between them and the portal.

Yondu and Meredith exchanged a look.

“Sure,” she said, “it's nothing.”

“Which is why you look like you're runnin' from the cops,” he said.

“Um.” Peter shifted slightly. “I might have done something.”

“Something?” Meredith raised her eyebrows.

“Something not-so-good,” Peter added.

“Spit it out, boy,” Yondu growled.

“I was trying to do my own laundry so mom wouldn't have to,” Peter said, “but there was no soap in the bottle.”

“That reminds me,” Meredith said to Yondu, “we need more laundry soap.”

“I'll get Kraglin to pick some up.” Yondu crossed his arms. “Go on, boy.”

“So I went to the kitchen and got some of the soap mom uses to wash the dishes,” Peter said.

Meredith put her hands over her mouth, her gray eyes wide.

“Oh Peter, you didn't,” she said.

Peter nodded.

“I don't get it,” Yondu grunted, “what he do wrong? It's just soap.”

Meredith started laughing, covering it with her hands.
“Did it foam up,” she asked Peter.

Peter nodded again, staring at his shoes in shame.

“Foam up?” Yondu's brow contracted. “What do you mean?”

“Come on,” Meredith sighed, taking Peter's hand, “let's show Yondu what you did.”

Peter stared at his feet the whole walk to the laundry room. Meredith opened the portal; mounds of white suds leaked across the floor. She put one hand on her face and started laughing.

“Peter, why? Oh honey,” she giggled, “honey look at the mess!”

Peter blinked back tears.

“I'm sorry,” he said.

“No, Peter, don't cry.” Meredith picked him up and hugged him tightly, chuckling. “It was an accident; I'm not mad. You were trying to do a really good thing to help me out and I'm proud of you. Don't cry, Peter, baby.”

Peter held onto his mother tightly. “You're not mad?”

“Not mad in the slightest,” she said.

The boy sighed in relief.

“And Yondu's not mad,” he asked.

Meredith looked at Yondu. The captain was staring at the sea of white foam that had taken over his laundry roam. He'd turned purple; there was a muscle jumping in his jaw.

“Um...” Meredith held Peter close so he wouldn't see Yondu's livid face. “It's okay, honey, I'll talk to him about it.”

“He flooded my ship,” Yondu said darkly.

“Only one room, and it's just soap.” Meredith chuckled. “I have no idea how he got hold of the dish soap; I was in the kitchen the whole time.”

Yondu swallowed.

“Yondu gave it to me,” Peter said.

“He what?” Meredith's mouth fell open. “You gave him dish soap to put in the laundry machine?”

“I didn't know this would happen!” Yondu gestured to the suds. “If I run out of soap I fuckin' buy more. I never shoved anything else in the machine, how the hell would I know this would happen?”

Meredith's whole body was shaking. She handed Peter to Yondu, holding onto the doorway as she laughed.

“You... you gave him the dish soap! Hahahaha!” Meredith's face was turning scarlet. “I'm so sorry, it's just... your face! You were so mad! Hahahahaha!”

Peter started to giggle; Yondu turned purple again.
“I ain't cleanin' it up,” he grumbled.

“I'll do it, I'll do it.” Meredith reached for a mop, chuckling. “Oh you two just crack me up.”

“No, mom, no cleaning today.” Peter's voice was sharp. “None. You have surgery.”

“Aw fuck,” Yondu said, “boy's right.”

“I can do it,” Meredith said.

“No,” Yondu and Peter snapped.

Meredith let go of the mop and held her hands up in mock surrender. A smile curved on her mouth.

“Okay, okay,” she said, “I know who's in charge here.”

“Damn right you do,” Yondu growled.

“I meant Peter,” Meredith said.

Peter laughed and poked Yondu's cheek.

“Mom said I was in charge.” Peter prodded Yondu's face. “You have to listen to me now.”

“That ain't how the chain of command works.” Yondu glared at Peter. “Put that finger near my face again and I'll bite it off.”

“Mom,” Peter whined, “Yondu threatened to eat me.”

“Yondu, stop.” Meredith took Peter from Yondu's arms. “You'll scare him.”

“I'll scare him? The kid likes to fire Kallusian energy grenades for fun,” Yondu complained, “and you think I'll scare him?”

“Yes, I do.” Meredith lifted her foot as the suds reached them. “Uh-oh, back up. It's spreading.”

Yondu and Meredith took a few steps back. Yondu pressed a finger to the comm link in his ear.

“Gef,” he said, “get some of the boys from auxiliary down to the laundry room for flood control and clean up.”

“Flood control?” Yondu could hear the frown in Gef's voice. “What happened?”

“Quill,” Yondu said through gritted teeth.

“Which one?”

“The little one, idjit. The bigger one don't fuck shit up.”

“Oh. Right.” Gef cleared his throat. “Should tell you, captain, the loading crew want to know if you're placing a bet on the surgery today.”

“What?” Yondu's crimson eyes flicked towards Meredith. “Oh. Right.”

Meredith pressed a finger to her own comm link. “Gef?”

“Hey, little missy,” Gef chuckled, “how much can I put you down for?”
“Everything I have is going to the surgery today, Gef. I don't have anything to bet.” Meredith hoisted her son higher on her hip. “I was going to ask about the odds.”

“Looking good so far, Quill. Lots o' speculating, o' course, but generally? Good odds,” Gef said.

“Thanks, Gef.”

“I'd tell you not to say that,” Gef said, “but I'm afraid you'd charge me.”

Meredith laughed.

“Gef.” Yondu's voice cut across their conversation. “Put me down for ten-thousand on her makin' it.”

Meredith's warm smile made Yondu's chest tighten. He swallowed.

“Just good odds,” he said.

“Right,” she said, “just good odds.”

“Aye, captain,” Gef said, “I've put you on the roster. That's a bet down and a cleaning crew dispatched. Anything else, captain?”

“Yeah.” Yondu squared his shoulders. “Tell the boys, day after tomorrow's a landin' day. Give 'em a five-hundred unit stipend and the day off.”

“Wow, captain.” Yondu heard the tone of surprise in Gef's voice. “Are we celebrating something?”

“No.” Yondu scowled, feeling his face heat up. “It's been two goddamn months since I let 'em loose. They're getting riled up.”

“Aye, captain. I'll tell them,” Gef said.

“Good.” Yondu took his finger off his comm link and looked at Peter. “I should make you scrub up this goddamn mess.”

“You're the one who gave me the dish soap,” Peter countered.

Yondu bared his teeth. He inhaled and prepared to rip into Peter, but Meredith's soft sigh interrupted him.

“It was an accident on all sides, okay? Peter, you didn't mean to flood the laundry room. Yondu, you didn't know that dish soap would do this. And I,” Meredith said, “I should have been watching Peter the whole time.”

Yondu grunted in acknowledgement, but Peter frowned.

“You don't have to watch me all the time,” he said, “I'm a Ravager.”

Yondu hated how happy it made him to hear Peter say he was a Ravager. He crossed his arms and did his best not to smile.

“Ravager or not, you're still a little troublesome angel.” Meredith kissed Peter's cheek. “And I'm still your mom.”

“I know, mom.” Peter hugged her. “You're the whole ship's mom.”
“Peter, I'm just your mom,” she said.

“Right,” Yondu said, “which is why you cook and clean and do laundry and tell people to be polite and make coffee and do every other goddamn thing. Face it, Mery, you might as well just stick a flame patch on.”

Meredith turned crimson, and Yondu cracked a grin.

“I'm not joining the Ravagers,” she mumbled.

“It's worse than that, Mery,” Yondu said, “you're motherin' the fuckers.”
Changes

Chapter Summary

Meredith undergoes her final implant surgery. Dr. Mareet and Corky are aspiring parents. Kraglin is trying his hand at commanding the Eclector. Yondu finally gets it through his thick head how the Terrans have lasted so goddamn long. The Quills are finally out of harm's way. Everything is good again...

...just in time for an old friend to come busting down the door.

(I did a lot of tag editing today. I've decided to make this the first work in a series; that way, the rating won't go up on this, I can post multiple "Bonus Tracks," and everything will be nice and tidy in the "Star-Queen" series thing. I'm sorry if anyone's been reading this to see a specific character; I promise that all the Guardians will be in the next work (Star-Queen Vol. 2) when I cover the first movie. I'm sorry if I disappointed anyone by changing the tags, but this is the most logical way to organize this. <3 )

The loading ramp descended; Meredith stood at the top, listening to the Ravagers shout bets behind her. The final surgery had come at last, and the odds were hot. Kraglin shoved his betting slip in his pocket; he'd bet all of his winnings from the previous pool.

“Vote of confidence, Ms. Q,” Kraglin said with a grin.

“Thanks, honey.” Meredith took a deep breath. “Last one.”

“It'll be okay, mom.” Peter hugged her legs.

Meredith picked him up and held him closely. Peter buried his face in her warm golden curls.

“I love you, Peter,” she said.

“I know, mom.” Peter hugged her.

“My precious son.” Meredith pressed a kiss to his forehead. “My little Star-Lord.”

Meredith set Peter down. He waved Kraglin and Meredith off with a smile.

“I hope the surgery goes good,” he called.

“Me too, baby,” Meredith said as she walked away, “but Dr. Mareet's a professional. I have complete faith in her.”

“She's a pro,” Kraglin admitted as he followed Meredith along, “no doubt about it. Been doctorin’ me up since I joined up. Blaster wounds, diseases, broken bones; there ain't nothin' Mareet can't handle.”
“I can't handle this,” Dr. Mareet said.

“Of course you can,” Corky said soothingly, “you're amazing.”

“But... are you sure I'm ready for this?” Dr. Mareet wrung her raspberry pink hands together. “I mean... I know we wanted this and I do want this, but... what if I'm terrible at it?”

“You cannot possibly be terrible at it.” Corky stood on his tiptoes to kiss her cheek. “Besides, I'll be there to help.”

“Of course.” Dr. Mareet nodded. “Right.”

“Clear your head, my dear. The Terran's surgery is today,” Corky said, “she's already in the waiting room.”

“Is she?” Dr. Mareet took a deep breath. “Alright. You prep the pod, I'll get the patient. We'll talk about... we'll talk about this later.”

“Yes, love,” Corky said as he prepped the medical pod.

Dr. Mareet paced down the hall, clearing her head. Only with a clear head could she get clear results. Meredith Quill sat in Dr. Mareet's waiting room tapping her feet. Her eyes flicked around the room, usually resting on the clock over the door. Kraglin chuckled as Dr. Mareet entered.

“Ms. Q's excited,” he said.

“One more surgery. One more, and then it's done. One more,” Meredith said, “and then it's just getting home. That's all it takes.”

“I'm sure getting to your home planet will not be easy,” Dr. Mareet said, “but I have faith in you. You've managed to raise three-hundred thousand units in less than a month; that's impressive in and of itself.”

“Kraglin paid for at least a third of it,” Meredith confessed.

“Did he?” Dr. Mareet squinted at Kraglin. “Interesting.”

Kraglin grinned nervously. Dr. Mareet frowned.

“Excuse me,” she said, “are you missing a tooth?”

“Yep.” Kraglin licked the gap. “Contraxian smuggler decked me about a month ago.”

Dr. Mareet handed Kraglin a silver tooth.

“Xandarian internal data array. Designed as a dental implant, it contains about five trillobytes of data space. Just push it in the gap,” she said, “and it will form to fit.”

Kraglin's eyebrows knit together.

“This is expensive stuff,” he said, “why am I getting it?”
“I ripped it out of Dr. Tannrik's mouth,” she said, “so I won't be missing it. It's configured for Xandarians anyway; I can't use it.”

Kraglin pushed the silver tooth into his gum; it immediately clamped in.

“Ow, fuck!” He winced as pain jarred his jaw. “Goddamn...”

“It will hurt,” Dr. Mareet said.

“No shit,” he muttered.

Dr. Mareet chuckled. Putting her hands together, she turned to Meredith.

“So,” she said, “today's the day.”

Meredith nodded firmly. Dr. Mareet pulled a datapad out from her jacket and showed a scan of Meredith's brain.

“Here,” she said, pointing to a large white mass, “is the tumor.”

“Holy fuck.” Kraglin's eyes widened. “It's that big?”

“Indeed.” Dr. Mareet flipped to another scan. “Once removed, that space will be taken up by the cerebral core. Now, there is one more issue. See this light all down your spine?”

“Is that my cybernetics,” Meredith asked.

“No.” Dr. Mareet sighed. “No, it's not.”

“Oh God, don't tell me it's spread.” Meredith covered her mouth with her hands. “If it metastasized, I'm... please tell me it didn't spread.”

“It didn't. I've been doing scans on some samples I took, and somehow your body has been restructuring itself.” Dr. Mareet's eyebrows contracted. “It's like your cells are dying and then regenerating again, but slightly altered. It's not quite Terran DNA, either. The cells are Terran, but whatever's making this happen isn't Terran.”

“I'm Terran,” Meredith said.

“I know,” Dr. Mareet said, “and that's what makes this so intriguing. At any rate, I have no idea how the cerebral core's homeostasis will interfere with that?”

“Homeostasis...” Meredith frowned. “Explain that a little more?”

“Homeostasis is the drive towards equilibrium of a process,” Dr. Mareet explained, “a kind of golden neutral zone in which all energies are perfectly created and utilized. A constant, perfect process.”

“And this cerebral core does that how?”

“It mechanically manages how your cells move and multiply. It will stop the cancer in its tracks,” Dr. Mareet said, “and everything else along with it.”

“When you say everythin' else,” Kraglin asked, “how much everythin' we talkin' here?”

“Oh, your basic natural processes will go on.” Dr. Mareet waved her hand as if physically dismissing the concern. “You'll be able to feel all the normal chemical processes throughout your body. Fear,
joy, drunkenness, orgasms, pregnancy, psycho-addictive chemicals...”

“Doctor.” Meredith closed her eyes. “I get the picture.”

“Yes, yes. But natural decay, age-related dissipation, and general cell death will no longer occur,” Dr. Mareet said.

“Wait... age-related dissipation?” Kraglin squinted. “Ms. Q won't get old?”

“I'm sure eventually she will,” Dr. Mareet said, “when the cerebral core begins to accept that process as part of homeostasis. But no, Ms. Quill, you needn't worry about getting wrinkles for say... the next fifty years?" 

“Fifty years?” Meredith's jaw dropped. “I'll still look twenty-eight in fifty years?”

“Yes.” Dr. Mareet patted Meredith's head. “Lucky you.”

“Jeez...” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “That's some extensive goddamn work you're doin' to her, doc.”

“I must remind you, Ms. Quill, that this surgery is dangerous. Even if it succeeds, you must return to have your implants synchronized. It's a minor mechanical housekeeping issue,” Dr. Mareet said, “but very important. If the core doesn't sync with your other implants, they could reject each other. That could be fatal.”

“Let's just get in there and get it over with, doctor.” Meredith's jaw locked. “Whatever happens will happen. I just want this over with.”

“Of course. Right this way,” Dr. Mareet said.

“Hold on,” Kraglin said.

Meredith turned in confusion, and Kraglin pulled her into a tight hug. He let go, grinning sheepishly.

“Peter told me I was supposed to give you a hug before you went in,” he explained, “to make you feel better.”

Meredith put both hands over her mouth, her eyes shining.

“Bless his little heart,” she said.

Kraglin put his hands in his pockets, turning a little blue. Dr. Mareet escorted Meredith down the hall; Meredith was fanning her face, blinking back tears.

“It will be fine,” Dr. Mareet assured her as they entered the operating room.

“I know, I just... Peter's such a sweetheart,” Meredith said, “and I worry so much about him.”

“You're a mother, Ms. Quill; mothers worry.” Dr. Mareet gestured to the medical bed. “Please, undress and lay down.”

Meredith undressed. She folded her clothes and handed them to Dr. Mareet. The doctor laid them next to a large glass jar filled with clear, light green liquid. Inside, a pale blue brain floated about. The floating organ reminded Meredith of her last visit with Dr. Mareet, when the doctor had joked about removing Dr. Tannrik's organs.
“Doctor, I was going to ask.” Meredith laid down on the medical bed. “How many of Dr. Tannrik's organs did you remove before you got bored?”

“Nine,” Dr. Mareet answered.

“You really scared him with that one.” Meredith laughed. “That was a good joke.”

“Oh no, Ms. Quill, that was no joke.” Dr. Mareet laughed too. “We hacked him apart and sold him for money.”

Meredith froze, her eyes widening. Dr. Mareet's eyes darted between the brain in the jar and the terrified Terran.

“Just another joke, Ms. Quill. We sent Adram Tannrik to a lovely planet full of sick individuals, so that he may work off the error of his ways by helping others,” Dr. Mareet said.

“Oh.” Meredith breathed a sigh of relief. “That's really great, Dr. Mareet. I'm so glad you were able to overcome your vengeance.”

“Of course,” Dr. Mareet said, turning her back on Meredith.

While the Terran went through decontamination, Dr. Mareet read the label on the side of the jar. Dr. Adram Tannrik. She sighed. At least she'd kept the only part of her former colleague that was ever worth a damn. But, best not to tell Ms. Quill that, Dr. Mareet thought as she selected her scalpel. She couldn't guarantee that Ms. Quill would not bolt for the exit; after all, Terrans were awfully jumpy.

Yondu sat back in his pilot's chair, picking at his teeth with a metal toothpick. Kraglin came back onto the bridge.

“Where's Gef,” Kraglin asked.

“Checkin' external comms array.” Yondu stabbed the toothpick into the seat of his chair, leaving it half-embedded in the fabric. “How was she?”

“Dropped her off at Dr. Mareet's. She stayed calm. Didn't freak out.” Kraglin dropped into the co-pilot's chair. “Gave her a hug like Peter suggested.”

“Did you?” Yondu kept his tone carefully disinterested. “Terrans love that kind of shit.”

“She nearly cried, cap'n.” Kraglin let out a soft chuckle. “I think she really needed it.”

“Terrans cry at everythin'.”

“I'll go back and pick her up in a few hours,” Kraglin said.

“No.” Yondu flipped a switch, opening some exhaust shutters. “You stay here, get the boys to clean up this goddamn ship.”

“Cap'n?”

“I'll pick up Quill,” Yondu said, “and you get the boys cleaning. Test your commandin' out.”

Kraglin's chest swelled with pride.
“I'll get it done, cap'n, no doubt about it.

“I know you will, idjit.” Yondu stood and slapped the back of the co-pilot’s seat. “Now get them exhaust shutters open and get some air movin' in here. Last thing we all need is to be chokin' on dust.”

Kraglin flipped the switches that controlled the exhaust shutters and started the duct systems. His finger paused over the comm link.

“Cap'n?” Kraglin turned around and squinted at Yondu.

“What, Kraglin.” Yondu went down the stairs and headed for the door off the bridge.

“Are we only cleanin' the ship to make it nice for Ms. Quill comin' home?”

Yondu's hand paused over the door panel. He turned around with his teeth bared.

“Home?”

“Cap'n, I ain't stupid.” Kraglin chuckled. “Half the whole damn crew thinks the world of her. Peter's practically our lil’ brother, and he looks up to you so much that even Ms. Quill get jealous.”

“She what?” Yondu blinked, his chest tightening.

“Those Terrans are ours now, cap'n, whether we want 'em to be or not. We're Ravagers,” Kraglin said, “we protect our own. I ain't stupid, cap'n. I know.”

The *let's-not-fool-ourselves-here* expression on Kraglin's face was uncomfortably familiar; Yondu had seen it on Meredith's face too many times to mistake it for anything else. Meredith had been such a boost to Kraglin's confidence; maybe too much. Yondu's mind raced to formulate an answer, but Kraglin seemed to take his silence as an answer itself. The corners of the Xandarian's mouth turned upwards, and he hit the comms array.

“Boys,” he said, “drop what you're doin' and grab the nearest cleanin' implement. Cap'n wants this ship goddamn spotless by the time Ms. Quill comes back, or they'll be nailin' sponges to your tongues with a rusty hammer.”

A wave of groans and complaints came over the comm. Yondu pressed a finger to the link in his ear and gave a sharp whistle; the arrow shrieked past the microphone, the piercing sound echoing through all levels of the Eclector. It returned to his hand, and he stowed it in his quiver. Yondu walked up to the microphone, enjoying the complete silence that he commanded.

“Y'all better do it,” he snarled, “or I'll be hockin' your corpses to Mareet for organ money.”

“Aye, cap'n,” the Ravagers answered.

Yondu flicked off the comms.

“Not bad,” he said to Kraglin, “but next time, don't give 'em a chance to say no.”

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin went back to managing the exhaust systems.

A large blue hand slapped Kraglin on the back.

“You'll get there,” Yondu said.
Kraglin swelled with satisfaction, a grin spread across his mouth. If Yondu Udonta said Kraglin could do it, then Kraglin could do it. Kraglin's faith in his cap'n never wavered.

Yondu sat on the loveseat in Dr. Mareet's waiting room, hunched over with his knees on his elbows, for hours. He never moved. He never spoke. He simply waited. Corky watched him out of the corner of his eyes while he pretended to scan through a datapad.

“Exciting, isn't it,” Corky asked in a carefully-contrived tone of politeness, “this last surgery.”

Yondu grunted.

“Quite dangerous though, I'll admit. First the tumor has to be removed,” Corky said, “and then the cerebral core has to be installed. All the technology has to be re-configured. It will be quite the extensive operation.”

Yondu shifted and made a noise of affirmation.

“I wonder if she'll make it,” Corky said disinterestedly.

Yondu stood up and started pacing. His heavy combat boots hit the floor so hard that the carpet couldn't hide the squeaks of the wooden floorboards below. The corner of Corky's mouth turned up in a wry smile.

“You seem a little on-edge, Yondu.” Corky put down the datapad. “Nervous?”

Yondu's only answer was a scowl. Corky watched him pace back and forth with mild amusement. After all these years, Yondu Udonta was still as emotional and reactive as he'd been the first time Corky had met him, back on Knowhere.

“The surgery will be over in about twenty minutes.” Corky flicked through the datapad. “Can you wait that long?”

Yondu grunted in affirmation, but kept pacing. The creaking of Yondu's combat boots on the floor was irritating; Corky threw down the datapad with a sigh.

“You, stop. Either she'll come out alive or you'll be dragging her corpse; pacing isn't going to fix anything. By the stars,” Corky said, “just sit down and wait.”

Yondu dropped back onto the loveseat and stared at the floor. He hadn't even thought about her dying until Corky had brought it up, but now the thoughts were racing through Yondu's mind like a pack of feral animals. He knew it'd only been four months, but Yondu'd gotten so used to the way things were going.

If she were gone, there'd be no more betting on Quill's surgeries, that was for damn sure. No more hot coffee in the mornings. No more dry cereal already poured. No more folded laundry. No more drinking Terran whiskey. No more 'thank-you-don't-say-that's. No more pancakes. No more stew. No more food that wasn't shitty. No more clean Eclector. No more hearing her voice sing Terran music. No more lullabies. No more big silver-gray eyes. No more 'big daddy'. No more teasing. No more laughing. No more mothering. No more confident Kraglin. No more happy Peter. No more Mery.

Yondu's fists had tightened so much that his knuckles had gone pale. She had to live. If she died, it just wouldn't be fair. Bad people like Yondu died; that was what they deserved. But good people like
Meredith, people that tried to go home to their families and raised their sons proper and did the best they could with the situation they had, those people ought to live. If Meredith died, Yondu thought, there was no justice in the universe. It was all fucked sideways if Mery didn't make it. If she didn't make it, Yondu was going to make the universe pay for it.

He stewed in those dark thoughts until Corky cleared his throat loudly.

“Yondu,” he said.

“Shut up, Corky, not now.”

“Yondu.”

“I said shut up.”

“Rude,” a weak female voice chuckled.

Yondu's head snapped up. Meredith had one hand on the doorway, her shoulders slumped and her curls tousled. Yondu got to his feet, his eyes raking over her. Linear scars carved down her arms and around her neck; Yondu could even see a few shining on her cheeks. Her skin was pasty, and she shook slightly. She looked like she'd gone through hell, but she was alive. An uncontrollable noise of relief came out of Yondu's throat. Meredith laughed weakly, leaning against the doorway.

“It's done.” There were purple circles under her eyes. “I made it. It's over.”

She took a few hesitant steps forwards; Yondu grabbed her under the arms and growled.

“You just got outta goddamn surgery,” he said, “don't you try to do shit.”

“But she got the pain inhibitor jump-started,” Meredith complained, “I can't even feel anything. I'm fine.”

“So you'll run yourself to fuckin' exhaustion, great.” Yondu pushed her to the loveseat. “Dammit Mery, just take a seat for a goddamn minute or two.”

Meredith sunk onto the loveseat with a happy sigh.

“It worked,” she said.

Yondu sat next to her, hunched over and brow furrowed.

“You sure? No weird feelin', no pain, no nothin' like that?”

“No, Yondu, nothing like that.”

“What about your vision, Mery, how's that?”

“It's fine. I can see as clearly as I ever have.”

“You're sure?”

“Yondu.” Meredith put her hands over his. “Calm down. I'm fine.”

Yondu turned his hands over, letting her soft fingertips brush his palms.

“You're sure,” he growled.
“Completely,” she said, “utterly, totally sure.”

Yondu's eyes burned into hers for a moment. He slowly clasped her hands, as if afraid to break her.

“If youfuckin' say so,” he said.

Dr. Mareet came into the waiting room, pulling blood-stained gloves off her hands.

“That went well,” she said, “but you'll need to return for a checkup. The implant is installed, but it's going to take a while to initiate homeostasis. You must return for the implant sync, do you understand? If they aren't synchronized, they could reverse, reject themselves, and kill you.”

Meredith swallowed.

“But it's very unlikely,” Dr. Mareet added.

“Stop scarin' her,” Yondu snarled.

Dr. Mareet raised her thin eyebrows. Yondu's hands gripped Meredith's; after all she'd gone through, this Krylorian bitch wasn't going to unnerve one of his damn Terrans.

“You'll be fine,” Yondu insisted, “you'll be more than fuckin' fine.”

Meredith shivered again. Her hands were cold in his; he held them, warming them up.

“Am I supposed to be this cold,” she asked Dr. Mareet.

“Just a side effect of the reboot of your pain inhibitors.” Dr. Mareet flicked through a datapad. “It was a little risky, but if I hadn't rebooted them, you would be screaming from agony for the next eight hours.”

Meredith cringed; Yondu growled.

“What did I say about scarin' the Terran,” he said.

“It's not scary,” Dr. Mareet complained, “I'm simply answering the question.”

Yondu slid off his jacket and threw it over Meredith's shoulders. Dr. Mareet and Corky exchanged a look.

“Oh, you don't have to,” Meredith said, “I'll be fine.”

“For fuck's sake, Mery, you're cold as ice.” Yondu bared his teeth. “You think I want to watch the boy freak out because his momma's shakin' like a leaf on a tree?”

“No.” Meredith pulled the jacket over her shoulders. “No, I don't want to scare Peter.”

“Then warm up and I'll take you back to the Eclector.” Yondu leaned forwards, putting his elbows on his knees. “Boys are off tomorrow; should give you some time to rest. You can come back for that sync day after, okay? I'll walk you here.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don't say that,” Yondu said.

“I'm going to start charging you every time you say that,” Meredith chuckled.
“No you ain't.”

“Are too.”

“Are not.”

“Are too.”

“Are not.”

“By the stars,” Corky said, “don't start that.”

“Shoo, shoo!” Dr. Mareet waved her hands at them. “Take your eros-mongering somewhere else!”

“Ero...what?” Yondu squinted.

“You've got me there.” Meredith blinked. “I have no idea what she just said.”

“She said shoo,” Corky said, “isn't that clear enough?”

Yondu stood up and transferred Dr. Mareet the units. Meredith kept Yondu's jacket snug around her. It was too wide for her and hung off her like a cape, but Yondu thought she kind of fit in it.

“You look good in Ravager red,” he said as they left Dr. Mareet's, “you should think about makin' the swap permanent now that you ain't completely useless.”

“So I can cook and clean for you for the rest of your life?” Meredith rolled her eyes. “I'm not your wife.”

Yondu snorted and squared his shoulders against the wind.

“There ain't a woman alive stupid enough to marry me,” he said.

“Don't worry.” Meredith patted his arm. “I'm sure she's out there somewhere.”

Yondu snorted again in derision.

“Oh, it's true,” Meredith said with a grin, “there's somebody for everybody. I didn't think I'd ever meet anyone like Jason, but then I did.”

They were back on Ego again. Yondu kept his eyes trained forwards, controlling his expression. He didn't want to get into that while she was recovering from surgery; for all he knew, the shock alone could kill her. Yondu's hands tightened into fists as he walked. The Eclector came into view. Meredith was shooting glances at him.

“Do you want your jacket back,” she asked.

“You still cold?’

“Yeah, but...”

“Keep it until you get warm,” he said.

“Are you sure about that? I mean,” Meredith said, “you probably don't want the boys seeing me wearing your jacket. They might get the wrong message.”

“I don't give a flyin' Orloni's ass what message they get.” Yondu scowled. “You're cold, you wear a
jacket.”

Meredith tugged the jacket around her.

“Smells like you,” she said.

“That bad?”

“No,” she chuckled, “it smells like leather and ship oil. I smelled like this after I slept in your chair on the bridge.”

“You did what?” Yondu's head whipped around. “When was that?”

“Oh.” Meredith turned pink and hid her face in the collar of his jacket. “That day I cleaned the bridge until I passed out? I passed out in your chair.”

“Dammit woman, would you keep outta my chair?”

“It was one time, Yondu.”

Yondu made a growl in his throat and pressed a finger to his comm link.

“Gef,” he said, “lower the ramp.”

“Aye captain.” Gef’s voice crackled over the comms. “Is Quill alive? I've got five-thousand on her living.”

“Is that all you fuckin' think about? Dammit, Gef, cancer ain't a goddamn joke.” Yondu was surprised at the vehemence in his voice. “Lower the damn ramp or I'll puncture your eardrums with a fuckin' nail.”

Meredith glanced at him. Yondu crossed his arms tightly together, his face uncomfortably warm.

“Thanks for coming to pick me up,” she said.

“Don't mention it.” Yondu wouldn't look at her. “Didn't want Kraglin or the boy to have to lug your corpse. They ain't strong enough for that.”

“I'm not that heavy.”

“That ain't what I'm sayin'.”

“Oh.” Meredith took a deep breath. “Yeah, I guess they're not.”

Yondu finally looked at her, soaking up her image with his eyes.

“Glad you ain't dead,” he said.

Meredith smiled.

“Me too,” she said.

The loading ramp descended. Meredith and Yondu paced up the ramp; at the top, Peter was waiting. Yondu glanced at Meredith, waiting to catch her if she didn't have the strength to make it up the ramp, but the fire in her eyes burned away any doubt.

“I'm back,” she said.
“Mom!”

Peter rushed Meredith for a hug, and she scooped him into her arms. He hugged her tightly, burying his face in her curls. Meredith’s eyes shut; large tears streaked down her face.

“It's over, baby. It's just you and me again,” she said, “and I ain't goin' anywhere.”

Peter started to laugh and cry simultaneously. The other Ravagers started exchanging their units while the Quills had their moment. Yondu watched the Terrans, watched the tears from their eyes, and frowned. Damn, those Terrans loved each other so goddamn much. How did they do it? How did the boy live every day knowing he could wake up without a momma? How did Mery keep up that drive to get better? Terrans, Yondu thought, were the toughest, most resilient, most stubborn crybaby know-it-all sentimental sons-of-bitches that ever lived. They just cried like they didn't even care what everybody else thought. There were Ravagers leering at them, rolling their eyes, pointedly ignoring them, but the Quills just held each other and had their moment. Yondu put his hands on his hips and squinted.

“Ms. Q!” Kraglin came running forwards on those lanky limbs of his. “Hey, you're okay!”

“Once I'm sync'd up,” Meredith said proudly, “I'll be healthy as can be.”

Kraglin’s grin spread across his whole face. He came up to Yondu and saluted.

“Ship’s clean as a whistle, cap'n,” Kraglin said, “and the boys were given orders for the day off.”

“Good.” Yondu crossed his arms. “This lot need to let off some steam. Couple clubs around here for them to cool off in.”

“And Ms. Q?”

“She's gotta rest.”

“Right.” Kraglin's face fell. “Right.”

Kraglin went off. Out of the corner of his eyes, Yondu looked at the still-hugging Quills.

“How the fuck do they do it,” he mumbled.

A memory resurfaced in Yondu’s mind. Stakar Ogord, leaning back in his pilot’s chair, waxing philosophical. On long flights, Stakar tended to pontificate; the topic of the day that day had been his wife, Aleta. Stakar had closed his eyes and said one of the words Ravagers never, ever said; love.

*Love is the most dangerous thing in the universe,* Stakar had said, *love is unchangeable, irreversible, and fucking crazy. People in love can do anything because love comes before everything. Love destroys a man, then makes him more than he could ever be.*

So that was it, Yondu thought, that was the secret. That was why Terrans could defy death fearlessly, why they broke down crying every chance they got, why they never gave up, why they were so goddamn stubborn. The Terrans were soft, easily injured bags of flesh, but they conquered death and braved the impossible. Watching the Quills, Yondu felt a chill run through his blood. Finally, he started to understand what Stakar was talking about.

Love made people dangerous.
Back at Dr. Mareet's, Corky slid into the operating room with a gait that belied his stout physique. He was doing everything he could not to smile.

“So,” Corky asked, “did you tell Ms. Quill?”

“About the cybernetics? Yes, yes, I told her. No excess mental strain and return to me tomorrow.” Dr. Mareet kept cleaning her scalpels. “Lovely Terran.”

“I meant did you tell her about you,” he said.

“Oh.” Dr. Mareet's cheeks turned a deeper shade of raspberry. “Do you think she'd want to know?”

“She seems like the type to get excited about it,” Corky chuckled.

“Did you tell Yondu?”

“What? No,” Corky scowled, “he'd just make a dirty joke about me knocking you up.”

Dr. Mareet chuckled and put away the scalpels.

“I was thinking about it during the surgery,” she admitted, “and I think you're right. We are more than capable of being parents.”

“Oh course we are. A daughter, can you imagine?” Corky smiled. “I hope she looks just like you.”

“A baby girl,” Dr. Mareet sighed, “how wonderful.”

“About damn time.” Corky shook his head. “Why is my species only fertile during heats? It's so irritating.”

“I didn't mind it. An entire week where all you wanted to do was fornicate?” Dr. Mareet tapped him playfully on the head with a datapad. “Oh yes, I didn't mind that at all.”

Corky chuckled, stood on his tiptoes and kissed her cheek.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too, darling.” Dr. Mareet kissed his forehead. “Now, what are we going to name her?”

“I was thinking either Jazka or Bereet,” Corky said.

“Bereet.” Dr. Mareet rolled her eyes. “We are not naming our daughter after your pet cat from Knowhere.”

“But she was such a lovely cat,” Corky protested.

“She liked to scratch and bite me.”

“And then I healed you, and that meant touching you more.” Corky grinned. “What was wrong with that?”

Dr. Mareet blushed. She turned around to give her lover a snappy retort when someone knocked at the door. Corky frowned.

“Is that Udonta?”
“No, he always knocks like he's trying to break down the door.” Dr. Mareet stepped out of the operating room. “Maybe Ms. Quill?”

The knock sounded again. Dr. Mareet and Corky went to the door. The knock sounded again, faster this time.

“Whoever it is,” Corky huffed, “they're impatient. We're closed; can't they read the hours?”

Dr. Mareet grasped the doorhandle and opened the door. As the door swung, it revealed two Ravagers. One looked as if he had been carved from crystal; the other was smoking a long, red cigarette. Both were wearing Ravager clothes in striking navy and gold. The man with the cigarette blew the cinnamon-scented smoke into Dr. Mareet's face.

“Hello, Mareet.” The man smiled charmingly. “How have you been?”

“Stakar Ogord.” Dr. Mareet's hand slipped off the doorknob; she took a step back. “You're not scheduled for a visit.”

“We dropped in. What's the matter, Mareet? You look nervous,” Stakar said as he stepped over the threshold.

Dr. Mareet and Corky exchanged a glance.

“If you're looking for Udonta, he's not here,” Corky said.

“I'm not looking for Yondu.” Stakar took a drag from his cigarette. “Although he is the reason we're here. Him, and the Terrans he's been dragging around with him.”

“How do you know about the Quills,” Dr. Mareet asked.

“Quills, hm? Actually,” Stakar chuckled, “I only knew it was a rumor. Thank you for confirming it, Mareet.”

“Doctor Mareet,” she snapped.

“Right. Doctor.” Stakar gestured to the crystalline Ravager. “Martinex, bar the door. We're about to have a doctor's visit.”

“What do you want from me,” Dr. Mareet asked sharply as Martinex threw the bolt-lock on the door.

“Answers. Who are the Quills,” Stakar asked, “where are they going, and what do they know?”

“What makes you think we'll tell you anything?” Corky crossed his stout arms. “We may be loyal to you and your clan, Stakar Ogord, but we've sworn an oath not to divulge patient information.”

“Really?” Stakar and Martinex pulled out heavy, dangerous-looking weapons. “That oath sounds hazardous to your health.”

Dr. Mareet and Corky exchanged a look. Dr. Mareet took a deep breath; with Stakar Ogord facing her, she had to give in. There was no saying 'no' to a Ravager Admiral.

“The patient's name is Meredith Elizabeth Quill,” Dr. Mareet began, “from Terra.”
Meredith is convinced to leave the ship for a little fun. Kraglin finds out about a certain bet. Yondu has to handle the giddy, drunken Terran (and all the emotions she brings with her).

(Did you know that this is the seventh-longest fic in the Guardians of the Galaxy movie tag? Holy cow, I did not mean to write this long of a fic!)

It was a small miracle, but Kraglin had managed to get Peter to sleep before nine o'clock. The kid had been running around all day keeping up with his mother, who had been twice as energetic as normal. With Lunis and Holdon staying behind to keep an eye on Peter, Meredith was free for the night, and Kraglin intended to convince her to go out with the Ravagers for the night. So far, it wasn't going well.

“No,” she said, “absolutely not.”

“Come on, Ms. Q!” Kraglin followed her around the kitchen. “It'll be fun.”

“You remember the last time I went to a club? You just got a new tooth, Kraglin honey, I don't want to be the reason you lose it.” Meredith was washing dishes. “Besides, I've got to keep an eye on Peter.”

“No you don't. I got Holdon and Lunis on it,” Yondu said from his seat in the corner.

“See? Peter's taken care of, you're as energetic as you've ever been, and you've got a lot to celebrate, Ms. Q.” Kraglin put his hands on his hips and used his future-first-mate voice. “Give me one good reason you shouldn't go.”

“Bad luck with clubs,” Meredith said.

“That was one time, Ms. Q.”

“What is it you always say, Yondu?” Meredith glanced at Yondu. “One time' can happen again?”

“She's got you there, Kraglin.” Yondu smiled.

“Aw, come on, Ms. Q. What's the point of bein' alive if you ain't livin’?”

Meredith dried her hands and let out a long sigh.

“You promise I won't be too much trouble if I'm drunk,” she said.

“Promise,” Kraglin said.

Yondu thought about the last time Meredith was drunk and kept his mouth shut. Trouble was right.

“Fine,” Meredith said, “let's go.”
Kraglin let out an impassioned whoop and hugged Meredith. She laughed and hugged him back. Yondu watched in disbelief. Damn, Kraglin had gotten goddamn comfortable with expressing emotion.

“Guess I'll wear my good pants, maybe ruffle my hair a bit.” Meredith chuckled. “I don't exactly have any dresses or makeup to put on.”

“Who needs that shit anyway?” Kraglin snorted. “You look fine just the way you are, Ms. Q.”

“Thanks, honey.”

“I'll get you a tank top,” Kraglin said firmly, “so you won't overheat in there.”

“Thanks,” Meredith repeated.

Kraglin sauntered off with pride. Yondu watched him go and shook his head. That kid got more and more positive every damn day.

“He's going to be a great first mate one day,” Meredith said, echoing Yondu's thoughts.

“One day.” Yondu leaned his elbows on the table. “Kid's got everything but the commanding down.”

“Can I ask you a question,” Meredith asked.

“Shoot.”

“Why Kraglin?”

Yondu shrugged.

“Oh come on, don't tell me you just picked him out of the blue.” Meredith put her hands on her hips. “I know you; you've got a reason for everything. Come on, why Kraglin?”

“When a captain picks a first mate, it's a big damn deal. It's more than just a vote of confidence; it's hiring someone to take your job if you can't do it. If I die or can't do it or somethin' like that, that Xandarian owns this whole goddamn ship. He becomes captain, and that ain't easy. The first mate is the one son-of-a-bitch on the ship who can tell the captain he's done fucked up.” Yondu's crimson eyes stared into the middle distance. “So when a captain picks a first mate, what he's really pickin' is someone who's judgment he trusts. If that kid told me 'don't you fuckin' dare, cap'n,' then I'd knock whatever it was I was doin' off.”

“He's the one person you trust to tell you what to do.” Meredith leaned against the wall. “You pick the one person on the ship you'd trust to be your captain.”

Yondu nodded, smiling slightly.

“If that kid came up with a plan, I'd follow it. If he said jump, I'd do it. I trust that skinny little fucker with my life,” Yondu said, “and the lives of everybody on this goddamn ship. A captain's gotta trust the first mate's judgment, skill, and loyalty. Ain't nobody got all that but Kraglin.”

Meredith blinked back tears.

“If you ever told him you thought about him that way,” she said, “I think it'd make his whole goddamn life.”
The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up.

"That's why I don't say it. If he knew, he'd get confidence from it. Fucker needs to learn to have confidence in his own damn decisions, even if I don't agree. How else is he gonna know to tell me to knock it the fuck off?" Yondu chuckled. "That's just how it's got to be, Mery."

"It makes sense."

"I do. I pay him. That's how you tell him,"

"I mean really tell him."

"Nope."

"Then I'll tell him he's doing a good job," Meredith huffed, "because he is. I'll go tell him right now."

Meredith went stalking out of the kitchen, her cheeks pink. Yondu watched her go, hiding a smile, then stood up and left the kitchen himself. He chuckled, shaking his head. Guess Peter wasn't the only Ravager that Mery considered as a son.

Meredith had pulled on the tank top, red leather pants, and her trusty leather jacket. The walk to the club wasn't far; it was a large building, low to the ground and packed with tables and Ravagers. Now, she and Yondu were leaning against the bar holding glasses of whiskey. Kraglin was already dancing; the kid's long limbs and natural coordination made dancing easy for him. Yondu shook his head.

"Look at that idjit," Yondu said, "makin' a goddamn fool out of himself."

"Actually, he's doing really well." Meredith lifted her whiskey glass to her lips. "He's pretty light on his feet for such a tall guy."

Yondu grumbled something indistinct.

"You're just jealous because you can't dance," she said.

"Who the fuck says I can't dance," he growled.

"You did." Meredith downed the rest of her whiskey. "You said, and I quote, 'I don't dance'."

"I said I don't dance," Yondu clarified, "not that I don't know how to."

Meredith's eyes widened and her jaw dropped open.

"No way," she said, "no way. I have to see this. You have to dance, I have to see this."

"Why?" Yondu scowled "Ain't there enough idiots on the dance floor without addin' us to the mix?"

"Please?"

Meredith's eyes widened; the lights of the club refracted in her silver irises, setting them to all sorts of colors. Yondu barely managed not to smile.

"At it again with the doe eyes, huh?" Yondu shook his head. "Goddamn it, woman."
“Aw, come on. Let's go,” Meredith said.

She grinned and took his arm, her fingers sliding over the thick muscle. Yondu couldn't help it; he gripped his hand into a fist, flexing slightly. Meredith's cheeks turned pink.

“Please,” she repeated.

“I don't dance, Mery.”

“I don't care if you don't dance.” Meredith put one hand on her hip. “Today's supposed to be about celebrating not dying, right? Live a little with me here.”

“Is that what you want,” he grunted.

She nodded.

Yondu snatched his whiskey up into the air. Meredith watched the muscles in his neck move as he guzzled the whole glass.

“Easy there,” she said.

“You want me on that goddamn floor?” Yondu let the glass drop back onto the bar. “I'm gonna need all of that I can get.”

Yondu's hand pressed behind Meredith's waist, leading her onto the floor. Her face broke out into a huge grin. Yondu could pick out Meredith's laugh over all the sounds of the club. He slipped his hands onto her waist; her arms went around his neck.

“Where did you learn to dance,” she asked.

“Stakar.” Yondu couldn't quite meet her eyes. “Said learnin' to dance was important to learnin' to screw.”

Meredith laughed, her whole face turning scarlet.

“Really? That's why you learned?”

“He was right.” Yondu shrugged. “Ain't much different. Can't use your body standin' up, you sure as hell can't use it lyin' down.”

“I feel like there's some little bit of wisdom in there somewhere,” she said, “but heck if I know where it is.”

Yondu chuckled and pulled her close. They rotated slowly, avoiding the other couples.

“This ain't really dancing,” she said.

“Ain't it?”

“No, dancing is a little more complicated than this.” Meredith looked down at her feet. “Though I guess this isn't the place to break out into the Virginia Reel.”

“Virginia?” Yondu bared his teeth. “You mean the Virgin Reel?”

Meredith laughed. “What is that, a sex game?”
“No, dammit, it's a dance. Real damn popular back when Terra was first discovered.” Yondu shrugged his enormous shoulders. “Kind of a novelty thing for a while, just another goddamn fad.”

Meredith squinted.

“Are you saying that they do the Virginia Reel in space?”

“That's exactly what the hell I'm sayin',” Yondu said.

Meredith's head hit Yondu's chest as she laughed.

“I could live out here a million years and never stop learning,” she said.

Yondu took a deep breath and rested his chin on the top of her head. He could see over most of the revolving couples; he spotted Kraglin, tall as he was, dancing with some teal-skinned woman with soft black hair. He nodded; Yondu returned the gesture.

“What are you doing,” Meredith said.

“Sayin' hi. What are you doing?” Yondu pulled his head back. “Cryin' again?”

“Not this time.” Meredith flashed a grin. “Almost, though, you almost got me.”

Yondu frowned; he rubbed her back with a large hand.

“What was it this time,” he asked, “thinkin' about Terra or Peter?”

“Terra.” Meredith wrapped her arms more snugly around him. “But then I thought about what you said about the blockade, and I thought, 'Wow, think of all the things I'm going to have learned before I get back. Think of all the stories I'll have.'”

“Who you gonna tell 'em to,” Yondu asked.

Meredith opened her mouth, then closed it. A small line appeared between her contracted eyebrows.

“Ha.” Yondu chuckled. “Terrans don't know about all this, do they? Wouldn't believe you if you told them.”

Meredith's head hit his shoulder.

“They didn't believe me back then.” Meredith sighed. “They won't believe me now.”

“No one believed you when you told 'em Peter's pop was from space, huh?” Yondu looked over her shoulder at the couples without seeing them. “They all told you that you were nuts.”

“Yes. Got to the point where I almost believed them.”

“What kept you from believin' it?”

Meredith's shoulders sagged.

“Look,” she said, “don't tell Peter this, okay?”

“I can keep a secret,” he said.

“About four years after Peter was born,” she said, “back when he was just a baby, Jason came back.”
Yondu's head snapped down in alarm. Ego never went back to the planets he visited, he'd made that very clear. That was the whole reason Yondu had to go around and fetch them; Ego didn't give enough of a shit to do it himself.

“He came back?” The intensity of Yondu's growl surprised himself.

“Yeah.” Meredith's head laid on Yondu's shoulder, her eyes lidded and soft. “He came right up to me and said, 'Hello, my River-Lily.'”

“What?”

“That's what he called me.” A small smile danced around Meredith's mouth. “River-Lily.”

Yondu had a sudden, inexplicable urge to crush something in his bare hands.

“He came back and saw Peter, and then he just disappeared again. I swear, Peter looks so much like him sometimes,” Meredith continued, “and that's why I could never forget. I knew I wasn't crazy. I'd look at that flower he'd left behind, I'd look at Peter, and I'd see that otherworldly light that Jason had.”

Yondu held onto Meredith as if afraid something was going to yank her away. His chest pulsated with tightness, releasing and returning as his emotions fluctuated between rage and...whatever other stupid emotion he was feeling right then.

“Guess he shoulda stayed,” Yondu muttered.

“Guess so.” Meredith closed her eyes. “But then I wouldn't have met you.”

The pressure on Yondu released as his chest expanded with irrational joy. Thank God her eyes were closed so she couldn't see him smile at that. He wrapped his arms more snugly around her, leaning his cheek on her head. Her curls smelled of soap and leather. He'd gotten used to that, he admitted, and everything else about her along with it.

“Glad you bit me in the goddamn neck and hitched a ride?” he asked.

Her laugh shook her whole body.

“Yeah,” she said, “I am.”

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up and stayed up, despite his best efforts to stop it. The song ended, and they both paused a moment. Another song came on with roughly the same tempo. Yondu hesitated, but Meredith kept her head on his shoulder, so he kept dancing with her.

“Can I ask you a question? It might be kind of awkward,” she admitted, “but it's something I noticed and I've always been kind of curious.”

“Shoot,” he said.

“You're always warm.” Meredith's large gray eyes were lidded again. “Your body temperature is always above mine. It's like your whole body just churns out this same level of heat all the time. Why is that?”

“Centaurian metabolism burns energy equally throughout the body,” he said, “and so all our muscles produce the same level of heat.”

“Wow.” Meredith blinked. “That's more explanation than I thought I was going to get.”
“I had the same damn question once. Asked Mareet the first time Stakar took me to the doc,” he admitted, “after he thought I was dyin' of a fever.”

“Makes sense.” Meredith grinned. “And here I thought you were going to make a joke about how hot you were.”

“Why,” he asked, “too warm? This damn place is already hot, I know.”

“No.” Meredith's slender arms tightened around him. “It's cozy.”

The tightness was back in force, squeezing Yondu's heart like it was trying to drain it dry. He took a deep breath, inhaling her familiar scent. It lessened the pain.

“So,” he said, “speakin' of Mareet. You're completely healed, huh?”

“Almost. The implants still have to be sync'd, but unless my body completely rejects the cybernetics, I'll be fine. The dangerous part is out of the way.” Meredith smiled. “I'm in the clear.”

“Must feel nice.”

“I never thought I'd get there. The doctors, the hospitals, all the tests...” Meredith laughed. “All that money, all that work, and finally it paid off. I just had to be kidnapped into space and work for a space pirate for a few months.”

“If I could go back and do it over again,” he said, “I'd do it all different.”

“Yeah?” Meredith glanced up. “How so?”

Yondu stared up at all the lights; they changed hues as the song progressed.

“I'd just leave you both on Terra. I'd never show up there to start with, never pluck you off the surface, never zip you off into the stars. Or maybe I would,” he said, “but I'd take you straight to Mareet and get you stitched up. Leave you on that planet with Peter, let Corky take care of you. Wait until you were fixed up, then kidnap Nova Prime and hold her for ransom unless the Nova Corps took you two back to Terra.”

“Nova Prime?” Meredith blinked.

“Head of the Nova Corps. Nearly impossible to get anywhere near,” Yondu said.

“How would you kidnap her, then?”

“No fuckin' clue.” Yondu scowled. “We're talkin' hypothetical past here; don't quiz me on the goddamn details.”

“Sorry,” Meredith grinned. “I think you did okay, except for the indentured servitude part.”

“Think so?”

“Saved my life,” she said, “and showed Peter the other half of him I never could.”

“Other half?”

“You're right about him, Yondu. He's only half-Terran, Yondu. The other half of him is...” Meredith sighed. “Somewhere out there, you know? Part of Peter will always belong up here. I think when we get back to Earth, he's going to want to be able to come back here. If I can, I'll raise him on Terra
until he's eighteen, but I know he'll end up out here. This... I don't know, something about this calls
to him.”

“What about you, Mery?” Yondu's voice was barely audible. “Somethin' about all this call you,
too?”

Meredith’s eyes were distant.

“Sometimes,” she confessed.

Yondu's heart leapt into his throat; he swallowed, forcing the wad of emotions down. She said
sometimes, he told himself, that ain't a yes. Still, it was better than a flat no, and it was the closest
Yondu had ever heard her come to admitting that she belonged here. Meredith kept her head on his
shoulder as they swayed slowly in a circle.

“I can't remember the last time I danced.” Yondu's brow knit together. “Think I was drunk, actually.”

Meredith laughed.

“When was that,” she asked.

“Day I got the Eclector. Little gift from Stakar to get me started Ravagin',” he said.

“Stakar Ogord gives away entire ships as little gifts?”

“For his ten-thousandth weddin' anniversary, he gave his wife a goddamn planet,” Yondu said,
“that's the kind of guy he is.”


“He's an Arcturan.” Yondu shrugged. “Him and his wife both. Last of their kind since his brother
died. Completely immortal, more or less. Only way to kill him would be to rend him apart and blast
the chunks to ashes.”

“That's...wow. What does he do with all that time,” Meredith wondered.

“Learn shit. Steal shit. Screw his wife a lot,” Yondu said.

“I bet they have a billion kids then.”

“Nah. They had some once, triplets I think, but then they tried to kill their parents.” Yondu scowled.
“Idjits wanted power, I guess.”

“So they don't have any kids now?”

“Didn't say that.” Yondu rested his chin on top of her head. “They're real fond of adoptin' people
what come their way.”

“Like you?”

Yondu took his chin off the top of Meredith's head and stared at her. She was expressionless,
curious, not intending to offend. Three months ago he would have airlocked her for saying that, but
he knew now that she just wanted to understand. Meredith was full of shit to give about people, and
she gave a shit every chance she could get.

“Used to be,” he said, “not anymore.”
“One day you two will get along again.” Meredith took her head off his shoulder as the song ended. “I just know it.”

“What makes you so damn sure,” he asked.

Meredith put her hands on her hips and smiled. “Intuition,” she said.

Kraglin was having a goddamn ball. Usually he wasn't much of a dancer, but a few shots of Xandarian liquor had changed that right quick. He'd even seen the cap'n on the dance floor with Ms. Quill, and that was nice, he thought. Good to see that Ms. Q was coming out of her shell a little bit; he knew she thought clubs were bad luck for her. And shucks, Kraglin hadn't seen the cap'n dance since they'd gotten the Eclector. Kraglin smiled and leaned his elbows back on the bar, watching them dance.

“Real nice,” he said.

Gef sidled up to him holding a datapad.

“Kraglin,” Gef asked, “how crazy are you?”

“Goddamn Ravager, Gef.”

“That's what I like to hear.” Gef smiled and tapped a datapad. “Got a new betting pool up since Quill's in the clear.”

“Really?” Kraglin turned with mild interest. “What's this one?”

“Oh no, you wouldn't be interested in this one.” Gef lowered his voice. “It's a little risky.”

Kraglin snorted and knocked back another shot of liquor.

“Gef, you idjit, I'm a Ravager. Risk is part of the job,” he said.

“Alright,” Gef sighed, “but you have to swear not to tell the captain or Quill.”

“Whoa, Gef.” Kraglin frowned. “The cap'n knows everything, you hear? If you're betting on him, you must have a death wish.”

“I've had loads o' folks telling me that lately,” Gef said disinterestedly, “and I'm still here. So, you want to take a look?”

Kraglin's eyes darted between the cap'n and the datapad.

“One look,” he said, “but no promises.”

Gef turned on the datapad. Kraglin read the title with wide, ice-blue eyes.

“Gef,” he said, “I'll make sure I say a good word at your funeral.”

“Oh, it's not that bad.” Gef scrolled through all the names of the Ravagers who'd put bets down;
Kraglin was surprised at how many had signed up. “I won't be the only one the captain's pissed at.”

“Nobody's betting it happens, though, right?”

“I am. The captain's got a way with those Terrans.” Gef winked. “And Quill hasn't had any for eight years.”

“Eight years.” Kraglin shook his head. “I can't imagine.”

“Sounds like hell, doesn't it?” Gef watched the dancers. “I bet she's packed with firepower, though. Wound tighter than a steel spring and ready to pop like a firecracker.”

“Gef, no.” Kraglin put his face in his hands. “Don't talk about Ms. Quill like that; she's a nice lady.”

“She's a woman, Krags, and women got needs. I'm betting the captain will be the one to satisfy those needs,” Gef said.

Kraglin gave him a look.

“You do realize if he ever finds out, you're dead,” Kraglin said.

“Yep. But if he sets off that firecracker first,” Gef said, “I'll have made over nine-hundred-thousand units.”

“Nine-hundred-thousand!” Kraglin's eyes shot wide. “Are you kiddin’?”

“Them's the odds, Krags.” Gef showed him the datapad again. “One-hundred to one.”

“That low?”

“Well, despite the captain having a way and the Terran being wound up tight,” Gef said, “none of the boys actually think she'd get in the sheets with him.”

“I can't even fuckin' imagine,” Kraglin said, shaking his head.

“I can.” Gef ordered a beer. “He's a big son-of-a-bitch, and she's thin as a twig. He'd get her down, rock her rough, leave her with that fucked-freaky look on her face.”

“Gef,” Kraglin said in a warning tone, “I don't need that image.”

Gef laughed and took the cap off his beer.

“I've had a couple make bets for how and where it happens,” Gef said, “but how do you figure?”

“I ain't bettin' on the cap'n.”

“I know, but say you were.”

Kraglin took a deep breath. He watched the cap'n and Ms. Quill dance, clearing his head. A logical pattern of events built in his mind, and he had a moment of clarity.

“Eclector, her room.” Kraglin took another shot. “And she tops.”

Gef nearly choked on his beer.

“What,” he sputtered, “she what?”
“She tops.” Kraglin down into his empty shot glass. “If I were bettin’, I'd bet that.”

“There’s no way in hell that the captain would let the Terran be the one doing the fucking,” Gef said, “no way in hell.”

“You don’t know Ms. Q,” Kraglin said enigmatically.

Gef took a swig of his beer, perturbed.

“You really think that's how it'd happen,” Gef asked.

“If it did, which it won’t, then yeah.” Kraglin set down his shot glass. “Have fun with your death-bet, Gef. I'm gonna go dance.”

Gef watched the Xandarian leave, then took another long drink of his beer. He eyed Quill and the captain with a calculating eye. The bet was a risk, no doubt about it, but Kraglin Obfonteri wasn’t the only Ravager with intuition.

Yondu was doing his best to avoid going anywhere near Meredith. He knew he'd pushed it with the dance; he couldn’t risk the Ravagers thinking he was favoring her. So, for two hours, Yondu stood in the corner and glowered at anyone who looked his way. He didn’t need to keep an eye on her anyway; Yondu figured someone like Meredith would stay out of trouble. As the club began to shut down, Yondu started herding Ravagers out of the building. He had just gotten Drazkar to leave the cute little bartender alone when he realized he hadn’t seen Meredith.

“Draz,” he snapped, “where's Quill?”

Drazkar jerked a furry thumb towards the dance floor. Yondu put his hands on his hips and belted out her name.

“Mery!”

After a second Meredith came waltzing out of the crowd of people and stood, one hand on her hip and the other holding a glass of whiskey. She hiccuped proudly, her eyes unfocused. Yondu's stomach did a backflip.

“You're drunk,” Yondu said.

Meredith pointed at him, a crooked grin spread across her face.

“And you're right,” she said.

Yondu bust out laughing.

“Where’s the ladies room,” she asked.

“Why the hell would I know where the ladies' room is?”

“Because you are standing in the corner looking at all the ladies,” Meredith said, “so you've got to know where the bathroom is.”

Meredith cringed, and Yondu stood up straight in alarm.
“Sorry.” She shuddered. “I need that bathroom fast; I’m gonna throw up.”

Yondu steered her towards the side room with rapidity. He kicked open the door to the women's bathroom and drug her in, ignoring the shocked looks of the other females. Yondu led Meredith to a toilet and shook his head.

“Partied too hard,” he said, taking the glass of whiskey from her and setting it on the ceramic tank cover.

Meredith nodded before vomiting into the toilet. Yondu kept her short curls from getting anywhere near her mouth. He rubbed her back gently.

“You're fine,” he said, “you're fine.”

She vomited once more, then pointed at the glass of whiskey. She crooked a finger.

“I ain't givin' you any more.” Yondu scowled and took the glass of whiskey. “I'm cuttin' you off, you hear?”

“For rinse,” she said.

Yondu took a deep breath and handed her the glass of whiskey. She swirled it around in her mouth and spat it into the toilet.

“Waste of good whiskey, huh?” She gave him a grin over her shoulder. “Thanks.”

Yondu stood her up, his hand still on her back.

“So turns out I can drink more than you,” he said.

“Don't rub it in.” Her forehead hit his chest. “You're also twice my size and you burn energy faster. Not fair.”

Yondu chuckled. He escorted her out of the bathroom, his hand on her back. She leaned into him, blinking slowly.

“This was the most fun I've had in...” Meredith squinted. “Years and years and years.”

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up.

“Learnin' to let it go, little momma?”

“I'm a momma,” she said, “I have to be responsible for Peter.”

“Not tonight, you don't.” Yondu led her through the crowd. “But I'm thinkin' you'd best get some rest, Mery. Gotta get sync'd up tomorrow.”

“We goin' home?” Meredith leaned her shoulder against his, blinking slowly.

*Home.* Yondu inhaled and slipped his hand around her waist.

“Yeah,” he said, “we're goin' home.”

It turned out that getting Meredith home was harder than it should have been. She kept trying to balance on the wall along the walkway, testing her balance. It set Yondu's teeth on edge; stupid thrill-seeking Terrans.
“Mery. Mery, get down.” His hands curled into fists. “Come on, dammit, get down.”

“Whoops!” Meredith stumbled off the wall, her feet hitting the grass. “I frip, I mean, tripped.”

Yondu grinned. “You're slurrin', Mery.”

“You're slurrin', er, stutter, stumbling! Whatever,” Meredith said, “you's drunk.”

“I am not,” he said, “you're drunk.”

“I am not,” she said, “I'm super super super sober.”

She stumbled, her foot dipping onto the other side of the wall.

“Whoa, whoops.” Meredith barely made it back onto the wall. “Almost got me.”

“Dammit, be careful!” Yondu's heart snapped a rhythm against his chest. “You're gonna hurt yourself.”

“Get down, stop that, you're gonna hurt yourself.” Meredith giggled. “Bossy big daddy.”

“Crazy little momma,” he said.

Meredith tripped again; this time, Yondu just grabbed her and pulled her off the wall, holding her in his arms like a child.

“I told you that you were drunk.” Yondu felt heat rise to his face. “You can't even walk for shit.”

“Whee!” Meredith giggled and kicked her legs. “You're tall.”

Yondu couldn't help but grin. There was so much of Meredith in Peter; they were like two bullets in a magazine. Yondu walked along, carrying Meredith like a sack of potatoes. She watched him with lidded eyes and a drunken smile. Yondu felt his face heat up as she cuddled in his arms.

“What're you lookin' at,” he growled.

“You,” she said.

“Why the fuck you lookin' at me like that?”

“Because I'm so happy we're friends.” Meredith closed her eyes. “I'm so glad I came to space and made friends with you.”

Yondu's chest was doing that annoying warping thing. He gritted his teeth and tried to ignore the warm swell of emotion in his chest.

“I hate it when you talk like that,” he said.

“Why?” Meredith frowned. “Was it mean?”

“No, it just...” Yondu squeezed her tightly, avoiding her eyes. “I don't deserve it, alright? I'm a lyin' decievin' sack of shit and I don't deserve people like you sayin' nice shit to me.”

“People like me?”

“Good people.” Yondu kept his eyes trained forwards as the Eclector came into view. “I ain't worth good people.”
It was always like this. Just a little bit of kindness reminded him what a piece-of-shit he really was. Yondu's eyes flicked down to Meredith. He half-wanted to drop her on the ground and just tell her everything. Meredith deserved to know what a piece-of-shit Yondu really was. Yondu wanted her to understand that, to get it through her thick Terran skull that she shouldn't care about him. He just wasn't worth it. But then she'd leave, and that couldn't fucking happen anymore. A growl escaped his throat as he tightened his grip around her, caught between wanting her to leave and needing her to stay.

“What are you thinking,” Meredith asked softly.

The question took Yondu by surprise.

“Thinkin’ about how thick-headed and stubborn you are,” he answered.

“You're twice the stubborn I am,” Meredith leaned her head back. “Three times the stubborn.”

“Am not,” he said.

“Are too.”

“Am not.”

“Are too,” she said, “that's why you're my favorite.”

Yondu's heart crushed in his ribcage.

“I'm what,” he said through a dry throat.

“You're my favorite Ravager.” Meredith put a finger to her lips. “Don't tell Kraglin.”

Yondu could scarcely believe what he was hearing. He looked down at her, fighting an irrational inner urge. His eyes lingered on her soft, pink bottom lip and swallowed. These were some dangerous goddamn impulses right here.

“And I could fuckin' do it too,” he mumbled, “and you wouldn't remember a goddamn thing. I'd get me a taste of that pepper.”


“But I can't.” Yondu continued up the ramp of the Eclector as if she hadn't spoke. “Because you're Meredith-goddamn-Quill and I'm Yondu-fuckin'-Udonta and I wouldn't stop at one goddamn kiss. It'd break the code.”

Meredith blinked.

“What about kissing,” she said.

“Nothin’.” Yondu set her down abruptly and led her down the hall. “Forget I said anything.”

“Okay!” Meredith bobbed along with him with a smile on her face. “I already forgot whatever it was I wasn't supposed to remember.”

There were Ravagers in the hall of the Eclector; Yondu glared at all of them in turn.

“What're you lookin' at,” he snarled.
The Ravager's eyes darted between their fire-eyed captain and Quill, who was leaning against him with a drunken smile.

“Nothing, captain,” they chorused.

“Good.” Yondu pushed Meredith along.

“Hi boys,” she slurred, “hi! Hi Drazkar, hi Kraglin, hi Gef, hi!”

“Ms. Q?” Kraglin blinked. “Ms. Quill, are you drunk?”

Meredith squinted.

“Maaaaybe,” she said.

The Ravagers laughed. Yondu put his hand on Meredith's back and steered her away from the crowd.

“I'm so much trouble, so much trouble,” Meredith sang, “I'm so much trouble when I'm druwwunk!”

Kraglin swallowed the laugh that threatened to bust out of him; Yondu's exasperated expression only sweetened the deal. Kraglin stood, his whole body shaking with barely-restrained laughter, as Yondu walked Meredith down the hall. When the portal shut behind him, Kraglin couldn't keep it in anymore. His back hit the wall as he broke down into a laughing fit. The Ravagers emerged from their hiding and dispersed down the halls. Gef scrolled through his datapad as he walked away.

“Gef.”

Gef turned around. “What is it, Krags?”

Kraglin inhaled, then let out a long sigh; this had to be the dumbest decision he'd ever made.

“Put me down for one thousand.”

“For or against,” Gef asked.

“Eclector, her room.” Kraglin walked away. “And she tops.”

Gef broke out into a wicked grin.

Meredith was being goddamn difficult. Stairs were impossible; he had to carry her down them. Walking was a struggle; he had to keep his arm around her waist to keep her in a straight line. All that was bad enough, but now Yondu was doing it with a constant drumbeat of don't kiss her pounding in his head. This was getting out of hand; he had to get her away from him as fast as possible. Yondu led her down to her cargo room as quickly as he could and opened the door.

“Now go on,” he said, “get.”

Meredith walked into her room and took off her jacket. Yondu stood in the doorway, watching her expose her soft, round shoulders. He let his eyes wander over her body. Looking wasn't against the code. Meredith looked over her shoulder and gave him a drunken smile. He let his head rest against the doorway.
“You let me walk your drunk ass back to the Eclector.” Yondu sighed. “You trust me to be a goddamn gentleman, don't you?”

Meredith nodded.

“You're an idjit,” Yondu said through gritted teeth, “you know that? You let Ego in your goddamn truck when he crashed outta the sky. You let me walk you back with no fuckin' supervision and here we are in your fuckin' bedroom. You trust me that goddamn much?”

“I trust you one-hundred-percent.” Meredith blinked. “You know that. You're a space pirate, yeah, but you've got a code. You're a Ravager.”

Yondu could clearly picture in his mind the day Stakar Ogord had stripped his captain's rank off and banished him from the Ravagers. A fire seared his veins. Damn it, that didn't matter anymore. These Terrans trusted him, and he was going to uphold that trust. It was the least he could do after lying to them about their destination as cargo. They trusted him. They cared about him. And it made him feel like fuckin' goddamn shit-on-a-shuttle, but Yondu gave a fuck about them too. He found himself stepping forwards and wrapping his arms around her in a tight hug. Meredith returned the hug, rubbing his back gently. Yondu pulled back and looked between her eyes.

“Mery, I...” Yondu swallowed, turning purple. “I'm glad you ain't dead.”

“Me too,” she said.

Meredith's eyes were like silver moons. Yondu took a deep breath and exhaled. Stupid goddamn Terrans making him feel stupid goddamn feelings.

“G'night, Mery.” Yondu pressed his lips to her forehead. “Sweet dreams, idjit.”

She giggled and hugged him; he had to pry her arms off and lead her to her bed.

“Go to bed,” he said, “go on.”

Meredith got into bed and snuggled under the covers. She smiled up at Yondu with big gray eyes.

“Goodnight,” she repeated.

“Yeah.” With a heavy heart, Yondu stepped back and hit the door panel. “Goodnight.”

The portal slid shut, shielding Meredith from view. Yondu let his forehead hit the steel wall and cursed. He shouldn't feel like this. He shouldn't want to be on the other side of that door, to sit down and laugh at her drunken ramblings and guard her while she slept. Yondu forced himself away from her step-by-step, ignoring the heat in his face. Absentmindedly he gave a nervous whistle; his arrow zipped through the air in tense figure-eights and tight loops. He made it back to an empty corridor, then paced back and forth, letting the arrow weave its way above his head. He licked his lips nervously; all he could taste was sugar and whiskey.
The sun beamed down onto the Krylorian buildings, glinting off the metal walkways and ships that soared through the sky. The wind played through the trees, tugging on Meredith's blonde curls. She stood at the base of the loading ramp with a wide smile, her hands on her hips. Peter, Yondu, and Kraglin stood at the base of the ramp behind her.

"Last visit," she said, "last doctor."

"Tell me how the visit with Dr. Mareet goes." Peter hovered near the edge of the loading ramp. "I'd come, but..."

"I know you don't like doctors, baby. Don't worry." Meredith kissed Peter's forehead. "I'll be back in less than an hour."

"It'll be okay, Ms. Q." Kraglin scratched his peach fuzz. "I did a little reading on how the process goes, and it ain't much more than runnin' a diagnostic or two and tellin' everything to just keep pluggin' away."

"That's what Dr. Mareet said; she said it'd be the easiest part of the whole process. She's even doing it for free," Meredith said with a chuckle.

"She'd better." Yondu bared his teeth. "Charges out the ass for every other goddamn thing."

"Hey, if it saves my life, I don't care about the price tag.” Meredith stroked Peter's hair. "If it keeps me with my baby, it's worth it."

"Good luck kiss?" Peter's eyes widened.

Meredith pressed a kiss to Peter's cheek. He pointed at the other one.

"This one, too."

Meredith obliged.

"And Kraglin." Peter pointed at Kraglin. "Good luck from him too."

Kraglin flushed completely blue as Meredith gave him a peck on the cheek.

"And Yondu." Peter pointed at Yondu. "Yondu's extra lucky."

Yondu turned purple. Meredith laughed and kissed Peter's cheek.

"You give one to Yondu," she said, "he doesn't want one from me."
The purple blush intensified. Meredith and Peter hugged one more time, Peter burying his face in his mother's curls. Kraglin took Peter's arm and led him back up the loading ramp. Yondu stood for another second, his arms crossed.

“I said I'd walk you there,” he grumbled.

“You don't have to.” Meredith watched Peter's retreating back. “Could you take care of Peter for me while I'm gone? He gets nervous when I go to the doctor, and this final visit really has him shaken up.”

Yondu grunted in affirmation.

“Don't die,” he said.

“I'll do my best not to,” she said.

Yondu went up the loading ramp; Meredith went walking down the street. Dr. Mareet's building stood alone, separate from the rest of the Krylorian structures. There were people standing on the doorstep; Dr. Mareet had customers. Meredith stepped up, smiling.

They turned, and Meredith froze. They were wearing Ravager clothes in colors of navy and gold. One of them looked like he was carved out of living diamond; the other had a swath of dark hair, lidded eyes, and a handsome face.

“Meredith Quill?” The dark-haired Ravager offered a hand.

“Yes, I'm Meredith Quill. Who are you?”

When Meredith took his hand, the dark-haired Ravager lifted it and pressed his lips to her hand. Half of her wanted to laugh, and the other half wanted to slap him.

“Stakar Ogord, Ravager Admiral.”

Meredith turned that name and title over in her head and decided that this man was probably not someone she wanted to slap.

“I've heard of you,” she said, “from a lot of people.”

“Alas,” he chuckled, “there goes my chance to make a good first impression.”

“It was all good things. It's a pleasure to meet you. Are you hear to see Dr. Mareet?” Meredith peered around them at the door. “Is she closed?”

“She is, yes.” Stakar crossed his arms. “Someone recently made dock. Someone it's against the rules for her to serve; an exile. You understand.”

Meredith blinked. “I'm sorry, I don't.”

“Walk with me, talk with me.” Stakar stepped past her.

Meredith looked back at the door, then at the dark-haired Admiral.

“I'm sorry, but I don't go walking with people I don't know, down streets I don't know, on planets that I don't know.” She crossed her arms. “If you want to talk to me, you can talk to me right here.”

The diamond man looked at Stakar. “Captain?”
“It's fine, Martinex.” Stakar walked back up to the doorway. “We respect the lady's wishes.”

“Thank you,” Meredith said.

“We're not here to hurt you and we don't want to cause trouble.” Stakar pulled out a long red cigarette and lit the end. “We're on your side.”

“I kind of guessed that by the Ravager patches,” Meredith said, “but I still don't understand.”

“Are you familiar with Ravagers, Mrs. Quill?”

“It's Ms., and yes, I'm very familiar with them.” Meredith chuckled. “I've been on a Ravager ship for almost four months.”

“And how would you describe your time?”

“Difficult,” Meredith said, “and yet fulfilling. I've learned a lot, and earned a lot.”

“And where does that money go?” Stakar's eyes were relaxed, but they bored into Meredith nonetheless.

“Not that it's any of your business what I do with my units, but I've been spending it on my health.” Meredith crossed her arms. “That's why I'm here at Dr. Mareet's. I'm getting my last cybernetic check-up today. Once the cybernetics sync up, I'll be completely cured. Nearly done with this whole nightmare.”

“Congratulations,” Martinex said. When he smiled, his teeth were dazzling.

“Thank you,” she replied.

“And what about your boss.” Stakar blew a puff of orange smoke out of his mouth. “Yondu Udonta.”

“Yondu? He's not my boss.”

“Is he your friend?”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“And how would you describe him?”

“Big blue idiot. Ugly as sin,” Meredith chuckled, “but occasionally he approximates something respectable.”

Stakar sighed. “Occasionally, hm?”

Meredith remembered everything Yondu had told her about Stakar and their falling out.

“He's gotten better since I met him,” she added, “if that's anything worth mentioning.”

“It is, thank you.”

“Why are you asking all these questions?” Meredith looked at Martinex. “Are why did you think you'd need a guard to handle one lousy Terran?”

“He's not just a bodyguard.” Stakar clapped Martinex on the shoulder with his free hand. “He's my
friend.”

Martinex glanced at Stakar and he raised one glittering brow.

“More or less.” Stakar chuckled. “Mostly a bodyguard who keeps me from doing anything exceptionally idiotic.”

Martinex smiled.

“I'm still confused.” Meredith's eyebrows narrowed. “Just tell me what you want.”

“We want what's best for you and your boy, Ms. Quill.” Stakar took another drag from his cigarette. “You've been abducted, lied to, betrayed, and dragged all around the galaxy. Your son has been exploited for illegal work; you've been kept around as incentive. It's a miracle you're still alive and not being sold to a Krylorian sex slaver.”

“That wouldn't go well for the Krylorian involved.”

“So we've heard.” Stakar blew the orange smoke out again. “You've gotten a bit of reputation, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith couldn't help but grin. “Alas, there goes my chance at a good impression.”

Martinex laughed; the corners of Stakar's mouth twitched upwards. He put the cigarette back in his mouth, twitching it slowly up and down.

“Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do. You're not wrong,” she said, “about being abducted and dragged around. But I don't think I've been lied to or betrayed or anything dramatic like that.”

“Do you know why you were abducted, Ms. Quill?”

“We were valuable cargo,” Meredith said, “although I never found out where we were going. It turns out we were too valuable to give away.”

Stakar's eyes burned into Meredith's. “Why did Yondu Udonta keep you?”

“Peter was small and good for thievin’.” Meredith crossed her arms. “And I'm a damn good cook and I keep shit clean.”

Martinex laughed. Stakar sighed and pulled his cigarette out of his mouth.

“Ms. Quill, your son was supposed to be delivered far past the reaches of the galaxy, to a planet called Ego.”

“Ego?” The name tickled Meredith's memory. “Does that have something to do with Jason? Is that where Jason is?”

“Jason. Ego. Same thing, Ms. Quill.” Stakar shifted his weight. “The one they call Ego goes by many names.”

“The one they call... You said Ego was a planet. How can a planet also be Jason,” Meredith asked.

“He's a living planet.” Stakar paced a little, his lidded eyes focused on nothing. “Capable of producing a limited physical form. Apparently that form was attractive to you. He called himself Jason while he was on Terra.”
“My... my boyfriend was a planet?”

Martinex nodded. “That's what we're saying.”

“You do realize how nuts this is, right? Jason was not a planet.”

“You've been halfway across the galaxy. You've seen things your little life on Terra could never begin to approximate.” Stakar took a drag from his cigarette and let the smoke spill from his lips. “At this point, Ms. Quill, you ought to have learned that nothing is impossible.”

“You... I mean... Wow.” Meredith pressed a hand to her forehead. “It's just... That's a lot to take in. Are you sure?”

“I wouldn't be here if I wasn't, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith turned that over in her head. From what Yondu had told her, the word of Stakar Ogord was not to be dismissed lightly. Stakar had no reason to lie to her.

“So... Jason, or Ego or whatever... He's still out there,” Meredith said, “Peter's father is still out there.”

“Yes.”

Meredith grinned. “That's great!”

“Actually, Ms. Quill, it's not great.” Stakar frowned. “Yondu Udonta has been preventing you from reaching Ego for four months. Before Ego arrived on Terra, he picked up hundreds of other-”

“[WHAT?]”

“Yondu has been keeping you from reaching that planet,” Stakar said, “and has been keeping you from Ego, or, as you know him, Jason.”

It was like someone had thrown a switch in the Terran. She flushed scarlet, and her eyes sparked with a steely fire. Stakar raised his eyebrows slightly as Meredith pressed her finger to her comm link.

“Yondu Udonta,” she snapped.

“What?” Yondu's voice grunted over the comm link.

“When I get my hands on you I'm going to skin you,” she said, “I'm going to tan the leather and make a big blue purse! And every time I use that purse I'm going to think about how much of a goddamned piece-of-shit you are, you big blue asshole.”

Stakar and Martinex started to chuckle. Meredith pushed past them, her face red.

“Ms. Quill, I wasn't finished.” Stakar frowned. “Ms. Quill?”

“Well I am finished with you,” Meredith shouted, then kept stomping down the street, still screaming into the comm unit. She raged off screaming, her Missouri accent bubbling to the surface.

Martinex looked at Stakar. “Do we pursue?”

“No.” Stakar put out his cigarette. “No. Let's keep an eye on the situation.”
“You're waiting to see if he'll come clean with her.” Martinex's voice was soft. “You're waiting to see if he'll do the right thing. Did you ever give up on him?”

Stakar said nothing. With a whirl of blue and gold, he was gone. Martinex paced after him, keeping an eye out for danger. The silence pressed in; Martinex knew his captain was being buffeted from all sides by gloomy thoughts and morose feelings.

“That Meredith Quill. She wasn't bad-looking, was she captain?”

It worked; Stakar laughed.

“Keep it in your pants, Martinex. We've still got a job to do.”

“Goddammit woman, I can't understand a word you're sayin'!” Yondu bellowed into the comm link. On the bridge, everyone was staring at their screens and avoiding so much as a squeak from their chair. Both Yondu and Meredith, angry at the same time? Nothing good could come from this.

“Quill. Quill! Dammit Mery, stop screamin' so I can hear what the hell you's so mad about! You're not even talkin', you're just cursin'!” Yondu paced back and forth. “What did I do? What did I do? What the fuck, woman, just tell me what I did!”

Gef was keeping his eyes on the comm lines. Drazkar cleared his throat and slid a folded piece of paper along the desk. Gef held it under the desk as he opened it.

100 units says they fuck tonite, it said.

You're on, Gef scrawled, then flicked the paper back to Drazkar, who opened it and grinned.

“Gef!”

Gef froze. “Aye, captain?”

“Open the loadin' hatch, she's back.” Yondu stalked to the bridge door. “Crazy-ass woman...”

As soon as the door shut, there was a great scraping of chairs. Gef whipped out the datapad, racing to handle all the bets Ravagers were shouting at him.

“Slow down, slow down, dammit!” Gef cursed. “A month ago you said I was nuts, and now you're all staking thousands on it, huh? What a bunch of idiots you are, mates. I told you this would pay off!”

Meredith stalked right up the loading ramp with all the trappings of a rolling storm. Yondu stood at the top of the ramp, his arms wide.

“What the fuck did I do,” he said.

Meredith began slamming her fists on his chest.
“You stupid – blue – piece – of – shit!” She began crying. “You knew where Jason was this whole time. This whole goddamn time Peter hasn't had a father because of you, you asshole!”

“Ow! Hey, knock it off,” Yondu roared, then grabbed her wrists.

“Is it true,” Meredith sobbed.

Yondu squinted. “What?”

“I said, is it true?” Meredith’s eyes were swollen pink. “You knew where Jason was the whole time and you never brought us to him. Not even when I was better.”

Yondu's blood froze.

“You're still sick, Mery,” he heard himself say, “implants ain't sync'd yet.”

“I don't care! If I die, big whoop, so what,” Meredith said, “Peter could still have his father!”

Yondu didn't answer. He held Meredith's wrists as she cried. She hung her head, tears dropping from her eyelashes. Yondu's chest was tight, but his mind was open and racing. A million and one lies were already shooting through his head.

She looked up, her silver eyes reddened by tears. “Dammit, is it true?”

Those eyes pulled the truth right through his teeth.

“Yes,” he said.

Yondu never thought he'd see that expression again. Years ago, when Stakar Ogord confronted him about trafficking kids and breaking the code, he'd asked roughly the same question. Did you do it, he'd said, did you break the code. Yondu had said yes. Now, the exact same expression of shock and betrayal was on Meredith's face. The same disbelief, the same crushed trust. It hurt Yondu just as much as it did the first time.

“You... I can't believe you,” Meredith said.

“Meredith, you gotta listen to me.” Yondu's eyes flicked between hers. “I can explain everything, I swear. Remember, I told you I'd never do anything to hurt the boy. I meant that. Now who told you?”

“Did Jason pay you to bring us to him?”

“Yeah, that jackass offered me five-thousand units to bring him Peter. But I ain't gonna do it,” Yondu added quickly, “I swear.”

“You were going to take him off Terra and give him to his father. Jason sent you.” Yondu could see the realization dawn in Meredith's eyes. “That was why you picked Peter up. That was always where we were supposed to be going.”

“But I ain't takin' you there, I swear. I ain't doin' it.”

“Why not?” Her voice snapped like a crack of thunder. “Dammit, I waited eight years for that to happen! I wanted him to go find his father, you idiot, I was dying! Jason said he'd come back, and he sent you?”

“You want Peter with that jackass?” Yondu scowled. “Dammit, woman, just listen. Ego ain't the
kind of man you want your son around.”

“No, you're not the kind of man I want my son around.” Meredith tore her wrists out of his hands and strode away. “I can't believe you. The whole time you just... ugh!”

“I was gonna take you there but it just wasn't right!” Yondu kept after her. “I made a goddamn mistake, I know, just listen!”

“Why should I? You lied to me!”

“I know, but... damn it, there's more to this than you know.”

“I'd know more if you'd just tell me.”

“Mery, you don't want to know.”

“Don't tell me what I do and don't want to know!”

“Woman, just listen!”

“No!”

As Meredith stalked through the halls of the Eclector pursued by Yondu, the Ravagers scattered. They avoided the sounds of the argument, wincing as Meredith's shriek and Yondu's bellow sounded through the halls. Meredith had found out about Ego; this couldn't end well. Meredith opened the portal; Drazkar and Lunis were crouched on the other side. When they saw her, they froze.

“Shoo! Go on, get!” She pointed down the hallway. “Go!”

Drazkar and Lunis bolted away, their eyes wide. Yondu came through the portal after her.

“Stop following me,” she yelled.

“Not until you listen!” Yondu's heart was beating a frantic pace. “For fuck's sake, Mery, you won't even hear why I goddamn did it!”

“I know why you did it,” she said, “it's because you're a selfish money-hungry son-of-a-bitch and I hate you!”

That hit him like a shotgun blast to the chest. Yondu's step faltered, coming to a stop. She walked three more feet, then turned around. There were tears in her eyes.

“Don't say that, Mery.” His chest ached deeply. “Don't hate me.”

“Why shouldn't I,” she said.

“You don't hate anybody,” he said, “you're Mery.”

She was trying to. She stared at him, her blood boiling, desperately trying to hate him. If she hated him, it wouldn't hurt so much. He'd kept her from Jason, used her and Peter for money, lied to her and betrayed her. He'd broken her heart. She wanted to hate him, but... Memories were flicking through her mind like shuffled slides, all out of order. Busting out laughing on Arazine. Him swinging Peter on his arm. A thousand crooked grins, purple faces, and exasperated sighs. For four months, he'd kept her and Peter safe. For four months, he'd helped her raise her boy. She tried to cut those feelings out of her heart, but they wouldn't go. Meredith couldn't not care. Her expression fractured.
“I don’t hate you,” she said.

Yondu's chest inflated, and she saw a flash of relief on his face.

“But we aren’t friends anymore,” Meredith added.

Huge tears rolled down her cheeks. She turned down the other hallway, scarcely able to see the hallway through her tears.

“Dammit, Mery.” Yondu paced down the hallway after her. “I fucked up, okay? Just... just hear me out.”

“No.” The tears streamed down her face. “I am not listening to you. I am done listening to anything you have to say.”

“Goddamn it.” Yondu threw himself between her and the portal. “Just listen, please.”

The 'please' threw her off. She crossed her arms and stared at the ground. Tears streaked down her face and dripped onto the black leather of her jacket.

“Mery,” Yondu said, “just let me explain.”

“How?” Meredith cocked her head to the side, putting both hands on her hips. “How the hell do you expect to explain to me why you kept me and my son from his father for four months? You knew the whole time. You took us off Terra for the sole purpose of taking us there, and you didn’t do it?”

“He's a jackass!” Yondu belted the words out of all four of his lungs. “He's a goddamn jackass and you don't need him!”

“Maybe I want him,” she shrieked, “did you ever think about that? Did you ever think that maybe for eight years I've been waiting for him to come get me, and all of a sudden some blue son-of-a-fuck gets in the way?”

“What, you think I did this for my goddamn self?”

“That is exactly what I think,” she fumed.

“What, I kept y'all around because I liked you?” Yondu's face was turning purple. “You think I'm getting soft!”

“No!” Meredith was so angry that she'd started to laugh. “No! I think you kept us because we made money.”

“And it went to your goddamn surgeries!”

“Half of it did.” Meredith crossed her arms, her lips pursed. “Half. The other half, you took. You kept a dying woman and her eight-year-old son from her love and his father so you could extort money from them. That is the skeeziest, greediest, most heartless thing I have ever seen anyone do.”

“That was just at first! I made a mistake!” Yondu's fist slammed into the wall. “Goddamn it woman, what do you want from me?”

“Take us to Jason,” she shouted.

“No!” Yondu's eyes were wide and manic. “Dammit, you idjit, don't you know what he'll do to your boy?”
“Be a goddamn father!”

“No, you dumb Terran bitch, he'll fuckin' kill him!”

“You are psychotic.” Meredith threw her arms up in the air and walked away. “You actually think
Jason's going to kill Peter. You stupid son-of-a-bitch.”

“He will,” Yondu snarled, “that's what he does!”

“Whatever. I just...” She sighed and made for the cargo bay door. “I can't trust a thing you say
anymore.”

“Mery.” He jogged after her. “Mery.”

“No.”

“Just listen for a goddamn second!”

“I'm done listening.”

“Please, Mery.”

“That's not going to work a second time.” She hit the door panel. “Leave me alone.”

Yondu tried to grab her arm, but those fast-twitch muscle enhancers worked wonders. She slipped
her arm out of his grip and pointed in his face.

“Don't touch me,” she snapped.

“Mery, listen.” Yondu stood in the doorway, his hulking frame rising and falling with audible
breaths. “I ain't askin' you to forgive me.”

“Good,” she said, “because I won't.”

“Goddamn it, just...” Yondu leaned his arm against the cold steel. “Say you'll give me a second
chance. One chance. Dammit, Mery, just... Please.”

Meredith's gray eyes were swimming in tears. Yondu's face was a shattered glass. He was lost, and
for the first time, she was too hurt to care.

“You did this to yourself,” she said.

“I know.” He breathed heavily. “I shoulda told you. I shoulda told you everything, I just... I didn't
want you to leave.”

Meredith bit her lips together. The blood rushed in her ears, filling her head with blistering wrath.
Her heart beat a constant drumbeat of pain. She closed her eyes and hit the door panel on the other
side. The portal slid shut, blocking his lost, vulnerable expression. The anger broke, and the sorrow
overwhelmed her. Meredith Quill had been through a lot in the last four months, but this was the
worst. A dry sob shot through her chest, and she slid to the ground, hugged her knees, and wept.

On the other side of the door. Yondu slammed his fist once on the portal. He pressed his forehead
against the cold metal, his eyes closed. He could hear her sobbing on the other side. Yondu wanted
to be next to her, and he hated himself for it. He wanted to hold her close and tell her that he'd kill
whoever had made her cry with his bare hands. Yondu wanted to be there for her, for her to confide
in him and trust him and give a fuck about him. And she had, he thought, and he'd thrown it away.
Yondu slammed his fist against the portal again, then walked away.
Family Debates

Chapter Summary

Kraglin and Peter strap on their protective gear and set to work fixing what their parents, er, um, Meredith and Yondu, have messed up. Yondu gets face-to-face-to-gun with Stakar Ogord.

Dinner was a muted affair. Everyone ate with their heads down; no one spoke above a murmur. Meredith didn't speak at all. Her jaw was locked tight as a vault as she served the food to the Ravagers. She met no one's eye and disappeared as soon as she was done eating. Peter picked at his food, his green eyes tinged red. He was still coming to terms with what his mother had told him. Yondu's face was a continuous expression of nastiness; he glared at anyone who dared to make eye contact and chewed his food with an aggression usually reserved for mutineers. Poor Kraglin sat in the corner, stared at his food, and tried to think of a way to solve the problem. After half an hour, his food was cold and he still had nothing.

“Kraglin?”

Kraglin looked up. The mess hall was empty except for Peter and Kraglin. Peter held out his hands.

“Do you want me to take your dishes,” he asked.

“Still eatin', kid.” Kraglin patted the bench next to him. “Why don't you have a sit and tell me how you're doin',”

“Bad.” Peter sniffed. “Mom and Yondu are really angry at each other.”

Kraglin stuffed a spoon of cold food into his mouth. “Yep.”

“And mom keeps crying,” Peter said, “and nobody's talking.”

“That's a problem. Can't solve a problem if nobody's talkin' it out,” Kraglin said.

“Why isn't anyone talking about it?”

“I think it's because everyone's afraid what they might say,” Kraglin replied, “or what they might hear.”

Peter blinked. “I don't get it.”

Kraglin sighed. “Peter, sometimes adults don't want to say what they feel because they're afraid it might hurt them. Or, they don't talk because they're afraid that someone might say something that hurts them.”

“Mom's not going to hurt Yondu,” Peter said.

Kraglin smiled sadly. “I don't think she wants to, Pete, but she might do it without meaning to.”

“Nothing can hurt Yondu,” Peter said, “he's Yondu!”
“Is that so?” Kraglin chuckled. “You should tell him that.”

Peter stood up. “I will!”

“Go on then,” Kraglin said, “get!”

Peter opened the portal and went running out as fast as he could. Kraglin grinned. Peter was an okay kid. Annoying as hell and always underfoot, but he had a true heart and a Ravager’s head. Peter was the closest thing to a little brother that Kraglin had ever had. And Meredith... Kraglin sighed. He wasn't her son any more than he was Yondu’s, but Kraglin liked to think that she at least thought he was an okay guy. Kraglin thought the world of her. He stood up and put his dishes in the sink, then turned the faucet on. He ran his hands under the water, then turned off the faucet and wiped them on his pants.

Yep, Kraglin couldn't deny it; the cap'n had himself in a right pickle this time. And this time, Kraglin couldn't see how he could help. He understood why Yondu had done what he'd done, but that didn't make it right. And poor Ms. Quill, having to learn everything all at the same time... damn.

Kraglin found himself walking down to the cargo bay. He hadn't been thinking about where he was going, yet he felt that this was the right way to go. He knocked on Ms. Quill's door.

“Peter?” Her voice was strained. “Not now, baby.”

“It's me, Ms. Quill.”

“Kraglin?” Meredith opened the door. “Honey, what are you doin' here?”

“Checkin' on you.” Kraglin looked at her tear-stained face and frowned. “Kinda figured you'd be feelin' like shit right about now.”

“That hits the nail on the head,” she said.

Kraglin put his hands in his pockets. “Can I come in?”

“Sure, honey.” Meredith backed up and let him into the room, wiping her eyes on her hands. “For a second I thought you were Peter. Can't let him see me like this.”

“Why not, Ms. Q?”

“I'm his momma.” She smiled. “I'm supposed to have all the answers.”

“Kinda hard to have all the answers when no one's telling you anything, huh?” Kraglin frowned and put his hands in his pockets. “I'm sorry, Ms. Q, I shoulda told you myself.”

“No honey. I wouldn't have believed you if you did, and besides, that's not your responsibility.” Meredith sunk onto her bunk, her elbows on her knees. “I can't believe Stakar Ogord came all this way to tell me.”

“Stakar Ogord?” Kraglin's throat went dry. “The Stakar Ogord?”

“One and only,” she said.

Kraglin swallowed. If the cap'n found out about this, he'd go ballistic.

“What am I going to do, Kraglin?” Meredith sighed and put her head in her hands. “I thought about just hijacking a ship and flying off with Peter, but that'd get us both killed. I can't protect Peter out in
space; I don't know anything about life out here. But it's not safe for us to stay here with that big blue asshole either. I can't leave and I can't stay.”

Kraglin pulled up the backless desk chair and sat in it, facing Meredith.

“The way I look at it, Ms. Q, you got yourself a choice. You can either accept that this is the way things are, or you can do somethin' about it. And you,” he said, “are the kind of person who does things.”

“I don't know what to do,” she said.

“Tell the cap'n you want to go to Ego.” Kraglin's face serious. “Give him the chance to take you there.”

“He kept this from me for four months, Kraglin.” Meredith scowled. “You really think he's just going to take us there because I asked nicely?”

“Just give him a chance, Ms. Quill. I know the cap'n ain't done right by you two, but please.” Kraglin's voice took on a pleading edge. “Just give him the chance to fix it.”

“I already asked him and he said no.” Meredith sighed. “Come on, Kraglin, let's be serious here.”

“I'm deadly serious, Ms. Q. Ask him again. Ask him to prove that he did right by not taking you there. If he's so goddamn sure that Ego's an asshole, then let him prove it. He will,” Kraglin said, “I promise.”

“Jason's not an asshole,” Meredith said.

“Ms. Quill, he left you on Terra for eight goddamn years. Call that what you will,” Kraglin said, “but out here we call that a grade-A asshole.”

“I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation.”

“Like what? He couldn't take you with you when he left? He sent space pirates to pick you up, Ms. Q. He didn't even pay for somebody half decent.” Kraglin frowned. “If somebody had done that to my sister, I'd kill him. He's an asshole, Ms. Quill. For fuck's sake, stop defending him.”

“I think I know Peter's father better than you do, Kraglin,” Meredith snapped.

“And I know the cap'n, and in a jackass contest, Ego leaves Yondu in the dust.”

“That's not true.”

“Who should you be pissed at more, Ms. Q; a man what's lied and extorted money from you for four months, or the man who knocked you up and abandoned you for eight years,” Kraglin said, “then sent a bunch of scummy space pirates to pick you up?”

Meredith opened her mouth, then closed it.

“Tell me, Ms. Q.” Kraglin leaned his elbows on his knees. “Besides Peter, what did your boyfriend do for you? What'd he give to you? How'd he help?”

“He gave me Peter and he...” Meredith huffed. “Peter is everything to me.”

“But besides givin' you Peter, he ain't done shit, has he?” Kraglin raised his eyebrows. “But you ain't mad at him?”
“I didn't say that,” she said.

“And cap'n Yondu, he's watched out for you and Peter for a couple months now. Helped you get the units for your surgeries. Yeah,” Kraglin said, “he took half of everythin' you earned off them jobs, but he's the one what got you to Mareet in the first place. He might not have been the most honest son-of-a-bitch, but the cap'n's done more for you than you think.”

“So you think I owe him,” Meredith said.

“No, Ms. Q.” Kraglin leaned back in his chair. “I just want you to think this through with your head instead of with your heart. There's a time and a place for getting pissed-off, but this ain't it.”

“So what, I just ignore how I feel and politely ask Yondu to take us to Ego?” Meredith's eyebrows contracted. “That's not going to work.”

“You don't know that. You don't know the cap'n like I do. I know how he feels about this and I know it's botherin' him that you're pissed. He gives a fuck about this, Ms. Q. That's... “ Kraglin shook his head. “That's pretty goddamn significant when you think about it. He don't give a fuck about a lot, but he gives a fuck about you two.”

“Then why did he lie to us,” she asked.

“Because he was scared you'd leave.” Kraglin spoke plainly. “Cap'n doesn't get scared by much, Ms. Q, but he's got a thing about folks abandoning him.”

“I guess I can understand that. It's not an excuse,” Meredith added quickly, “but...it's an explanation.”

“There ain't no excuse, Ms. Q, but he does give a fuck about you two. I know it don't feel like it right now, but don't write him off. Get to your boyfriend, get the damn facts about what's been goin' on, and make an informed damn decision.” Kraglin's eyes were as pale as ice. “Keep an open mind, Ms. Quill.”

“That's tougher than it sounds, Kraglin.”

“I know it ain't gonna be easy,” Kraglin said, “but try to think this one through based on the facts. This is as much about Pete as it is about you; you can't afford to make a mistake.”

“You're right. I suppose that's why I'm so angry.” Meredith put her head in her hands. “I thought I could trust Yondu with Peter, but he's been lying to us and extorting money...”

“And teachin' the kid how to shoot and fly a ship,” Kraglin pointed out, “and keepin' you both safe in space. He ain't no angel, Ms. Quill, but he ain't a complete jackass either. It wasn't about the money. Cap'n's made about two-hundred-fifty-thousand units off y'all; he could have gotten twice that by givin' up Peter, and quadruple that by givin' up both of you. He kept you rather than makin' a million units.”

Meredith sighed. Her eyes stung with unshed tears; Kraglin was surprised she still had tears left to shed.

“He gives a fuck about you two, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin's voice was soft. “He's willin' to take you wherever you need to go, whatever's gonna get you to trust him again. He values your friendship. That ain't trivial.”

“You really think he'll do it just because I ask,” she said.
“Ms. Quill,” Kraglin said, “I think he'd do just about anything if you asked.”

“What?”

“Nothin’. Just ask him, Ms. Q. One last chance,” Kraglin said.

Meredith turned it over in her head. She didn't have anything left to lose except Peter, and no one was taking him away from her. If this worked, she'd finally be face-to-face with Jason. Yondu would be doing the right thing by her and Peter. Peter would meet his father.

“Fine. I'll give Yondu one last shot. If he takes us to Jason, I'll forgive him for everything.” Meredith rubbed her arms, her eyes downcast. “A lifetime with Jason is more important than a few months of dishonesty and extortion. Peter needs a chance to be with his father.”

“Thank you, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin smiled. “It'll all work out, you'll see.”

“You really have faith in him, don't you?”

“I trust the cap'n with my life.”

“So did I,” Meredith said softly, “and with Peter's. Damn, I was so stupid.”

“Ms. Quill?” Kraglin reached out and put his hands on her shoulders. “From now on, no more secrets. I promise. If the cap'n says 'don't tell Ms. Quill', you can bet you'll be the first person that knows.”

Meredith smiled.

“Thank you, honey, but you have to follow orders.”

“I have to be a good Ravager,” Kraglin corrected, “and lyin' to Peter and his mom don't sound like good Ravagerin' to me.”

Meredith pulled him into a hug. He patted her back awkwardly.

“It's okay, Ms. Q. Bein' who I want to be is more than just bein' a Ravager.” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “Learned that on the way, at least.”

“I'm proud of you, Kraglin.” Meredith squeezed him tightly. “You're a great Ravager, a good young man, and a wonderful friend. I didn't know your parents, but they raised one smart kid.”

Kraglin's voice cracked as he hugged her back.

“Thanks, Ms. Q.”

“Yondu?”

Yondu opened his eyes. Previously, the quarters had been completely empty. This was clearly no longer the case; Peter was staring at him, eyes wide.

“What,” Yondu grunted.
“Kraglin told me that sometimes adults don't talk because they're afraid they're going to get hurt or they're afraid they're going to hurt each other.” Peter's emerald-green eyes were fixed on Yondu's. “So I ran here because mom's not going to hurt you. You're Yondu. Nothing can hurt you.”

Yondu reached out and put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

“Boy,” he said, “you're an idjit.”

Peter grinned. “Kraglin says that too, but only when I'm right.”

“And when you're being an idjit,” Yondu said.

“But I'm right, aren't I?” Peter crawled onto the bed and sat criss-cross at the end. “Nothing can hurt you. You're too cool.”

Yondu couldn't help but grin. “Too cool, huh?”

“Yeah. You fly a ship and you go wherever you want and you fight bad guys with a super arrow,” Peter said, “and you can eat more stew than anybody I know.”

“And that makes me cool?”

“Yeah.”

Yondu chuckled and sat up. “Good to know, kid.”

Peter crawled up and sat next to him, hugging his own knees.

“Why is mom mad at you,” he said.

“Cause I didn't tell her everything.”

“Why?”

Yondu scowled. “Cause she didn't need to know, dammit.”

Peter rested his chin on his knees.

“Yondu,” he said, “is my dad a jackass?”

“Yes,” Yondu said immediately, “the biggest goddamn jackass that ever lived. You can see it in his smug-ass grin.”

Peter looked up, frowning. “Am I going to be like him?”

“What? Fuck no,” Yondu said, “you're gonna be cool.”

Peter grinned. “Like you?”

“Hell yeah.” Yondu's grin showed his jagged teeth. “You're a Ravager, remember?”

Peter's chest puffed out. “Yeah.”

“Plus,” Yondu added, “you're more like your momma.”

The little Terran was glowing with pride; Yondu had never seen him beam so much. Yondu chuckled and ruffled his hair.
“Idjit,” he said.

Peter laughed, hugging his knees. The two sat in silence for a second.

“Yondu?”

“What, boy.”

“If my dad was a jackass,” Peter said, “why did mom fall in love with him?”

Yondu shrugged. “You'd have to ask her.”

“I did,” he said, “and she said it was because he was charming and kind and loving. She said he was like me. But you said he's a jackass, and that I'm not like him. I'm confused.”

Yondu looked down. Peter was hugging his knees, and a small frown marred his expression.

“Boy,” Yondu said, “we're all a little confused right now. If you ever meet your pop, you make your own decision, okay?”

“Okay.” Peter rested his cheek on his knees and looked at Yondu. “But if we do go there and I don't like him, I don't have to stay, do I?”

“Boy, you're a Ravager.” Yondu lifted his chin. “You're free.”

Peter's smile was one of the most goddamn beautiful things Yondu had ever seen. If Ego ever took it away, Yondu was going to kill him; no ifs, ands, or goddamn buts about it. Yondu had blown up moons before; how much bigger could a planet be?

“And mom,” Peter said, “mom wouldn't have to stay if she didn't like him anymore?”

“No,” Yondu said, “she wouldn't have to stay there.”

“You'd take us both with you if we didn't like Ego?”

“Yeah.”

“You promise?”

The big Centaurian looked down at the little Terran. Peter's big green eyes were still so trusting, so pure. Yondu had no idea why the boy's trust in him hadn't broken; his momma's trust sure had. Maybe that was just kids, or maybe it was just Peter. Yondu put his arm around the boy's shoulders and pulled him into a hug.

“I promise,” Yondu said.

Peter hugged Yondu. Yondu patted his back a few times, and Peter let go.

“Head to bed, boy,” Yondu said, “and we'll figure it out tomorrow.”

Peter crawled off the bed and curled up on his bedroll. He lay there awake; Yondu could see the whites of his eyes. Yondu sighed.

“Boy,” he said, “go spend the night with your momma. Keep an eye on her.”

“Really?” Peter got up. “I can?”
“Just go, goddam it.”

Peter grabbed his pillow and his Walkman and went running out of the room. Yondu laid back down, letting a long breath escape him. He was vaguely aware of the Ravagers that came in and readied themselves for bed, but for the most part, he stared at the ceiling. Ravager snoring was filling the air when Kraglin finally made it back to the quarters.

“Report,” Yondu muttered.

Kraglin shut the portal with a sigh.

“How’s the ship, cap’n?”

“Just report, goddam it.”

“Fine. Night Pilot’s taken control of the ship and everything’s doin’ dandy.” Kraglin crawled into his bedroll. “’Cept Ms. Quill. She’s walkin’ around with unchecked cybernetics, dealin’ with a lot of stress and mental energy, just like Dr. Mareet told her not to.”

“Stubborn woman,” Yondu muttered.

“Tough as goddam nails, cap’n.” Kraglin stared at the ceiling. “You should have told her the truth.”

“So what, she could go and get herself and the boy killed? I saved their goddam lives, keeping them on this ship.” Yondu scowled. “She couldn’t handle it.”

“That woman,” Kraglin said, “has flown a billion goddam light years from her home. She got on this ship with one mission; protect her goddam son. She’s done it. She was dying, damn it, and that didn’t stop her. Nothin’ stops her. Ravager life ain’t knocked her around worse than a few bruises, and she’s still soft and lovin’ and kind. She’s got more strength in one smile than the rest of us have in our whole souls. She loves that boy with a fire that a pair of goddam fleas like us can’t barely try to understand. There ain’t nothin’ she can’t handle.”

Yondu swallowed. Kraglin’s voice never rose above a whisper, but it carried with a kind of deadly reverberation that echoed through the dark room. Yondu had heard that kind of tone before, in both himself and Stakar. That was the tone of a man who was to be taken seriously.

“You should have told Ms. Q the truth,” Kraglin repeated.

“I know, goddam it.” Yondu scowled. “I know.”

Kraglin turned over and closed his eyes. Yondu stared up at the ceiling.

“She says she’ll give you a second chance,” Kraglin mumbled, “and I suggest you fuckin’ take it.”

“Did she tell you who told her?”

“Yeah, cap’n, but you ain’t gonna like it.”

“Today’s already been the worst goddam day in four fuckin’ months,” Yondu snarled, “so fuckin’ try me.”

Kraglin took a deep breath.

“Stakar Ogord,” he said.
Stakar Ogord sat in Dr. Mareet's waiting room, smoking a long red cigarette. Corky and the good doctor herself glared at him from where they were tied up, back-to-back, in chairs.

“Really? Smoking in a hospital? In front of your doctor?” Dr. Mareet rolled her eyes. “Do you even want me to begin listing the health risks?”

“Don't bother.” Stakar took a draw from his cigarette. “I wouldn't listen anyway.”

Dr. Mareet huffed.

“Instead, let's go through all the health risks associated with disobeying my commands.” Stakar blew orange smoke lazily into the air. “Decapitation. Disembowelment. Dismemberment.”

Corky swallowed.

“We didn't disobey. You said no one was to serve an exile, and we didn't,” Dr. Mareet said.

“Right. Which is why he's been returning here monthly for medical services.” Martinex flicked through Corky's datapad. “Definitely doesn't count as serving an exile.”

“We didn't serve him.” Corky glared up at Martinex. “Check for yourself.”

“What do you mean,” Stakar asked.

“The only patient that I ever personally saw was Meredith Elizabeth Quill,” Dr. Mareet said, “and she isn't a Ravager.”

“She isn't?” Stakar's brow contracted. “She looked like one.”

“Refused to join,” Corky said.

“She's still determined to get back to Terra,” Dr. Mareet explained, “she'll never be a Ravager.”

“I don't know.” Martinex grinned, showing scintillating teeth. “She cursed like a Ravager.”

“I'd curse too if I had to put up with Yondu Udonta for four months,” Dr. Mareet said.

Stakar's eyes flashed. He leaned forwards and put his cigarette out on Dr. Mareet's cheek. She let out a cry as it burned her skin. Corky bared his teeth, fighting at his bonds.

“Don't bother,” Martinex said, “just take her hand.”

Corky could just barely hold Mareet's hand; as soon as their skin touched, her burn healed. She glared up at Stakar.

“Still can't take it when someone speaks ill of your protege,” she asked.

Stakar's answer was to flick ashes on her face. His eyes were cold, detached.

“Your records show that you saw Yondu Udonta for a physical weeks ago,” Martinex said, “explain that one.”

“I never saw him. The entire check-up was completed on the Eclector by Meredith Elizabeth Quill.”
Dr. Mareet's voice was cold. “All I did was log information, and that's hardly a medical activity.”

Stakar re-lit his cigarette.

“You played a very dangerous game, Mareet.” The flame of his lighter reflected in his merciless eyes. “I thought you gave up that kind of risk after we saved you two on Knowhere.”

“Yondu Udonta saved us on Knowhere.” Corky bared his teeth. “He tricked the Nova Corps; you just flew the damn ship.”

“So your loyalty is to him and not me? Very interesting,” Stakar said.

“No, Stakar, our loyalty is to you and your clan,” Dr. Mareet said, “and we believed it was in the best interest of your clan to serve Meredith Quill.”

“And why is that,” Stakar asked.

“Stakar, I tended to Yondu while he grew up. I've been your family doctor since he was scarcely old enough to shave. Did you think we were just going to let you drop him like a bag of rotten meat? No! You were too hurt to listen to him, and he was too hurt to talk to you.” Dr. Mareet sighed. “Corky and I did what we thought would be best, and you will find that we operated within the confines of the rules.”

Martinex scrolled through the datapad, squinting.

“Technically, she's right,” he said, “Mareet herself never gave him any real medical assistance.”

“I'm a doctor, you ignorant buffoon.” Dr. Mareet scowled. “Did you really think I wouldn't think this all the way through?”

Stakar chuckled.

“You were always a smart one, Mareet,” he said.


Stakar gave Martinex a nod. Martinex reached down to untie the two when three loud booms echoed through the house. Martinex paused, listening. The booms sounded again, more agitated this time. Dr. Mareet shrunk down, her eyes closed. She knew that brutish knock anywhere.

“Dammit,” she whispered.

A heavy combat boot busted down the front door, shortly followed by a livid, purple-faced Centaurian.

“Stakar Ogord, you selfish cock-sucking cum-guzzling four-faced dick-munching shit-eatin' low-life two-timin' big-mouthed fat-ass pig-fuckin' son-of-a-bitch!” Yondu came down the hallway like a rolling storm. “When I get my hands on you I'm gonna rip off your head and piss down your goddamn throat!”

Martinex stumbled back, his eyes wide. Stakar bust out laughing, covering his eyes with one hand.

“Well damn it all,” he said, “this night is just hell, isn't it?”

Yondu came into the waiting room with a bloodlust in his eyes. He gave a shrill whistle, and his arrow shot through Dr. Mareet and Corky's bonds. They scrambled for the door, leaving Yondu,
purple-faced and livid, to deal with Martinex and Stakar.

“You told her,” Yondu snarled, snatching his arrow out of midair.

“She had a right to know,” Stakar said loudly, “and you had every opportunity to do it yourself.”

“Do you fuckin' know what you did?” Yondu picked up the chair Corky had been tied to and threw it across the room; it splintered to pieces. “Do you know what you've fuckin' done?”

“No, not really.” Stakar messed with his cigarette, then sighed. “Oh what's the point, I don't even want this right now.”

Stakar stomped on his cigarette, leaving ash on the cream-and-black carpet. Yondu's fists balled up, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

“I should kill you for this,” Yondu said.

“For what, exposing you for what you are? A liar, a thief, a child-trafficking exile?” Stakar crossed his arms. “I only managed to tell her about you keeping her from Ego. I had intended to tell her about both you and Ego's trespasses against her. Preferably she'd know the entire extent of the way she's been misused.”

“Listen, fuck-nuts,” Yondu snarled, “you don't know that woman. You leave her the fuck alone.”

“Like you give a damn about those Terrans,” Stakar scoffed.

Stakar's back slammed against the wall, Yondu's arm on his chest. Martinex drew his pistol, but Stakar held up a hand, staying him.

“Don't you ever tell me what I feel or who I am.” Yondu's voice had gone low and deadly. “I swear if I didn't have more important goddamn things to do, I'd kill you right now.”

“More important things to do,” Stakar asked sarcastically, “such as?”

“Right now there's a dyin' Terran cryin' herself to sleep on my ship, and I gotta go fix it.” Yondu's eyes were lit with a wild, manic light. “I can't be pissed at her, but I'm sure as fuck pissed at you.”

“The feeling is mutual.” Stakar shoved Yondu off. “You're such a disappointment.”

“I'm a goddamn disappointment? What about you,” Yondu bellowed, “you fuckin' broke it to her like dumpin' rocks on a goddamn daisy!”

“You're kidding.” Stakar linked his hands behind his back. “You expect me to believe that you care about how it hurt her feelings, and not because she's flying away and you lost your cash cow?”

“Goddamn it, she hasn't been that for three goddamn months!” Yondu picked up Dr. Mareet's chair and bashed it against the wall. “You don't – fuckin' – listen!”

Stakar and Martinex exchanged looks.

“Are you saying you stopped exploiting those Terran for money,” Martinex asked.

“Had to take half or the boys woulda suspected shit was up, idjit.” Yondu snarled, rounding on Martinex. “Them jobs was to get Quill back here so she wouldn't kick the goddamn bucket!”

“Interesting.” Stakar squinted. “You wanted to save them.”
“No fuckin' shit!” Yondu's eyes were wide as he overturned a loveseat. “Why the fuck else would I do this? You think I'd go through all this shit for money? Holy fuck, if it was that I'd just give 'em to Ego! This wasn't about the goddamn money.”

“Maybe this isn't what we thought it was,” Martinex said to Stakar.

“No.” Stakar watched Yondu destroy the waiting room with interest. “No, it most certainly is not.”

“You told her about that stupid jackass planet and now she wants to go there! I tell her that he'll kill the boy, but now, thanks to you, she don't believe me. She's gonna get there,” Yondu fumed, “and I ain't gonna be there to protect either of 'em and he's gonna kill 'em!”

Stakar's blood chilled.

“And if he does,” Yondu continued, “I swear I will hunt you down and kill you myself.”

“Is that a threat?” Martinex's eyes glittered as he stepped forwards. “Do I need to intervene, Stakar?”

“No, no.” Stakar put his hand on Martinex's shoulders. “Just let it go.”

“You took everything from me once,” Yondu raged, “I ain't lettin' it happen again. I'm gonna fuckin' fix this. I'm gonna keep them Terrans alive. This ain't over, not by a long shot. But you and I? We're finished, goddamn it.”

Stakar blinked, his expression completely stoic despite the whirlwind of emotions that tore him up inside.

“Go to hell,” Yondu snarled, then turned and left the waiting room, his coattails flying.

Stakar turned the loveseat back up proper and sunk into it with a great sigh. Martinex pushed back the curtains, watching Yondu walk by outside.

“With all due respect, captain,” Martinex said, “that went about as well as an A'askivaarian blowjob.”

“What?”

“Nothing but regret,” Martinex said, “and we're lucky we escaped with our dicks intact. I thought he was going to try something there for a moment.”

“So did I. Martinex, what have I done?” Stakar turned his head slightly. “I wanted him to come clean, not... not push me away again.”

“Captain, he has to go his own way.” Martinex watched the back of Yondu's coat until it disappeared. “He's too much like you.”

“You sound like Aleta,” Stakar sighed.

“Please, captain, that insult is a little too much.”

“Ha.” Stakar grinned, looking back down at the floor. “She was right. I should have just stayed out of it.”

“Maybe, maybe not, captain.” Martinex shrugged his glittering shoulders. “Yondu might still come around one day, make it back to the fold.”
“I wouldn’t if I were him. I wanted him to be a man, and I treated him like a child. If he really is trying to save those Terrans, Martinex, then he wants to do the right thing again.” Stakar made fists with both of his hands, shaking them at nothing. “And I come in and break everything down. Why couldn’t I just leave him alone?”

“Because you care too much,” Martinex answered.

Stakar sighed and put both of his hands over his face. Martinex patted his shoulder.

“Captain, all we can do is wait and see. We can’t change the past,” Martinex said, “we can only prepare for the future.”

“Alright, now you’re quoting Aleta.” Stakar stood and put his hands on his hips, glaring. “What, are you trying to make me call her back?”

“No, captain, I’m asking you what we’re going to do about this.” Martinex gestured to the broken-down door. “If he’s telling the truth, those Terrans are in danger.”

“No thanks to our intervention, hm?” Stakar sighed and left the waiting room. “We follow. We watch. Whatever happens will be whatever happens. We didn’t take those Terrans off Terra; he did.”

“And if they do die?”

Stakar remembered the blood-lust in Yondu’s eyes and swallowed.

“Then he’ll come at us with everything he’s got,” Stakar said, “and you had best be ready to handle it.”

“Me, captain?” Martinex frowned. “What about you?”

“Aleta and I can’t kill him,” Stakar said softly, “so you’ll have to do it.”

“Captain, he’s like my brother.” Martinex shifted. “I... I don’t know if I can.”

“Then we watch as closely as we can. If the Terrans die,” Stakar said, “we blow the Eclector. It’ll be easier to kill him if we...”

Stakar’s voice broke. Martinex sighed.

“If we can’t see his face,” Martinex finished.

“Exactly.” Stakar took a deep breath, regaining his composure. “Now. Enough talk. We have a job to do.”

The two Ravagers stepped over the broken front door and headed out into the darkness. Morose thoughts fluttered around their heads like invisible bats as the night swallowed them whole.
Chapter Summary

They should have listened to Dr. Mareet.

Kraglin woke up to small hands violently shaking him.

“Kraglin! Kraglin!” Peter's voice was choked with tears. “Kraglin, wake up! I'm scared!”

“Go back to bed, Pete.” Kraglin rolled over. “It's just a nightmare. Everybody gets 'em.”

“Kraglin, something's wrong with my mom! Something's really wrong!”

A cold bolt of fear snapped Kraglin's brain out of sleep. He shot out of his bedroll and snatched up his interface and omnitool.

“What happened,” he said as he slammed his fist onto the portal panel.

“I woke up from a nightmare and I was gonna ask her to sing for me but she's...” Peter shuddered. “She's all shaky!”

Kraglin remembered what Dr. Mareet had said about rejected cybernetics and bolted.

“What do I do,” Peter called from behind him.

“Find the cap'n,” Kraglin yelled.

Taking the stairs two at a time, he flew across the Eclector. When he threw open the portal door to Meredith's room, he saw what Peter had been talking about.

Meredith's eyes were white, rolled back in her head. Her body twitched in robotic, unnatural movements, and all of her muscles were taut. Kraglin's blood went cold. He gripped her shoulder and turned her on her side. The thin metal lines at the base of her neck were flickering with static. It was as Dr. Mareet had forewarned; the electrical current was doubling back. If it wasn't redirected to the implants properly, it would fail, and worse, Meredith's heart might not survive the shocks.

Kraglin wasn't a doctor. He wasn't a surgeon. But dammit, he knew something about machines. He slammed his fist into the portal panel; it popped open, revealing the wires. Kraglin ignored the slamming door as he yanked a wire out. Carefully, he fed the base of the wire onto the metal in Meredith's neck and stuffed the other end into the interface on his bracer.

Data started racing across the holographic screen; the current was overloading the pain inhibitor, causing Meredith's nerves to explode with agony. The limb actuator was malfunctioning, pulling all of her muscles taut. Kraglin started working, his fingers flying across the interface. He'd read a little bit about how the sync was supposed to work; a little would have to be enough. There was no time to go fetch Dr. Mareet. Kraglin had no guarantee that what he was about to do was going to work, but for Ms. Quill, he had to try. He was Kraglin Obfonteri; he could fix anything.
Yondu wasn't in his bed. Peter ran to the bridge and shook Gef awake.

“Gef, Gef!”


“Gef, where's Yondu? It's an emergency,” Peter cried.

Gef checked the cameras, blinking one eye at a time.

“Looks like he just came up the loading ramp.” Gef yawned. “Should be able to catch him by the cargo bay doors.”

Peter bolted off, leaving Gef to return to his on-the-job slumber. Peter raced down the stairs two at a time. He tripped on the last one and fell to the ground, but his adrenaline pushed him back up again, letting him tear across the Eclector in record time.

Yondu was pacing about the Eclector with his heart thumping in his ears. He hadn't killed Stakar. Considering how full of wrath he was at the moment, he felt that was a kind of personal accomplishment. So he'd destroyed some furniture, so what? He hadn't killed Stakar or Martinex, and that was the most he'd ever acted against his temper. Yondu didn't have the time to worry about Stakar right now. He'd made his position clear, and that was that; what mattered now was fixing this whole goddamn mess.

Out of nowhere, Peter Quill rammed into Yondu.

“The fuck?” Yondu stumbled back, then put his hands on Peter's shoulders. “What you runnin' for, boy?”

“Mom's hurt,” Peter said, “she's shaking all over and she won't stop!”

Ice water surged through all of Yondu's veins; his breath caught in his chest. He'd never taken her back to get the goddamn sync. Yondu put Peter under his arm like a rucksack and bolted across the Eclector.

“Where's Kraglin,” he said.

“He went to help mom.”

Peter was crying. Yondu's eyes flicked down to the terrified Terran's face.

“Don't worry.” Yondu was surprised at how relaxed his voice was. “Relax, boy, I’ve got you.”

Peter immediately stopped crying. Yondu flew down the stairs to the cargo bay. When Yondu and Peter made it down to Meredith's room, they found the portal firmly shut. Yondu set Peter down and tried the door panel.

“Power's off.” Yondu slammed the portal with his fists. “Goddammit.”

“Is she gonna be okay?” Peter looked at Yondu with desperation in his eyes.

Yondu couldn't answer. He pounded at the door with his fists, growling.

“Meredith! Meredith! Goddamn it, open up! Kraglin, get this goddamn door open.” Yondu pushed
on it with all his might. “Come on, you stupid sheet of fuckin' metal!”

Peter ran into it, slamming his round shoulder into the metal. “Open! Open! Open!”

“Gef!” Yondu pressed his finger to the comm unit. “Gef, dammit, you better not be asleep on the job!”

“What? Shit, no! No, captain!” Yondu could hear Gef scrambling around. “Not asleep, no sir.”

“Cargo door, bay 42-A.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Get it open now.”

Up in the bridge, Gef was flicking through holodisplays.

“Er, captain?” Gef winced. “Can't do it, captain.”

“What the fuck do you mean, you can't do it? Get this goddamn door open or I'll fracture your fuckin' femur!”

“The control wire's been disconnected, captain. You'll have to open it manually. Open the panel on your side, reach in, and disconnect the–”

Yondu punched his fist through the panel, grabbed a fistful of wires, and ripped them out. Peter's eyes shot wide.

“Holy shit,” he said.

“Watch your goddamned language,” Yondu snarled.

Slowly, the portal was opening. Peter dropped to the floor and tried crawling under it, but Yondu grabbed him and pulled him up.

“Somethin' goes wrong, that portal'll drop and smash you in half.” Yondu kept a firm grip on Peter's shirt. “Wait.”

“I can't wait, that's my mom,” Peter screamed.

“I know, goddamn it!” Yondu's face was purple. “Don't you think I wanna get in there, too?”

Peter's head whipped around.

“What,” he said.

*Shit.* Yondu quickly scowled.

“You think I want somebody dyin' on my damn ship? Whole Eclector would be up in a goddamned roar,” Yondu said, “and I'd have to handle it!”

Peter evaluated Yondu for a second or two longer, then looked back at the portal. Yondu exhaled; that was too goddamned close. With a painful clank, the door shot open. Peter and Yondu threw themselves into the room. Kraglin was performing some kind of tech wizardry; Meredith was shaking violently.

“Report, Kraglin.” Yondu pressed Meredith's wrists down to prevent her from hurting herself.

“I'm doing what I can cap'n.” Kraglin's eyes were flying across the holodisplay. “Synchronizin' the tech. Ain't much different than calibratin’ a weapons system. Almost there.”
Peter had started to cry. “Mom?”

“Got it. I've got it.” Kraglin stood, his eyes wide. “I've got it, cap'n!”

The static on Meredith's neck stopped. Her body relaxed; Yondu let go of her wrists.

“Implant's working normally, cap'n.” Kraglin scanned the readings. “She should wake up now.”

“Should?” Yondu put his ear to her mouth. “She ain't breathing.”

“What?” Peter's eyes were red. “Is she dead?”

Yondu and Kraglin didn't answer. All they could hear was their own breathing. Yondu's chest was heaving; his eyes were locked on Meredith's neck, waiting to see a pulse. His own heart was rapidly beating a tattoo against his chest. She couldn't die while still being pissed at him. It wasn't fair. She didn't deserve this. It was his fault. If he'd just told her everything, Stakar wouldn't have mattered. Meredith would have seen Dr. Mareet. Meredith couldn't die. It wasn't right.

“She...” Kraglin put his face in his hands. “God, I was too late.”

“Goddamn it!” Yondu roared and threw Peter aside.

Peter stumbled into Kraglin, who caught him. Yondu grabbed Meredith's chin, tilted it up, pinched her nose, and placed his mouth over hers. Peter's face twisted.

“Ew, that's my mom!” He tried to kick Yondu, but Kraglin held him back. “Get off my mom!”

Ignoring Peter, Yondu breathed into Meredith's mouth, then took his fists and compressed her chest by placing them on her sternum and pressing down in rapid succession.

“Start breathin' on your goddamn own, you lazy Terran bitch.” Sweat was beginning to bead on Yondu's forehead. “I ain't takin' care of your goddamn kid if you die.”

Meredith's mouth was still partially open from where Yondu had given her rescue breaths; the corners were turned slightly up, as if to say, \textit{Oh yes you would, you big blue asshole}. The imagined sass only drove Yondu to greater rage. He took a deep breath and exhaled into Meredith's mouth, keeping her nose pinched, then went back to compressions. He did this for one minute, then two. Peter's heartbeat was in his ears.

“No,” Kraglin whispered.

Peter's voice wavered. “Mom?”

Her body jolted. Yondu immediately leaned back as Meredith's chest expanded with a heavy breath. He pressed two thick blue fingers to her throat and felt a pulse. Her chest rose and fell on its own. Yondu staggered back, his chest expanding as he breathed a great sigh of relief.

“You did it, cap'n.” Kraglin's eyes were wide.

“Learned it from Mareet's stupid book on Terran care,” Yondu panted, “works on Xandarians, Terrans, Contraxians...”

“Centaurians?” A female voice croaked.

They all looked at Meredith. Her soft gray eyes blinked back at them.
“No,” Yondu said, “we got four lungs. You gotta compress the diaphragm.”

Peter ran forwards and took Meredith's hands; tears were streaking down his face.

“Mom!” Peter's voice was fluttery with panic. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“I don't know, baby.” Meredith's eyes flicked over to Kraglin. “I think he's the one to ask.”

“It happened just like Dr. Mareet said it might. The implants ended up runnin' a feedback loop and that turned your pain inhibitor into a pain-creator, and then your fast-twitch muscle implant, well hell,” Kraglin said, “that was just tryin' to paralyze you. Cerebral core was blitzin' out. Wasn't sure if your heart was gonna make it, Ms. Q.”

“I've been told I've got a big heart. You saved my life, Kraglin.” Meredith's eyes moved between Kraglin and Yondu. “You both did.”

Yondu's chest tightened painfully.

“Could you go five goddamn minutes without messin' somethin' up, Quill,” he mumbled.

Meredith sat up, rubbing her neck.

“Apparently not,” she chuckled.

“Are you gonna be okay, mom?” Peter's eyes were brimming with tears.

Meredith spread her arms wide, smiling. “All better.”

Peter tackled her with a hug; Meredith scooped him up and stood.

“Maybe you shouldn't be movin' around quite yet, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin frowned.

“You fixed the feedback loop, Kraglin.” Meredith stroked Peter's hair. “I'll be fine now, I can just tell.”

“Are you sure, Ms. Q?”

“Positive.”

Kraglin shifted, looking uncertain. Yondu cracked a crooked grin.

“Don't argue,” Yondu said, “it won't work anyway. Terrans ain't bothered by near-death incidents.”

“That's absolutely right.” Meredith looked at her destroyed door panel. “Kraglin, honey, could you fix that please?”

“On it, Ms. Q.”

Yondu watched Kraglin immediately begin fixing the panel. Since when did Kraglin start taking direct orders from Meredith? Yondu frowned. Who was he kidding; that had been happening all over the ship for four months now.

“Thanks, honey.” Meredith walked through the portal with Peter in her arms.

Yondu followed her. Meredith's hair bounced as she walked. Over her shoulder, Peter was smiling at Yondu.
“You did it,” he said.

Yondu's chest was in a vice. His face was uncomfortably warm. Dammit, Ravager captains didn't blush. They reddened. It was completely goddamn different.

Meredith took Peter into the quarters and laid him down. The rest of the Ravagers were still sleeping. Peter held onto her hand.

“So, you're all better now,” he said.

“That's right, baby.” She stroked his hair and kissed his forehead. “I'm not going anywhere. It's just you and me.”

Peter clung to her in a child's hug. She rubbed his back, smiling.

“That's my little Star-Lord.” Meredith's voice was soft. “My precious son.”

The boy buried his face in her curls. Yondu looked at the floor; he felt like an intruder.

“Yondu?”

Yondu's head snapped up, frowning. Peter had crawled out of bed. He ran forwards and hugged Yondu's legs.

“Thank you,” he said.

Yondu froze. Meredith stood, walked over, and picked Peter up. Peter grabbed Yondu's shoulder, refusing to be carried away. Meredith sighed. With her left arm holding Peter, she put her right around Yondu's waist. He went rigid, then wrapped his large blue arms around them both. He took a deep breath and caught the scent of Meredith's hair; soap and leather, clean and familiar. The scent filled all four of his lungs, warming his chest.

“Thank you, Yondu,” she muttered.

“A lot,” Peter added, “for everything.”

Yondu looked around at the sleeping Ravagers. If one of them woke up and saw this, he might as well blast his own face off. He swallowed, but kept his arms tight around them. Fuck it; this was probably the last time he'd ever get to do this. Peter looked up at them both.

“You're my favorite people,” he said.

Meredith and Yondu's hearts were simultaneously crushed by Peter's innocent green eyes and cherubic smile.

“Oh baby.” Meredith kissed his forehead. “Let's get you to bed, honey.”

Meredith carried Peter off. She laid her son back in his bed and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

“Goodnight, Star-Lord.”

“Goodnight mom.” Peter turned over and closed his eyes.

Meredith stood back up and went out the portal door. Yondu followed her halfway down the hall.

“Hey.” Yondu reached out and took her hand. “Mery.”
It was the most gentle she'd ever felt him, and the surprise was evident on her face.

“You alright,” he grunted.

“I'm fine.” She gave him a slight smile. “Really.”

“You sure,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Damn sure?”

Meredith grinned. “Yes, Yondu, I am damn sure.”

Yondu let go of her hand; she walked down the hall. As she made it to the turn, she heard Yondu's footsteps behind her.

“Mery.” His voice was strained. “About Ego.”

Meredith blinked. Nearly dying had made her forget her mind-numbing anger at Yondu. Now that he brought it up, she could feel it bubbling to the surface.

“About Jason,” she corrected.

“Jason, Ego, whatever.” Yondu scowled. “Look, there's somethin' you gotta trust me on, alright? I'm a bad man who's done a lot of shit things, I know, but just trust me on this one goddamn thing.”

“What?”

“Ego is the worst goddamn person I've ever met,” Yondu said, “and that's sayin' a hell of a lot.”

Meredith sighed. “Yondu, even if that were true, that doesn't excuse what you did.”

“I know, dammit.” Yondu's voice went low. “But he ain't right. He ain't no good father, that's for damn sure, and you don't want him around your boy.”

“Isn't that Peter's decision to make?” Meredith crossed her arms.

“You ain't listening,” Yondu said, “Ego's a goddamn jackass.”

Meredith pursed her lips. “Let me make my own opinion out of it, okay?”


“I am listening!” Meredith gestured. “You're telling me Jason, my boyfriend from eight years ago whom I loved, he's a jackass. That's what you're saying.”

“Yes!”

“Oh I hear what you're saying,” she said, “and I'm willing to believe you. Just let me go see for myself that you're right.”

“Dammit, Quill! You got rocks in your ears, woman?”

“Take me to Ego's planet and I'll see if you're right.” Meredith's gray eyes shone with a glimmer of silver. “If you're wrong, Peter gets his dad and I get my lover. If you're right, we'll just kill him.”
There was something about this bull-headed Terran that made Yondu want to shake some sense into her. Violently, preferably on a bed, without clothes, and with music. He stood in front of her, his heavy breathing echoing through the halls. Her blonde curls were hanging just in front of her clear gray eyes. His chest tightened painfully.

“Is it that damn important to you,” he said.

Meredith's eyes softened.

“Yes,” she said, “it's very important to me.”

Yondu fought the tumult of emotions that was clawing at his chest. He couldn't let the boy get hurt, but he had to trust Meredith to protect Peter. She was the boy's mother, and she was a damn good one. Peter was her boy first, and a Ravager second. Yondu could see it in her silver eyes; this was the only way she'd forgive him. This was his second chance. It broke every sworn oath Yondu had ever made that Ego wouldn't get the Quills, but it was his only chance at keeping them.

“Fine.” Yondu's shoulders sagged, defeated. “You'll see your goddamn Jason.”

Meredith's face lit up; her excitement stabbed into Yondu's heart like an ice pick.

“Thank you. I know you don't want me to go, and I don't actually understand why, but...” Meredith took a deep breath. “I'm willing to listen.”

Yondu tried, but the words caught in his throat. There were just too many of them. The story of Ego and the kids and the trafficking and the slow, creeping feeling that Yondu was being used and the cavern of skulls...

The skulls.

“I'll show you,” he heard himself say, “when we get there. I'll show you why I know he's the galaxy's biggest piece-of-shit.”

“Okay.” Meredith nodded. “I can handle that.”

No you can't, Yondu said, it'll break your heart. Yondu still had nightmares about those children’s skulls, grinning up at him in death. But that wasn't important right now; what was important was that she'd finally agreed to listen to him. Yondu put his hands on his hips and shifted nervously.

“So you ain't pissed-off at me no more, Mery?”

“I forgive you,” she clarified, “but don't ever use me or Peter for money ever again.”

“Cross my heart,” Yondu replied.

Meredith smiled and made for the door.

“Glad you ain't dead,” he called after her.

Meredith stopped, turned around, and hugged him tightly. She was slender and soft against him. Yondu's face heated up. Goddamn it, Ravager captains didn't blush.

“Glad we're friends again,” she replied, “and thanks for caring about us so much.”

Yondu's muscled arms wrapped her up in his vice-like grip, growling in her ear.

“Don't push it, Star-Queen.”
She pulled back. “What did you call me?”

“Star-Queen,” Yondu said.

Meredith’s cheeks turned pink. “That’s what I thought you said.”

“What, ain’t Star-Lord’s momma got a code name too?”

“Didn’t he tell you? It’s not a code name, it’s an outlaw name now.” Meredith grinned. “And no, I never had one.”

“Fuck it, then.” Yondu kept his arms tight around her waist. “You’re Star-Queen.”

“My own outlaw name,” Meredith joked.

“Could be.” Yondu's crimson eyes were locked on hers. “We’d get you a ship, get a patch on that damn leather jacket of yours. Make you a real Ravager.”

Her mouth curved up in a soft smile; Yondu's chest clenched.

“I'm not a Ravager,” she said.

Right, Yondu thought, and that hard-on is just an omnitool I got in my pockets. What was it about this goddamn stubborn woman? Her face and body had filled out, but she was still thin and gangly. She’d just survived another near-death experience for crying out loud. Nothing about Meredith Quill was sexy, so what was it that was driving him wild? If she wasn't Meredith Quill, and he wasn't Yondu Udonta, he'd take her down in the goddamn hallway right then and there. But this was Meredith Quill, and he was Yondu Udonta, so that wasn't even close to being an option.

“Go on.” He let go of her abruptly. “Get to sleep, and for the boy's sake, try to stay alive this time.”

Meredith smiled. “I'll do my best.”

With that, she turned the corner and was gone. Yondu went back to the quarters. He stepped over the limbs of the sleeping Ravagers and climbed into bed. He scowled at the ceiling.

Ego. What the fuck was so special about Ego? The guy was a goddamn jackass. Part of Yondu wanted to tell Meredith the truth about him. Ego was a child-killing piece-of-shit, that's what he was. But the other, smarter part of him reminded him how Ego had gotten those kids. If Yondu was going to tell Meredith the truth about Ego, he'd have to reveal the truth about his own little role in that. Yondu punched his pillow into a better shape and turned over. Ego had killed those kids, but Yondu was the one who'd delivered them to their deaths. Meredith wouldn't want to be around Ego or Yondu. She'd nearly left just because he'd kept her from Ego; if she found out he'd trafficked kids, too, he'd never see her or the boy again.

And then he'd have to tell them about the exile. Yondu's heart sank. If the boy found out Yondu wasn't technically a Ravager anymore, it'd break his little Terran heart. Yondu pressed his face into the cool cloth of the pillow and cursed. Not for the first time, Yondu wished anyone other than himself could have picked up Meredith and Peter. They deserved better. Yondu was a piece-of-shit, he knew that, but being around the Quills reminded him just how much of a gaping asshole he really was. It was always like this; being around a decent person made the hole inside his heart feel so much darker. His chest was tight with pain. What happened to the ruthless Ravager captain he'd been four months ago? Four months ago he could have dumped Peter and Meredith off like twin sacks of garbage and flown off without a single fuck given. Now, he could barely think of them leaving without wanting to cut off Ego's head and piss down his throat.
Yondu took a deep breath. It wasn't his decision to make. Peter belonged to Meredith first and the Ravagers second. No one was taking that boy away from that woman, and no one on the Eclector was fool enough to try. She was a bossy, stubborn, over-protective lunatic, but she was a hell of a good mother. He almost believed that Meredith could handle Ego, but he knew better. She didn't stand a chance without Yondu and Kraglin there to watch her back.

If she knew the truth, would she want him watching her back? A thread of doubt cut through him and sawed at his heart. She still trusted Kraglin, but Yondu... Even Yondu didn't trust himself anymore. The boy, though, the boy trusted Yondu with every fiber of his little Terran body. The thought made Yondu want to blast his own face off. He damned himself for a fool, but he couldn't let that boy down.

So, he'd keep an eye on the Quills as long as he could. He'd show Meredith the caverns and the skulls, show her exactly what kind of jackass she'd lain with. Yondu bared his teeth at the blackness. Yondu hadn't done right by the Quills, but Ego...he was a monster. Yondu just had to prove that to Meredith without Ego getting wise. Yondu turned over on his side and exhaled. Ego, Yondu, Peter and Meredith all on the same planet; it was a recipe for disaster, and Ego was the goddamn cook.
Arrival

Chapter Summary

The Quills make it to Ego, and everyone's angling for something. Yondu's rage at Ego screws up his perfect plan. Kraglin finds evidence of tampering on the ship. Meredith is caught between being in bliss and in anger, and Peter's eight-year-old mind has already figured out that something isn't right here.

There was silence on the bridge. Gef stayed busy with the comm lines, but they were all completely silent. Yondu flew the ship; Peter sat in his lap and watched. Any other time, Yondu would have thrown him off and bellowed at him, but today was different. Yondu wanted that boy in his sights at all times; he knew what Ego might try to do. His scarlet eyes glanced at Meredith. She was standing at the very front of the ship, watching the stars fly by as they coursed through hyperspace. Yondu could see the back of her. Her red leather pants clung to every curve. The back of her black leather jacket was cracked and dusty, and blonde curls were dusting the base of her neck. Yondu swallowed. He knew he should tell her what Ego might try to do to Peter, but he had no proof. She'd never believe him. She'd stop listening again, and if she did that, the Quills were doomed. He'd have to show her.

“Yondu?” Peter looked up. “Where are we going again?”

“Ego,” Yondu replied.

Ego. The name swung in the air like a lead pendulum, counting the seconds the Quills had left before Ego took them. It hung from their hearts, dragging them down. The Eclector jumped out of hyperspace. Looming in front of it was a huge, multi-colored planet.

“There it is,” Kraglin said softly.

Yondu's countenance darkened; he let go of the steering mechanism and took Peter off his lap. Yondu made for the bridge exit.

“Take us down, Kraglin,” he said.

The portal shut behind him. Meredith and Kraglin exchanged a look.

“He's fine,” Kraglin assured her.

Meredith shifted from foot to foot, then went back to watching the planet. Kraglin took a deep breath. Damn, he hoped they were doing the right thing. If they took the Quills in like nothing was wrong, Ego wouldn't be suspicious. They'd play for time; Ego was expecting the Ravagers to be greedy and heartless, so that's what they'd pretend to be. Yondu could show Meredith what she needed to see, and then they'd high-tail it out of there. Kraglin swallowed, glancing at Meredith. Hopefully Ms. Quill would be so worried about protecting Peter that she wouldn't want to kill Ego. Kraglin wasn't even sure Celestials could die. He took another deep breath and steered the ship into the atmosphere, watching the fire burn against the hull as he took the Eclector in. When they broke through the atmosphere, Meredith and Peter gasped.
“It's beautiful,” Meredith said.

“Look at the bubbles!” Peter pressed his nose against the glass. “Look at that weird building.”

“There's so many colors,” Meredith laughed, “and grass! How long has it been since I've seen grass!”

“Mom, look, it's you!” Peter pointed.

“What?”

“Look!”

True enough, there was a twelve-foot-tall statue of Meredith Quill visible from the Eclector. Meredith's eyes widened; her statue was wearing her favorite blue jean dress and strappy heels.

“Oh my God,” she said, “Jason really is here.”

“That's you?” Kraglin squinted. “Always kinda wondered who the hell that was supposed to be.”

“Always wondered'?” Meredith frowned. “Kraglin, what are you talking about?”

Kraglin's words caught in his throat. Shit.

“We had to come here to get the job o' picking you up, didn't we?” Gef covered quickly. “And we saw that statue last time.”

“Oh.” Meredith watched her twelve-foot-replica pass by. “It's a nice likeness.”

Peter nodded; the rest of the Ravagers exchanged dismal looks. They hadn't even landed and already Ego was working his charm on Quill. There was no way this was going to go well. Kraglin sighed and landed the Eclector on their usual spot. He dropped the loading ramp and gave Meredith a broken, weak grin.

“Ego,” he said, “just like the cap'n promised.”

Meredith's eyes sparked. She took Peter's hand and left the bridge. Finally, she was going to see her man again. Peter hurried to keep up with her quick pace; he'd never seen her so excited. As she pulled them around a corner, Peter saw a shadow leaning against the wall; he caught a glimpse of Yondu leaning against the wall, his head down and his expression unreadable. Peter opened his mouth to ask him what was wrong, but his mother pulled him along down the stairs and to the loading ramp. They stepped down onto the brightly colored planet. Peter peered around.

“Stay here, honey.” Meredith pressed a kiss to his forehead. “I'm going to go look for your father.”

“Shouldn't someone go with you,” Peter asked.

Meredith chuckled and stroked his hair.

“Your momma can take care of herself,” she said.

Peter watched Meredith stroll away through the grass, headed towards one of the main buildings. Peter sat down on the grass and frowned. He had a real bad feeling about all of this. If this guy loved his mom so much, if he was so great and good and wonderful, why had he left in the first place? And why hadn't he come back to help Peter's mom when she was sick? Peter wanted proof that this Jason guy loved his mom; otherwise, he was just a big pile of lies. Yondu had lied, yeah, but Yondu had
also saved Peter and Meredith's lives. Kraglin was a big dork, but he'd given Peter's mom the money for her surgery. Peter trusted the Ravagers; he wasn't so sure about this Jason guy.

Yondu and Kraglin were pacing down the loading ramp. Yondu was fiddling with a blaster.

“Are we practicing shooting,” Peter asked.

“Maybe later. For now, keep this close.” Yondu handed the blaster to Peter. “Don't be afraid to pull that trigger, boy.”

Peter took the blaster without hesitation. If Yondu thought he'd need it, then Peter would keep it.

“So my dad's on this planet,” Peter said.

“Your dad is the planet,” a slightly familiar voice chuckled.

Peter turned around. Strolling from the trees was a tall man. He had the same chestnut brown hair as Peter, and a big smile.

“Hello Peter,” he said, “I'm your father.”

“Ego,” Yondu said through gritted teeth.

“Udonta,” Ego said in a clipped tone, “about time you showed up.”

Peter squinted. Something about Ego's voice was awful familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

“Mom,” he called out, “I found him!”

“Yes, I'm sure your mother would be very proud of you for making it all this way.” Ego smiled sadly. “She was the most amazing woman I'd ever met, Peter. I loved her very much.”

Peter blinked.

“Mom,” he yelled again, “he thinks you're dead! Are we sure this is the right guy?”

“What?” Meredith came stomping up the hill. “Honey, what are you yelling about now?”

Peter pointed at Ego. Ego's eyes widened, his jaw dropping.

“Meredith,” he sputtered.

“Jason?” Meredith stopped in her tracks. “Jason, is that you?”

“Meredith.” Ego put both hands in his hair, his eyes as wide as they'd go. “Holy shit, Meredith!”

“Jason!”

Meredith broke into a dead sprint and slammed into Ego, hugging him with all her might. Ego got a faceful of golden curls; he staggered back in shock.

“No, no no no.” Ego pulled back and held her face in his hands. “It can't be you. It can't be.”

“It's me, Jason.” Meredith giggled. “Just a little more full of metal.”

“Metal?” Ego blinked.
“Cybernetic enhancements. Do you remember when you came to see me when Peter was young? After you left, I got diagnosed with a very aggressive kind of cancer,” Meredith explained, “and it... well, it did kill me, really. But now I'm cured.”

“You died?” Ego looked her up and down. “You did die, didn't you?”

“Yes, and then,” she continued, “I could feel myself going, but something was pinning me down, like a javelin through the heart. Pinning me down to the ground, not letting me leave. It's happened a lot, actually, but hey, I'm still here!”

“You died multiple times,” Ego said.

“Yeah.” Meredith nodded. “Like, a lot.”

Ego squinted, looking back and forth between her eyes.

“You died,” he said.

“Yes, Jason,” she said slowly, “and I'm still here. I'm... I don't know, really lucky I guess.”

“You can't die? You... the light... I...” There were tears in Ego's eyes. “It would be impossible.”

“Nothing's impossible, Jason.” Meredith kissed him softly. “I'm back.”

Ego kissed her back hard, wrapping his arms around her tightly. Meredith folded her hands behind his neck. Eight years, she thought, and he still loves me. The thought made her kiss him all the much more.

Kraglin coughed and put his hands over Peter's eyes. Peter took off Kraglin's hands and gave him a withering look.

“They're my parents, Kraglin,” he said, “it's not weird.”

“Kraglin.” Yondu was already heading back to the ship. “Let's go.”

Kraglin looked at Yondu's retreating back. “Cap'n?”

“You're leaving?” Meredith had heard and detached herself from Ego.

Yondu whirled around so fast that the tails of his coat flew wide.

“Why the fuck would you care,” he snarled.

Meredith's taken-aback expression faltered for a second.

“I just...” She swallowed. “Peter?”

Peter stomped his foot. “I don't want you to go, you're cool!”

Kraglin's facial expression was so pleading that Yondu couldn't even look at him.

“Fine,” he spat, “we'll stay until we get paid.”

The way Peter's face lit up was painful. Yondu turned away, his chest tight as a vice. He stalked right back up the loading ramp, the tails of his coat fluttering in the breeze. Kraglin looked at Meredith and her anxious expression.
“He's fine,” Kraglin said.

Meredith smiled in a way that told him she knew he was lying, but Peter was looking at her and she had to do something. Kraglin went up the ramp after Yondu.

“Of course he is,” Ego chuckled, “he just made five-hundred-thousand units. I should throw in five-hundred-thousand more for bringing you along, Meredith.”

Meredith reached up and stroked his hair. “You're exactly the way I remembered you.”

Peter crossed his arms and gave Ego a very serious look.

“So you're my dad,” he said.

“Yes, Peter. I'm your father.” Ego gave him a winning grin. “Couldn't you tell from the rugged good looks?”

“Yondu said I look like my mom,” Peter said.

“You do,” Ego agreed, “same cute little face.”

Peter made a face.

“He doesn't like being called cute,” Meredith whispered.

“Oh.” Ego blinked.

Peter huffed. He had known his dad for all of five minutes, and already he preferred Yondu. Meredith could tell; she frowned. This family reunion was going to be a lot harder than she thought.

Yondu kicked a chair; it soared clean across the bridge and hit the ground with a painful shriek. He grabbed a drawer and tore it out of Gef's desk. Trash, pens, and assorted tech went skidding across the floor. Over the sounds of his destruction he heard an annoying beep.

“What the fuck is that noise?” He rounded on Kraglin.

“Indicator,” Kraglin said immediately, “says a regulator panel's been disconnected from the stabilizers.”

“Then go check it you fuck-forsaken idjit!” Frothy spit came from Yondu's mouth. “Why the fuck do I have to do everything around here?”

Kraglin left immediately. The cap'n never meant what he said when he was in those dark moods, Kraglin knew that. He just had to let it wash over him and wait until the cap'n felt better. Then, they could go get the Quills and Ms. Quill would learn the truth and everything would be fine. Until then, he'd just fix the regulator panel and hope the cap'n calmed himself down. Ego always made him angry, Kraglin thought, although never this angry before. Kraglin went down to the stabilizer access station and opened the door.

Kraglin blinked. The regulator panel was lying on the ground, ripped off its mount. Gef, Holdon, Lunis, Drazkar, and about fifteen other Ravagers were standing around the hole behind the panel. They were taking live Orloni and throwing them into the stabilizers.

“What the hell are you doing?” Kraglin's voice shot shrill.
They all looked up. Kraglin looked between their faces with incredulity. Drazkar coughed and dropped another Orloni into the stabilizers.

“Hello, Kraglin,” Gef said.

“What,” Kraglin repeated, “the hell are you doing?”

“Puttin' Orloni in the stabilizers,” one of them piped up.

The others quickly beat him into silence. Kraglin stared. Gef shifted his rather portly weight. Drazkar grabbed another two Orloni and threw them in.

“Dammit, knock that off!” Kraglin picked up the regulator panel and slammed it back on the stabilizer. “What the hell are you doing?”

“We told you,” Holdon said, “we're putting Orloni in the stabilizers.”

Kraglin put his hand on his forehead; a mannerism he'd picked up from Meredith.

“Why are you puttin' Orloni in the stabilizers,” he asked.

“So the Orloni will chew the cords!” Drazkar was beaming. “Then we will be stranded on Ego's planet.”

“And why,” Kraglin said, “is that a good thing?”

“Me and the mates, we figure it'll take two, maybe three days for Meredith and Peter to realize Ego's a jackass.” Gef shrugged. “This saves us the cost o' fuel, y'know. Turning around to come get them could get pricey.”

“And if she don't want to come back with us?” Kraglin raised his eyebrows.

The Ravagers laughed and punched each other lightheartedly.

“Of course she'll want to come back,” Gef snorted, “she's one o' the crew.”

Kraglin sighed. “Boys, she ain't a Ravager.”

“No, but she's still part of the crew.” Gef screwed up his face in concentration. “She's like the...”

“Like the engine!”

“Like the captain's chair?”

“She's the mascot!”

“No, she's the cook!”

“Mother o' the ship,” Gef finished. “Yeah, that's what she is. Mother o' the ship.”

“Like a momma Ravager,” Lunis said.

There was a collective grunt of affirmation. There was no better way to describe what Meredith had become for all of them. Kraglin sighed and put his hands on his hips. He looked from the stabilizers to the crooked regulator panel, and then to the two biting, snarling Orloni that Drazkar was still carrying.
“Cap’n Yondu ain't gonna like this,” he said.

Gef winked. “Cap’n Yondu don't gotta know.”

“Hold on, that ain't right.” Kraglin put his hands on his hips, frowning. “You can't do things to his ship without askin’, and you sure as hell can't expect Ms. Quill to just hop back on here. Y'all are bein' selfish. I say again, what if she really don't want to come?”

“We kidnap her again!” Drazkar grinned, showing all of his fangs.

“No!” Kraglin's eyes flashed. “Dammit, y'all listen! You ain't gonna do things without the cap'n's permission, you ain't gonna kidnap Ms. Quill, and you sure as hell ain't gonna argue with me! Now get your asses back to work before I string you up by your innards!”

Kraglin's bark made the Ravagers cringe. Under his watchful and vehement gaze, they shuffled off to their duties.

“Drazkar,” he snapped.

The big furry Ravager paused. “Aye, first m-er, I mean, Kraglin.”

Kraglin looked around at the empty room. He reached over and shoved the regulator panel to the side, then jerked his head towards the open hole.

Drazkar grinned. He stuffed the two screaming Orloni into the hole, then gave Kraglin a Ravager salute.

“Glad to have you at the side of the helm, Krags.”

Kraglin gave him a wry smile. “Get back to work, idjit.”

Drazkar walked away grinning. Kraglin took an omnitool out of his pocket and fixed the regulator panel, adhering it firmly to the mount. He allowed himself a grin while he worked.

Kraglin Obfonteri, first mate.

Yondu slammed his fist on the wall. He could hear Ravagers scurrying away from him, but Yondu didn't care. He wanted to throw something. Break something. Hurt someone. Preferably all three. The rest of the Ravagers knew when their captain was in a black mood and wisely avoided him. So Yondu was alone on the bridge, and he was wrecking it. He was a natural disaster, destroying every piece of furniture or unfortunate object that got within his radius of destruction.

Finally he gripped the banister with both hands, eyes wide and breathing heavy. He hadn't been this angry since he was exiled. Every time he thought he'd calmed down, that image of Ego's smug smile would appear, and the rage would begin anew. It didn't help that he'd tried to walk away. Goddamn it, he was such a fuck-up! He was here to keep a goddamn eye on them; why the fuck had he suddenly needed to be as fucking far away from them as possible? The image of Meredith and Ego sucking face in front of Peter flashed in his memory, and his knuckles went white. Yondu could have crushed Ego's skull with his bare hands. He'd never been so angry, so hateful, so goddamn...

A queasy feeling rose in his stomach. Dammit, he wasn't jealous. The thought was ridiculous. Meredith Quill was just another woman, another five-minute distraction. If he did want her, which he kept telling himself he didn't, it was only because she was off-limits. She was the one woman he
couldn't get, that was it. Nothing else. If he had her, he'd get bored and drop her just like everyone else. She was no different.

His chest was crushed; he pressed his forehead against the banister.

“She ain't different,” he said hoarsely, “she ain't. She ain't different.”

Damn, he even lied to himself now. The cold metal banister burned against his forehead. She had those big doe eyes when she looked at Ego; so trusting, so completely adoring. The rage fired through Yondu again, and he gripped the banister. Roaring, he tore upwards. His muscles strained, but finally the rivets that held the banister to the ground popped free. Yondu threw the entire section of steel banister through the air. He watched it clang onto the floor, busting holes into the tile as it fell. Yondu turned around and grabbed Gef's desk.

“Captain, no!” Gef came running in. “By the stars, captain, what did my desk ever do to you?”

Yondu glared at him with manic, crimson eyes.

“What the fuck are you doing here,” he snarled.

“My job, captain.” Gef picked his chair off the ground and sat behind his desk. “If you'll avoid throwin' it across the room, that is.”

“I'm pissed,” Yondu said.

“I can tell that, captain.” Gef kept his voice calm and unassuming. “But what's destroying the bridge going to do about it? Waste o' time if you ask me.”

Yondu breathed heavy, his eyes flicking between Gef's.

“If I were you, which I'm not, but if I were,” Gef said, “and if I were, let's say, going to lose some people I'd grown rather used to, I think I'd spend my last evening with them with them instead of destroying a man's perfectly innocent desk.”

Yondu bared his teeth and opened his mouth to rip into Gef, but Gef met his eyes.

“Captain,” Gef said calmly, “hurting me won't make you feel any better. Only one thing will. The rest of us can't do it, captain, but you can.”

Yondu's brows knit together.

“The fuck are you saying,” he asked.

“Captain, the Quills are Ravagers. We take care o' our own.” Gef put on his headset. “We want our goddamn Terrans back, but we can't deal with Ego. These are a captain's decisions, a captain's problems. If you don't bring them back, no one can.”

“The crew wants the Quills,” Yondu realized, “and so they sent you to talk to me about it.”

“Bloody cowards won't even come on the bridge.” Gef sighed. “Just go and tell Ego that you want the Quills to stay on the ship until you get paid. Good enough o' an excuse, isn't it?”

Yondu turned that idea over in his mind. He could keep the Quills safe one more night. Meredith would still have to see the caverns, but Yondu had to wait until Ego's guard was down. The entire planet was Ego; sneaking into the cavern would be difficult.
“Good enough,” he said gruffly, “for one night, at least.”

“Get her in bed, captain, and one night might be all it takes.” Gef chuckled. “The boys and I were laughing about that earlier, in fact.”

Yondu's blood rushed in his ears.

“What,” he snarled.

“Just the idea o' you and Quill shagging it on Ego's planet. Can you imagine his face,” Gef laughed, “can you? Ach, that'd be something to see.”

Ego's expression of fury, incredulity, and complete repulsion appeared in Yondu's mind. He couldn't help it; he laughed.

“You're nuts, Gef, but that ain't happenin'. Don't even joke about it or you'll piss Quill off.” Yondu went to the bridge door and hit the panel. “Get someone in there to fix that goddamn banister. Then I want Lunis in the kitchen; tell him to roast a laukha. Tell the boys to piss out the windows if they goddamn feel like it. We're trashin' this goddamn planet.”

Gef laughed. The portal shut behind Yondu. Gef opened his secret drawer and pulled out the datapad. He edited the odds.

“He said it wasn't happening,” Gef muttered, “but he didn't say it wouldn't ever happen.”

Closing the datapad, he leaned back in his chair, a smile spreading across his face. Gef, like all Ravagers, courted death with a grin.

Ego showed Meredith and Peter their rooms. The décor was unlike anything Meredith had ever seen. She stroked the soft bedspread and the window frame with her fingertips, her gray eyes wide.

“It's so open,” she said, “what do you do when it rains?”

Ego chuckled.

“It doesn't rain unless I tell it to,” he said.

“Right.” Meredith flushed. “I forget that you're... the whole planet.”

“It's a lot to take in, isn't it?” Ego sighed. “I'm so sorry, Meredith, I never meant for you to have to handle all of this. It's so much.”

“I'll handle it.” Meredith winked. “I'm tough.”

“I know you are,” Ego chuckled, “you're the most resilient woman in the galaxy.”

Meredith blushed. She looked towards the drawers, then frowned. Ego's eyes flicked between the drawers and her face.

“What is it,” he asked.

“Just thinking about all my clothes on the Eclector.” Meredith shrugged. “I'll have to go get them if I'm staying the night here.”
Ego chuckled and pointed to the drawers.

“Why don't you check first,” he said.

Meredith rolled her eyes with a smile and pulled open the drawer. Her breath caught in her throat; the drawers were filled with the same soft, clean clothes that she'd worn on Terra. She closed the drawer, blinked a few times, then opened it again.

“My clothes,” she breathed.

“I hope they were made accurately.” Ego stepped forwards. “I remember everything you like to wear; you looked amazing in everything.”

Heat rose to Meredith's cheeks.

“Don't you start flirting with me,” she warned, “it won't work.”

“It won't?” Ego grinned. “Are you completely sure about that, River-Lily?”

“Oh hush.” Meredith's cheeks went scarlet. “You were always thick on the flattery, Jason.”

“It's not flattery if it's true,” Ego said, “and you do look amazing in everything.”

Meredith tucked her curls behind her ear, her face red-hot. Peter leaned into the room.

“Mom,” he said, “there's stuff in the drawers already. That's super weird, mom.”

“Oh no, honey, your father did that.” Meredith smiled. “It's okay.”

Peter's eyes flicked between Ego and Meredith.

“Mom,” Peter repeated, “it's weird.”

“Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, honey.” Meredith crossed over and kissed Peter's forehead. “Be thankful you don't have to wear those old Ravager clothes.”

“Those clothes were gifts.” Peter frowned. “They gave us clothes when we didn't have anything.”

“And then they stole your money so you couldn't afford more,” Ego added.

Peter's eyes snapped to Ego, and his little eyebrows contracted.

“Mom,” he said, “I'm gonna go talk to Yondu.”

Ego frowned.

“Okay honey, be safe.” Meredith pressed a kiss to Peter's forehead. “Come find me if he starts flying away, and don't you dare let him do anything silly. Make sure he and Kraglin are doing well, won't you honey?”

“Yes, mom.” Peter kissed her cheek. “I'll tell them you were worried.”

With a slight glare at Ego, Peter left.

“He's still getting used to all this.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “He really likes the Ravagers. They're space pirates; he thinks its cool.”
“Cool to be a criminal?” Ego raised an eyebrow. “They've had quite the influence.”

“Yes,” she said, “both good and bad.”

Ego made a hm noise in his throat. Meredith shrugged.

“Well,” Ego said slowly, “what shall we do while our son's out of the room?”

“Show me your planet!” Meredith's eyes lit up. “I want to see everything.”

“Everything, hm?” Ego held out his arm; his eyes sparkled. “I can think of a few things I know you'll like.”

“You're planning something,” Meredith said as she took his arm, “I can tell.”


Meredith laughed. They walked out of the building arm-in-arm. Meredith could see Peter going up the ramp of the Eclector. She sighed; all this beautiful planet to explore, and he wanted to be on that rusty flying garbage heap. Ego led her away from the building and down a path lined with glimmering, twisting gold arches. The path itself was set with vividly colored tiles that formed beautiful geometric patterns.

“You designed this? It's breathtaking,” she said.

“I knew you'd like it. Beauty appreciates beauty, after all.”

“Oh, don't you start.” Meredith laughed. “I've been run through the wringer; I know what I look like, and it's not the pretty blonde you met all those years ago.”

“You have changed,” Ego allowed, “but you are still the most beautiful creature I've ever beheld.”

Meredith's face flushed. Ego walked her under another series of twisting arches and out onto a green field. Meredith's eyes traced the horizon line.

“I missed grass,” she admitted.

Ego let go of her arm.

“Go say hello then,” he said.

Meredith's eyes sparkled. She kicked off her shoes and bolted. The cool grass brushed cold kisses on her legs as her feet hit the ground hard, her breathing heavy. A laugh built in her chest, bursting out of her. The wind in her hair, the grass on her feet; she was twelve years old on Earth again, running down the hill in her backyard. Joy overtook her; tears streaked down her cheeks as she laughed. Meredith spiraled around and fell to the ground, staring up at the sky. The grass was like a pillow under her; she saw the strands wave gently in the wind. Meredith closed her eyes and felt the warmth of the sun on her skin.

“Meredith?”

Meredith opened her eyes, smiling. Ego stood over her.

“I forgot how pure it is.” He blinked tears out of his eyes. “Your happiness. How...beautiful. Even the tiniest things make you light up. You see the best in everything.”
“Get down here,” she said softly.

Ego laid down with her, closing his eyes. She took his hand.

“How're you feeling,” she asked.

“I forgot so much. You being here... it brings it back.” Ego frowned. “It's like I could be happy here, like this, and nothing else would matter.”

“That's how it's supposed to feel,” she said.

“Is it?” Ego sighed and opened his eyes. “How are you feeling, Meredith?”

“Confused, but... I'm dealing with it.” Meredith chuckled. “I've gotten used to the unexpected.”

“That's good,” he said.

“Is it,” Meredith said softly.

Ego reached out and touched her jaw.

“You've changed,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, “but some things are still the same.”

“Oh really?” Ego sat up, chuckling. “I bet I can guess one thing that hasn't changed.”

Meredith propped herself up on her arms, her grinning face framed by golden curls.

“Give it your best shot,” she said.

Ego stood up and offered a hand. Meredith's slender hand slipped in his. He pulled her up and spun her in the air, grinning, then sat her down. He put one hand behind his back, then pulled from behind him a beautiful white lily.

“Oh!” Her gray eyes widened. “Oh, it's beautiful.”

Meredith took it in her hands and breathed in the sweet scent.

“Close your eyes,” he said, “and throw it over your shoulder.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Go on,” he chuckled.

Meredith closed her eyes, took a breath of the sweet flower, and threw it over her shoulder. The scent of the lily didn't go away.

“Open them,” Ego said softly.

Her gray eyes snapped open and immediately widened. Meredith and Ego were standing in a field of snow-white river lilies. No matter where Meredith turned, she couldn't see an end to them.

“Wow,” she breathed.

“Like it?” Ego chuckled and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Lilies are still your favorite. That hasn't changed.”
Meredith looked at the field with wonder and joy. Ego held her tight, burying his face in her curls.

“And River-Lily is still my favorite,” he said.

Heat flushed across Meredith’s cheeks. She wrapped her arms around his, leaning into his hold. She met his eyes, and they looked at each other for a long moment. Then, his face twitched. Meredith frowned and cupped his face with her hands.

“What is it,” she asked.

“I am the entire planet. I can feel when things aren’t right, and right now,” Ego said coolly, “those son-of-a-bitches are pissing on me.”

“What?” Meredith couldn’t help but laugh. “Who?”

“Ravagers.”

“Oh no,” Meredith put her hands over her mouth. “They're still mad at me for leaving.”

Ego scowled.

“What do a bunch of dirty space pirates want with my girl,” he asked.

“Oh, I cook, I clean.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “I guess they've gotten used to me.”

“Used to you.” Ego's voice became cool. “They think they own you. You're not cargo anymore, you're my girl.”

“Technically, until you pay them, we're cargo.” Meredith winked. “That's what Yondu will say.”

“Fine,” Ego sighed, “let's go bandy words with space pirates.”

“If you didn't want to deal with them, you should have come and gotten us yourself.”

It was out of Meredith's mouth before she could stop herself. Ego frowned.

“We'll talk about that later,” he said.

With that, he took Meredith’s arm and led her away from the field of lilies. Meredith wanted to tear her arm out of his, to demand that no, they would talk about it now, but she'd just gotten the man she'd been dreaming of for eight years. Now seemed like a pretty bad time to pick an argument. Besides, Peter needed time to adjust to his father. Peter deserved to have a chance at a paternal relationship; how Meredith felt about Ego could go on the backburner for a while. She sighed and closed her eyes as she walked, breathing in the scent of the lilies. Meredith had waited eight years; she could wait a little longer.
Yondu and Ego argue over who gets to keep the Quills for the night. The Ravagers prove to be quite the dinner show. Ego is always watching.

(Pun title is not funny.)

When Yondu went to exit the Eclector, Peter was standing at the top of the loading ramp with crossed arms and a frown.

“Why ain't you with your mother,” Yondu asked.

“I figured something out. His voice,” Peter said, “I know where I’ve heard it before.”

Yondu swallowed.

“He's the same guy, isn't he? The one from the bridge who thought I was his kid. The one you said all those bad things to,” Peter said.

Yondu took a deep breath. Great; now even the boy was going to be pissed at him.

“Yeah,” Yondu said, “same guy.”

Peter made a face.

“You were right,” Peter said, “he's a jackass.”

Yondu's whole body shook as he laughed.

“Watch your goddamn language,” he chuckled.

Peter grinned.

“So,” Yondu said, “you don't like him either?”

“He left the nicest, sweetest, kindest, most awesome lady in the world behind.” Peter squinted. “Dad or not, I hate him.”

“Me too.” Yondu picked up the boy and held him in his arms. “You got a good head on your shoulders, boy.”

Peter beamed; that was the nicest compliment Yondu had ever paid him.

“I just know there's something weird about Ego,” Peter said, “something really wrong.”

“At least one of you's got the sense enough to see it.” Yondu held Peter close as he carried him off the Eclector. “Now why ain't your momma figured it out yet?”

Peter tapped his heart.
“Mom believes in people,” he said.

Yondu looked out at Ego's planet. He could see Meredith and Ego coming back towards the buildings; Meredith was rubbing her arms. Yondu frowned.

“She won't give up, will she, boy?”

“No,” Peter replied, “she doesn't give up. She doesn't back down. She's mom.”

Yondu set Peter down and jerked his head towards the buildings.

“Go get your shit,” he said, “and your momma's shit, too.”

“Are we leaving?” Peter's face lit up.

“Not yet, boy,” Yondu said as he watched Meredith leave Ego and disappear into the building, “but soon.”

Yondu was supervising a personnel extraction. He stood there, face-to-face with Ego himself, while Kraglin went in and retrieved the Quills. Yondu bared his teeth at Ego, fighting the urge to drive his fist between the Celestial's eyes.

“I don't understand.” Ego's brow furrowed. “Why are you taking them back?”

“You don't get 'em until you pay.” Yondu's eyes glittered dangerously. “Don't want that boy disappearin' in the middle of the night, if you catch my drift.”

Ego's expression soured.

“But why does Meredith have to go,” he complained.

“Wherever Pete goeth, she goeth, jackass.” Kraglin grinned, walking out of the guest house. “Got 'em right here, cap'n.”

Kraglin was dragging Meredith and Peter behind him. Peter hurried to keep up, beaming at Yondu as they passed. The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. Meredith's curls flounced around her face as she jogged to keep up with Kraglin's long strides, her free arm around a large bundle of clothes. She nearly dropped a hairbrush, barely managing to catch it as Kraglin rushed the Quills along.

“What's going on? Kraglin, slow down,” she said.

“Sorry Ms. Quill, but a personnel extraction's supposed to be nice and fast.” Kraglin dragged the Quills to the Eclector. “The boys'll be real happy to see you. Lunis even made dinner.”

“He did?” Meredith hugged her clothes to her chest with one arm. “That's so sweet.”

“Don't tell him that, Ms. Q,” Kraglin warned, “or he'll bite your nose off.”

“I know, Kraglin.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “Ravagers don't like being called sweet.”

“You can't just take Meredith and Peter,” Ego said, “they're not cargo.”
“What?” Meredith pulled her wrist out of Kraglin's hand, frowning. “What about me being cargo?”

“Your boyfriend here ain't paid for you, so he ain't getting you.” Yondu crossed his arms. “Simple as that, Mery.”

“Um, no, it's not as simple as that. I'm an adult,” Meredith said, “I decide where I go.”

“But the boy,” Ego began.

“Mery,” Yondu said warningly.

“Peter.” Meredith cut both men off, looking at her son. “Peter, sweetheart, honey, where do you want to sleep tonight?”

“The Eclector,” Peter said instantly.

“Then you go back with Yondu. Yondu, please keep an eye on Peter while I sleep here,” Meredith said, gesturing to the building with her free hand.

“No,” Yondu and Ego said.

“Oh yes.” Meredith crossed her arms. “I trust Yondu to take care of Peter, and I know Jason's not going to hurt me.”

“You trust him?” Ego and Yondu scowled, pointing at one another.

“Oh dear sweet Lord in heaven.” Meredith pressed a hand against her forehead. “I am an adult. As long as Peter's safe, I will be fine.”

“I don't think that's a good idea, Mery,” Yondu said.

“It's a horrible idea.” Ego crossed his arms. “Peter should not be on that space craft.”

Meredith sighed and hugged the bundle of clothes to her chest with both arms. Yondu met her eyes and gave her a hard stare. You're in danger, dammit, he thought, pay the fuck attention. Somehow, it seemed to get across; Meredith's eyebrows contracted.

“You think I should stay with Peter,” she said.

“Trust me,” Yondu said.

Meredith stared long and hard at him. Trust was a lot to ask, but she'd meant what she said when she said they were friends again. Meredith had told him she'd give him a second chance, and that meant putting a little trust in him. Something in his eyes was like an alarm bell ringing in her head. Something wasn't right here, and he wanted her to see it. Meredith remembered that he'd sworn to show her why he hated Jason. She hadn't seen it yet, but something told her she'd find out soon.

“Fine. Peter and I will stay on the Eclector tonight,” she said.

“Meredith,” Ego said, “you're brilliant but this is a terrible idea.”

Yondu's growl cut him off.

“If she says she goes, she goes.” Yondu glared at Meredith, but she could see the corner of his mouth curve up. “Ain't no use playin' catch-and-release with this one.”
“I'll be fine, Jason,” she said.

Ego looked back and forth between her eyes, as if expecting one of them to be lying. After a moment, he nodded.

“Go back, eat dinner, sleep well,” he said, “and stay safe, Meredith.”

Meredith nodded. She took Peter's free hand, and Kraglin and Meredith walked him away. After they went up the ramp of the Eclector, Ego turned his cool gaze on Yondu.

“They're mine,” Ego said.

“Listen dirt-dick, they're ours until you pay,” Yondu told Ego.

“Then let me pay you now for both of them.” Ego pulled an interface out of nowhere. “A million, correct?”

“Whoops.” Yondu leered at his interface. “Looks like it's evenin' hours.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Business hours is over.” Yondu closed his interface. “Guess you'll have to wait until tomorrow, jackass.”

“Ravagers don't have business hours,” Ego raged, “you're making that up to piss me off!”

“Course I'm makin' it up to piss you off.” Yondu grinned, showing jagged teeth. “But I'm the captain and I decide what my business hours are. And right now, I ain't acceptin' unit transfers. You can wait until mornin', jackass.”

As Ego stood there fuming, Yondu walked away, whistling merrily. His arrow zoomed through the evening light, cutting the words **GO TO HELL** clearly into the night sky. It zipped back into his hand, and he stowed it in his jacket. Yondu cracked a wide grin. He may not have won the war quite yet, but he'd won the battle; Meredith trusted him more than she trusted Ego, and that was a hell of a good start.

Meredith hung her new clothes up in her cargo room on the Eclector. She pressed her face into the soft blue cloth of one of the dresses and sighed. They were almost the same as her clothes on Terra, but they lacked that fresh scent of her papa's laundry soap. Still, she admitted as she stroked the fabric, it was wonderful to have real ladies' clothes again.

The portal door opened, and Peter came in.

“Hi mom,” he said.

“Hey baby.” Meredith smiled at him. “How's it going? Did you have fun on the Eclector today?”

“Yondu and I talked about this Ego guy.” Peter sat on Meredith's bed. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, honey.” Meredith picked up a hairbrush. “Anything.”

“If I'd never been born and you'd still come to space, would you have looked for Ego?”

Meredith frowned.
“Honey,” she said, “why would you ask that?”

“It’s important.” Peter’s green eyes were serious. “Really important.”

Meredith drew the hairbrush through her curls, thinking. If Peter hadn’t been born, would she still have looked for Jason?

“No,” she heard herself say, “I would have forgotten about him.”

“So you don’t love him,” Peter said.

Meredith opened her mouth, then closed it. She bit her lips together and sat down her hairbrush.

“I did,” she said, “and I’m trying to again.”

“Don’t.” Peter hugged his knees. “Don’t try to love somebody, mom. You don’t need him. You’re a great mom all by yourself.”

“Oh honey.” Meredith sat down next to Peter, chuckling. “Baby, that means the world to me.”

Peter crawled in her lap. Meredith held him close, rubbing his back gently. Peter buried his face in her curls, thinking. Yondu had told him not to tell his mother about Ego trying to buy him, so Peter wouldn’t say. Peter could keep a secret.

“Peter,” Meredith said, “I know this is really hard for you, but I want you to keep an open mind and give your father a chance, okay?”

“He had it,” Peter said, “and he flew back to space and left you there.”

“If he hadn’t gone away, he wouldn’t have sent Yondu to pick you up.” Meredith smiled. “You never would have seen space.”

Peter thought about that for a second.

“He sent us Yondu,” Peter admitted, “so that’s one good thing.”

Meredith sighed and said nothing.

“Guess dinner’ll be ready soon,” she said.

Peter frowned.

“Aren’t you going to wear something nice,” he asked.

“Should I?” Meredith blinked. “Is this formal?”

“They made you dinner, mom.” Peter said it like it was an explanation.

“Okay, okay.” Meredith chuckled and scooted Peter out of her lap. “You want your momma dressed up, then I’ll dress up.”

Lunis had a knife. The sly-eyed purple Kallusian stood between the Ravagers and the roast laukha. The mouthwatering scent lingered in the air, tempting them, and the lights in the kitchen gleamed off
the shiny skin of the cooked bird. It also shined off the six inches of steel that Lunis held in his hand.

“Just a taste,” Drazkar begged.

“I will shave you.” Lunis squinted. “And then. Then I will kill you.”

Holdon patted Drazkar's shoulder.

“It's okay,” he said, “we just have to wait until Quill shows up.”

Drazkar stared at the cooked laukha and whimpered. The portal door opened, and Yondu and Kraglin entered. Yondu's eyes glazed over the feast Lunis had cooked.

“When did you learn to do this,” he asked.

“Quill taught me. Those are something called turnip greens. That's mashed turnip. That's cornbread. Xandarian bean casserole. Corn on the cob.” Lunis kept an eye on the Ravagers as he pointed to each meal in turn. “I made angel food cake. For dessert, you know. Didn't fuck it up somehow. I hope. Baking is hard.”

“Holy shit, Lunis.” Kraglin's eyes widened. “All the cap'n wanted was a roast laukha.”

“I know.” Lunis' eyes flicked to the captain. “Just thought. You know. Terran cooking. I'd give it a try.”

“Aw, you made the little Terrans some home-cooking so they'd feel at home?” One of the pilot's curled his lip. “You're getting soft, Lunis.”

“Get over here.” Lunis' eyes glinted like the steel of his knife. “Test that theory.”

The pilot shuffled, but no one advanced. Yondu's brow contracted; schisms in the ship were never a good thing. He snapped his fingers and pointed to the mess hall benches; everyone sat down. Kraglin sat to the right of Yondu and stared at the door. The rest of the Ravagers drooled over the food, in Drazkar's case, quite literally.

“Do I need to get you a bib?” Gef swatted him in disgust. “Back off, mate, you're icing the cornbread.”

The portal door opened, and Peter came racing in with a grin on his face. He jumped up and smashed himself between Gef and Lunis, kicking his legs and whacking Drazkar's knees with his feet.

“Get away from me,” Lunis said, pushing him towards Gef.

“I don't want him!” Gef pushed the boy towards Lunis. “You're skinnier, you take him.”

“He's kicking me.” Drazkar growled. “Get rid of him or I will!”

“Boy!” Yondu snapped his fingers and pointed to the empty seat by Yondu. “Get your ass over here before I tan it.”

Peter popped off the bench, raced around, and plopped into the seat next to Yondu. He was still smiling and kicking his legs.

“Mom found a pretty dress,” he said.
Yondu grunted.

“She looks pretty,” Peter added.

Yondu ignored him, choosing instead to reach out and position the laukha dish so he'd get first dibs. Kraglin picked up a spoon and started twirling it absently as he leaned his cheek on his other hand and watched the door. Quill would have to hurry, Yondu thought; the boys looked hungry. The only reason they hadn't torn into the feast was because Yondu hadn't told them they were allowed to. Still, he could see some sly swipings of cornbread chunks, some fingers stuck in the mashed turnip. Yondu's eyes snapped to the culprits, who quickly shrunk out of view. The portal opened.

“About damn time,” Yondu said.

“Peter insisted I dress up,” Meredith said, “so that took some time.”

The sound of heels clicking on the floor made Yondu look up. Kraglin dropped his spoon; Yondu couldn't blame him. There was no way that what he was looking at was Meredith Quill. Yondu's eyes flicked down to the small black heels she was wearing and traced up the curves of her calves. She was wearing a black button-down dress with white dots on it, a brown belt cinched around her waist. Her curls were fluffier and softer than he'd ever seen them; they framed her face like golden clouds. Meredith smiled at him, and Yondu quickly covered his expression with a scowl.

“Where'd you get that,” he asked.

“Jason.” Meredith took a seat on the other side of Peter. “It's a replica of one of my dresses on Terra.”

*If it's from Ego, take it off and get it off my goddamn ship.* Yondu opened his mouth to say that, but quickly realized asking Meredith to remove clothing could be construed any number of ways. With the rumors the crew had been circulating, Yondu figured it was a better use of his mouth to just shove laukha into it.

As soon as the food hit Yondu's mouth, the Ravagers descended upon the feast like animals. Kraglin leaned back, his eyes seemingly glazed. Whenever a portion of something that looked fairly decent came in front of him, his fork shot out and he slid it onto his own plate. He was amassing quite the load. Peter's tactic was to just take off Yondu and Kraglin's plates while they weren't looking. Or, rather, when Kraglin wasn't looking; Yondu just pretended to look the other way. It encouraged good thievery, he thought. Meredith sat with wide eyes. Usually she reserved herself a plate while she was cooking; she had never had to implement a strategy in order to get food before. Yondu noticed and started grabbing food for her.

“Move quick, Mery, or there won't be nothin' left.” He ladled some mashed turnip onto her plate.

“Come on, woman. Take what you want.”

Meredith swallowed.

“Isn't that rude,” she said.

“Ravagers,” Yondu said exasperatedly.

“Oh. Right.”

Meredith looked around, then bit her lips together.

“Come on, Mery,” Yondu scowled.
“What am I supposed to do?” Meredith picked up a knife and wielded it mockingly. “Avast, give me food or I'll kill you!”

Kraglin and Peter spat up mashed turnip and laughed.

“See? I'm not scary,” Meredith said, putting down the knife.

“Then try somethin' else,” Yondu said through a full mouth.

Meredith looked at the Ravager's feeding frenzy. Mothering them wouldn't work in this situation; they were all out for themselves. The ones she could usually boss about wouldn't be willing to accommodate her with the entire crew watching. She supposed she could get food from Kraglin, but begging felt wrong. No, Meredith decided, she'd have to get it herself. She leaned in and waited for food to pass. The plate of laukha was being passed around; her hand was a blur as she shot out and took the whole bird.

“Hey!” Gef's eyes flashed.

Meredith snapped a leg off and dropped it back onto the plate. She held onto the leg, eating it while the cornbread inch ed ever nearer.

“Like a trapdoor spider,” Peter said.

“That's right, honey.” Meredith snatched the cornbread clean off the plate and snapped off a huge chunk. “I'm not stronger than these big lugs, but you can bet your rear that I'm faster.”

“Where's the booze,” someone called.

“Holdon,” Yondu yelled through a mouthful of cornbread. “get the grog.”

“Aye captain.” Holdon stood and exited the room.

Meredith watched the Ravagers pick Holdon's plate clean and shook her head.

“He's going to be awful angry when he gets back,” she said.

“Don't worry, Ms. Q.” Kraglin smiled. “He'll punch 'em in the gut and get it all back.”

Meredith laughed. Holdon came in with his arms around a huge barrel. He set it on the counter, and stabbed a spigot into it. Ravagers took their mugs to it and filled them to the brims with the frothy dark brew.

“It's beer,” Meredith said.

“Kinda, Ms. Q. It's more like a big ol' barrel full of whatever fermented juices were cheapest at the last port.” Kraglin wrinkled his nose. “Not my cup of tea, honestly.”

Meredith watched the liquid splatter on the floor and winced.

“I'm with you honey. I'll stick to water,” she said.

“Can I have some grog,” Peter asked.

“No,” Yondu and Meredith both snapped.

Peter shrunk back in his seat and pouted. The corners of Meredith and Yondu's mouths turned up.
By the time the dishes were empty, so was the barrel. Most of the Ravagers were slumped over furniture, hiccuping and laughing drunkenly. Meredith had scooted Peter out of the room long ago; Yondu and Kraglin were getting the most sober of the Ravagers to do the dishes. Yondu stepped out and went to find the Quills. He found Peter asleep in the quarters, and Meredith just a few hallways away.

“Good,” she said, “I was looking for you.”

“What for,” he asked.

“You told me that there was a reason you didn't like Jason. You said you'd show me when we got here.” Meredith took a deep breath. “I think I'm ready to see it.”

Yondu's eyes burned holes into hers. She wasn't ready, he thought, but could you ever be ready to find something like that? Yondu walked her down the halls, heading to the loading ramp. He held up a hand.

“You wait here,” he said.

Meredith nodded, rubbing her arms. Yondu paced down the ramp and squinted at the darkness. He saw nothing, but the tenseness in his muscles told him that he was being watched. After a minute of searching, he found what he was looking for; a dark, barely-visible silhouette in the blackness. Yondu bared his teeth and returned to Meredith.

“I'll show you tomorrow,” Yondu said, “I can't do it tonight.”

“Why not,” she asked.

“You're bein' watched.” Yondu's voice was grim. “We all are.”

“By who?”

“Ego.”

Yondu paced right past Meredith, scowling.

“Why's he watching us?” Yondu could hear a note of nervousness in Meredith's voice. “Did we do something wrong?”

“No.” Yondu glanced at her. “You're fine, Mery, don't worry about it. It ain't you he's after.”

“Who's he after?”

“Who do you think, stupid?” Yondu scowled. “He asked for the boy to be picked up, not you. He thought you were dead, remember?”

Meredith's eyebrows contracted.

“He did, didn't he,” she said.

A memory from months ago resurfaced in Yondu's mind. The first call Ego had made after Yondu had kidnapped Peter. Even then, something had been off. How the hell had Ego known that Meredith was dying, Yondu wondered, and why was he surprised to find out that she wasn't dead? Something was wrong here, and it had Ego written all over it. Yondu scowled, and Meredith
“Go on to bed,” he said, “I'll figure this out.”

Meredith bit her lips together.

“Something's really wrong here, isn't it,” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, “it is.”

Meredith nodded and walked away. Her heels clicked on the ground as she walked. Yondu watched her leave, then went down and looked for Ego again. This time, there was no silhouette. Yondu breathed in relief.

Tomorrow, Yondu would show Meredith the caverns, tell her about Ego, tell her about the exile and the children and everything. Meredith would know it all; there'd be no secrets left between them. A surprising feeling of relief rose in his heart. Yondu would never have to worry about her waking up one day and realizing he was a shitty son-of-a-bitch. Nothing left to hide, nothing in the way; she'd know him. Yondu frowned as he paced back up the ramp; there was still a chance she'd bolt for the first free ship away from him and he'd never see Meredith or Peter ever again. But Peter was right, Yondu reasoned, about Meredith if about anything. Meredith believed in people, and Yondu would have to believe in her, too.
Discovery

Chapter Summary

Peter can only take being pushed around for so long. Yondu comes clean with Meredith, and Meredith faces the truth about her ex-boyfriend. Ego has a problem on his hands; fortunately, he knows exactly how to fix it.

(Long chapter is long!)

Meredith got off the ship early the next day. She sat on the lowered loading ramp, holding her coffee and watching the sunrise. Warm coffee, crisp morning air, the way the light softly bled across the scenery... she could remember sitting on the porch on Terra with her papa, seeing a similar thing. A different sun, she reasoned, and different land, but the feeling was the same. There was something filling about it.

The wind played with the skirt of her floral sundress. She smiled and tugged the skirt down over her ankles. As far as dresses went, Meredith preferred casual, light clothing; glitz wasn't her style. Still, it felt nice to dress like a lady again.

“You look magnificent,” a familiar voice said.

“Good morning, Jason.” Meredith smiled as he came out of the foliage. “Thank you so much for the clothing.”

“Not at all.” Ego smiled and sat down next to her. “Just seeing you in it makes all the trouble worthwhile.”

“Any reason you're up so early,” she asked.

“Yes. I wanted to talk to you. It's about why you're alive.” Ego linked his fingers together. “I suspect, Meredith, that you have the light.”

“The what now,” she asked.

“I'm a Celestial,” Ego explained, “so I'm immortal.”

“I'm so sorry.” Meredith frowned and rubbed his arm. “That must be awful for you.”

Ego blinked.

“Pardon,” he said.

“I can't imagine knowing everything around you is transient.” Meredith's eyes were nothing but sympathetic. “It must be awful lonely.”

There were tears in Ego's eyes.

“It is,” he said, “it's so lonely.”

Meredith took his hand and smiled. He lifted her hand and pressed his lips to her knuckles.
“My River-Lily,” he sighed, “who always understands.”

Meredith blushed.

“Meredith,” Ego said, “could you try something for me?”

“Anything,” she said.

Ego pulled her to her feet and took her a few steps away from the Eclector.

“I need you to concentrate. I need you to reach down to the very core of this planet,” Ego said in a serious tone, “and pull on that energy.”

Meredith bit her lips together. It was a weird request.

“You can do it,” Ego said encouragingly.

Meredith closed her eyes and concentrated. He was right; a thin line was drawing her to the center of the planet. It felt like the javelin that had kept her alive, but thinner. A cord, tied to something deep within her. She tugged at it.

“Whoa!”

Meredith opened her eyes as Ego exclaimed. Her hands were awash in blue light. Meredith screamed, and it dissipated.

“That was weird!” Meredith's eyes were wide. “Really weird!”

“That was it!” Ego's triumphant grin stretched across his face. “Meredith, baby, you're a natural!”

She shook her head. “No. Nope. Too weird. Can't do it.”

“Come on, one more time!”

Meredith looked at Ego's face. He was glowing with an excitement she'd never seen before. Concentrating, she pulled the planet-cord again. The blue light returned. She stared at it.

“Now what,” she asked.

“Now, you can make anything!” Ego spread his hands wide. “It might take you a couple millennia to get it, but you can do it! Go ahead, try.”

Meredith's face screwed up in concentration, moving the light and energy between her hands. Ego's face was awash in ecstasy; whatever this was, Meredith thought, it was very important to him.

“Ego.”

Yondu's voice broke Meredith's concentration; the light disappeared. He and Kraglin came striding down the ramp, the tails of their coats fluttering in the wind. Peter plodded along after them, a tinier, less serious version of a Ravager.

“Aah, Captain Udonta. You've brought me the boy.” Ego turned with a smile. “Here for your units?”

“Here for a while longer than that,” he said.

Ego frowned. “What do you mean?”
“Some goddamn Orloni's gone and chewed through our stabilizer regulator in the middle of the night,” Kraglin said, “so it's completely busted. Freak accident. Completely un-fuckin'-predictable.”

“So you're not leaving,” Ego scowled. “Great.”

“Not until we fix our ship.” Kraglin smiled. “And with the boys as upset as they are about losin’ Peter and Ms. Quill, that might take a while.”

“Upset? What would a bunch of dirty space pirates want with my girl and my son,” Ego asked.

Yondu scowled. “That ain't none of your damn business, and it ain't why we're stayin'. We gotta stay until the stabilizer regulator's fixed, and that's gonna take at least a day. Deal with it.”

With that, he walked away. Peter ran after him.

“Yondu,” he said, “show me how to shoot stuff.”

Yondu turned with a terrible expression. Peter stopped in his tracks, eyes wide. Then, Yondu took a deep breath and grinned.

“Sure kid.” Yondu's big blue hand clapped Peter on the shoulder. “Kraglin, you head back to the Eclector and keep them idjits workin’.”

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin strode away to tell the Eclector to repair the stabilizer wires; he knew what the cap'n really meant.

“Know what, boy?” Yondu crouched down to get eye-to-eye with Peter. “Think you're ready to take the stun pack off this time.”

Peter's face lit up like a sun. “Wow, really? Thanks!”

Ego frowned. Meredith's eyes widened.

“Um, is he ready for that?” She held up her hands as if in surrender. “I know, I know, worry-wart mother. I trust you, I trust you, but... just be careful, Peter.”

“I'll be super careful.” Peter smiled. “I know gun safety.”

Meredith and Yondu smiled. Ego looked between them. A crease appeared between his eyebrows.

“You should shoot out on the back pavilion.” Ego walked up and put his hands on Meredith's waist. “Your mother and I can go... catch up.”

Meredith blushed scarlet. Peter blinked; the innuendo went right over his little head. Yondu stood, squeezing his hands into a fist as hard as stone.

“Let's go, boy,” he said.

Yondu turned, the tails of his coat rippling in the wind. He caught a glimpse of Ego's expression. One good punch, Yondu thought, and he'd knock that smug smile right off his goddamn face. One good punch, that was all it would take.

Ego's eyes flicked to Meredith. Yondu couldn't clock Meredith's boyfriend in front of her, and Ego knew it. There'd be too many questions, and Yondu wasn't sure enough about how he felt to answer them. Goddamn it, he hated that planet.
Barely controlling himself, Yondu paced away. His heart was beating a tattoo against his chest. He'd seen the light in Meredith's hands. It wasn't the boy Ego was after this time; it was Mery. If Peter didn't have the light, he'd be killed just like all the others, and Meredith? Fuck. Yondu gritted his teeth together. He knew exactly what that fucker would do to Meredith. Ego wanted kids with those special light powers and with Mery, he'd get them. Yondu's jaw locked. He had to get Meredith to that cavern of skulls, and he had to do it today.

Ego and Meredith went to an upper room, complete with a resplendent balcony and beautiful curtains. Yondu and Peter were firing out on the back deck; Meredith could see them from the balcony. A cloud of bubbles was their target. She watched Yondu line Peter's shot up for him, adjusting the sights and keeping Peter in good form. Meredith smiled. Peter fired; the blast hit one of the bubbles and it exploded into more.

“Good job, Peter!” She called down to him.

“Hi mom!” Peter looked up and waved.

“Have fun!” Meredith waved, then sighed. “Peter's such a good boy, Jason.”

“He had an amazing mother to raise him,” Ego said with a smile.

“But not a father.” Meredith glared at Ego. “You were suspiciously absent on that account.”

“If I don't return to this planet, Meredith,” he said, “the light within it dies.”

“You should have thought of that before you decided having a kid was a good idea.” Meredith crossed her arms. “We needed you, Jason, and you abandoned us. I'm not going to just let that go. I'm angry with you, and I'm not sorry about it.”

She had been planning what she was going to say all morning. Meredith bit her lips together, looking between Ego's eyes.

Ego sighed. “You're right. You're right. I should have paid more attention to you. I should have been there, for you and for Peter. I made a mistake.”

“And you sent Yondu Udonta to rectify it?” Meredith frowned. “I'll give him his due, but he ain't exactly the first person you send to take care of your lover and child, Jason.”

“That blue son-of-a-bitch.” Ego scowled. “I still have no idea why he kept you from me for four months.”

“Peter's skinny. Good for thievin'.” Meredith's voice was flat. “I clean and I cook a mean stew.”

“I should have seen it coming. Ravagers always keep the most valuable cargo for themselves.” Ego leaned against the elaborate banister. “I should have known they'd figure out you two were better than money. Yondu can't be trusted, Meredith.”

Meredith looked down at Peter on the lawn, and Yondu gently coaching him.

“Not with some things,” she admitted, “but Peter thinks the world of him.”

“Poor kid.” Ego stood back up. “I hope he never finds out the truth.”

“The truth?” Meredith's eyebrows contracted. “About what?”
“Yondu's not even a Ravager,” Ego said.

Meredith laughed. “Yeah, right.”

Ego's face was serious. Meredith looked down at the Centaurian; he was showing Peter how to stand while he shot from the hip.

“No,” she said, “he's a Ravager. If he's anything, he's a Ravager.”

“An exile, actually.” Ego watched her face. “He was exiled from the clans by Stakar Ogord himself, the Admiral of the Ravagers.”

“Exiled for what?” Meredith's eyes were wide.

“Child trafficking,” Ego sighed. “He's a very bad man, Meredith. It's a miracle you and Peter weren't killed, or worse. He kept his hands off you, didn't he? I swear, if he laid so much as a finger on you I'll rip out his intestines right now and hang him with them.”

“He never touched me. It's against the code.” Meredith's mind was racing. “Child trafficking? But he'd never hurt Peter!”

Ego shrugged. “Maybe he decided to start recruiting instead of trafficking. I mean, forcing Peter to work so you wouldn't die? That's practically slavery. Definitely indentured servitude.”

“I just can't believe it.” Meredith stared down at Peter and Yondu. “I mean, I know he's a criminal, but... He always had a line, you know? Like Robin Hood.”

“Robin Hood?” Ego snorted. “Yondu doesn't exactly give to charity, Meredith. He's a murdering, lying, deceitful son-of-a-bitch. His soul is nothing but garbage. There's nothing good in him.”

Meredith put her head in her hands. Why did learning this hurt her? Yes, Yondu had wanted Peter to work for him, but hadn't he told Peter he was always free? She knew Yondu wasn't exactly an angel, but she'd always felt something in him that she could put faith in. Even when her trust in him was completely destroyed, she had trouble giving upon him. There was something about him that she just wanted to believe in. Peter saw it; Peter looked up to him, trusted him entirely. Kraglin saw it. Yondu was Kraglin's idol, his captain, his role model. And Yondu was Meredith's friend, whether she liked it or not. When he wasn't being a big blue asshole, Meredith almost felt like he was her best friend. And now, being told he was a child-trafficking criminal who wasn't even a Ravager? How could he teach Peter everything about being one when he was just an exile? Meredith's heart gave a terrible pang.

“I just can't believe it,” she repeated.

“Ask him, if you don't believe me.” Ego shrugged. “You've always been good with people. I'm sure he'd talk to you.”

“He does. Or at least, he did,” she said.

“False trust,” Ego said, “so you'd trust him. Tells you everything but what you should know, that way you assume he's got no secrets.”

Meredith sighed. Ego put his hands on her shoulders and smiled.

“You're a brilliant woman, Meredith, but he's been doing this his whole life.” Ego rubbed her shoulders gently. “I should have been there to help you.”
Ego's hands rubbed down her ribs, wrapping around her waist as he pulled her backwards into the room. Meredith's eyes were distant as he slid her hair out of the way and kissed her neck.

“Yeah,” she said, “you should have.”

Meredith grabbed his hands and ripped them off her waist.

“Don't touch me when I'm angry with you, Jason.” Her voice had a razor's edge. “And don't think we're staying just because we came here. I need to know a lot more about what you've been doing for the past eight years before I decide you're fit to raise my son.”

“Our son,” Ego said.

“My son.” Meredith's eyes were steel.

Ego opened his mouth to argue, but Meredith's eyes flashed and his jaw clamped shut. Meredith wasn't the Terran he'd loved and left; she'd changed and she knew it. Meredith left the room, letting the door slam behind her. She was not some dumb blonde who was going to roll over with one kiss and some smooth words. She was not going to let Jason glaze over his absence by pointing fingers at Yondu. She was not going to stop believing in the big blue asshole who'd saved her son's life. She was Meredith Elizabeth Quill, and the most important thing in her life was to raise Peter in the right environment, and from what she'd just seen of Ego, this definitely wasn't it. If she could re-pick Peter's father, she thought sarcastically, even Yondu would be a better choice than Jason.

For once in his life, Yondu was having trouble coming up with a goddamn strategy. He knew he had to get Meredith to those caverns, but Ego was always watching. It was like he knew what Yondu was trying to do, Yondu thought, like he suspected something was up. Absentmindedly, he fixed Peter's arms.

“Keep 'em up, boy,” he said, “elbows in.”

“I know,” Peter said, fixing his posture.

Peter fired, but missed just barely.

“Elbows in, dammit.” Yondu bared his teeth. “What's with you?”

“Thinking about mom and Ego.” Peter lowered the gun, sighing. “My stupid father.”

“Just because he was your father don't mean he's your dad,” Yondu clarified.

“I wish you were my dad,” Peter muttered.

Yondu felt his entire chest crush in the grip of an enormous fist. He looked down at the little Terran.

“You don't mean that,” Yondu said.

“Do too.” Peter aimed the gun. “You're way cooler than he is. Plus, mom likes you more than she likes him.”

Yondu could hear his heartbeat in his ears. Peter blasted the target, hitting it dead-on, but Yondu was too shocked to compliment the boy's aim.
“Your momma's in love with that jackass,” Yondu said.

“Is not,” Peter said.

“Is too.”

“Is not.”

“Is too.”

“Is not,” Peter said, “she told me so.”

“Did she,” Yondu said.

“And we're not staying,” Peter said.

Yondu's stomach did a back flip.

“Did she say that too,” he asked.

“No,” Peter said, “but I know we won't stay because he doesn't like me.”

“And that matters?”

“Yeah. Mom's a good mom,” Peter said, “she won't want to be around someone who doesn't like me.”

The doors opened; Yondu watched Meredith stalk off in an angry rage. The sight shouldn't have made him as happy as it did. Finally, he thought, the jackass had let his colors show.

“You really think she don't like him,” Yondu said.

“She's trying to like him,” Peter explained, “but it's not working because he's a jerk and she doesn't love him.”

Peter and Yondu watched Meredith pace towards the glimmering pools.

“He must have said something really rude to her,” Peter said.

Yondu's mind flashed to the light he'd seen in her hands. Meredith had what Ego was looking for, and she was a woman. Ego wanted kids with that crazy planet-light, and if he wanted them now instead of later... Yondu's fist tightened. If Ego had tried to touch that woman, Yondu was going to blow the planet to fuckin' smithereens. So what if Ego and Meredith had a previous relationship; Yondu didn't give a fuck. If Ego had pissed Meredith off, then it wasn't consensual, whatever he'd tried to do. Yondu's expression hardened.

“Boy,” he said, “you keep shootin'. I'm gonna go have a chat with your fuck-forsaken father.”

There was no denying it; this turn of events was unexpected. Ego sat in one of his upper rooms, thinking. Meredith had the light. How weird.

On one hand, Ego decided, this was a bit of a drawback. Children were easy to deal with; a woman
like Meredith had fire to her soul. Convincing her to accept the expansion would be difficult. Also, children were easy to teach. Ego would have to spend years teaching Meredith to unlearn everything she'd learned about molecules and energy. Finally, there was the boy; Ego hadn't had the chance to test whether or not he had the light. If he did, splendid. If not... Well, with no light in him, he was useless to Ego, and convincing Meredith that the love she felt for the boy was transient would be nearly impossible.

On the other hand, this was a great boon. Meredith was a woman. Not a daughter, not a son, a woman. Procreating with her would bring more Celestials; their bloodline would inherit the universe. The very thought was so beautiful in Ego's mind that his eyes stung. Plus, it was Meredith Quill; the only woman Ego had ever felt truly connected to. Meredith understood. When he was around her, he forgot that he was alone. Sweet, innocent, beautiful Meredith; having her back felt like breathing again.

However, she was far from the Meredith Quill he used to know; he'd seen that on the balcony. She was sharper, harder, more intense; practically tempered steel. That was to be expected, Ego thought, after all she'd been through. She had always been sweet and kind, but she wouldn't have lasted this long if she wasn't strong, too. Ego's eyebrows contracted slightly. He hadn't seen that when he knew her. Strength of spirit, yes, but strength of will, not so much. Meredith had always been willing to follow him; she would have followed him to the stars, had he asked her to.

Of course, he couldn't have asked her to. She would have seen all his other children, and Meredith had such a soft spot for children. She would have insisted on keeping them, and Ego didn't want any useless little fleas living on his back. Also, she wouldn't have liked him sleeping around with thousands of other women, but how else was the expansion going to grow? Ego had to make sacrifices, and Meredith had to be one of them.

The door opened; Ego sat up with interest.

"Meredith," he said.

"Do I look like a goddamned Meredith to you?" Yondu paced in with a hideous expression on his face.

"Oh." Ego's face soured; he leaned back. "It's you."

"What the fuck did you do," Yondu said.

"What?"

"You pissed Mery off." Yondu's hands curled into fists. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. We had a bit of a verbal debate." Ego rolled his eyes. "Don't give me the threatening look, Udonta. I'm an immortal planet; you're one Centaurian. Even that fancy arrow of yours won't hurt me."

"If you hurt them," he snarled, "I'll kill you."

"Ha." Ego grinned. "How cute."

"Listen to me. Don't think this is like every other goddamn time, because it ain't." Yondu's face was serious. "You stay away from that woman and her boy."

With a flurry of coattails, Yondu made for the exit.
“Oh, so now you have a conscience?” Ego scowled. “This is ridiculous. What happened to the ruthless Yondu Udonta?”

“He met those goddamn Quills,” Yondu grabbed the doorknob.

“I can't believe this,” Ego said, “you've gone soft.”

“It ain't soft.” Yondu threw open the door. “It's bein' a Ravager. We take care of our own.”

“She's not a Ravager,” Ego snapped, striding forwards.

“You keep tellin’ yourself that, dirt-dick.” Yondu yelled as he paced down the hall. “You'll see. You don't know a goddamn thing about that woman.”

“I know everything about her!”

Yondu turned around, a fire in her eyes.

“Favorite color,” he said.

“What,” Ego asked.

“Mery, you jackass. What's her favorite goddamn color?”

“White.”

“Wrong.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Red. What does she drink?”

“Martinis, I think.” Ego gestured in frustration. “I don't remember.”

“Wrong. Whiskey. It's always been whiskey.” Yondu could feel the anger coiling in his chest. “What's her pop do for a living?”

“I don't know,” Ego snapped.

“Damn right you don't know.” Yondu turned around and kept walking. “You might've gotten down n' dirty with her, but you don't know shit about her.”

“You insolent ass.” Ego's face was scarlet as he leaned out of the doorway. “Who do you think you are?”

“Her goddamn friend,” Yondu answered.

“You don't have friends,” Ego scoffed, “you don't have the capacity. You're nothing but a greedy money-hungry space pirate. You don't have a heart; you have a black hole that pumps blood through your body. You can't care about anything. You're space scum.”

Yondu kept walking away, his heartbeat in his ears. *Don't fight him. That's what he wants. You gotta be around to take care of the boy. Don't fight him. You gotta show her the truth. Don't fight him. He don't know you and he don't know her. He might know her body, but he don't know shit about her soul.*

“Face it, Yondu; you're disgusting, irrational, rage-filled and crude. No woman in her right mind would love you. You betrayed everything you stand for; you're a disgrace. You're not capable of being anything more than a greedy narcissistic exile. I told Meredith myself,” Ego said, “there's nothing good in you.”
“Hey!”

Ego and Yondu's heads snapped to the left. Peter stood at the end of the hallway, his face red.

“You take that back,” he snapped, “you take it back right now.”

Ego stared in disbelief. Yondu felt his chest inflate. The boy was defending Yondu against his own father; damn, that little fucker wasn't scared of shit.

“Yondu is the coolest guy I know and he saves people with a magic arrow and he flies a spaceship!” Peter came striding forwards with his hands curled up in little fists. “He's awesome and he saved mom's life and mine and he can do anything and you're just a big jealous jerk!”

Peter kicked Ego in the shin as hard as he could. Ego scowled, a small crackling of energy flicked from his fingertips. Ice flushed through Yondu's veins; the boy could not get hurt. Yondu quickly picked up Peter and walked him away.

“You're just a jerk,” Peter screamed at Ego, “a big jerk! You don't love mom! You don't love me! You don't love anybody!”

Ego looked vaguely confused, which only angered Peter more.

“If you loved her you wouldn't have left!” Peter fought Yondu, kicking and screaming. “You're the one who can't care about anything! You're the one who's got nothing good in you! You're evil!”

“Peter.” Yondu's voice had taken on his commanding tone. “Enough.”

Peter collapsed into Yondu's arms, sobbing. Yondu rubbed his back as he walked the boy out to the pools.

“It's okay, boy.” Yondu looked around for Meredith. “I've got you.”

“He's evil,” Peter cried, “just evil.”

“I know, I know. You're preachin' to the choir, boy,” Yondu said.

“I don't want to be here anymore.” Peter wiped his nose on his own sleeve. “Can we go home?”

Home. Yondu held the boy tightly, setting his jaw.

“I ain't leavin' you here,” he said, “that's for damn sure. Let's go find your momma.”

“Mom,” Peter wailed, “mom!”

“Peter?” Meredith's voice was just around the corner. “Peter?”

Yondu heard her feet hit the ground. Meredith rounded the corner, standing there with a look of concern. When she saw Peter's red, tear-streaked face, her eyes widened.

“Peter! Oh honey, are you okay?” Meredith ran forwards, cupping the boy's face with her hands. “Oh baby, what happened?”

“He got real riled up at your boyfriend,” Yondu grunted, “after he saw us arguin'.”

“Why were you and Jason arguing,” Meredith asked.
“That ain't important right now.” Yondu jerked his head towards Peter. “The boy's in a goddamn fit, Meredith. He don't want to be here.”

“Oh honey.” Meredith took Peter into her arms. “Come here, sweet baby, it's alright.”

Yondu watched Peter sob into Meredith's shoulders. The boy was crying too much to say a word; Meredith stroked his hair, talking soothingly.

“It's okay, baby,” she said, “I've got you. It's okay.”

Yondu couldn't remember anyone ever holding him when he was young, much less the way Meredith held Peter. No one had ever held him close, wiped away his tears, said soothing words. Kidahet had tried when she could, and Aleta had been there when he was older, but Aleta's mothering was less direct, and Kidahet had been cold-blooded and scaly. Being held in warm, soft arms by someone that wholly loved you... Damn, Yondu thought, that kid was spoiled as shit.

“Mom,” Peter said, breaking Yondu's train of thought, “I want to go home.”

“Oh baby.” Meredith pressed a kiss to his hair. “Baby, I know, but the blockade's still up and we don't have the money.”

“Not Earth,” he said, “the Eclector.”

“Oh.” Meredith sighed. “Peter, honey, you just take a few deep breaths, okay?”

“I am.” Peter sniffed. “I'm trying.”

“Good boy,” she said, “it's okay.”

Meredith turned so Yondu couldn't see Peter's face. She mouthed can you take him back? Yondu nodded.

“Why don't you go back with Yondu and have a lie down, honey.” Meredith kissed Peter's forehead before handing him to Yondu. “Go on. I'll be fine, go on.”

“Come on, boy,” Yondu said roughly.

Peter sniffled, but didn't argue as Yondu carried him towards the Eclector.

“We're not safe here, are we?” Peter looked up at Yondu with red-tinged eyes. “Are we?”

“No,” Yondu admitted, “nobody's safe here.”

“Why did you bring us here,” Peter asked.

“Because your momma deserves to know how much of a goddamn jackass Ego is,” Yondu said.

“You promised you'd take us away if we didn't like it here. You promised,” Peter said, “and I don't want to be here. I want to go back to space and be a Ravager. I don't want to be Ego's son.”

“Look, boy, I want to get out of here as much as you do. But first, there's something your momma's got to see.” Yondu exhaled. “I just ain't figured out how the hell to distract your fuck-forsaken father long enough to show it to her.”

“I'll distract him,” Peter said.
“No! No, no no no. Hell no. Fuck no.” Yondu pointed at the Eclector. “Your ass stays safe as fuck, you hear?”

“If we don't distract Ego, you can't take mom to the thing she needs to see. If she doesn't see it, we can't leave. As long as we're here,” Peter said, “we're not safe. He's everywhere, Yondu. I'm not safe anywhere.”

Yondu swallowed.

“Kraglin goes with you,” he said.

“Ego will hurt him.” Peter wiped his eyes. “This is me and mom's problem. If we didn't want to come here we'd all still be safe. I'll bother Ego, then you get mom to the thing she needs to see. Ego won't know she's seen it, so you can come back and then we can go.”

“It ain't safe,” Yondu said.

“Giving me plasma and having me rob people and letting me operate heavy machinery wasn't safe either,” Peter countered.

“Boy,” Yondu thundered.

“Yondu.” Peter's green eyes were clear. “You think you'll be able to stop me?”

Yondu could hear his blood pulsing in his ears. The boy could not get hurt.

“If you get hurt,” he said, “your momma ain't got reason enough to live.”

“I'm fast. If he hurts me,” Peter said, “mom will hurt him.”

Yondu looked back at the ramp, then at Peter, and then swallowed.

“Do it,” he said.

He put Peter down, and the Terran went running down the ramp, blaster in hand, the spitting image of a Ravager on a mission. Yondu held his breath for a moment. He wasn't much of a praying man, but if there was any cosmic star-spirit that looked over reckless Terran kids, he hoped it was watching over that one.

Meredith was sitting on the lawn by the sparkling pools. Peter was off; her son needed some time to think. While he was gone, Meredith focused on shaping energy. This was important to Jason, although she didn't know why. Not that it mattered; Meredith liked doing it regardless of what Jason thought. While she was moving the energy, she felt like she was figuring things out. Things like how she felt, for one.

She made a cube and rotated it in the air. So, Jason was here. He hadn't changed much. Meredith formed a cone. Yondu didn't like Jason, but she already knew that. Peter didn't like Jason, and Jason seemed a little cold to Peter, too. That, Meredith thought, was wrong. She spread the energy into a star shape. Peter wanted to go with Yondu and the Ravagers; anyone could see that. And Yondu, for some reason, wanted to keep Peter and Meredith, too. She couldn't begin to understand why. Sighing, Meredith spun the blue energy into the shape of a heart.
A red bolt shot through the energy form, and the shock made her concentration break. The scarlet-lined arrow zoomed out along the ponds, reflecting in the water. Meredith looked back across the lawn. Yondu was sprawled out on the steps of the guest house, whistling lazily and watching Meredith.

“Stop thinkin' so hard,” he said, “you're makin' it difficult for yourself.”

“What?”

The arrow drifted around his head; he scowled.

“You think when I move this thing, I use my head?” Yondu gave her a Ravager's salute, pounding his fist over his heart.

“Oh.” Meredith blinked. “It's an emotional thing?”

“Idjit,” he muttered.

Fine. If he was going to critique her, she was going to put on a heck of a show. She formed another heart and sent it up; again, Yondu pierced it with his arrow. Meredith's face screwed up in concentration; the heart burst into more hearts. With a sharp whistle, the arrow spiraled through all of them.

“Stop showing off,” she said.

The arrow playfully tangled itself in her hair. Meredith grinned and made a series of rings. She pushed them out over the pond, and the arrow danced through all of them. Meredith watched it move with a smile. She looked over her shoulder again. Yondu was whistling still, but his eyes were watching her. He was teasing her again.

Meredith focused. She wove the energy into a long, straight pole, then added flares and a tip. She flicked the energy arrow, which went zooming along with Yondu's. The two raced across the lawn, splashing through the fountain and casting a rainbow spray. They snapped the bubbles overhead, then doubled back to pop all the bubbles that had been created. The twin arrows dived, then sped along the lawn again, creating ripples in the grass. Yondu gave a repetitive whistle that rose and fell; his arrow shot up and wove a shape. The scarlet of the light cut a red heart into the sky; Meredith shot her energy arrow right through it, then followed his arrow back down and across the lawn to where they sat. Yondu kept his eyes on Meredith as the arrows zoomed side-by-side. Yondu's arrow made a beeline for his own heart. Meredith gasped; her arrow dissipated a foot away from his chest. Yondu whistled sharply, and his arrow came to a perfect halt, rotating less than a millimeter away from his chest. Chuckling, he took his arrow out of the air.

“Not bad,” he said, “for a Terran.”

She stood up and walked over to him. “Guess I'm a Celestial now.”

“You didn't need no goddamn boyfriend to tell you that, did you, Star-Queen?”

Meredith's face warmed. “Not every day someone tells you you're a goddess.”

“If he'd bothered to stay on Terra,” Yondu growled, “he could have.”

Meredith sighed and rubbed her arms. “I know. I'm still not happy with him about that.”

“So.” Yondu pulled his lips back, exposing his gnarled teeth in a sneer. “You two 'catch up' while I
was babysittin' your damn kid?"

“Not that it's any of your business, but no, we did not do any 'catching up'. I told him not to touch me as long as I'm angry at him.” She sat down on the stairs, right next to Yondu. “If he does, I'll cut his manhood off and feed it to an Orloni.”

The corners of Yondu's mouth turned up slightly. “Now that sounds like Star-Queen.”

With Meredith hugging her knees and that same little smile, Yondu was struck again by how much she and Peter resembled one another.

“The boy,” Yondu said, “he don't look much like Ego.”

“No, he doesn't. He has his grandpa's eyes.” Meredith smiled, then sighed. “Peter doesn't like Jason.”

“Good.” Yondu bared his teeth again. “Ego's a goddamn jackass. Celestial or not.”

“What, are you jealous?” She stretched her legs out on the stairs. “No immortal Yondu Udonta, sailing the stars and making a million units every day?”

“If you told me fucking Ego would bring me immortality and all the cash I'd ever want, I still wouldn't let him get within a foot of me.” Yondu bared his teeth. “He's a goddamn jackass, I'm telling you. The boy hates him, Mery.”

“Peter just got here.” Meredith turned her back to him, her arms crossed. “We both did. It's confusing for both of us. We don't need you...doing whatever it is you're trying to do.”

“I ain't tryin' to angle for anything, alright?” Yondu stood up. “I'm speakin' the goddamn truth for once, that's what I'm doing.”

Meredith just exhaled. She stood facing the pools, her back to Yondu. The breeze tugged at her golden curls and made the skirt of her sundress ripple. Yondu had a brief, crazy impulse to grab her around the waist, snatch up the kid, board the Eclector, and never come back. The intensity of the desire made his hands grow cold. He was in way over his goddamn head now.

“Do whatever the hell you want,” he said, “but for the boy's sake, think before you do it.”

Meredith's round, pale shoulders rose and fell with a sigh.

“I'm his mother first,” she said, “and I'll always do what's best for him. I just need to find out what that is.”

Meredith turned around. Her eyes were more distant than Yondu had ever seen before.

“Yondu,” she said, “we need to talk about something. Can I trust you to be honest with me for five minutes, please?”

Yondu frowned. “About what?”

“Peter.” She walked towards him. “And you. Stakar Ogord. Ego. Me. We need to talk about a lot of things.”

“Alright.” Yondu put his hands on his hips and bared his teeth. “Try me, dammit.”

“Were you exiled from the Ravagers for child trafficking?”
Yondu now knew exactly what it felt like when he had his arrow at his victim's forehead, where even a twitch in the wrong direction meant certain death. Meredith's question was a loaded gun pressed to his forehead, and he wasn't sure who was pulling the trigger.

“Yes,” he heard himself say, “I trafficked kids away from their mommas.”

Her face of shock made him break out into a sweat.

“You want the truth, dammit, then I'll give it to you.” Yondu clenched his hands to keep them from trembling. “I took a dozen kids from their mommas all over the galaxy and took 'em to Ego. He had a lot of damn kids and he paid me to bring 'em here. I ripped apart families for money. I was a stupid, greedy, selfish bastard and I got exiled for it. Stakar Ogord, he doesn't want a damn thing to do with me. That's why you couldn't see the goddamn doctor when you went. Mareet ain't supposed to be helpin' me. I risked it because...”

Yondu's voice had broken. Why had he risked it?

“Because Peter had a goddamn momma,” he said, “who was as tough as nails. You deserved to live. The kid deserved a parent. You deserved to be a goddamn family. You were fuckin' dying, and you ran across that parking lot like it was nothing.”

There were tears in Meredith's eyes, but Yondu had started laughing.

“You bit me in the goddamn neck for fuck's sake! You stayed in a ship surrounded by the meanest sons-of-bitches in the galaxy. You worked yourself to fucking exhaustion to keep yourself alive. You're...” Yondu shook his head, putting his hands on his hips. “Damn, Meredith. You're the best goddamn mother in the whole damn galaxy. I couldn't take the boy, not from you. Still can't. He belongs with you, and that's the fuckin' truth.”

Meredith wiped her eyes on the hem of her sundress.

“Mery, there's somethin' else you gotta know.” Yondu swallowed. “The kids I brought here... they ain't all in hidin' or nothin'.”

She lifted her head, a small line creasing her brow.

“Then where are they,” she asked.

“Dead.” Yondu's voice was hard. “He kills 'em if they ain't got that light. He kills 'em all.”

Meredith frowned. Her eyes flicked left and right, as if expecting to see children pouring out of the halls and arches. Yondu swallowed.

“Follow me,” he said.

Peter found Ego in the main building. Ego was staring at a white display; in it stood replicas of Ego and Meredith, their limbs entwined lovingly around each other.

“Hey,” Peter said.

Ego turned.
“You’re back,” he said.

“Mom told me that I’m not allowed to hate someone that I don’t know. She said maybe you had reasons for doing things that I didn’t understand.” The lies came smoothly off Peter’s lips as he walked forwards. “She said I should try to get to know you.”

Ego smiled softly.

“That sounds like your mother,” he said.

Peter looked around at the white, egg-like displays.

“What is all this,” he asked.

“I’m glad you asked.” Ego put his hand on Peter's shoulder. “This is the story of how I came to be, Peter, and also how you came to be.”

Peter wanted to grab the guy’s fingers and break them, but allowed Ego to steer him around.

“I don’t really know where I came from. I floated around for a while, just another sentient spec of consciousness in the galaxy.” Ego gestured to the display that showed a floating blue brain surrounding itself with rock. “Eventually I figured out how to move molecules, matter, and energy to my will. I constructed this planet.”

“So you can make or un-make anything,” Peter asked.

“Anything.” Ego grinned roguishly. “But that wasn't enough. I sought meaning.”

Peter let Ego steer him to the next display, which showed Ego’s physical self being formed.

“I created a form by which I could explore the galaxy. I sought life. I needed to know that I wasn't alone.” Ego sighed, and the display changed to Ego and a little Krylorian girl. “And then I found it. Life, sentient life.”

“Wow,” Peter said.

“And then,” Ego said, “I fell in love.”

The third display still showed Ego and Meredith; Peter tilted his head and stared at it.

“And from that love, Peter,” Ego said softly, “you.”

Peter looked at the glowing baby in the display, a tiny crease appearing between his brows.

“You’re not like everyone else, Peter.” Ego's voice was gentle. “You were born for a reason.”

Peter reached into his jacket and pulled out a tiny piece of paper.

“What's that,” Ego asked.

“David Hasselhoff,” Peter mumbled.

“Oh.” Ego blinked. “Any particular reason you carry a picture of a Terran celebrity in your pocket?”

“When the kids at school used to pick on me about not having a dad,” Peter said, “I'd show them this picture and tell them that you were on tour with your band or serving the Peace Corps in Germany.”
Ego’s brow contracted, but he chuckled. Peter glanced from the picture to Ego, then put the paper away.

“You came back to visit mom,” Peter said.

“Yes.” Ego’s eyes were sad. “I couldn’t keep away.”

Peter stared into the middle distance for a second, putting things together in his head.

“When mom came off the ship... You thought she’d be dead,” Peter said.

“Yes. You can't imagine my shock,” Ego chuckled.

“Why?” Peter's eyes glinted. “Why'd you think she'd be dead?”

“Because she had brain cancer, of course. You don't exactly expect a woman to survive having a brain tumor long enough to show up at your doorstep,” Ego exclaimed.

“How'd you know what kind of tumor she had,” Peter asked.

Ego watched Peter's hand stray towards his blaster. The Terran's eyes glimmered with a deep emerald light.

“Peter,” Ego warned.

“She got cancer after you left. If you could change molecules and cells,” Peter asked, “why didn't you stay and cure her? She's been sick for four years. You came back four years ago.”

“Peter.” Ego held up a hand. “Peter, I know it looks bad.”

“You gave my mom cancer, didn't you?”

Ego swallowed.

“It broke my heart to do it,” he said, “and I know it sounds awful, but I didn't know –”

The remainder of his words were drowned out by blaster fire as Peter emptied bolt after bolt of white light into Ego's skull. His eyes glinted with a predatory, hateful light as he eviscerated Ego's physical form, each bolt hitting right on target. Peter Quill was done playing around.

Yondu led Meredith across a dusty field and down a canyon. He didn’t speak to her at all. That was fine; Meredith had enough on her mind. Peter had been crying and Jason had been so strange, and now Yondu was acting weird, too. First and foremost, he’d admitted to kidnapping a dozen kids from families all over the galaxy. Secondly, he’d claimed that Jason had killed children. Thirdly, and of least importance, he’d called her the best mother in the galaxy. Meredith's cheeks burned. It was quite the compliment, but Meredith was so confused.

The canyon bellied out into a deep cavern. Yondu paused at the mouth, waiting for Meredith to catch up. She had hoisted her sundress up with fistfuls of fabric, quickly clambering over the rocks.

“Hurry up,” Yondu said, “we only got so much time.”
“What do you mean?”

“Don't ask.” Yondu's eyes darted around. “Just hurry up, dammit.”

Meredith followed Yondu through the cavern. It was cool and dry; holes in the ceiling provided some level of light. Dust motes floated in the air; besides their feet on the stone, there was no sound.

“There aren't any animals here,” Meredith noticed.

“If you were a planet,” Yondu said, “would you want some animals chewin' and pissin' on you all the damn time?”

“I guess not,” she said.

Meredith's feet skidded on the gravel; Yondu grabbed her around the waist.

“Watch it,” he growled.

He pulled her back onto her feet; her cheeks burned.

“You okay,” he asked.

“Fine.” Meredith smiled shakily. “Just nervous. This is a lot to take in.”

Yondu's jaw locked. He grabbed her by the wrist and tugged her deeper into the caverns.

“You ain't seen nothin' yet,” he said.

Meredith swallowed. Yondu dragged her down a slope and towards a cavern. Meredith squinted; it looked like a tree of stone, almost completely obscured by piles of oddly-shaped stones. Yondu's grip on her wrist tightened; Meredith's eyes widened as she felt his hands shake. Whatever this place was, Meredith thought, it bothered him. He stopped at the enterance to the cavern and jerked his head towards the odd stones.

“Look,” he said.

Meredith stepped forwards into the hazy light. The oddly-shaped stones weren't stones; they were bones. There were piles of them, hundreds of them, humanoid and non-humanoid. Her heartbeat shot into overdrive as her eyes flicked from skull to skull. Some were barely even solid plate; the skulls of infants, of toddlers, of children.

“I told you,” Yondu said hoarsely, “he kills 'em all.”

Pressing her hands over her mouth, Meredith stumbled back, her eyes wide. She felt tears burn in her eyes and streamed down her face.

“No,” she whispered, “no no no no.”

“Mery.” Yondu stepped forwards, his hands held up to steady her. “Mery, don't freak out.”

“They're children,” she said.

“I know. I know.” Yondu put his hands on her shoulders. “He had a lot of 'em, Mery.”

“He killed children,” Meredith sobbed, “children!”
“I know.”

Meredith stared at the skulls with complete terror, shaking her head in complete disbelief. As she backed up, the blue light appeared in her hands again. Yondu took a step back as the stones of the cavern began to shake.

“No, no no no,” Meredith was saying, “no no no.”

“Fuck, he's found us!” Yondu grabbed Meredith's wrist and tugged. “Come on, dammit!”

“Children,” she whispered, “he killed children.”

The cavern was vibrating; the tremors, Yondu realized, were coming from Meredith herself. Yondu let go of her wrist. Of course; Meredith had Ego's powers. What kind of fuck-forsaken idjit gave Meredith Quill powers that were controlled by emotion, Yondu cursed.

“Look at me, Mery,” he said.

She didn't move; the tremors were increasing in volume; the skulls were rattling over each other in mad dash for the ground, rolling as they grinned up at Yondu. If this kept up, she was going to bring the whole cavern down on top of them.

“Look at me, Meredith. Mery. Goddamn it, woman,” he barked, “look at me!”

Meredith's eyes snapped to his, and the tremors stopped. Yondu had never understood how her eyes could be such a clear, colorless gray, like polished silver.

“It ain't your fault. You can't change it. We gotta get your boy,” he said, “and we gotta go.”

He could see in her eyes that something wasn't connecting; they were filled with blank terror. Growling, he shook her slightly.

“Dammit, woman, snap out of it! Your boy needs you,” he said, “you hear me? Peter needs you!”

“Peter.” Meredith blinked. “Peter!”

“That's fuckin' right!”

“Yondu, we have to go.” Meredith's voice was stricken with terror. “We have to get Peter out of here.”

“No shit,” Yondu said, “that's what I've been tryin' to say all along! You don't listen, woman.”

He grabbed her by the wrist and started dragging her away from the skulls.

“You knew. That's why you took so long. That's why you didn't want to come.” Meredith stumbled behind him. “You were protecting us.”

Yondu forced a grin. “He's skinny. Good for thievin'. You cook and clean and keep shit together.”

They moved through the caverns. The silence pressed against them in awkward ways. Yondu's hand was sweaty on Meredith's wrist; her skin was cold to the touch.

“Sorry,” they both muttered, then jumped simultaneously, giving each other incredulous looks.

“Why you apologizin', idjit?” Yondu scowled.
“For not believing you about Ego,” she said, “back on the Eclector. We wouldn't be in this mess if I'd just listened. You did everything you could to protect me and Peter, and I just screamed at you for it. I'm so sorry, Yondu, I was... I was a bitch.”

“That's it, take parentin' advice from a goddamn space pirate.” Yondu wouldn't meet her eyes. “I never shoulda kept all that shit from you. Should have told you in the beginning that he was a prick. Lyin', deicin'... that ain't no way for a Ravager to treat his Terrans.”

It was the closest that Yondu had ever come to fully admitting he liked having her and Peter around, and it softened Meredith's heart. She leaned in and pressed a kiss against his cheek.

“You're a lyin' son of a bitch,” she said, “but you're a good man.”

“You got damn poor taste in 'good men','” Yondu grumbled, his face warming.

“You get to the Eclector and get the ship running. I'm going to go find Peter.” Meredith brushed her curls behind her ear. “If Jason shows up, I'll... I'll stall for as long as I can.”

Yondu didn't like the sound of that. He squared his shoulders and shook his head.

“No, Mery. You ain't facin' that fuck-forsaken jackass by yourself. I'll get the boy,” he said, “you get the ship.”

“Like anyone on the Eclector's going to listen to me. I'll get the boy,” she said, “you get the ship. I can handle Ego; I'm practically a Celestial, remember?”

Yondu shifted.

“This is a shit plan,” he said.

“I know, but It's the only one we've got. We go, we get Peter, we fly away, and...” Meredith took a shuddering breath. “I don't know what I'll do after that.”

“We throw an after-party on the Eclector,” Yondu said, “and we get shit-faced drunk together.”

It worked. Meredith grinned, pressing a hand to her forehead.

“Sounds great,” she said.

Yondu let go of her wrist, pulled out his gun, and handed it to her.

“I know you can't shoot worth a damn, but... just in case,” he said.

Meredith's hand curled around the grip, and she nodded. Meredith hurried across the stone to the cavern entrance. At the end of the cavern, she glanced back at Yondu. He put his hands on his hips and watched her run out onto the dusty field, headed straight to the main buildings. The wind pressed her floral sundress to her body; her entire left side was a perfect silhouette, her right side obscured by curls and cloth in the breeze. Yondu took a deep breath. She'd be alright. She was tough. If this was going to work, Yondu had to trust Meredith to take care of Peter; Yondu would have to take care of everyone else.

“You know,” Ego said as he lifted Peter into the air, “you're really nothing like your mother.”
“Go to hell, jackass,” Peter screamed.

Ego's upper lip curled.

“Clearly Udonta has rubbed off on you,” he said.

Peter spat at Ego. Ego's face twitched, and a tendril of blue energy came up behind him.

“Fine,” he said, “we'll test this the hard way.”

The tendril wrapped around Peter like the tentacle of some great squid. It pulsed around him; he tried to kick and flail, but it was as unforgiving as stone.

“Nothing,” Ego sighed, “just like all the others.”

The tendril retracted, and Peter was slowly lowered to the ground.

“It's a pity you aren't more like your mother,” Ego reasoned, “because then I wouldn't have to kill you.”

Peter's eyes widened. Ego flicked his hand; the tendril spiraled down towards the boy's chest. The ground shook, and the tendril dissipated. Ego faltered as he felt a sorrow shuddering deep within him, a shudder that shook the entire planet with grief and shock. Not his, Ego quickly realized, but Meredith's. Ego immediately located Meredith and Udonta himself in the tomb of his progeny. Ego sighed, his shoulders falling.

“Well,” he said, “guess I've got some explaining to do.”

Peter bolted for the door; Ego surrounded him in an energy bubble and rendered him unconscious.

“Unfortunately, Peter, it looks like I'll need to keep you alive for a little while longer.” Ego made the bubble invisible. “I'll need something to prevent your darling mother from trying to kill me, and the threat of splitting you into molecules just might do it.”

The Eclector was in an uproar; the captain had come back on and demanded that the ship be ready to launch immediately. Kraglin and Lunis were working like dogs repairing the stabilizers. Yondu himself had picked up an omnitool to help.

“Guess we're high-tailin' it, huh cap'n?” Kraglin ripped out some frayed wires. “A heads-up would be nice next time.”

“Shut up and work,” Yondu snarled.

Kraglin threaded replacement wires in with machine-like efficiency. Gef came on over the comms.

“Ready to ascend into orbit, captain!”

“Good enough.” Yondu pulled Lunis and Kraglin out of the stabilizer room. “Slap the panel on and let's get the fuck out of here.”

“What about the Quills,” Kraglin asked.

Yondu stood up and paced back and forth.
“Somethin' ain't right. The boy should be back by now, at least” he said.

“Peter?” Kraglin blinked. “Where did Peter go?”

“To distract Ego.”

“You sent Peter?” Kraglin nearly whacked his head on the stabilizer panel. “Cap'n, he's a goddamn kid! If he ain't got that light, he's practically a goner!”

“I know that, idjit. His momma's takin' care of him,” Yondu said.

“And if Ego decides he don't need her, neither?”

Kraglin and Yondu exchanged equally grim looks.

“Prep my ship,” Yondu said.

“Already did it.”

“What?” Yondu squinted.

“Figured you'd want your ship up and ready if the need came around for it. Took the liberty of loadin' up some proton torpedoes and a few gidgy-gadgets we had lyin' around.” Kraglin shrugged.

“Had a bad feelin' about this from the goddamn start, cap'n.”

Yondu was really starting to think seriously about Kraglin's promotion.

Meredith paced into the foyer with her heartbeat in her ears. Aside from the trickling of the fountain outside, she heard nothing. The quiet frightened her more than anything.

“Peter,” she whispered, “Peter?”

“Meredith.” Ego stepped out from behind a pillar with a charming smile. “So glad you're here.”

Meredith froze.

“Jason,” she asked, “where's Peter?”

“I'll show you.” Ego walked forwards, holding his hands up as if in surrender. “I'm not going to hurt you, Meredith.”

Meredith swallowed. Ego stood less than a foot away from her; her hand twitched towards Yondu's blaster.

“Where's Peter,” she demanded to know.

“Right here,” Ego said.

Ego tapped her forehead; Meredith's mind seemed to expand out of her body like a great balloon. Her brain became numb; it was like her whole body was moving through syrup. Her anger and fear dissipated in the great expanse. It kept expanding and spreading; she could see beyond the limits of the universe. She couldn't remember where she was, what she was doing, or even who she was.
Meredith Quill was lost in the splendor of eternity.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“Isn’t it?” Ego stroked her dazed, disoriented face. “Beauty appreciates beauty.”

“What is it,” she asked.

“It’s everything. All things. Eternity, forever.” Ego took her hands. “And Meredith, love, I want to spend it with you.”

“What made me so special,” Meredith asked.

“You’ve got the light,” Ego said.

Meredith blinked in confusion. “I’m special because I’m connected to your planet?”

“Yes, Meredith!” Ego seized her shoulders, nearly crying from happiness. “Don’t you see? You, me, and the light. The expansion, baby, it’s us!”

Something stirred in Meredith’s numb mind; her eyebrows contracted slightly.

“But Peter,” she said.

“We’ll have more, baby.” Ego’s eyes shined. “And they’ll all have the light. All of them. We’ll fill the universe with us. Just us, and our love.”

Meredith looked at him with wide, confused eyes. “What about Peter?”

“He’s mortal, my River-Lily,” Ego stroked her hair. “We’ll have a better one.”

“A better...” Meredith’s eyes flashed; the galaxies faded from within them as the balloon in her mind popped with a thunderous crack. “Are you kidding me? That’s your son!”

“I’ve had plenty of sons.” Ego gestured to the white display. “And daughters, too.”

Meredith saw it transform, depicting Ego in the arms of thousands of women from thousands of species. Her heart was lodged in her throat; Yondu had been right about the children, but she hadn’t thought about the mothers. Meredith wasn’t special; she was just one woman in a line of millions. Ego had betrayed them all.

“You screwed them,” she said, “and then you left and never came back.”

“But not you,” he said, “I came back for you. I love you, Meredith.”

“You lied to them. You betrayed them. You’re worse than Yondu ever was.” Her blood was on fire. “Do you know how goddamn hard it is to raise a kid alone? Do you know what you did to those women?”

“It was all for the sake of the expansion,” he said, “they didn't mean anything to me. Not like you do. Yondu brought some of them to me. It broke the code, so he was exiled, but I compensated him handsomely.”

“You tricked him,” Meredith said, “and he lost everything.”

“He was incredibly easy to trick. Funny,” Ego chuckled, “he wouldn't bring them to me at first. I had
to swear not to hurt them. And I didn't; their deaths were completely painless.”

Meredith's blood ran cold. “Where's Peter?”

“Meredith, he's only temporary.” Ego cupped her face. “We're forever.”

“Then forever's gonna suck!” Meredith kicked him in the shin. “Where is my baby? What have you done with Peter?”

“Meredith, please!”

“Tell me where my baby is!” Meredith pulled out Yondu's blaster and aimed it at his chest. “Don't fuck around with me, Jason! I've spent four months among the hardest, biggest sons-of-bitches that ever flew a goddamned spaceship! I will not hesitate to blow your head off like a goddamn grape!”

“Oh please, you've never even fired a – ”

The rest of his words were drowned out by blaster fire. Meredith was no great shot, but she knew how to pull a trigger. Wild blue bolts of energy cut holes in Ego's physical form. When his face finally formed back, he was scowling.

“Fine! He's here, he's right here!”

Ego pulled up a large ball of energy; when it popped, Peter fell to the ground. Peter wasn't moving. Meredith's insides were as cold as ice.

“Peter,” she breathed.

“He's alive, Meredith.” Ego's voice took on an edge. “And if you want him to stay that way, you're going to do exactly what I say.”

Meredith couldn't look away from Peter. Ego was right; a slight rise and fall of the chest told Meredith that her son was still alive.

“First, you're going to provide the energy I need to expand to the planets that I've anchored myself to. Secondly, you're going to behave and cease this ridiculous protesting. Thirdly, when the expansion is complete, we are going to have children, they are going to have the light, and you,” Ego said with a thunderous voice, “are never going to leave me.”

“And Peter,” she asked.

“He'll live.” There was a cold light in Ego's eyes. “You can have him; I don't want him.”

Hot tears dripped down Meredith's face.

“Fine,” she said, “just don't kill Peter.”

Ego smiled. A blue-white tendril of power snaked up and pierced Meredith through the chest. All of Meredith's nerves exploded with fire. She gritted her teeth, but accepted the pain. This was nothing.

Having her body used as a battery was nothing compared to dying of cancer. It was nothing compared to raising her kid alone. It was nothing compared to realizing that Yondu had been right, Meredith was wrong, and Peter was going to suffer because of it. It would have been better if Meredith had never had the spark. It would have been better if Yondu had just taken Peter and Meredith would have died. She wanted to protect her baby; instead, she'd brought him to a genocidal child-killing planet. Meredith remembered the flower on Earth and her heart broke further. Because
of her mistake, her home planet was being destroyed. Yondu, Kraglin, and the rest of the Ravagers were probably dead because of her. Peter would suffer because of her. Tears were streaming down her face as the power tendril drained her energy. Yondu had been right, except for one thing. He had been wrong about Meredith.

She was the worst mother in the galaxy.
“Hey there, jackass!”

As soon as she heard Yondu's voice, Meredith's head snapped up. Yondu's M-craft crashed through the pillars and slammed into Ego; the power tendril dissipated, and Meredith fell to the ground. Yondu leapt out of the ship scooped up Peter's body.

“Is he...” Meredith could scarcely breathe. Her life depended on the answer.

“He's alive,” Yondu snarled, “no thanks to that jackass you call his father.”

Kraglin helped Meredith get on the craft, but she was more preoccupied with Peter. The boy's breath was shallow and he was bleeding from a shallow gash in his arm. Kraglin immediately took to treating the minor wounds while Meredith went to the controls. She dropped into the co-pilot's seat.

“You let him use you like a goddamn battery?” Yondu's knuckles were pale on the steering mechanism. “What the fuck is wrong with you, woman?”

“I didn't have a choice.” Meredith blinked away her tears. “He threatened to kill Peter.”


Yondu smashed the spaceship straight through Ego's reforming body and out into the light. Down below, Meredith could see the statue of herself quickly melting.

“Guess he's pretty pissed at me,” she said.

“Peter's stable,” Kraglin called.

“Then let's get the fuck out of here,” Yondu said.

“We can't. That light, or whatever, what he was using me for. He's using that power to take over the galaxy.” Meredith slammed the controls, switching piloting over to her. “We have to go into the center of the planet, find his core, and kill that son of a bitch.”

“Are you nuts?” Kraglin's eyes boggled. “He's a fuckin' planet!”

“He's going to take over Terra. Xandar. Everywhere he's ever been.” Meredith locked her jaw.

“We're stopping him.”

“Meredith...” Yondu reached to take control of the ship.
“Yondu,” she said, “those kids that died had moms like me. They had families like me. Those kids died because of Ego; I'm not letting those families, those planets, die because of me.”

Meredith swerved down to the Eclector; it was prepping for take-off. She unhooked her belt, allowing it to whip back into the wall, and stood up.

“Kraglin,” she said, “take Peter. You get him out of here safe, you understand?”

Kraglin nodded, immediately taking Peter to the Ravager's ship. The ramp began to close. Meredith and Yondu looked at each other, nothing but the wind and Ego's howling passing between them.

Meredith brushed her curls out of her eyes. “Yondu, you can get out if you want, but I just hijacked your ship and I'm gonna go blow up the planet with it. If you want to come along, I can think of worse people to die next to.”

Yondu stared at her with an odd expression.

“What,” she said.

Yondu reached over and muted the comms.

“Say that thing you call me,” he mumbled.

“Big blue asshole?”

“The other thing, dammit.”

Meredith's cheeks warmed. “...big daddy?”

Yondu dropped back into the pilot's seat. The ship jerked up; Meredith lost her balance and stumbled to the co-pilot's seat. While the Eclector soared away, Yondu flew towards the gorge.

“What is it about that,” she asked, “that you like so damn much?”

“None of your goddamn business.” Yondu flew the craft down a huge gorge, headed for the center of the planet. “What's the plan?”

“I get to the center, I use my special planet powers to open a hole, and then we use these.” Meredith reached into a box and pulled out some plasma tubes.

“What the fuck? Why are those here?”

“Peter kept them after the Modari mission.” Meredith hooked her belt. “He put them in your ship.”

“Those have been here the whole goddamn time?” Yondu's eyes were wide. “Why the fuck didn't he tell me that?”

“It wasn't important that you know.” Meredith glared at Yondu. “By the way, never use my son to heist a national bank ever again.”

“He's good at it.”

“That ain't no excuse.” Meredith handed Yondu the detonator.

Yondu took it and put it in his jacket pocket. “You sound like Kraglin.”
“If both of us end up kickin' the bucket down here,” Meredith said, “I hope they look after each other. Kraglin's like a brother to Peter.”

“And if I die, he ends up cap'n.” Yondu almost smiled. “Sounds like a shitload of responsibilities for one Xandarian.”

“Exactly.” Meredith prepped the weapons system. “So let's try not to die.”

A blue tendril shot through the rock and nearly severed the ship in half; only Yondu's exceptional piloting saved their lives.

“Mother of fuck!” Yondu spiraled downward.

“Oh my God, oh my God!” Meredith clung to the side of her seat, eyes wide. “We're gonna die.”

“Don't freak out.” Yondu swerved through the tendrils. “This fucker ain't killed you yet, and he ain't killin' you today neither. You're in my hands now, Star-Queen.”

Meredith's face warmed. The protectiveness was one thing; the Star-Queen name was an altogether new level of sweetness, and she was having trouble ignoring the heat in her cheeks. Yondu flew through the tendrils, veering downwards into the hollow mantle of the planet. Meredith pointed at a huge, discolored sphere.

“There, that's the core,” she said.

“Do your magic planet shit,” Yondu said.

“It won't work from in here; the ore's too thick,” she said, “I have to touch it.”

Yondu cursed. “What do we do if he shows up?”

“Whatever it takes to distract him.” Meredith took a deep breath. “Even if we only get his attention for five minutes, that's five minutes to help Peter escape.”

Yondu looked at her. “You're always thinkin' about your boy.”

“Yeah, but this time it ain't just about Peter.” She smiled. “The galaxy's full of some pretty amazing folks. They're rough and tumble, but they're good people, and they're worth taking care of.”

“You're a bad judge of character,” Yondu grumbled as he pulled up next to the core.

“Don't have to tell me twice,” Meredith said, “my ex-boyfriend was a child-killing planet. My friends are all heavy-drinking space pirates, and my best friend is a big blue asshole with questionable morals who kills people for money.”

Yondu's hands were numb on the steering mechanism. “Best friend, huh?”

“Oh, get over it.” Meredith unhooked her belt and went to the back of the ship.

“I wasn't complainin','” he mumbled.

Laughing, Meredith leapt out of the back of the ship. The wind caught the skirt of her floral sundress, billowing it around her as she fell. Her hands caught on the rough ore, and she clung to the core. She was so close to the center that pulling the energy was easy; slowly, she carved a tunnel into the center.
“No!”

It was Ego. A blue tendril slammed down from above, piercing the M-craft like a shiskebab. Meredith gripped onto the core as the ship plummeted beneath her, splitting in half as it crashed against the rocks below.

“Yondu,” Meredith screamed.

Despite her volume, Meredith couldn't hear herself over the sounds of the ship being demolished. Screwing her eyes tight against the coming tears, she put everything she had into carving the hole. *This is for Peter. Papa. Kraglin. Yondu. Ravagers. Xandar. Earth. The galaxy.*

“Meredith, stop!” Ego's voice echoed again, and this time she could feel him siphoning away her energy. “This isn't how it's supposed to be.”

“You tried to kill Peter.” Meredith sobbed. “You didn't love me, you didn't love a damn thing I cared about. You selfish bastard!”

A great rush of energy forced her backwards; Meredith found herself standing a few yards away from the core.

“Meredith!” Ego appeared in front of her, grasping her hands. “Meredith of course I love you.”

“Like hell you do!” Meredith's anger made the rocks around her quiver. “Because of you, I can't just *die.* I've died over and over again. This light, this immortality... it's a curse. You've no idea how much pain you put me through. How much pain you put Peter through! He had to watch me die. I had to die, Jason, or Ego, or whatever you are! Over and over, living every day on the brink of death. You don't know that pain.”

“If I'd known how much that would have tortured you, I'd never have given you that tumor!” Ego clutched her hands. “If I'd known you'd take the light, I would have taken you with me. I'll never forgive myself for not seeing that sooner, my River-Lily.”

“Given me the...” Meredith couldn't breathe. “You gave me brain cancer?”

“I thought Peter had the light,” Ego explained, “I thought that if you lived, I'd never leave Terra and the expansion would die. I had no choice.”

“It was me or the expansion,” Meredith realized, “and you chose the expansion.”

“My life's purpose!” Ego pressed his hand to her cheek.

There was something hot coiling in Meredith's chest; a white-hot steel spring that was building up energy. Meredith nodded, blinking back tears.

“I can understand that,” she said, “I can understand giving up on people you loved in order to protect your life's purpose.”

“You can?” Ego's eyes brimmed with joy.

“Yeah, honey, I can,” Meredith said calmly, “and my life's purpose? His name is Peter. And Jason, honey, I'm giving up on you.”

Ego never knew what hit him, but Meredith did; the combined wreckage of Yondu's ship, compressed and welded together by Meredith's righteous fury. It slammed into Ego like a bowling
ball, flattening him and dispersing his physical form. Meredith smashed the ship onto his physical form over and over again, until Ego's form was completely gone. If Yondu were here, Meredith thought, he'd be laughing.

“Sorry about your ship, big daddy,” Meredith breathed, walking back towards the core, “but I needed a big ol' bullet.”

She placed her hands back on the core and kept carving. The plasma tubes were still hanging from her waist; she was lucky they hadn't remotely detonated when Yondu and his ship had fallen. Yondu had the detonator, Meredith remembered, and now he was... She shuddered. Meredith was on her own; she would have to ignite these herself. There would be no going home to Terra. Meredith took a deep breath. Peter would have to go on without her. Meredith was meant to die on Terra four months ago; this right here, this was just borrowed time. It was time for her to go, and to go for real this time. With Ego fighting her, moving the ore of the core was like swimming through molasses, but the thought of Peter and Kraglin escaping drove Meredith onwards.

“Meredith, please.” Ego had reformed, this time with tears in his eyes. “I didn't mean to hurt you.”

“You meant to kill me and my son,” Meredith said, “and that's pretty damn hurtful.”

“But you understand, you always understand.” Ego dragged her away from the core; she fought him, but he pulled stones from the ground and tried to wrap her in them. “You're my River-Lily. No one understands me like you do.”

“I thought I did understand you, Jason.” Meredith struggled against the stone bindings. “I thought you were a good man. A good father. Turns out Yondu's right; I'm a damn bad judge of character. Hell, he turned out to be a better papa for Peter than you did.”

A flash of anger crossed Ego's face. “He kept you both from me.”

“Lord knows why,” Meredith choked a laugh, “we were annoyin' as hell.”

“Boy's skinny. Good for thievin'. You're not bad to look at and you cook a mean stew,” was the answer.

Meredith and Ego looked up; Yondu had flown up out of the wreckage by holding onto his arrow. He dropped down and whistled, allowing his arrow to break off the rock bindings on Meredith.

“You,” Ego snarled, “you took them from me.”

“You said you wouldn't hurt them kids!” Yondu roared, slamming his fist into Ego's nose. “You was their damn father! You're not bad to look at and you cook a mean stew,” was the answer.

Meredith's heart swelled with pride, but she still had a task to do. She ran back to the core and directed that pride into finishing the tunnel to the core. Yondu was a big blue asshole, but he'd taught Peter to shoot, to fly, to stand up for himself... all the things a father should teach. Meredith felt more kindly towards Yondu and the Ravagers than she'd ever felt before. If she died, she thought, she hoped Yondu made it out. He'd be a good parent for Peter; she realized that now.

A glint of blue light shone at the bottom; the tunnel was complete. Meredith started rolling plasma tubes down the tunnel, praying they didn't detonate when they clinked together.

“Yondu!” Meredith turned around. “Yondu, we have to get out of here!”
"No shit," Yondu yelled as he wrestled Ego, "but you crumpled up our ship into a fuckin' pinball!"

Meredith winced. "Not my smartest decision."

"You'll never leave," Ego yelled, "you cannot defeat- shit!"

Yondu plowed his fist into Ego's jaw. Ego stumbled back out of sheer shock.

"Do you ever stop talkin' about your fuckin' self," Yondu growled.

"You insipid insect!" Roaring, Ego threw Yondu against the stone like a rag-doll. "You'll never escape!"

Above him, Meredith was dumping plasma into the core; Ego was completely focused on killing the Ravager captain. Yondu quickly realized he had to keep it that way.

"Look, dirt-dick," Yondu said, "out of a million Ravagers in the universe, you're tryin' to kill the wrong damn one."

"You're not a Ravager; you're pathetic," Ego snarled.

A tendril whipped out, and Yondu whistled; the arrow pierced through it, dispelling it.

"I'm pathetic," Yondu laughed, then winced slightly; it felt like he'd broken a rib in the fall, but that didn't matter right now. "You're the one who pissed off the craziest goddamn Terran in the galaxy. All that planet knowledge don't amount to a hill of shit when it comes to women, huh?"

"What?" Ego squinted.

"You son of a bitch, after all your posturin' about takin' over the galaxy, you can't stop her, and you sure as hell can't stop me!"

Yondu slammed his fist against his chest in an aggressive Ravager salute. If he was going out, he was going out the way Stakar would want him to; a Ravager protecting their own. Ego's tendrils wrapped around Yondu's feet and started dragging him into the ground. The sand sucked up his legs, crushing his bottom ribs.

"Fuck you, jackass," he bellowed, "fuck you and go to hell!"

Ego smiled coldly. Yondu looked at Meredith; she'd just finished dumping the last of the plasma tubes down the hole. She looked at Yondu, and from where he knelt he could see her eyes widen.

"You're fucked now, jackass," Yondu said to Ego.

"Oh please," Ego sniffed, "if you were twice as smart as you think you are, you'd still be an idiot."

Yondu cracked a grin. "Luckily I got a habit of pickin' up clever Terrans."

This time, Ego recognized the feeling of getting smashed by the remains of Yondu's ship. Meredith threw the big metal ball at him, smashing it onto Ego over and over again until his physical form shattered. Knowing she had only seconds, Meredith ran over and pulled Yondu up out of the sand.

"Shoulda just left me," Yondu wheezed.

"How the hell am I supposed to get out when you're the one with the magic arrow and the detonator?" Meredith crossed her arms. "You're convenient, that's it."

“Just get us out of her and hit the 'boom' button! We don't have a lot of time.” Meredith looked at where Ego was already reforming.

Yondu reached out and grabbed Meredith around the waist. She looked up in alarm, but Yondu was glaring at Ego.

“He had Peter, and he had you,” Yondu snarled, “and that wasn't enough for him? Selfish jackass.”

Meredith stared up at Yondu. Damn, he was ugly as sin. There was uneven stubble all over his face. His teeth were as misshapen and crooked as ever, and his skin was smeared with dirt. A trail of blood from his bottom lip told her that it was busted.

Not that any of it mattered; she kissed him anyway. His lips were warm and rough; she tasted the blood off his lip. She felt the ground disappear from under her feet; the arrow was lifting them out of the gorge. She kissed him softly, tenderly, stroking her thumb along his cheekbone. When Meredith finally pulled back, his vulnerable expression was unlike anything she'd ever seen. For a very brief moment, he looked a little like Peter.

Yondu snapped back to his typical scowl. “The hell? What was that for?”

“That was a nonverbal thank you for saving my life,” Meredith explained as they soared through the mantle, “so don't think you'll be getting another one.”

“If that was for savin' you,” he asked slyly, “what do I get for savin' the galaxy?”

Meredith's hand slid into his pants pocket. For a moment Yondu was stunned, but then she tugged out the detonator and smashed her thumb onto the button. Down below, there was an unearthly scream as the core was obliterated. Ego began to crumble beneath them.

“Technically,” Meredith chuckled, “I just saved the galaxy. You can be my sidekick.”

“Har har har,” Yondu growled.

Meredith hugged him, laughing.

"We did it," she said, "we lived!"

“What are you so happy about,” Yondu said, “we're still floating in the middle of the god-damned stratosphere with no way back to the ship.”

“And the planet's blown to pieces and neither of us can survive in space.” Meredith laughed and leaned her forehead against his chest. “Yeah, we're still gonna die.”

Yondu looked at the horizon line, then down at Meredith. “Fuck it. I can think of worse people to die next to.”

She smiled up at him. “You stole my line, asshole.”

Yondu laughed. A jet of fire shot next to them; Yondu cursed and pulled them away. Meredith blinked, then frowned. She could see over his shoulder, to where something dark was approaching them.

Meredith squinted. “Is that...”
An M-craft ship came swooping onto the horizon. It dodged the jets of fire that were beginning to spurt from the dying planet as it made its approach.

“Kraglin,” Yondu said.

“He'll get killed!” Meredith clung to Yondu. “What's he doing?”

“Savin’ his cap'n and Ms. Quill.” Yondu chuckled. “Crazy Xandarian son-of-a-bitch.”

The ship swung right next to them. The loading ramp dropped like a broken jaw, and Yondu threw Meredith onto it. She landed hard, but got up fast. Yondu leapt for it, but a jet of fire shot right next to the ship; it shook, and Yondu fell just short.

“Fuck!” His eyes shot wide as his hand barely missed the edge of the loading ramp.

A strong hand grasped his. Yondu's head snapped up. Kraglin's jaw was locked as he gripped Yondu's hand like death itself. The Xandarian pulled Yondu up, his eyes like ice. Meredith pulled the lever and the loading ramp began to shut; Yondu gave a whistle and the arrow returned just as the ramp snapped closed. Kraglin ran back to the front and dropped into the pilot's seat.

“Move,” Yondu panted as he stowed his arrow, “I'll fly.”

“Cap'n, with all due respect?” Kraglin slammed on the thrusters, weaving through the chunks of destroyed planet. “Sit down, shut up, and don't touch anything.”

Yondu's face went slack. Meredith grinned and pushed him down one of the backseats. She pulled the safety rig on him and kissed his cheek.

“You did good with that one,” she said, “a real Ravager, through and through.”

Yondu blinked in disbelief as Meredith buckled herself into the other backseat. Kraglin swerved to avoid a jet of fire, then spiraled through some shrapnel. He put his foot flat on the thrusters, racing the exploding planet. Fire and stones went shooting past the ship like oversized bullets; Kraglin dodged them all, his serene expression never changing. The ship bolted out of the stratosphere, the atmosphere burning against the hull. The Eclector hung like some great ugly ornament on the star-speckled sky; Kraglin spun to avoid a large chunk of planet, then soared towards the Eclector, leaving the danger behind.

“There we go, cap'n,” Kraglin said calmly, “you can resume command now.”

Meredith's eyebrows disappeared up into her curls. She looked at Yondu and her heart gave a pang. He was leaning his head on his hand, grinning from ear to ear. Meredith had never seen him look so proud.

“Take 'er in, first-mate,” he said.

A satisfied grin spread across Kraglin's face.

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin hit the comms. “Gef. We're comin' in. Extraction complete.”

“No can do, Krags,” Gef said.


“The hangar bay door got banged up by one o' those flyin' meteorites and now it won't open. We've got maintenance on it, but for now it's shut.” Gef's voice was slightly crackly over the comms.
“You'll have to fly up the loading ramp.”

Kraglin sighed. “Prep the tractor beam; I want the cap'n and Ms. Quill off this ship before I try threading that needle.”

“Aye,” Gef said.

Kraglin steered the ship in front of the Eclector; a blue beam of light was shining down.

“You two go ahead. I'll get this ship onboard in one piece, cap'n.” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “Maybe not a pretty piece, but one piece.”

Yondu and Meredith stood at the top of the loading ramp; it slowly descended. They could see the fiery explosion and chunks of rock that used to be Ego.

“Bye, Jason,” Meredith said, “you... you absolute...”

“Jackass,” Yondu finished.

“Jackass,” Meredith agreed.

Yondu and Meredith leapt for the tractor beam. The short space between the ship and the beam was painfully cold, but the beam was warm and full of oxygen. The beam began to pull them into the ship. Meredith looked up at the blue light, then at Yondu, and smiled.

“Last time we did this,” Yondu said, “you bit me in the fuckin' neck.”

Meredith laughed. “You tasted awful.”

“How'd I taste five minutes ago,” he growled.

“Exactly like you did the first time,” she said, “like Centaurian blood. Your lip's busted.”

“Is it?” Yondu flicked his tongue over the cut in his mouth. “Damn.”

Meredith reached up and slid her thumb across his bottom lip, wiping the blood away.

“But still, a little better this time.” She smiled. “You did good, Yondu.”

Yondu couldn't quite look at her. “You too, Star-Queen.”

The tractor beam pulled them into the Eclector. As soon as they were on board, Kraglin steered the ship through the loading ramp. It was a difficult maneuver; he had only a yard of clearance on either side. For Kraglin, that was more than enough. He glided the ship into the loading bay with perfect grace. The Eclector's thrusters fired up, and the ship began to soar away.

The planet Ego finally imploded in a burst of green and blue fire; the last shock wave slammed into the Eclector, forcing it away. The remains of Ego sparkled for a minute, and then the light passed, leaving only the lifeless shell behind. Throughout the galaxy, the violent expansion ceased; hundreds of thousands of planets lived on, untouched by Ego's curse. The bones of his children were burned to ash in the explosion; the only thing that remained of Ego was the little half-Terran, half-Celestial who sat on his mother's bunk, mourned not his father's passing, and waited for his heroes to return.
Healing

Chapter Summary

Yondu and Meredith take some time to recover from the wounds Ego's given them, both physically and emotionally.

(This fic has over 20,000 hits. Holy snapdragons, y'all, thank you so much! I really appreciate all the comments, kudos, and the time you've taken to read this. Some of you have even been sharing this on Tumblr and such (YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE YOU BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE) and I am extremely flattered! If you like this fic and you want to share it with people, please do! I am so grateful for all of you and I want you to know that you, yes YOU, have become honorary Ravagers for sticking with this fic until Ego kicked the bucket! <3 <3 <3)

When Kraglin came off the ramp, he was greeted by a sea of shocked faces. Every pilot on the Eclector was gathered in a semi-circle around the base of the ramp. Kraglin paced down the ramp leisurely.

“How'd you do it,” one of them asked in awe.

“Cap'n's in trouble,” Kraglin said as he walked by, “the first mate gets him out of it. Don't matter how, don't matter what, don't matter when.”

“We didn't think we'd ever see you again,” one of the pilots said.

Kraglin stopped and turned around to face him fully. All traces of awkwardness were gone from him; he stood tall and firm, a glint in his eye.

“Don't ever bet against me,” he said.

The other pilots were stunned. Kraglin straightened his flight jacket and paced out of the hangar bay. As soon as he was out of view, he broke into a huge grin. He'd done it. They'd called him crazy, begged him not to go, insisted he'd die trying, but Kraglin had saved Ms. Quill and the cap'n. He felt like a million units, and it showed in the bounce of his feet. Kraglin Obfonteri, first mate; Kraglin thought it had a damn nice ring to it, honestly.

Kraglin found the cap'n and Ms. Quill in the quarters; Yondu was lying on his side, gritting his teeth in pain.

“Broken rib,” Yondu grunted.

Kraglin frowned, his eyebrows contracting.

“Should we set course for Dr. Mareet,” he asked.

“Yeah.” Yondu winced. “This thing punctures a lung and I'm fucked.”
Meredith bit her lips together. Kraglin pressed a finger to his comm unit.

“Gef, set course for the doctor. Fast, dammit, now.” Kraglin looked at Meredith. “Think you can handle watchin' over the cap'n again, Ms. Q?”

“I'll manage.” Meredith smiled. “Where's Peter?”

“In your room, waitin' for the two of you.” Kraglin hit the comm link again. “Peter? Your momma's up in the quarters.”

“The boy alright,” Yondu grunted.

“Fine, cap'n. Just a little shook up, and I figure seein' you two alive ought to fix that,” Kraglin said.

Kraglin left the quarters.

“He seems to really like his new promotion,” Meredith chuckled.

“Good.” Yondu closed his eyes. “Fucker deserves it for that crazy stunt he pulled.”

“It was very brave. You taught him well,” Meredith said.

“I didn't teach him that. That's all him,” Yondu guaranteed, “one-hundred percent.”

Meredith chuckled. She sat on the edge of Yondu's bed.

“How's the rib,” she asked.

“Hurts like the motherfuckin' fires of hell,” Yondu said through gritted teeth.

“I'll get you some harberry juice.”

Meredith got up to leave, but Yondu gripped her wrist.

“Abandonin' your goddamn post,” he asked.

“Fine. I'll let Peter get it when he shows up.” Meredith sat back down, biting her lips together.

Yondu noticed. “Nervous, Mery?”

“Worried. That was a lot for a kid to take in,” she said, “and I'm worried that he'll have nightmares about it.”

“He will,” Yondu said, “and then they'll go away. Kids is damn resilient, Mery. They can snap back from more than you think.”

Meredith sighed and rubbed the silver scars on her arms. The portal opened; Peter came in like a chestnut-haired blur.

“Mom,” he shrieked.

“Peter!”

The Quills hugged in the middle of the quarters, Peter leaping into his mother's arms. Meredith held him close as she could, kissing his cheeks.

“You're okay,” Peter half-laughed, half-sobbed.
“Course I am, honey,” Meredith chuckled. “It'll take more than a planet to take me out.”

“I was so scared,” Peter said.

Meredith wiped the tears off his face.

“You don't have to be scared of Ego any more,” she promised, “because he's dead and he's never coming back.”

“Ever,” Yondu added.

Peter hugged Meredith in relief.

“You're okay,” he whispered through his tears.

“I'm doin' just fine, baby.” Meredith sat on Yondu's bed, placing Peter in her lap. “But Yondu's a little under the weather.”

“Is he gonna be okay,” Peter asked with a note of panic in his voice.

“I'll be fine,” Yondu grunted.

“It'll take a lot more than a planet to stop Yondu, too,” Meredith added.

Peter grinned at both of them, hugging his mother tightly. Meredith held her son close with her left arm; her right hand lay gently on the bed next to Yondu. Yondu looked up at the two Terrans and felt the sharp agony in his side lessen very slightly. He'd done it. They were safe. Ego was gone. Yondu sighed, then cursed as a bolt of pain rang through his ribs.

“Fuck,” he snarled.

“What is it?” Meredith frowned and grabbed his arm. “Ribs?”

“Ribs,” he panted.

“Peter, honey, go get some harberry juice from the kitchen. Top shelf, dark blue bottle; get someone tall to help you get it down.” Meredith set Peter on the floor. “Don't try and climb up to get it, you hear?”

“I hear, I hear,” Peter said as he scampered off.

“Good kid,” Yondu mumbled.

“Why is it that whenever you're injured, you start being nice,” Meredith asked.

“Earnin' brownie points in case I kick the bucket.”

Meredith laughed.

“Remember, I told you on Emris that I'd find you in the afterlife. So when you get there, just wait at the bar. I'll show up eventually,” Meredith joked.

“By the time you show up I'll be forty drinks below.” Yondu gave her a jagged grin. “Goddamn death-defyin' Terrans.”

“It comes in handy,” Meredith allowed, “although I can't take credit for surviving cancer. Ironically,
Ego gave me the antidote to the disease he planted in me.”

“Disease?” Yondu squinted. “That fucker gave you the cancer?”

“Didn't I tell.. Oh, right, you weren't there for that fun revelation.” Meredith sighed. “Yeah. He planted the cancer in me when he came back. I guess he wanted to make sure Peter survived infancy before he offed me.”


“It's fine.” Meredith bit her lips together. “He also gave me the light, which kept me alive. Balanced it out, I guess.”

“Think about how many goddamn times you've died,” Yondu snapped, “and tell me that's even. Tell me that him makin' you suffer don't matter.”

Meredith sighed and put her face in her hands.

“It's not even and it's not fine,” she admitted, “but I can't do anything about it now.”

“You can be goddamn honest and say you're pissed as fuck.”

Meredith took her face out of her hands. Yondu's jaw was locked, and there was a fire in his eyes.

“You're right.” Meredith sighed and rubbed her arms. “Look, it's not that I'm not angry, but I can't do anything about it. What am I supposed to do, just hold onto it forever? That can't be right.”

“Be pissed. Be honestly fully totally fuckin' pissed,” Yondu said.

Meredith closed her eyes and bit her lips together hard.

“Done,” she said.

“Now take a deep goddamn breath,” he said, “and let it go.”

Meredith opened her eyes, frowning.

“I thought you said I was supposed to be angry,” she asked.

“I said you were supposed to be honest and pissed.” Yondu spoke through gritted teeth. “If you don't let yourself feel it, you ain't gonna be able to get rid of it.”

Meredith pondered that for a second.

“Makes sense.” She took a deep breath. “Okay. Letting it go.”

Yondu watched her take a few deep breaths. He reached out with his right hand and grasped her left.

“Hey,” he said hoarsely, “it ain't your fault.”

Meredith looked down at him with slightly widened eyes.

“How did you know I was thinking that,” she asked.

“I thought about it a lot after I saw the skulls. Figured you'd be thinkin' about it too.”

“I'm going to have nightmares about that.”
“I do,” Yondu admitted, “still do. Always will, probably.”

“I just...” Meredith exhaled. “Maybe if I’d been better, if I’d loved him more, he would have stayed on Earth and he never would have killed those children. He thought about it, but I just wasn’t enough.”

“He nearly gave it all up for you,” Yondu said.

“Nearly isn’t enough.” Meredith sighed. “Not nearly enough.”

Yondu grunted. Meredith looked at the ceiling, blinking back tears.

“Don’t you fuckin’ dare cry a goddamn tear over that fucker. Ain’t you cried enough on his account,” Yondu asked.

“I guess.” Meredith sniffed.

“And what’s all this bullshit about lovin’ somebody more? You’re motherfuckin’ son-of-a-bitchin’ Meredith goddamn Quill.” Yondu chuckled, then winced as pain stabbed him in the side. “Mery, nobody gives a fuck about nobody like you give a fuck about everybody.”

Meredith smiled for a second, but it quickly slid off her face.

“I’m an idiot,” she said.

“Don’t say that.” Yondu spoke in clipped, serious fragments. “You love, Mery. You love and don’t let a goddamn thing stop you.”

“That’s not a very Ravager thing to say,” Meredith teased.

She was absolutely right; Ravagers never said love. But, Yondu was far past the point of giving a fuck about that; besides, since he technically wasn't a Ravager anymore, he could say whatever the fuck he wanted.

“I don’t give a fuck. If that jackass woulda loved you half as much as he loved himself, he wouldn't be a smokin' pile of gravel right now.” Yondu let go of her hand and pressed it to his wound, baring his teeth. “You ain’t an idiot.”

“Yes I am,” she said softly, “because I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“I knew Ego was a jackass,” she said. “even when I was first dating him.”

Yondu frowned. “I thought you thought he was a goddamn angel?”

“Nope. I knew he was a jackass, the moment I met him. Something about his eyes just seemed wrong. But he was smooth, and I was so damn stupid. When you're young, you start thinking you'll never find anyone, so you panic. You're lonely.”

Yondu kept his eyes on her face. Loneliness was something he could understand.

“He talked so much about himself. Never asked me anything about how I saw the world or how I felt. I was just this... toy to him, I guess. A favorite toy, but still. I wasn't supposed to be anything more than the plain-Jane curly-haired blonde he wanted me to be.” Meredith took a deep breath. “And since that was what he wanted, that's what I turned into. He was so smooth, so persuasive.”
“I know the goddamn feeling,” Yondu muttered, “that fucker tricked me too.”

“You know how he was. And I was so young and lonely and so incredibly stupid. He caught me like a fly in a spider's web.” Meredith let out a frustrated sigh. “Did he ask me to introduce him to my father? No. Did he care about my career? No. Did he want to get married? No. He screwed me in the back of his car while we were parked in the Dairy Queen parking lot. Honestly, the sex wasn't even that good.”

Yondu swallowed; hearing Meredith talk smack about Ego should not have been as satisfying as it was.

“And so I got pregnant with Peter,” she continued, “and then four years later he came back from space like everything was normal. I wanted to scream at him, but I was so scared and so alone. I thought I needed him. Then, poof, in less than an hour he was gone. He left me living at home with my father raising a kid out of wedlock from a man from space. He was a jackass, I knew it the whole time.”

“So why were you so goddamn excited to see him again?”

“Because I spent the first eight years of Peter's life convincing myself that Ego hadn't been a mistake. He couldn't have been; I had Peter because of him, and Peter was perfect. Ego had been an angel, I convinced myself. I really did. I lied to myself, because the thought that I'd screwed up and now Peter was going to grow up without a papa because I picked the wrong man...” Meredith closed her eyes. “It just tore me up. I had to believe Ego would come back for him. And then I got sick, and you know what happened from there.”

“You wanted to believe he wasn't a mistake.” Yondu stared at the ceiling. “I can get that.”

“And then you told me he was a jackass,” she said, “and I did everything I could to not believe you.”

“And I was right,” he growled.

“You were right. I just didn't want to believe that I'd screwed up.” Meredith exhaled. “But I did. I slept with a horrible man, fell for his stupid charms, got pregnant, and then didn't even find a proper father for Peter. I had eight years to date and I spent all that time convincing myself that my mistake had been a good thing.”

“That's the dumbest goddamn thing I've ever heard of,” Yondu said.

“Yeah.” Something broke in Meredith's voice as she laughed. “I'm a fool.”

Fuck. Usually when Yondu told Meredith that she was being stupid, she argued back. Her agreeing threw him off. Yondu scowled.

“You fucked up. You made a mistake. Now the fucker's dead. Let it go, Mery,” Yondu said, “you've still got a boy to worry about.”

“I know.” Meredith sighed. “I just feel like an idiot.”

“Everybody fucks up. You listened to your heart when you shoulda listened to your head,” Yondu said, “and I listened to my head when I shoulda listened to my heart.”

“Guess we both screwed up,” Meredith said.

“Me worse than you,” Yondu said, “and there ain't no goin' back and fixin' it.”
Meredith frowned. Yondu's fist clenched, feeling the guilt work its way back into his heart. Regret wasn't the Ravager way, but for once Yondu was beside someone who'd done the same thing; fucked up, been tricked, and regretted everything. Something about her despondent gray eyes pulled the words right through his lips.

“There's something wrong with me, Mery. Stakar wouldn't have fallen for Ego's bullshit. Kraglin wouldn't have made that goddamn deal. You wouldn't have taken those kids. But me,” Yondu said, “I did it all. I fucked up hard. Twelve kids are dead because of me.”

“Because of Ego. He lied to you, Yondu. You didn't know,” Meredith said.

“I didn't know because I didn't want to know because it made me rich.” Yondu's voice had a hard edge. “Don't make excuses for me, Mery. I'm a garbage piece-of-shit and there ain't nothin' good in me.”

“Now that's a lie.” Meredith slid her hand on his left shoulder. “You may not be morally flawless, but you're trying. You've done some pretty fair things.”

“Exploited a kid and his dyin' mom for money,” Yondu snapped, “and lied to 'em, cheated 'em, killed a man for a signal scrambler, made a kid rob a goddamn bank.”

“And those things are wrong, right?”

“No shit, Mery.” Yondu bared his teeth. “That's what I'm sayin'.”

“Well, you're admitting that they're wrong and that you shouldn't have done them.” Meredith rubbed his shoulder gently. “That's a start.”

Yondu's crimson eyes darted between hers. Damn, she never gave up.

“Yondu, occasionally you approximate someone more than decent.” Meredith slipped her hand off his shoulder and rubbed her arms. “Saved Maorda-4. Forged adoption papers for an Orloni. You captured a dangerous doctor who was selling illegal organs. You gave me a fair deal on the pay for that job, too, if I remember correctly.”

“That's because it was you, dammit. I wouldn't have done that for anybody else.” Yondu scowled. “What I do for you and the boy don't count.”

“Why not,” Meredith asked.

“It just don't. It's selfish. I'm used to you and the boy,” Yondu said, “and I... kinda want to keep y'all around.”

“Kinda want to?” Meredith chuckled. “You fought a Celestial with your bare hands, Yondu. You risked it all.”

“I like the little spit-piss,” Yondu admitted, “and you ain't too bad when you're not pissin' me off.”

Meredith smiled.

“You're not perfect,” she said, “but you're changing for the better.”

Yondu grumbled and wouldn't meet her eyes. Meredith tilted her head.

“Yondu, if you could go back to the moment Ego offered you the deal, would you take it?”
“Hell no,” he said.

“And say you knew what he was doing and what he'd done.” Meredith swung her legs. “What would you do?”

“Kill him,” Yondu said.

“What about his money?”

“F*ck his money,” Yondu said, “I can make as much of that as I damn well please.”

“So you wouldn't make the same decisions or use the same reasoning.” Meredith shrugged. “Yeah, that sounds like change. Good change. Downright improvements.”

“Why you tryin' to convince me I ain't a piece-of-shit, Mery?”

“Because you're not.” Her eyes glimmered. “You're a big blue asshole.”

Yondu chuckled. “Improvements, huh?”

“Yondu,” she said softly, “if you could see in yourself half of what Peter sees, you'd be so full of yourself that I wouldn't be able to stand you.”

It was the perfect Mery kind of compliment; honest, sweet, but with just a little pepper. Yondu felt his face burn. He swallowed, not looking at Meredith.

“Kid thinks that much of me,” he asked.

“He adores you.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “It's irritating. He loves you as much as he loves me, and he's only known you for four months.”

“Now hold on there.” Yondu frowned. “That ain't right by a fuckin' long shot, Mery. That kid loves you more than anything; he won't shut up about you. He's like a tiny male Meredith runnin' around breakin' shit and causin' trouble.”

“Oh no, no no no.” Meredith laughed. “He was never this rambunctious on Earth. This is your doing.”

“Hell no it ain't. He was punchin' people before he got on this ship,” Yondu said, “and that he learned from you.”

“A few fist-fights here and there,” Meredith allowed, “but never like this. This is Ravager influence.”

“No, it's definitely Ravager.” Meredith shook her head. “I see it more and more every day. Soon he'll be stalking around and growling and turning purple and barking orders all the damn time.”

“No he won't,” Yondu growled, “he'll be bawlin' and cursin' and cookin' and doin' crazy-ass death-defyin' Terran shit.”

“Oh no, he's much tougher than me.” Meredith chuckled. “He won't cry nearly as much.”

“And Terrans don't turn purple,” Yondu said.

Meredith laughed.
“No,” she said, “we don't do that. We do, however, like to go on death-defying suicide missions.”

“And smash a man's ship into a goddamn pinball not two seconds after he gets out of it,” Yondu grumbled.

“Sorry, but I needed something big and heavy to smash on him and your ship was all I could think of.”

“How about a goddamn rock, Mery?”

“He could break the rocks,” she countered, “he was the whole damn planet. The ship, I figured, wasn't his to control. It worked long enough for me to get that plasma in there, didn't it?”

“No,” Yondu growled, “I had to beat the shit out of him as a distraction.”

“You were a great distraction.” Meredith chuckled. “And a great escape plan, too.”

“And you kissed me,” Yondu said.

“Yeah?” Meredith's voice became a little defensive. “What of it?”

Yondu knew he was going to have a hard time forgetting that one. She'd been so soft, so yielding, and knowing that Ego was watching wasn't a bad touch, either. No wonder they'd gotten out of that gorge so quickly; Yondu hadn't felt that full, that elated, that up, in a long damn time. It was all he could do to prevent that arrow from rocketing him into space. Yondu was used to hard kisses, kisses with intent and physical need behind them. Something as tender and gentle as Meredith's kiss was disarming to say the least. It promised nothing and asked for nothing. It was pure sugar, and Yondu had never tasted something so sweet. He wanted to hate it; sugary things rotted you away, eating at you like maggots. Instead, he had a sneaking suspicion that he was going to develop a taste for it.

“It was nice,” he said.

Meredith fiddled with her skirt, her face slowly flushing.

“Why'd you do it,” Yondu asked.

“I told you; I needed to say thank you, but I just didn't have the words for it. How do you thank someone for risking their live to protect you and your son?” Meredith frowned, her eyebrows contracting slightly. “How do you apologize for misjudging someone as badly as I did? I intended for that to be a suicide mission, and you went with me.”

“You weren't the only one with a score to settle,” Yondu said.

“I know that,” Meredith admitted, “but it was still a really brave thing to do.”

Yondu grumbled. The portal opened, and Peter came in with a dark blue bottle and a glass.

“Thanks, baby.” Meredith took the glass and the bottle. “Was it hard to get down?”

“Drazkar helped.” Peter peered over the bed at Yondu. “How bad does it hurt?”

“Really fuckin' bad,” Yondu said through gritted teeth.

Peter's eyes widened. Meredith poured Yondu a hefty glass of harberry juice, then helped him drink it. He made a face at the flavor, but drank it readily. Meredith handed the glass and the bottle back to Peter, who ran off to put them back. Yondu laid his head back and exhaled.
“Do you want me to stay while you sleep,” Meredith asked.

“Nah. You go with your kid, take a goddamn breather. I'll be fine.”

“You're not worried about one of your crew coming in here and slipping a knife between your ribs?”

“I'd deserve it. Speakin' of, that there.” Yondu looked at the datapad resting on his alarm clock.

“Open that.”

Meredith took it and swiped it open. It was a highly-detailed ledger marking all the income and expenditures of the Eclector. Meredith's eyebrows raised.

“You've got a head for numbers,” she said.

“I ain't as stupid as I look, Mery.” Yondu chuckled, then winced. “Just... go to the side tab. Says cargo income, see it?”

Meredith tapped it. At the top of the screen was an account marked Quill Units, in which rested over two-hundred-thousand units.

“What is this,” she asked.

“Every time I took half from you or the boy, I put it in that account.” Yondu kept his eyes low.

“That's all of it. Every goddamn unit I made off you that ain't already gone to utilities and food.”

Meredith's eyes flicked from the account number to the thinly-disguised self-loathing on Yondu's face.

“You can keep it if you want,” she said.

“What?” Yondu's brow knit together. “I don't want that shit. Take it, dammit.”

“You may have taken us off our planet, but you also saved our lives and risked yours to kill Ego.”

Meredith went to set down the datapad. “This is a gift, Yondu. You aren't allowed to say no.”

“I don't want your goddamn money,” Yondu snarled.

“Fine.” Meredith tapped the account. “Fine fine fine.”

“What are you doing,” Yondu asked.

“Pay-day. I'm splitting the account among everybody on the Eclector.” Meredith transferred the units. “As a thank you for all those people that helped me.”

“What about the fuckers who were bettin' on you kickin' the bucket,” Yondu asked indignantly.

“Maybe money will get them to like me.” Meredith shrugged with a smile. “If not, who gives a damn? All the people that I like also like me, and that's what matters. Besides, everybody helped kill Ego, sort of. It wouldn't be fair if they didn't get paid for risking their lives going there.”

Yondu squinted at her.

“You gave up a couple hundred thousand units to be fair,” he said.

Meredith leaned in with a big grin.
“I'm not a Ravager,” she whispered.

“You're an idjit,” Yondu whispered back.

Meredith broke out into a giggling fit.

“Don't tell anybody, hahaha!” Her grin spread from ear to ear. “Shh, it's a big secret!”

“I think everybody already knows, idjit.” Yondu was trying not to grin. “Now go on, get out of here. I can feel this juice kickin' in.”

“I'm surprised you're not already out.” Meredith stood up. “It knocked me flat.”

“Centaurian metabolism.” Yondu yawned. “Shit like this takes a while.”

Yondu's eyelids sagged, then dropped.

“Yondu?” Meredith rubbed his shoulder gently. “You awake?”

Heavy, deep breathing was his only answer. Meredith looked at the datapad. All the money he'd extorted from the Quills, and he didn't even want to keep it. She smiled, remembering the early visit to the hospital, to emergency lights shoved in plastic bags and passing out while she was washing dishes. Meredith knew that she and Peter had changed, but Yondu had too. He wasn't the same man she'd bitten in the neck four months ago, that was for damn sure. Meredith could still feel her teeth sinking into the muscle, still taste warm, bitter blood. She made a face. Yuck.

Still, the same taste on his lips had been a lot different. Meredith bit her own lips, staring down at him. So she'd kissed him, she thought, big whoop. It was a little thank-you kiss, nothing more. Besides, Meredith was not shy about physical affection anyway. She hugged Kraglin and Peter all the time, and she couldn't even count the times she'd kissed Peter on the cheek. Of course, Yondu was a man and not a child, so that made it a little different. Yondu was sleeping, breathing deeply. Meredith's eyebrows knit together; funny, usually he snored while he slept. She checked his bandages one more time, then took a few steps towards the door.

Meredith turned around and looked at him, biting her lips together. He'd willingly gone with her on what was in all honesty a suicide mission. He'd tried to save her from her psychotic ex-boyfriend and done everything in his power to keep her baby safe. Sure, he wasn't perfect, but neither was Meredith. Either way, she'd never had a better friend. Peter was right, Meredith admitted, Yondu was the coolest guy they knew. The gratitude and admiration towards him had never been higher. She crossed over to the side of the bed and rubbed his shoulder.

“Hey,” she said softly, “hey, you awake?”

He gave no answer. Meredith laid her hand on his forehead and kissed him softly.

“Thank you,” she said.

She stood, turned, and hit the door panel. After she walked through it, the portal closed. A second passed, and then the corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. Harberry juice took a long damn time to work on Centaurians, but that'd never been a benefit before. The pain was worth being awake a little longer after all. Yondu might be developing a sweet tooth, he thought, but she was the one kissing him.
Chapter Summary

While Yondu gets his rib repaired by Dr. Mareet, Meredith thinks about what she can do to repay him for saving her and her son. After wracking her brain, she can only think of one thing; she calls Stakar. While Yondu handles his father-figure forcing a family reunion, Kraglin pulls out all the stops to help his favorite Terran get home.

(Long chapter is long. I hope you like fluff, emotions, and internal screaming because that's the true summary of this chapter.)

“A broken rib, three fractures, a bruised sternum, seat belt trauma, and a bust lip.” Dr. Mareet threw down her arms in frustration. “How do you get yourself into these messes, Udonta?”

Yondu stood in the doorway of Dr. Mareet's hospital, his arms around Kraglin and Meredith. They had to support his body, keeping their hands on his bandages. Yondu licked the healed cut in his lip.

“Guess I'm just lucky,” he said.

“Stakar wouldn't want us serving you,” Corky said.

“Stakar Ogord put out a cigarette on my face. As far as I'm concerned,” Dr. Mareet snapped, “Stakar Ogord can suck my pink tits. Get that big blue son-of-a-bitch in here right now.”

Kraglin and Meredith exchanged a wide-eyed look, but brought Yondu in.

“Don't serve an exile, don't serve an exile. I'll serve Stakar Ogord something,” Dr. Mareet said, “a scalpel up the rectum!”

“Love, calm down.” Corky was chuckling. “Fix Udonta first, then worry about Ogord.”

“You're right, you're right.” Dr. Mareet walked to the back room. “Clear mind, clear results.”

“You'll have to excuse her,” Corky said, “the pregnancy is making her very emotional.”

“Pregnancy?” Meredith lit up. “Oh, that's wonderful! I'm so happy for you two!”

Corky puffed out his chest. Kraglin gave him a distracted smile, more worried about keeping the cap'n upright and breathing. Yondu snorted.

“Knocked 'er up, did you,” he asked.

“I told her that's what you'd say.” Corky rolled his eyes. “I'll have you know that this was a planned pregnancy.”

“Is it a boy or a girl,” Meredith asked.

“Girl.” Corky beamed. “We've decided to name her Bereet Aleta.”
Kraglin and Yondu both winced.

“You're namin' her after Aleta? The she-wolf? Holy shit, talk about bad vibes.” Kraglin shuddered. “She's gonna have eyes like death and a voice like the whisper of the grave.”

“That's like namin' a kid after Stakar,” Yondu protested, “you're gonna end up with trouble in goddamn spades.”

“If it had been a boy,” Corky said, “we were going to name him Kardos Udonta.”

“Aw!” Meredith put her hand over her heart. “That is the sweetest damn thing.”

“You'd have doomed him,” Yondu said flatly, “doomed him to a lifetime of fuckin' shit up and getting screwed over.”

“Oh hush.” Meredith swatted Yondu's shoulder lightly. “That's sweet and you know it.”

Corky chuckled. Dr. Mareet opened the door at the end of the hall.

“Bring him in,” she called.

Meredith and Kraglin escorted Yondu to the end of the hall and got him into the medical pod. Yondu gritted his teeth and didn't cry out. Meredith and Kraglin hovered by the bed nervously.

“Kraglin, you wait in the hall. Mery,” Yondu said, “get back to the ship and keep an eye on your boy.”

“Peter wants me to keep an eye on you,” Meredith said.

“I don't give a fuck what he wants,” Yondu snarled, “I want you on the goddamn ship. Last thing I need is knowin' you're out there worryin' yourself half-to-death over a bust lip and some banged-up bones.”

Meredith bit her lips together.

“Go back, get Peter, and relax.” Yondu exhaled. “Go get Gef and bet on whether or not I'll live or somethin'.”

“That's not funny,” she said.

“It's goddamn hilarious. Now go,” Yondu said.

Meredith rolled her eyes and left the room. Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck, chuckling.

“She's awful fussy about folks, isn't she cap'n?”

“Course she is.” Yondu winced as his ribs gave a pang. “It's Mery.”

“Alright, alright, enough. Obfonteri, out.” Dr. Mareet pointed to the door. “I have a Centaurian to fix. Again.”

Kraglin went back to the waiting room. Some of the furniture had been replaced, and there were dents in the walls. He frowned.

“Your boss redecorated for us,” Corky said.
“Oh.” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “He found Stakar then?”

“Sure did. It's a miracle we all made it out of that alive.” Corky sat on the loveseat. “I've never seen Udonta that angry before.”

“Yeah well,” Kraglin chuckled, “cap'n has a thing for keepin' his Terrans.”

“So we see.” Corky leaned back. “He's quite fond of them.”

“They're nice to have around.”

“The boy seems to amuse him.”

“Pete? Kid's a goddamn barrel of laughs.”

“And the woman,” Corky said, “seems very attached to him.”

“Ms. Q? Oh, no,” Kraglin said, “they're just friends.”

Corky squinted.

“Right,” he said sarcastically.

“They are. Rumors or not,” Kraglin said firmly, “if the cap'n says they're friends, then they're friends.”

Corky closed his eyes and leaned his head back. Sometimes Ravagers could be so dense.

Meredith was pacing back and forth on the bridge. Gef watched her, trying not to laugh. She paced like the captain did; eleven paces left, a spin turn, eleven paces right, spin turn, eleven paces left.

“Worried about the cap'n,” Gef offered.

“What?” Meredith's head snapped up. “No, just waiting. He'll be fine, I'm sure of it.”

“If you're not worried,” Gef said, “why are you pacing?”

“I'm thinking,” Meredith said.

“About?”

“Doing something exceptionally stupid.”

Gef grinned.

“How stupid,” he asked.

“Really exceptionally idiotic and possibly life-ending,” Meredith said, “but if it works it'll be amazing.”

“So, Ravager stupid,” Gef said.

“Yeah.” Meredith rubbed her arms as she walked. “Ravager stupid.”
Gef watched Meredith paced back and forth for a while.

“Does it have something to do with the captain,” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Life-ending, you say. Hm.” Gef picked up a datapad and edited some odds. “Not anything personal then, right?”

“It's a little personal on his end,” she said.

Gef’s eyes flicked up. He edited some more odds.

“Hm,” he said, “hm hm hmm.”

“I don't know. If it works, it'd be great. It'd be the perfect way to pay him back for saving us,” Meredith said, “but if it goes wrong, we could all die.”

“All of us?”

“Maybe. Probably not me and Peter,” Meredith said.

Gef winced and set the datapad down.

“I'm all for risking our hides for the captain, but maybe think things through first,” he suggested.

“That's what I'm doing,” Meredith huffed.

She kept pacing. Gef watched her go back and forth and chuckled. One of these days, he thought, they needed to get a Ravager patch on that leather jacket of hers. Gef picked the datapad back up and scrolled through it. Lots of bets, lots of odds, and lots of danger; Gef loved wagers like these.

“Gef!” Kraglin's voice came on over the comm line. “Open up. Cap’n and I are back.”

“On it,” Gef replied, pulling the lever that dropped the loading ramp.

“Told you he'd be fine,” Meredith said.

Gef winked.

“I never doubted him,” he said.

“Mom!” Peter's voice bubbled over the comms. “Mom, he's back!”

“I know, honey, I know.” Meredith laughed, pressing a finger to her comm unit. “Why don't you go say hello and I'll wait here on the bridge.”

Within minutes, the portal to the bridge opened. Meredith spun around and had to cover her mouth to hide her smile.

Yondu was standing in the doorway with right arm around Kraglin's skinny neck, rubbing his left knuckles into Kraglin's head. Peter was hanging off Yondu's back, his arms around Yondu's thick blue neck. All three of them had massive grins.

“You keep talkin' that way I'm gonna split your fuckin' skull,” Yondu half-growled, half-joked.

“Ow, ow! Sorry,” Kraglin laughed, “sorry sorry sorry!”
“Get him!” Peter giggled. “Get him get him get him!”

“Get down, you bloodthirsty savage.” Yondu chuckled, letting go of Kraglin and pulling Peter off. “Go on, get to your momma.”

Peter raced across the bridge; Meredith picked him up and held him on her hip.

“How’d the surgery go,” she asked Yondu.

“Fine. She cut me up, yelled at me a lot,” Yondu said, “the usual shit.”

“And Stakar?” Meredith frowned. “What did she say about him?”

“She said if he was gonna kill me then I'd be dead already, and she wasn't gonna bother dancin' around toes she wanted to step on.” Yondu put his hand on his pilot's chair. “Guess he'll just have to deal with it.”

“If Dr. Mareet thinks he'll let it go, he'll let it go.” Kraglin smoothed back his short hair. “She's been at this game a long damn time.”

“Not as long as me,” Yondu said, “and I'm tellin' you we ain't seen the last of Stakar Ogord.”

His jaw was locked and his voice was edged, but Meredith could see a despondency in Yondu's eyes. Stakar was like his father, she remembered, and the Ravagers were like his family. Meredith had that strange urge to hug him and tell him everything was going to be okay; she hugged Peter instead. The crazy idea from before was burning into her brain; it was risky, it was dangerous, but it might help Yondu. It would pay him back for all he'd done for her family.

“Gef,” Yondu said, breaking Meredith out of her reverie, “how're the stabilizers?”

“Holding, captain, but that patch job Krags did will only hold for so long,” Gef answered.

“Best do a proper goddamn repair while we're boarded here.” Yondu grabbed an omnitool from his dashboard and paced off the bridge. “Kraglin.”

Kraglin followed. Meredith set Peter down and kissed his forehead.

“Why don't you go with Yondu,” she said, “and learn how to fix a stabilizer.”

Peter lit up and chased after Yondu, who grimaced.

“You're stickin' him with me?”

“You're supposed to teach him how to be a good Ravager.” Meredith pointed to the bridge door. “That's your job, not mine.”

Yondu growled, but let Peter tag along. Meredith lowered her arm, smiling. She waited for the portal to close, then took a deep breath. It was risky, but he was worth it. Meredith looked at the comms station.
“Gef,” she said, “I need your help.”

“Sure, Quill.” Gef leaned back in his chair. “What do you need?”

Meredith took a deep breath.

“I need to make a call,” she said.

It was days before Meredith's actions came to fruition. She was down in the cargo hold with Yondu, waiting for Peter to get out of the flight simulator.

“He's getting better,” Yondu grunted.

Meredith bit her lips together.

“When do you think he'll be ready to pilot a ship,” she asked.

“You kiddin'? Them short little legs of his can barely reach the goddamn petals. It'll be a couple more years before that kid's ready to fly solo,” Yondu answered.

Meredith nodded. The sounds of the ship churned around them; Meredith stared into the middle distance.


“I'm wondering how long we're going to be here. I know it's going to be a long time until that blockade goes down, but maybe if I make my case to the Nova Corps, they might help me. Maybe.” Meredith's eyebrows knit together, her voice serious but hopeful. “In the meantime, maybe I could set up on one of the nicer planets and get Peter back into school. I could work a job, maybe even start singing again, and we'd be able to get by out here.”

“What, we ain't good enough?” Yondu scowled and crossed his arms. “You'd make more money as a Ravager.”

“Yondu, if I get arrested by the Nova Corps, there won't be any returning to Terra, you get it?” Meredith rubbed her arms, frowning. “Once I've got a record they won't help me. If I get jailed, I'm done.”

“You won't get arrested. We won't let you,” Yondu swore.

“You can't promise that, Yondu.” Meredith sighed. “I trust you, I really do, but I just can't risk it.”

“We ain't worth it, huh?” Yondu bared his teeth. “Don't think we'd take care of you?”

“I know you would. You're reliable and trustworthy and I'm not saying that I wouldn't like to be here. But the truth of the matter is, it's a dumb risk. A Ravager risk,” Meredith said, “and I'm no Ravager.”

“Yes you fuckin' are.” Yondu put his hands on his hips, scowling. “Mery, you hijacked a pirate's ship to go blow up a planet with barely over ten percent of a plan. That's Ravager.”

“That was one time,” Meredith said.
“One time' can happen again. We could keep you on the ship,” Yondu suggested, “just keep you on as part of the maintenance crew.”

“And Peter's schooling?”

“I'm tellin' you,” Yondu said, “I could kidnap any tutor you want.”

“I'm not letting you kidnap someone else off their planet.” Meredith put her head in her hands. “Peter is not staying here.”

“You don't trust me to teach him,” Yondu said.

“Yondu, the only reason I was okay with dying on Ego's planet was because I trusted you and Kraglin to take care of him,” Meredith snapped, “so don't assume who I do and don't trust.”

Yondu's mouth became dry.

“You'd trust me to raise your kid,” he asked.

“Out here? Yes. On Earth?” Meredith gave Yondu a sideways look. “You'd need a chaperone on Earth. I feel like the first time Peter ever had a parent-teacher conference, you'd threaten the teacher with bodily harm if he didn't give Peter straight-A's.”

That made Yondu laugh. The flight simulator opened; Peter came bouncing out with a big grin splashed across his face.

“High score,” he cheered.

“Atta boy,” Yondu chuckled.

“Good job, baby.” Meredith picked Peter up and kissed his cheek. “You're gonna be a great pilot one day.”

“Better than Yondu,” Peter affirmed.

“Don't push it,” Yondu snarled, “I still ain't ruled out eatin' you yet.”

Meredith and Peter grinned.

“Captain!” Gef's panicked voice came over the comm. “Captain we need you on the bridge!”

Meredith and Peter followed Yondu as he sprinted to the bridge.

“Report.” He came into the room with his coattails swirling and his jaw locked, the fitting image of a Ravager captain.

“It's...” Gef swallowed. “It's Stakar Ogord.”

Yondu's face went slack. The indicator blinking on the screen told him that yes, Stakar Ogord was calling him. Yondu swallowed.

“Alright, everybody off the bridge,” Kraglin said, “this is cap'n stuff.”

The crew quickly abandoned the room. Kraglin looked at Yondu.

“Can I stay,” he asked.
Yondu wanted to tell him to scram, but he just nodded.

“Is this the same Stakar from Dr. Mareet’s?” Meredith didn't leave either; she tried very hard to look surprised. “I remember him.”

Yondu shifted. “This ain't a social call; you two better leave.”

Meredith put her hands on Peter's shoulders. The two of them smiled winningly.

“Peter and I will be very quiet, won't we Peter?”

“Not a peep!”

“Fine. Kraglin,” Yondu said, "guard the door.”

“Aye, cap'n.”

Yondu reached out and tapped the indicator. Stakar Ogord, decked out in navy and gold, appeared on the screen.

“Stakar.” Yondu tilted his chin up slightly. “It's been some time since you bothered callin'.”

“It has.” Stakar's expression was unreadable. “Your ship still looks like shit.”

Yondu's mouth twitched, but then his eyebrows furrowed. “How the hell can you see my ship?”

“You didn't pick up soon enough, so I found your coordinates.” Stakar tapped something on the screen on his end. “I'm dropping in. We need to talk.”

“Stakar.” Yondu looked at his former mentor, desperately trying to figure out what the Ravager Admiral's intent was.

Instead, he was greeted by the sight of Ravager ships, a veritable fleet of them, appearing in front of his ship. He went to the window and stared as one by one, they jumped out of hyperspace.

“What's happening?” Peter pressed his nose against the glass.

Yondu didn't answer; with a whirl of his jacket, he was gone. Meredith looked at Kraglin.

“Kraglin, what's happening?” She glanced at the fleet of ships. “Is this bad?”

“It might be. Either they've come to bring the cap'n out of exile, or...” Kraglin swallowed. “Or they've come to kill us all.”

“What can we do?”

“Look nice.” Kraglin shrugged. “Either we'll look respectable or our corpses will.”

Meredith looked at Peter.

“Kraglin,” she said, “if this goes south...”

“I grab the kid, get to a ship, sell some organs for units, buy the fuel and smuggle him onto Terra?” Kraglin smiled.

“Yes, only don't sell your organs. I don't care what Dr. Mareet is offering,” Meredith said.
Kraglin chuckled and took Peter with him. Meredith went back to her room in the cargo bay. Dress nice, Kraglin had said. Meredith looked at the dresses she'd received on Ego's planet.

“No,” she said.

Meredith pulled on a tight black shirt and slid herself into the soft red leather pants she owned. She'd had these since she first left Terra; they knew her every twist and turn. The black leather jacket she pulled on was the same way; timeless, fitting her like a favorite song. Meredith smiled.

“Mery.”

Yondu's voice made her jump. He had opened the door to her room and was lingering in the doorway.

“Oh! Oh, hey.” Meredith ran her fingers through her already-tousled blonde hair. “How's it going? Are they here to kill us?”

“Weapons cold,” he said, “but that ain't the problem.”

He walked in the room; the door closed behind him. Meredith sat on her bed; Yondu wheeled the desk chair over and sat in it, facing her. He stared at his lap. Meredith was reminded of the time he'd had that awful nightmare; Yondu had the same distant eyes and tense movements, and she felt the same awkward tenderness towards him.

“Then what's the problem,” she said.

“Scared,” he muttered.

“Who's scared?”

“I am.”

Meredith blinked. “You are? Why?”

“Stakar... he's... I told him we were finished. Fuck, I didn't mean it.” Yondu sighed. “I let him down. Dammit, I let 'em all down. Traffickin' kids to Ego broke the code. It's my fault those kids are dead. All because I'm a stupid, selfish, greedy son-of-a-bitch.”

“What Ego did to those kids wasn't your fault. He told you he wouldn't hurt them.”

“And I was fool enough to believe that.”

Yondu couldn't even raise his head. Meredith leaned forwards.

“You're not a fool. We fixed what was our responsibility to fix, Yondu. Thanks to me, he would have had the power to take over the galaxy. We stopped him.” Meredith smiled. “You avenged those kids, and I avenged those women he manipulated. We did the right thing.”

Yondu put his face in his hands.

“You don't need to prove anything to Stakar. You don't need him to take you out of exile.” Meredith put her hands on Yondu's shoulders. “Yondu, you wiped out that red in your ledger. You don't owe him anything. You saved every person in the galaxy. That means every Ravager is alive because of you, including Stakar.”

“We,” he reminded, “saved the galaxy. Ain't I just your sidekick?”
Meredith grinned. “Maybe, but you still protected them. That's what a Ravager does, isn't it? Protects their own.”

Yondu said nothing. Meredith slipped her hands off his shoulders and folded them in her lap. She waited until Yondu started nodding.

“I wiped out the red,” he said, “and protected my own.”

“You did good, big daddy.” Meredith kissed his cheek and stood up. “Now let's go tell Stakar just how good.”

“You keep callin' me that.” Yondu grabbed the tail of her shirt and pulled; Meredith fell backwards into his lap. “I'm gonna start thinkin' you're getting used to me.”

Meredith rolled her eyes.

“Don't make it into something it's not,” she said.

“Yeah?” Yondu wrapped his arms around her waist. “What is it, then?”

“Me bein' soft.” Meredith crossed her arms. “Told you I'm no Ravager.”

Yondu grinned, showing his disfigured teeth.

“But you're getting used to Ravagers,” he said.

“Some Ravagers more than others.” She smiled and stood up. “Come on. Let's go.”

Yondu stood and followed her out of the room. They took the stairs up out of the cargo bay and headed towards the bridge. Yondu didn't speak to Meredith as they walked, but Meredith could tell by his tensing muscles and darting eyes that he was getting more and more nervous by the second. Yondu reached out to touch the bridge door panel. He swallowed; Meredith could see sweat breaking out on his neck.

“Hey.” Meredith reached out and grabbed his huge blue hand. “Look at me.”

His crimson eyes flicked to hers; she could see the uncertainty within them.

“I'm proud of you,” she said, “and I'm so glad I met you. It's going to be fine, I promise.”

Yondu swallowed.

“I know, I know,” she laughed, “Quill sentiment, Terran garbage, going soft, whatever.”

Unexpectedly, he linked their fingers together; his fingers were large, but her narrow fingers spread wide enough to allow them to rest comfortably between them.

“Stubborn as shit, that's what you are.” His voice was barely audible. “Glad you're here, Mery.”

Meredith's heart gave a fierce pang. She kissed his cheek once, softly.

“That was for luck,” she said, “so don't read into it.”

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. His other arm shot around her waist and pulled her into a fierce kiss. His lips and his body were warm against hers; against her will, Meredith shivered. Fine, she thought, so he's good at kissing. He kept kissing her, and her head started to buzz as the heat
from his body bled into hers. Fine; he was very good at kissing. A large hand ran through her curls. Her hands, she remembered, she could still use her hands. She slid them on his chest, feeling his muscle on the other side of his shirt; it was all she could do to push him back. He leaned back willingly and let her go.

“There.” Yondu grinned and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “Now I feel lucky.”

“You asshole,” she said, her face flushed with heat.

“You're welcome,” he replied.

Yondu pressed the door panel and strode through the portal without so much as a glance back at her. Meredith sighed and followed him through.

“Ravagers,” she muttered, her face scarlet.

Yondu grinned.

Stakar stood on the bridge like some figure of space legend. He was resplendent in Ravager clothes of navy and gold; his countenance was firm, yet his eyes sparkled a little. Yondu saluted him, pounding his fist over his racing heart. He wasn't sure if he expected a fight or a pardon, but he was on edge either way.

“Stakar,” he said.

“Yondu.” Stakar picked up the blue glass frog that Yondu kept by the pilot's seat. “Still collecting, I see.”

“Kinda,” Yondu grunted.

Stakar grinned slightly. “Glad to hear it.”

Yondu faced Stakar and put his hands on his hips. He tilted his chin up and puffed his chest out.

“So,” he said, “why you here?”

“We received a rather interesting bit of information about you, Yondu.” Stakar's eyes flicked towards Meredith. “We came to see if it was true.”

Yondu's eyebrows knit together.

“What did you hear,” he asked.

“We heard,” Stakar said, “that the planet Ego had been blown to smithereens by Yondu Udonta.”

“Meredith did it,” Yondu said, “I just flew the damn ship.”

“Oh come on,” Meredith said, “you did more than that.”

Stakar raised his eyebrows at the interruption. Yondu swallowed and shifted his weight.

“What?” Meredith gestured. “You saved Peter and me. You flew through the core of a planet that was trying to kill you, then escaped a crashing ship, then beat a Celestial with your bare hands!”
The corner of Stakar's mouth twitched up. Meredith put a hand on her hip and laughed.

“Look, I'm the last person in the world to say this,” she said, “but you were pretty cool back there.”

Yondu's face was searing with heat. The compliments were enough to make him blush, but the fact that Meredith was praising him in front of Stakar Ogord made it a million times more uncomfortable. He swallowed with difficulty, his throat dry.

“I like your Terran.” Stakar scratched his chin. “She has pepper.”

“Thanks,” Yondu muttered. “She talks a lot. Cries a damn lot too.”

“Hey,” Meredith said.

Yondu and Stakar chuckled. Stakar looked out at the stars.

“Is it true,” Stakar asked.

“What?”

“What she says.” Stakar wouldn't meet Yondu's eyes. “Is it true? Did you kill Ego? You risked your life to save the galaxy?”

“It wasn't that goddamn significant,” Yondu said, “I just wiped out the red in the ledger. I did what a Ravager does; I protected my own.”

“Why didn't you call me up?” Stakar linked his hands behind his back. “Ask to be forgiven.”

“What's the point in askin' for somethin' you don't fuckin' deserve,” Yondu muttered.

Stakar shoved Yondu in the chest.

“Hey!” Yondu's eyes flashed.

Stakar's eyes flicked down to Yondu's chest. Yondu looked down; Stakar had stuck a proper captain's rank onto Yondu's jacket. Yondu lifted the jacket and stared at the patch. His mind was completely blank.

“Welcome back into the fold, son.” Stakar clapped his hands on both of Yondu's shoulders. “I can't tell you how long I've waited to say that.”

Yondu looked up at Stakar with wide eyes. Stakar nodded towards Meredith.

“Ms. Quill called us and told us what you did. You were willing to die to fix your mistake. You were willing to sacrifice yourself to save the galaxy. Bravery. Sheer recklessness. You flew in the face of death and told him to kiss your ass. That,” Stakar said, “makes you more of a goddamn Ravager than anyone I ever met.”

Yondu's heartbeat was in his ears.

“Welcome back to the family,” Stakar said.

“You're shittin' me,” Yondu said, “I can't believe this.”

“Believe it.”
“And I'm back in? Just like that?”

Stakar was grinning. “Just like that, you stupid son-of-a-bitch.”

The captain's rank glittered on Yondu's jacket. His chest tightened so much that it felt like his ribs were breaking. He looked up at Meredith; she was rubbing the scars on her arms. She had the same smile on that she had when she looked at Peter and Kraglin. The I'm proud of my reckless Ravager smile. Goddamn, it was beautiful.

“You did this,” he said.

“I helped,” she confessed, “but you earned it.”

Yondu had an irrational urge to grab her around the waist, throw her over his shoulder, carry her to the quarters, and make her feel twice as good as he felt right then. Instead of acting on it, he just stared at her in disbelief. All he could think to say was, “Thanks.”

“Speaking of thanks, we wanted to thank Ms. Quill,” Stakar said, “for alerting us to this change of circumstances, and as a token of my regret for our rather unorthodox conversation outside the hospital.”

“No thanks necessary.” Meredith smiled. “I'm just happy everyone's together again.”

“You might want to rethink that.” Stakar gestured out the window of the bridge. “Take a look, Ms. Quill.”

A gleaming M-craft was hovering in front of the Eclector. It was a dark, steely blue, licked with gold circles. Meredith's mouth fell open.

“No way,” she said.

“Consider her yours, Ms. Quill. Good luck on your journey home,” Stakar said.

“I...” Meredith covered her mouth with her hands. “I don't even know what to say. Thank you doesn't even begin to cover it.”

“Don't thank me, thank Martinex.” Stakar chuckled. “He's the one that lost his ship privileges.”

“Captain, I told you, that Krylorian cheated.” Martinex's voice came over the comms, as smooth as chocolate. “I don't know how he did it, but he was looking at my cards!”

“Martinex, you're refl...you know what, I'm not going to tell you,” Stakar sighed.

Yondu let out a low whistle as he looked at the ship. “That's a beauty.”

“Just like her previous pilot,” Martinex said over the comms.

“This is what you get for gambling my things, Martinex.” Stakar chuckled. “Bring it into the hangar, would you?”

Meredith's eyes were glued onto the ship until it passed out of view.

“My own spaceship.” Her eyes were wide. “Peter's going to scream.”

“The moment that blockade goes down, you can go home,” Stakar said.
Meredith put her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide. Yondu watched her expression and shifted uncomfortably. She was truly free now, and Yondu couldn't do a damn thing to keep her here.

“I'm sorry, Stakar, could I impose on you for one favor?” Meredith was blinking back tears.

“That depends on the favor,” Stakar replied.

Meredith gave a watery laugh. “Could you paint it green?”

“You're nuts, Quill.” Yondu stalked after her as she speed-walked down the hall. “This is your goddamn freedom we're talkin' about here.”

“If I don't do this now, I'll regret it forever.” Meredith's face was lit up with a passionate fire. “When the blockade is gone, any ship can take me home. There will always be more units. But this, right now? This is perfect.”

She slammed the panel; the door to the quarters opened.

“Kraglin,” she said.

Kraglin looked up from where he'd been lounging on his bedroll.

“Hey, Ms. Quill. Hey, cap'n. What's up,” he asked.

Meredith reached down, grabbed his upper arm, and yanked him to his feet. She whipped a handkerchief out of her jacket pocket.

“Bend down,” she said.

Confused, Kraglin leaned down. Meredith tied the handkerchief around his eyes.

“Ms. Quill?” His voice was uneasy. “Is this some kind of Terran thing?”

“It's a surprise,” she said, “just go with it.”

“If anybody else blindfolded me out of the blue, Ms. Q, I'd deck 'em.” Kraglin grinned. “But alright, I'll roll with it.”

Meredith grinned. She took Kraglin's hand and began dragging him through the hallway. Yondu followed, frowning.

“Ms. Q, where are we goin'?” Kraglin had started to laugh.

“Hangar bay,” she said, “just keep moving.”

When they made it to the hangar bay, Meredith positioned Kraglin, turning him to face something.

“Are you ready,” she asked from behind him.

“Born ready, Ms. Q.”

Meredith slid off the blindfold and took a few steps back to watch. She didn't want to miss a second of this.

For a moment, Kraglin didn't get it. It was an M-craft, painted a deep forest green. The wings were
emblazoned with a huge Ravager flame. He looked over the guns; this thing was loaded with weaponry of all sizes. The thrusters had been configured for long flights, and the whole thing was spotless. Just by looking at it, Kraglin could tell it was top-of-the line; one of Stakar's ships, just like the one he'd looked at in the ship yard. It took him a moment to realize that, despite the coloring, this was the ship he'd seen in the ship yard. There was something written on the side in elegant silver script; Kraglin moved to the left to read it more clearly. Emblazoned in large letters was one name; Suzarra.

Meredith watched his expression change from confusion to shock. When Kraglin turned around, there were tears in his eyes.

“Is this mine,” he choked out.

Meredith's eyes were shining with tears, and her hands were over her mouth. She just nodded. Kraglin ran both hands through his hair, laughing.

“Holy shit!” He just gestured to the ship. “I can't... oh my God, this is mine?”

“Yeah. That crazy stunt you pulled to come get us... Kraglin, honey, you saved our lives. Mine twice; you gave up your dream ship to get me my surgery.” Tears were falling down Meredith's cheeks. “You deserve this. Stakar offered it as a gift, but I figure I can always get a different kind. This is a real Ravager ship; needs a real Ravager to fly it. Needs you, honey.”

Kraglin's heart was in his throat.

Meredith smiled. “She's all yours.”

The force of Kraglin's hug nearly bowled Meredith over. He picked her up and swung her in wide circles, spinning across the floor of the hangar bay. Both of them were laughing, and tears ran down their faces.

“Thank you!” Kraglin buried his face in her curls. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! Thank you so goddamn much.”

She squeezed him. “You deserve this, honey.”

He held her close for a few moments. She was without a goddamn doubt the nicest, kindest, softest person in the galaxy, but Kraglin had never met someone so tough. To go through everything she'd gone through without becoming bitter, without becoming hard, was a miracle. She was the strongest person Kraglin had ever met.

“You deserve to get home, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin pulled out of the hug, blinking huge tears away. “You need to go back to Terra.”

“Peter doesn't want to go. Blockade's still up.” Meredith smiled sadly. “So I guess I'm stuck.”

Kraglin frowned. “Like hell you are.”

“Kraglin,” she sniffed, “I can't leave my baby.”

“Ms. Quill, it's about goddamn time you did somethin' for yourself. You're always takin' care of people, always goin' the extra mile for Peter.” Kraglin's voice grew in strength and volume. “So he doesn't want to go back to Terra, so what? Do you?”

“Yes, but...”
“No goddamn buts,” Kraglin said, “not a damn one. You want to go back to Terra? You go, dammit. Once you find a way back, we'll bring Peter to you.”

Meredith's eyes widened. “What?”

“You find a way back to Terra. It ain't gonna be easy. We can't take y'all; the fuel alone would probably cost you an arm and a leg, and then you'd be payin' Dr. Mareet for a new one of both.” Kraglin chuckled. “But for you, a Terran? I'm tellin' you, someone on the Nova Corps would be glad to take you and Pete home. Someone's gonna help you; I wish it could be us, but...”

“You've already broken the law enough for my sake.” Meredith put her hand on his shoulder. “I don't want the entire Eclector getting arrested because of one lousy Terran.”

“You ain't a lousy Terran, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin frowned. “You're a very special Terran.”

Meredith smiled. “Thank you, honey. But there's just no way anyone on the Nova Corps is going to help me.”

Kraglin's eyes grew distant. Meredith frowned.

“Honey? You okay,” she asked.

Kraglin took a deep breath.

“Ms. Q, I told myself I'd never do it,” Kraglin said, “but there's a call I could make.”

“You?” Yondu made a face. “Kraglin, who the hell do you know on the Nova Corps?”

Kraglin took Meredith by the hand and dragged her towards the bridge. Yondu watched them go in total disbelief.

“Hey,” he said, “answer the goddamn question!”

“Friend of my pop's, cap'n.” Kraglin opened the portal door. “Trust me, you don't know him.”

Yondu paced after them.

“Kraglin, what are you doing,” Meredith asked.

“My pop's old co-pilot is an officer in the Nova Corps. Pretty high up. If anyone can help you,” Kraglin said, “it's him.”

“And why haven't you mentioned this before?” Meredith had to jog to keep up with Kraglin's long strides.

“The day Yazkin-8 went kaboom, he was the officer that didn't show up. He followed the orders given to him, called off the Nova Corps assault, and abandoned my pop. Sent me a call a few days later sayin' it was the biggest mistake of his life, yada yada.” Kraglin scowled. “Swore I'd never talk to him again. But my pop always trusted him, and he told me if I ever needed help, that co-pilot was the one to call.”

“And you really think he's going to be able to help me,” Meredith asked.

Kraglin chuckled. “I should damn well hope so, Ms. Q. He's a Denarian.”

“Denarian?” Meredith blinked. “What's that?”
“General, big wig at the top.” Yondu scowled as he kept pace with them. “Why the hell didn't you tell me you knew a Denarian?”

“Wasn't important, cap'n,” Kraglin said.

“Kraglin,” Yondu said, “don't do anything stupid.”

“Can't help it, cap'n.” Kraglin pulled Meredith along. “I'm a Ravager. Makin' reckless decisions to help my own is kinda part of the job.”

Yondu grinned, but covered it by rubbing his jaw.

“Which Denarian,” he asked.

“Saal.”

“Saal?” Yondu snarled. “Garthan motherfuckin' Saal?”

Kraglin blinked.

“So you do know him,” he said.

“Course I know him.” Yondu stalked along, growling. “Stakar's nephew.”

“I thought you said Stakar and his wife were the last of their kind,” Meredith said.

“They are. Stakar had a brother, Vance, and he was one of the foundin' losers who decided the fuck-forsaken Nova Corps was a good goddamn idea. Then Vance ended up with some Xandarian chic, and then he got killed off by the Kree.” Yondu was gritting his teeth together. “And their kid is Saal.”

“He's half Arcturan,” Kraglin asked.

“Sorta. Same powers don't apply,” Yondu said, “except for the ability to be completely full of shit and full of himself at the same goddamn time. You think he'll help Mery?”

“Worth a shot,” Kraglin said firmly.

Yondu snorted and took off towards the kitchen.

“Have fun with that, idjit,” he said.

Kraglin waited until Yondu was out of earshot before speaking to Meredith.

“You'll see,” he said, “Saal will help.”

Meredith and Kraglin stood alone on the bridge. Kraglin took a deep breath and started the call. After a moment, a handsome face popped up on the screen. The man had angled eyebrows, lidded eyes, and dark hair. He immediately reminded Meredith of Stakar Ogord, but he was dressed in a crisp Nova Corps outfit. He looked down at Kraglin and Meredith and his eyebrows contracted slightly.

“Hello, Denarian Saal.” Kraglin swallowed.
“Who are you?” Saal frowned.

“Kraglan Obfonteri.” Kraglin took a deep breath. “Jagar Obfonteri's son.”

Saal's eyebrows raised. “Jagar Obfonteri was a respectable man, a Nova Corps pilot. I'm looking at a Ravager. I'm not seeing much of a resemblance.”

Kraglin's fists clenched. “Just because I'm a Ravager don't mean I ain't my pop's son.”

“Why are you calling me, Kraglin.”

“My pop once told me if I ever needed help, I could call his old co-pilot. Well, I need help,” Kraglin said, “and for once, you're the one I need help from.”

“How could I help a Ravager,” Saal said.

“You ain't helpin' me. You're helpin' her. This is Meredith Quill.” Kraglin put one hand on her shoulder. “She and her son were cargo for a long time. She's a Terran. She needs to go home.”

“If you kidnapped her, then you can take her home.” Saal's mouth was a hard line. “I'm sure you'll have no trouble breaking through the blockade and bypassing the interference rule.”

“She ain't a Ravager,” Kraglin said, “she wants to do this legal-like.”

Saal looked at Meredith. She tucked her curls behind her ear and swallowed.

“If you're not a Ravager,” he asked, “then why are you on a Ravager's ship wearing Ravager clothing?”

“You think after four months I'd still be walking around in a hospital gown?” Meredith crossed her arms. “Look, I'm trying to get home. Kraglin says you can help.”

“If you really are a Terran, then coming to Xandar to be evaluated shouldn't be much of a problem.” Saal kept his tone flat. “If you are innocent, I'm sure our relocation team would be happy to start the process to get you home. If you're a Ravager, there's always an empty cell in the Kyln.”

“I'm not a Ravager.” Meredith frowned. “Who are you, exactly?”

“Denarian Garthan Saal, Nova Corps officer.”

“Meredith Quill,” she said, “Terran mother.”

Saal raised an eyebrow. “Mother?”

“Me and my eight-year-old Peter have been on this ship for four months. In that time, I've flown spaceships. I've explored unknown planets. I've met people,” she said, “of all walks of life. I've done things I'm not proud of and seen things I never wanted to see. I've killed people. People have tried to kill me. I've even died.”

Saal squinted.

“Denarian Saal,” Meredith continued, “I'm not the same person that came off Terra, but I can tell you this; I'm still Terran, and I want to go home.”

Meredith's voice swelled in strength until she finished. Saal looked at her for a long moment.
“Come to Xandar, Mrs. Quill.” He was almost smiling. “We'll see what we can do.”

“It’s Ms.,” she said.

Saal nodded. “Understood, Ms. Quill.”

“Thank you for listening to us,” she said, “I wasn't sure if anyone in the Nova Corps would.”

“If it were anyone besides Jagar Obfonteri's son calling me,” Saal said, “I wouldn't be listening. As it is, I think we're done here. Come to Xandar, and I'll see what I can do for you, Ms. Quill.”

Meredith nodded. Saal turned his cool green eyes on Kraglin.

“Obfonteri,” he said.

Kraglin shifted. “What?”

“Try not to disappoint your legacy too much,” Saal said.

“Name the time and place.” Kraglin's voice was cold as ice. “I'll out-fly anybody you know, yourself included. Just because I'm a Ravager don't mean I'm not my pop's son. You ever want to test that legacy, you give me a call.”

Kraglin shut off the call. His eyes were lit with a spirited fire; Meredith had previously only seen it while he was operating a ship. Kraglin looked at Meredith. She chuckled and shook her head.

“What,” he said.

“You,” she said, “are gonna be a hell of a captain one day.”

Kraglin's whole face turned bright blue.
Chapter Summary

Meredith and Peter meet Martinex and Stakar. Formally this time, with less overhanging threats of death.

(No new updates in a week?! Crapsmacks, y'all, I'm so sorry! I got sick recently and my job is picking up, so I've had less time to write and even less opportunities to post; I have to drive all the way into town in order to post anything, and I usually don't have the time (or gas) to do so. At any rate, my deepest apologies for making any of you worry and for making all of you wait!)

Yondu had never seen Kraglin so happy. Kraglin spent hours explaining everything about the ship to anyone who would listen. Mainly the Quills, who loved nothing more than to sit and listen to him talk about thruster capacitors and stabilizing computations. Peter found the information engrossing and would pepper Kraglin with questions. The questions, of course, spurred Kraglin to even deeper levels of discourse over the ship. Meredith sat there and smiled; she seemed happy just to hear Kraglin go on and on in rapture. Yondu leaned against the wall of the hangar bay, watching them from a distance.

Meredith was sitting on a crate of photon torpedoes; her slender calves were swinging slightly. Yondu chuckled. She kicked her legs, just like Peter. Kraglin was on top of the ship, prattling on about hull density. Peter was jumping around, trying to climb up after him. That boy had more energy than a goddamn quarnax battery. Meredith pointed to a crate; Peter climbed up on top of it and grabbed the wing of the ship. He managed to scramble his way up to where Kraglin stood. Yondu could see Meredith laugh, but couldn't hear over the din of the ship. That didn't matter. Yondu knew what her laugh sounded like; he could hear it pealing off the sides of his skull.

Yondu grabbed at his captain's rank. He pulled the pin off, turning it in his fingers as if it were made of glass and not carbon steel. The light from the cargo bay made the flame-shape gleam like the real thing. Yondu could see the cross-weave of the metal. A good Ravager was like steel, Stakar had always said, forged in flame. Yondu tossed the steel rank up and caught it, feeling the satisfying weight in his hand. His eyes flicked up to Meredith.

So, she had called Stakar. After everything he'd done to her; lying, deceiving, betraying, extorting, complaining, threatening, pushing her away... Yondu was surprised she hadn't tried to kill him. Instead, she'd given him his dream back. She'd given him a chance to have his family again. Despite everything Yondu had put her through, Meredith cared.

The tightening in Yondu's chest was almost painful. Goddamn it, what was wrong with that woman? After everything he'd done, she ought to hate him. It would be easier if she hated him. If she hated him, she'd just get off the ship, take Peter with her. Yondu wouldn't give a fuck, and everything would go back to normal. But no, he thought, not Mery. She had to go and make everything difficult by giving a shit.

Yondu caught the rank in midair again; this time, the pin jabbed him.
“Fuck,” he said.

The pin hadn't broken the skin; he rubbed his sore finger and repositioned the rank on his chest. It gleamed on his chest, stately and commanding. For a long damn time, Yondu had stared at that rank on Stakar and thought, *One day that'll be mine.* It had been, and then he'd fucked up. Now, thanks to the goddamn Quills, it was back again. Yondu's chest swelled tight, a fierce and relentless joy building up in him. He was *back,* goddamn it, and this time he wasn't going to fuck anything up. He'd live by the code. He'd make Stakar proud. He'd be the kind of Ravager he always knew he could be, the kind of Ravager he'd made Kraglin and Peter.

Yondu grinned at his rank. He wouldn't be surprised if Kraglin didn't end up wearing one of these one day. Yondu had always known that Kraglin would end up a captain; the kid was made for it, burned for it. Peter... well, maybe not. Yondu looked at the Terran boy clambering over the ship. He had a gut feeling that said Peter's destiny lay somewhere else. But for now, it was here, with the Ravagers. And, he reminded himself, with Yondu.

Meredith pulled her legs up, sitting cross-legged on top of the box. She had such a slender body, but all the curves she lacked in her body were made up for in abundance with the curl of her hair. Yondu watched her tuck it behind her ear and chuckled. It wouldn't stay there, he knew that. That woman's hair did whatever the fuck it wanted, just like the woman herself. If she wanted to go to a planet and see her ex-boyfriend, she did it. If she wanted to get to Terra, she gave it everything she had. If she wanted to help some blue son-of-a-bitch get his goddamn life back in order, he thought, she did it in fucking *spades.*

Now, Meredith was rubbing her arms. Yondu couldn't see them from this far away, but he knew her fingers would be gliding over those silver lines in her arms. She rubbed her arms a lot, Yondu noticed. She'd been doing that on the bridge when she gave him that smile. *Damn, that smile.* So the Terran wasn't as drop-dead gorgeous as other women he'd seen; she was still goddamn beautiful. So beautiful, he remembered, that he'd had that stupid damn urge to do some stupid damn things.

“Stupid,” he grunted aloud, “goddamn stupid.”

Stupid was the word for it. Meredith Quill was not some cheap hussy. She wouldn't sleep with him if he was the last man in the galaxy. Besides, she was from Terra; they didn't really get around with other species. Except, Yondu reminded himself, Meredith had slept with Ego, a Celestial. In fact, had Meredith ever slept with a Terran? Was she only into cross-species sex? The thought should not have been as exciting as it was. Yondu found himself tracing the lines of her body with his eyes, wondering if she'd ever give a Centaurian a try.

Maybe she would, if he played his cards right. Take her somewhere she'd love to be. Maybe park the Eclector with Stakar, then take a little vacation. Just him, her, Peter, and Kraglin to babysit. They'd head to Ilyth. The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. Ilyth was Stakar's personal goddamn paradise; it was filled with architecture and research about long-past species. Yondu remembered Stakar going into long speeches about how they'd lived and built and survived. Too boring for Yondu's taste, but Meredith would love it. She and Stakar were the same sort of people, Yondu realized. No wonder they'd gotten along so fast. Stakar wouldn't mind it if Yondu stayed in Ilyth for a little while. There was that villa on the side of the mountain. White curtains, soft winds; Yondu could see it in his mind. Again, not Yondu's style, but Meredith would love it. She and Stakar were the same sort of people, Yondu realized. No wonder they'd gotten along so fast. Stakar wouldn't mind it if Yondu stayed in Ilyth for a little while. There was that villa on the side of the mountain. White curtains, soft winds; Yondu could see it in his mind. Again, not Yondu's style, but Meredith would have a goddamn ball. Peter could muck around in the forest, do some shooting; Kraglin wouldn't mind going and keeping an eye on him. Meredith and Yondu could spend some time alone. He didn't think they'd actually end up in the sheets; Meredith wasn't that kind of woman. But then again, Terrans were goddamn crazy. Yondu might have a chance.
She's off to Terra, he reminded himself, you'll get a taste and then she'll be gone. Even if the blockade lasted another decade, it wouldn't matter. She'd never really be his; her heart belonged to Terra. Yondu's hands turned into fists. He couldn't allow himself to think of her as his. That was one step on a long goddamn road that ended in pain for both of them. Yondu wasn't stupid; no matter how he played his cards, he'd lose the game. She belonged on Terra, and that was where she needed to be.

“Peter!”

Meredith's voice snapped Yondu out of his reverie. Meredith was standing on the crate now with her hands on her hips. Peter was fiddling with something on the ship.

“Peter,” Meredith warned, “don't you dare go messing with that laser.”

Peter winced, then backed off.

“Kraglin said I could look at it,” he said.

“Look,” Meredith said, “but don't touch.”

Yondu pulled his arrow out of its quiver and rolled the tip of it across his bottom lip. *Look, but don't touch.* He let his eyes roll over the swell of Meredith's hips. She was wearing those red leather pants again. He liked them, he decided, they looked good on her. Yondu knew what those hips felt like in his lap, what those arms felt like around his chest. He’d even gotten a taste of those lips, he thought, and who the fuck would have predicted that? He shifted uncomfortably as his arousal kindled again. That Terran pepper whetted his appetite, he realized, and now he was wanting the whole damn thing. He held his arrow in front of his eyes, balancing it between his fingers. He had to stop thinking about her like that.

“Yeah, because that worked out real well last time, dinnit?” Yondu snorted. “Cold sweat and needing a shower.”

Over the arrow, Yondu could see Meredith sitting back down on the crate. Again, she was swinging her legs. So many things she did were so innocent, Yondu thought, so Peter-like, and then she'd turn around and do something crazy and full of pepper and completely Meredith. She shook her curls over her shoulder and saw him. She smiled and waved.

Yondu gave a whistle; the arrow zoomed out of his hands and tangled itself in her hair.

“Hey!” She started swatting at it. “Not funny, Yondu.”

He gave a low warble; the arrow did a guilty little roll, then fell lifeless into her lap. She picked it up and pointed it at him.

“You,” she said, “are teasing me again.”

Yondu shrugged. Meredith shook her head and looked at the arrow. Her slender fingers traced the shaft, then she stroked her fingertips across the four-faceted arrowhead. The tightening in Yondu's trousers increased, and he swallowed. His goddamn imagination needed to knock it off right the hell now.

“It's so sharp.” Meredith examined it, holding it up and looking at it lengthwise. “And straight. What's it made out of, again?”

“Yaka,” he grunted, “Centaurian metal.”
“I know that you control it with your fin,” she said, “and that it's an emotional thing, but how do you do the... y'know, whistle like that.”

“What, this?” Yondu whistled, hitting four tones simultaneously; the arrow returned to his hand.

“Yes.” She tucked her unruly curls behind one ear. “Your whistle is beautiful. It's like angel music.”

“So's your voice,” he said, “when you sing.”

The words were out of his mouth before he had time to curse at himself for them. Meredith smiled.

“Your whistle is better,” she said.

He shrugged and walked towards her.

“All Centaurians can do it. We got four lungs, see, and our voice is split into quarters.” He tapped his throat as he walked. “One lung for each voice box.”

Meredith brought her knees up to her chest and hugged them.

“So when we whistle, it's one note in four tones.” Yondu pulled out the arrow again. “See how it's got four sides? Reacts on each side to one tone. Four tones, four sides; hit ’em all, and it stays up in the air.”

Yondu whistled one solid note; the arrow held itself in midair.

“Amazing,” Meredith said.

The corner of Yondu's mouth threatened to turn up. He took the arrow out of the air.

“Guess so,” he said, “but it's just for killin' people.”

“And teasing Terrans,” Meredith added.

“And teasin' Terrans,” Yondu agreed, “but that ain't all Centaurians. That's just me.”

Meredith laughed. Yondu sat next to her on the crate and fiddled with his arrow. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see her watching it.

“Whatcha thinkin', Star-Queen?”

“Why do you call me that,” she laughed.

“Because I want to, dammit.” Yondu twirled the arrow in his fingers. “Now answer the goddamn question.”

“I was thinking about our conversation yesterday. The one about whether or not Peter and I were going to stay on the Eclector. This Garthan Saal guy, he says I should come to Xandar and work it out with the Nova Corps. That might take months,” Meredith said, “and I don't know where I'd stay or what I'd do in the meantime.”

“Havin' second thoughts,” Yondu asked.

“No, I was thinking about Peter. I was hoping to ask you a favor.” Meredith swallowed. “I was going to ask if you'd take care of Peter while I sort out this mess on Xandar.”
The arrow stopped in Yondu's hands.

“You want me taking care of your boy,” he asked.

“For a few months. Please,” she added.

Yondu looked between Meredith’s cool gray eyes.

“Are you bein' fully fuckin' serious,” he asked.

“Yes.” Meredith hugged her knees. “I need someone I can trust.”

Twiddling his arrow between his fingers, Yondu turned over the notion in his head. Mery was damned determined to do everything she could to get back to Terra. She cared more about that one floating rock than what she could find in a million star systems. Yondu couldn't understand it, but then again, Yondu had never really had a home planet. Still, if Peter was staying on the Eclector, that was more months of training the boy. If that stubborn boy didn't want to leave, then he wouldn't, and if he didn't want to leave, his mother wouldn't either. Yondu stowed his arrow away.

“Fine,” he grunted, “I'll babysit your damn kid.”

Meredith smiled and put her right hand over his left forearm.

“Thanks,” she said.

“Don't say that,” he said automatically.

Meredith rolled her eyes. Yondu's comm link lit up.

“Captain?” Gef’s voice hummed over the comms. “Admiral Ogord's back on the bridge. Martinex is wandering around some o’ the hallways; think he's lookin' for you.”

“Great,” Yondu grunted, “just what I need.”

“The entire fleet's out front,” Gef said, “and Admiral Ogord is ordering us to allow shuttles onto the Eclector.”

“Old man always did like invitin' himself over. Go ahead, let 'em in. Get the loadin' crew to bring up a couple barrel of grog. Stakar will be expectin' a proper homecomin' party,” Yondu said, then switched off the comm link.

“You have to throw him a homecoming party?” Meredith raised her eyebrows. “That seems a little backwards.”

“After what I did, he could have my whole goddamn ship if it meant I was back,” Yondu said.

Meredith rubbed his forearm.

Martinex and Yondu stood facing one another, their shoulders squared and their faces grim.

“So,” Martinex said, “you're back.”

“Seems like it,” Yondu said.
Martinex rushed Yondu in a glittery blur, plowing into him. Fists punched and legs kicked, and the two broke out into huge grins. Meredith jumped and pressed herself against the wall, watching with wide eyes as the Ravagers roughhoused.

“You big blue son-of-a-bitch! Don't you ever scare me like that again!” Martinex was laughing so hard that his whole body shook. “I thought we'd never see you again! You know how much this place sucked without you? It sucked ass, man, it sucked ass!”

Yondu roared with laughter as the two wrestled. Finally they staggered upright, one arm around the other, holding themselves up and facing Meredith.

“Mery, this is Martinex,” Yondu chuckled.

“Hi.” Martinex grinned charmingly. “I'm the attractive brother.”

Meredith laughed.

“You're the fuck-forsaken flirt of the family, that's what you are.” Yondu growled and put his free arm around Meredith's waist. “This one's off-limits.”

“Oh is she?” Martinex raised his crystalline brow. “Why?”

“She's the boy's momma and she blew up Ego and saved the whole goddamn galaxy,” Yondu said.

“You blew up Ego?” Martinex held up a fist. “Dope.”

Meredith bumped her fist against his, grinning.

“It was nothing,” she said, “Yondu did most of the work.”

“I refuse to believe that.” Martinex crossed his arms, taking his arm off from around Yondu. “I've got this great, woman-empowering video in my head of you single-handedly detonating your ex-boyfriend while wearing some really sexy dress. If I imagine Yondu in it, it just ruins it.”

“Are you imagining him in the video or the dress,” she giggled.

“Ah, no!” Martinex covered his hands with his eyes. “Why would you say that, ugh! I did not need that mental image.”

“Mind yourself, idjit. It might have been a few years since I did it,” Yondu said, “but I could still kick your ass.”

Martinex grinned.

“Kick my ass? For what,” he said, “this?”

Martinex took Meredith's hand and kissed it; Yondu slapped Martinex upside the head.

“I said hands off,” Yondu snarled.

“But you didn't say lips off,” Martinex said.

Martinex snapped his fingers, pointed at Yondu, smacked a cold kiss onto Meredith's cheek, and bolted. He didn't make it five feet before Yondu tackled him from behind, pinning him to the ground.

“What the fuck did I say,” Yondu bellowed.
“You're being possessive, you're being possessive!” Martinex laughed in a sing-song voice. “Yondu's got a girlfriend, Yondu's got a girlfriend!”

Martinex's own fist was jammed inside his mouth. Yondu's wide eyes burned scarlet.

“You shut the fuck up before I chip your goddamn tongue off with a pickaxe,” he snarled.

Around his fist, Martinex laughed.

“I miffed dat,” he said.

“What?” Yondu took Martinex's fist out of his mouth. “What the fuck are you sayin' now?”


“Course I'm pissed,” Yondu fumed, “not five minutes after you're on my goddamn ship and you're touchin' who I tell you not to touch and mouthin' the fuck off!”

Martinex and Yondu wrestled for a few more moments. Yondu slammed Martinex onto the floor, pinning him down. Martinex made a couple of cursory attempts to get free before pleading to Meredith for assistance.

“Meredith! Meredith,” Martinex begged, “you'll give me a hand here, right? Do me a solid? Help a bro out?”

Meredith chuckled and put her hand on Yondu's shoulder.

“Let him go,” she said.

Yondu bared his teeth and snarled.

“Please let him go,” she asked.

“Hell no,” Yondu said, “I'm keepin' him right here until he learns a fuckin' lesson.”

Meredith hugged Yondu tightly from behind.

“Please let him go,” she asked again.

“That ain't gonna work.” Yondu kept his grip firm. “I don't fall for that shit.”

“Let him go or I'll bite you in the fuckin' neck,” she snapped.

Yondu turned his head to look at her.

“Mery,” he said, pretending to be offended, “I fuckin' thought we were fuckin' friends.”

“Then be my friend and let my new friend go,” Meredith said.

“Friend? You've known him for five fuckin' seconds,” Yondu said indignantly, “and you knew me for months before we were friends!”

“You're my best friend. He's your brother, and because he's your brother, he's my friend.” Meredith leaned her elbows on his shoulders. “If you let him go, you can go find Stakar and Peter. I'll take Martinex to the kitchen and get him doing dishes or something.”
“I ain't leavin' you alone with him,” Yondu growled.

“You don't trust me?” Martinex put a hand on his chest. “I'm wounded, Yondu.”

“Shut up or you're gonna be wounded, fuck-for-brains,” Yondu said.

“You trust me, don't you?” Meredith leaned over so she could look at his face. “Come on. I can take care of myself.”

“I know that, dammit. No one better to know it. But this asshole,” Yondu said as he pressed Martinex down, “is crystallized trouble.”

“The ladies call me rock candy.” Martinex winked.

“Oh boy.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “Why don't you take him to Stakar or something?”

Yondu grunted and stood, dragging Martinex behind him as he stalked down the hall. Martinex grinned and waved at Meredith; Meredith shook her head, but waved back before disappearing through a portal.

“I like her,” Martinex said.


“Stubborn and emotional?” Martinex grinned as he got to his feet. “Guess you and her are two bullets in a mag, then.”

Yondu grunted noncommittally. The two Ravagers strode to the bridge, their feet keeping perfect rhythm with each other. The corner of Yondu's mouth threatened to turn up; it'd been a long time, but falling into sync with Martinex felt as natural as anything in the world.

“How's Chuck,” Yondu asked.

“Ol' Charlie-27? He's not been the same since you left. Had a big row with Stakar over it,” Martinex explained, “him and Aleta both.”

“Stakar and Aleta ain't speakin' again?”

“Well, not yet.” Martinex linked his hands behind his back. “We kind of split after Stakar exiled you. Krugarr and Charlie-27 sided with Aleta, and Mainframe and I sided with Stakar.”

Yondu's brow furrowed.

“What do you mean, sided with,” he asked.

“Charlie and Krugarr thought we should have done something about Ego. We should have physically detained you, stopped you from breaking the code, and killed Ego ourselves.” Martinex frowned. “Mainframe ran the odds and said there was no way we could do it without a Celestial on our side, and Stakar hid in the rules and made it clear he wasn't coming out of them.”

“Sounds like him,” Yondu muttered.

“Stakar keeps to regulation; you know that. And as for me, I thought the best way to get you back was to wait for you to come back on your own. No one was going to be able to force you to return. I thought that I was best suited to being that quiet voice in Stakar's ear reminding him that you were
still out there.” Martinex smiled and shrugged. “Somebody had to keep the dream alive.”

Yondu chuckled.

“Look, **someone** in this family has to be level-headed, and we both know it’s not you. Or Charlie-27,” Martinex added, “and **definitely** not Stakar or Aleta.”

Yondu laughed as they turned a corner, pacing up to the bridge.

“Charlie’s going to be so happy to see you,” Martinex said softly, “and Main's going to blitz her circuits.”

“And Krugs?”

“He'll slither around with that stupid I-told-you-so look in his eyes.” Martinex grinned. “And Aleta might even cry.”

“Nah she won't, she'll just slap me.” Yondu stared at the ground for a second. “Can't believe y'all split up after I left.”

“You were part of the family. It didn't feel right without you,” Martinex said.

“You're a bullet-proof walkin' rock what can burn or freeze anything by touchin' it. Stakar can fly and has a mind like a steel trap. Mainframe is a fuckin' steel trap of a mind; she can practically predict the future. Charlie-27 can turn the tide of any fight, and Aleta's the very shroud of death itself. Krugarr's fuckin' **magic**.” Yondu snorted and shook his head. “Y'all didn't need me.”

“Wrong.” Martinex stopped walking and fixed Yondu with a glittering stare. “We needed you more than we wanted to admit. You being a mouthy, stubborn, over-emotional asshole was **exactly** what we needed. With you gone, it was like a hole. There was no one for Aleta to boss around. Stakar had no one to be worried about, no one to guide. Charlie lost his little tag-a-long partner-in-crime, and I lost the blue jerkoff who tried to beat the snot out of me and never shut up. **Hell yeah** we needed you.”

Yondu fought the urge to grip Martinex in a rib-crushing hug. Instead, he hit the door panel to the bridge and grinned.

“You keep that in mind when I'm back to pissin' you off,” Yondu said.

“I'll try,” Martinex answered.

Stakar Ogord was already on the bridge, waiting for them. He chuckled when he saw Martinex and Yondu come in together.

“Aleta and Charlie called. No one's going to be able to make it to this forsaken slice of the galaxy, so they're all meeting up on Ilyth for a meeting at the Table.” Stakar smiled. “It'll be nice to see all the chairs filled for once.”

Yondu's chest swelled with pride.

“Of course, that means you'll have to come to Ilyth, Yondu. And it means I'll have to make arrangements for the other captains,” Stakar said.

“I'll take care of it.” Martinex flicked on his comm unit. “Respectfully speaking, captain, if you try and coordinate with Aleta, this isn't going to go well.”
“True.” Stakar sighed. “Martinex, you deal with the minutia.”

“On it, captain,” Martinex called behind him as he left the bridge.

The portal shut. Stakar looked at Yondu.

“I think he missed you,” Stakar said.

Yondu flushed violet and grunted. The portal opened again; Yondu and Stakar turned, expecting to see Martinex. Instead, Peter Quill came barreling through the door with wide eyes.

“Yondu! Yondu!” Peter half-ran, half-fell down the stairs. “There’s a guy out there and he's made of diamonds!”

“It ain't diamond. That's Martinex,” Yondu said, “so don't piss him off.”

“It looked like diamond.” Peter squinted. “How many carats do you think he is?”

“You're a goddamn carrot, now sit the fuck down and stop talkin',” Yondu said.

“Who's this, Yondu,” Peter asked, pointing at Stakar.

“This is Stakar. Your momma met him down at Mareet's,” Yondu answered.

Peter gave Stakar a long, hard look.

“You kept my mom from getting her surgery,” Peter asked.

Stakar winced.

“It was purely accidental,” he said.

Peter seized the front of Stakar's jacket, climbed him like a tree, and socked him. Pain shocked through Stakar's jaw as a tight, small right hook plowed into it. Peter dropped down; Stakar stumbled back a step or two. Yondu's eyes widened; Peter, red faced, prepared for another swing. Stakar looked from Yondu to Peter and then back again. Yondu tensed, ready to throw himself at Stakar if Stakar retaliated. Stakar's mouth opened, and a deep, straight-from-the-gut laugh shot out of him.

“Bahahaha!” Stakar doubled over, his hands on his knees. “Right in the jaw, right in the jaw! Bahahahaha!”

Peter and Yondu looked at each other as Stakar laughed himself into hysterics.

“Because you, and he did the same thing!” Stakar had tears in his eyes. “Remember? Remember? Yondu, Yondu, the same thing, remember?”

“What the fuck are you talkin' about,” Yondu asked.

“You, stupid! Remember?” Stakar stood up straight, laughing. “You got out of the cell, what was the first thing you did?”

Yondu broke out into a huge grin, shaking his head.

“Punched you square in the goddamn jaw,” he said.

“Same! Same!” Stakar pointed at Peter. “You see?”
Yondu chuckled while Stakar doubled over again. Stakar's laughter petered out, and he stood. He cleared his throat and addressed Peter.

“So,” he said, “you're the infamous Peter Quill.”

“I'm Star-Lord,” Peter growled.

Stakar's stern expression fractured. He looked at Yondu.

“Tell me he's for sale,” Stakar said.

“No! Goddamn it,” Yondu snarled, “why is everybody always tryin' to buy my goddamn Terrans?”

“Because he's adorable,” Stakar said, “Aleta would love him.”

“Yeah, and smother him to death in her goddamn bosom,” Yondu said.

“Probably,” Stakar said, “but what a way to go.”

“You ain't takin' either of my Terrans, you hear?” Yondu held Peter tightly. “Mine, dammit.”

“Yeah,” Peter said boldly, “we're Yondu's!”

An irrational bubble of pride swelled in Yondu's chest.

“So I see. You are a very loyal Ravager,” Stakar said to Peter, “Yondu should be proud.”

Peter puffed up his chest, beaming. Pride surged through Yondu, and he couldn't help the crooked grin that spread across his face.

“Yeah,” he said, “Terrans are a handful, but they're goddamn useful. Death-defyin', crazy, stubborn, talented little things.”

It was as close to a compliment as Yondu was likely to give, and Peter was bursting with pride. He hugged onto Yondu tightly; Yondu turned purple and tried to pry him off.

“Come on,” Yondu grumbled, “none of that, now.”

Stakar chuckled. Yondu put Peter down, pushing him a good two feet away.

“So you're Star-Lord,” Stakar said, “how interesting. They call me Starhawk.”

“Starhawk?” Peter's eyes widened. “Cool.”

“It ain't that cool,” Yondu mumbled.

“It is too.” Stakar bristled. “Do I need to remind you that I can fly?”

“You also ended up absorbin' your wife for a couple thousand years,” Yondu snapped, “so I don't want to hear it.”

“She never stops complaining about that.” Stakar put his hand over his face. “It was an accident, it was survival.”

“It was fucked up and wrong. I wasn't even there and I reckon I understand why she was pissed,” Yondu said.
Stakar waved his hand as if physically dismissing the concern.

“Nevermind Aleta,” he said, “let’s focus on your homecoming. Do you have enough grog?”

“Yeah.” Yondu rolled his eyes. “I been a goddamn captain long enough to keep ’em watered, Stakar.”

“And food?”

“We got Mery,” Yondu said, “that’s more than enough.”

Stakar raised an eyebrow.

“You expect one woman to be able to cook for two ships’ worth of Ravagers,” he asked.

Stakar looked at the sea of platters piled with every dish Meredith could muster. He whipped his head around, staring at Yondu with wide eyes. Stakar just pointed to the food.

“I told you,” Yondu said, “we got Mery.”

“Is this okay?” Meredith was stirring some boiling caramel-colored liquid on the stove. “I didn’t know if there was anything traditional so I just cooked as much as I could. Hopefully this is enough.”

“How can you cook this much,” Stakar asked.

“My papa liked Southern livin’, and my mama was Midwest.” Meredith smiled; the steam from the pan made her gold curls kink around her face. “I’m used to cookin’ for a lot of cousins.”

Stakar put his hands on his hips and lowered his head.

“She's not for sale either, is she,” he asked.

“No, goddamm it! Fuck, what is with you? Ain't that slavery, sellin' people?” Yondu snarled and subconsciously angled himself between Meredith and Stakar. “Holy fuck, Stakar, the fuck is with you?”

“I'm only teasing.” Stakar pulled out a cigarette. “Goodness, Yondu, calm your tits. Take your panties out of a twist.”

Yondu took the cigarette out of Stakar's hand and snapped it between his fingers, scowling. Stakar's mouth soured.

“No smokin' on my ship. Now go on, get. Leave the woman to her work.” Yondu shoved Stakar out of the kitchen. “For fuck's sake, she don’t need any goddamn help.”

The portal closed on Stakar's bewildered face. Yondu half-turned to Meredith.

“D'you need any fuckin’ help,” he grumbled.

“You're doing a dandy job already. Just keep the boys out of here and go have fun with your family.” Meredith smiled, still stirring the pot. “I've got it handled here. You can count on me.”
The corner of Yondu's mouth twitched up. He left the kitchen without another word, dragging Stakar away. Over at the stove, Meredith tucked her curls behind her ear and smiled. Maybe Meredith had a long road ahead of her until she returned to her own family, but Yondu had gotten his back, and that alone was worth all the trouble.
He said they'd get shit-faced drunk. Well, they don't, but that certainly doesn't stop them from doing some stupid shit anyway.

The entire Eclector was packed with drunk Ravagers. Outside the windows, ships were sending out beautiful colored flares; a Ravager homecoming. Every captain wanted to shake Yondu's hand, and every Ravager wanted to hear the story of how Yondu had defeated Ego. In an odd fit of humility, he kept telling them that Meredith had done most of the work. She, in turn, kept insisting that he'd saved the day. The only thing they could agree on was that Kraglin had saved their lives; every other detail was fair game for debate. It got to the point where they were, to no one's surprise, arguing.

"Damn it, woman," Yondu said, "how the hell was I gonna blow it up without you cuttin' a hole to the core?"

"What use was cutting the hole if I didn't have the detonator," Meredith countered.

"You coulda got the detonator off my corpse."

"No," she said, "because if you hadn't flown out of there I wouldn't have even been able to get to your corpse. Also, the detonator would have been smashed."

Yondu scowled. "How the hell would you know that? Detonator could have been fine."

"But it probably wouldn't have been fine."

"Could have been."

"Probably wouldn't have been."

"Coulda."

" Wouldn't have been."

"You can't prove it," Yondu said.

"Oh sure," Meredith said, throwing up her hands, "let's debate the probability."

"Both of you." Stakar put a hand on their shoulders. "Ms. Quill. Captain Udonta. Please, do us all a favor."

Yondu swelled with pride; it felt good to be Captain Udonta again. Meredith chuckled at him, then looked at Stakar.

"What," she asked.

"Please just fuck each other senseless and get it over with. If there was any more sexual tension here," Stakar said, "I'd be able to cut it with a knife. Please, just adjourn to the quarters, indulge in furious carnal relief, and come back when you're done. Be safe, use protection, and enjoy"
yourselves, but do try to keep it down.”

There were some hearty yells of, “Here here!” Yondu mentally made note of who spoke up; he'd have to beat the shit out of them later. Meredith's face burned like fire.

“Excuse you? Who the hell do you think you –”

Yondu clamped his hand over her mouth. He was turning several shades of purple.

“Stakar, it ain't like that,” he said, “we're just friends.”

“Just friends.” Stakar rubbed his temples. “Yondu, you don't have a beautiful woman on your ship for four months and keep it at 'just friends'. ”

“Meredith ain't like other women,” Yondu said, “she's different.”

Meredith took Yondu's hand off her mouth.

“Clap that hand over my mouth when I'm talking again,” she said, “and I will cut it off.”

Yondu cracked a grin. Stakar raised his eyebrows and pulled out a long, red cigarette.

“There's that pepper again,” Stakar said.

“Like I said.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “She ain't like other women. Other women, yeah, they're one-night distractions. Meredith ain't that; she's part of the crew, Ravager or not. We don't treat her like them others, not on this damn ship.”

Stakar took a long drag from his cigarette, his eyebrows nearly disappearing into his soft dark hair. Meredith was looking at Yondu with a slight smile. The other Ravagers were exchanging significant looks; almost all of Yondu's crew had joined the secret bet going about whether or not Yondu and Meredith would screw before she got back to Terra, and tonight looked as good of a night as any. Units changed hands in the background as Stakar blew smoke into the air.

“By the stars, Yondu,” he said, “that was almost respectable.”

“Don't push it,” Yondu grunted.

Stakar chuckled.

“Aleta would be proud,” he said, “although I do look forwards to you explaining your habits to her.”

“Bots ain't people,” Yondu countered.

“The principle stands. Bad habits are bad habits,” Stakar said.

“It works,” Yondu grunted.

“That's not how you were raised.”

“I was raised in a fuck-forsaken slave camp.”

“And eight years of Aleta and I, that counts for nothing?”

“I didn't say that, dammit.”

“But you implied it.” Stakar frowned. “Aleta would put a knife in your gut if she knew the way
you’d been acting.”

Meredith tried to disappear into the crowd. Yondu noticed her discomfort and put his hand on the small of her back.

“Where’s the boy,” he said in a low voice.

“I sent him to bed.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “You know what, I’ll go check to be sure.”

Meredith wandered off, grateful for the excuse to leave. Yondu watched her go; Stakar watched Yondu watch her.

“Martinex was right.” Stakar's voice became mockingly sing-song. “Yondu's got a girlfriend, Yondu's got a girlfriend.”

“We ain't like that,” Yondu said through gritted teeth.

“Maybe not, but you can't deny you're attracted to her. Don't give me that look,” Stakar said as Yondu glowered at him, “I can see it in your eyes.”

“Am not,” Yondu snapped.

“Oh yes you are.” Stakar tilted his head back, a slight smile playing around his lips. “And you'd better figure out what you're going to do about that.”

“Do about it? The fuck you talkin' about,” Yondu asked.

“Look, son, you've got two courses of action here.” Stakar put his hand on Yondu's shoulder, leading him to the side of the room. “Option one, you can fuck her against the wall and all that jazz.”

“Stakar,” Yondu said in a warning tone.

“Or, option two, you can kill this right where it starts.” Stakar sat down and put his elbows on the table. “Look, either fan that flame or pour ice water on it. There's no letting it burn out on its own.”

Yondu's eyes slid between Stakar's.

“How,” he asked, sitting next to Stakar.

“Push your limits. Indulge yourself a little. She’ll either shut you down or melt into your arms.”

Stakar leaned back. “It's up to you to figure out which reaction you really want.”

Yondu bared his teeth, but his eyes flicked to the party. He swallowed.

“She's just distractin',” he said.

“Then let her shut you down. After that, it should be a simple matter of writing her off and returning to your previous existence of detachment,” Stakar said.

Yondu exhaled in relief, grunted what could possibly be taken as gratitude, and returned to the party. Stakar watched him go, the corner of his mouth turning up.

“Ugly blue fucker's smitten as hell,” Stakar muttered.

Gef dropped into the seat Yondu had vacated and threw a sharp Ravager salute.
“Gef,” Stakar said, returning the salute, “it's been a while.”

“That it has, sir.” Gef slid a datapad onto the table. “Tell me, Admiral. How crazy are you?”

Stakar lit a cigarette. He took a long draw from it, the glow of the cigarette reflecting deep in his hooded eyes.

“Try me,” he said.

Yondu found Meredith by the liquor. She'd uncorked a bottle of Terran whiskey and was pouring herself a glass.

“Doin' alright,” he grunted.

“Oh!” Meredith jumped. “Oh, sorry, I didn't see you there. Yeah, I'm doing okay. Peter's in bed; he's so worn out from running around to see all the new faces.”

“Pour me one of those.” Yondu leaned against the table. “Figure I deserve it.”

“That you do,” Meredith chuckled.

She poured Yondu a heady glass of whiskey and handed it to him. He looked at her skirt and frowned.

“That ain't Ego's, is it,” he grunted.

“No.” Meredith tugged at the skirt, adjusting it so that it hit just at her knee. “This was an oversized shirt Kraglin gave me. Figured I'd sew it up nice for the occasion. I'm selling all Ego's dresses to Algon the next time we dock there.”

“Good. Less we got to remember that jackass by, the better,” Yondu said.

Meredith chuckled, fiddling with her glass. She stared down into the whiskey, her eyes distant.

“Hey,” he said.

Meredith looked up. Yondu held his glass out to her.

“Cheers to not fuckin' up anymore,” he said.

“To Peter,” she replied, “the only thing you, me, or Jason ever did right.”

Yondu touched his glass to hers, and both of them drained the glass in one go. They lowered them and laughed at each other. She glanced at the bottle and raised her eyebrows.

“Go on,” he said.

Meredith topped off both of their glasses.

“What was it you said,” she asked, “what were we gonna do after we got rid of Jason?”

“Get shit-faced drunk,” Yondu said, “and that's exactly what the fuck we're gonna do.”
Giggling, Meredith took a big gulp from her glass.

“Two emotional, stupid drunks on the same ship?” She shook her head. “Kraglin's gonna have a hell of a time.”

“We're gonna have a hell of a time,” Yondu said.

“Hell yeah we are.” Meredith laughed. “We saved the universe, we deserve this!”

“Course we do.” Yondu drank from his glass, hiding a smile. “This is what we get for actin' altruistically.”

“Altru...” Meredith covered her mouth with one hand. “Do you know what that word means?”

“I ain't an idjit, Mery.”

“I'm so proud.” Meredith put her hand over her heart, laughing. “You used 'altruistically' correctly in a sentence all by yourself. It's the word of the day!”

“Here's your fuckin' word of the day; whiskey.” Yondu grabbed the bottle. “Now stop talkin' and drink.”

Meredith needed no second bidding. She leaned back and kept drinking. The sweet butterscotch taste burned the sides of her tongue, and she smacked her lips.

“That,” she said, “is good shit.”

Yondu cracked a grin. Music came blaring over the speakers; they looked left to see Kraglin fiddling with the overhead comm system. There was a roar of approval from the Ravagers.

“Figured y'all might like some tunes,” he said.

“Karaoke!” Drazkar cupped his claws over his mouth and yelled. “Do the karaoke!”

“Quill!” Lunis broke out into a needle-toothed grin. “Quill! Someone make Quill sing!”

There was a roar from Yondu's crew, and they rushed Meredith. All she did was flinch, and Yondu snarled. The crew immediately stopped.

“I mean. If she's okay. If she's okay with that.” Lunis backed up slowly. “No pressure.”

“Aw, go on Ms. Quill.” Kraglin stood and grinned at her. “Why not? Stage fright?”

“I don't get stage fright, I just don't know what to sing.” Meredith looked around at all the expectant faces. “I..um...oh, fine.”

The Ravagers chuckled. Kraglin handed Meredith a mic unit. Meredith looked out at the starscape; in her mind, she could still see the broken pieces of the planet Ego floating through the void. She flipped through all the songs on the tapes she had, finally resting on one.

“Get on with it,” a Ravager hollered.

“Boy, you want me to tan your hide? Patience,” she snapped.

There were some sniggers from the audience. Yondu moved through the crowd, headed back to Stakar with his whiskey in hand. There was a short musical intro, and then singing swelled into the
very corners of the room.

“At first, I was afraid. I was petrified. Kept thinkin' I could never live without you by my side.”
Meredith's voice was low and full. “But then I spent so many nights thinkin' how you did me wrong,
and I grew strong, and I learned how to get along.”

Yondu stopped. She had never sounded that good before. He forced himself to go back to Stakar
while she sang. He snarled at Gef, who quickly left the seat. Yondu dropped back in it, scowling.
Stakar tapped Yondu's drink with his finger; Yondu drained it while Meredith sang.

And so you're back! From outer space! I just walked in to find you here with that sad look upon your
face. I should have changed that stupid lock, I should have made you leave your key, if I'd had
known for just one second that you'd be back to bother me!

Stakar chuckled.

“So she can sing,” he said.

“Went to school for it. Goddamn useless talent.” Yondu examined his empty glass. “Can't kill
anyone with it.”

“Could she sure could rake in the units. If she got a contract on Xandar, she could be a big hit. Make a
million or two, comfortably retire.” Stakar laughed. “Just think, you could have the next celebrity on
your ship.”

“Mery? A celebrity? You've got to be shittin' me.” Yondu set down his glass. “She ain't that kind of
woman.”

“Says you,” Stakar said.

Go on now, go, walk out the door. Just turn around now, 'cause you're not welcome anymore.
Weren't you the one who tried to hurt me with goodbye? Did you think I'd crumble? Did you think
I'd lay down and die? Oh no, not I! I will survive! As long as I know how to love, I know I'll stay
alive! I've got all my life to live and I've got all my love to give, and I'll survive, I will survive, hey
hey!

Yondu groaned and put his face in his hands; Meredith had gotten up on the table to sing. She had a
blaze in her eyes; Yondu knew it was nothing but trouble brewing.

“Here she goes,” he grunted.

Stakar laughed.

“Tell me she does this all the time,” he said.

“Only when she's drunk and the boy ain't around.”

“She's fun.”

“She's alright.”

It took all the strength I had not to fall apart. Kept trying hard to mend the pieces of my broken
heart, and I spent oh so many nights just feeling sorry for myself. I used to cry, but now I hold my
head up high! And you see me, somebody new; I'm not that chained-up little person still in love with
you. And so you felt like droppin' in and just expect me to be free? Now I'm savin' all my lovin' for
“someone who's lovin' me!

Stakar and Yondu listened to the rest of Meredith's song. When she finished, the Ravagers roared for an encore. Martinex came over to Stakar and Yondu, grinning.

“She's good,” Martinex said, “maybe too good.”

“Too good for what,” Yondu challenged.


Stakar chuckled deeply, patting Yondu on the back.

“Good luck,” he said.

“You picked a hell of a catch, bro.” Martinex sat on Stakar's other side. “Sign me up for the first shuttle to Terra; if this is how they grow them, I'm going to get a full dozen.”

“Shut up,” Yondu growled, “we ain't like that.”

Meredith was disentangling herself from the crowd, refusing the pleas for more and trying to make it back to her whiskey. Yondu stood and made a beeline for her, shouldering Ravagers out of the way.

“What the hell was that,” he asked.

“That? I get theatrical when I sing.” Meredith shrugged and topped off her whiskey; someone had drained it while she was singing. “It's not a big deal, it's just show stuff.”

The music had switched to a popular Kallusian pop song; Yondu knew the words, but he could see Meredith blink in confusion.

“Don't get the lyrics,” he asked.

“No, I do. I got a translator implant up here now.” Meredith tapped the back of her head. “I just... geez, this is a dirty song.”

Yondu's eyes flicked from the mass of wildly dancing Ravagers to the Terran before him.

“Let's dance,” he said.

“To this?” Meredith turned her head slightly. “You're kidding, right?”

His large blue hand pressed to her back, and he led her into the sea of Ravagers. Bodies were moving against each other rapidly. Someone had turned the lights down; the area was lit only by the colored flares of the outside ships and a few flashing emergency lights, set off just for the evening. Within seconds, Meredith found her entire body flat against Yondu's, his hands on her waist and her arms around his neck. She swallowed, feeling the intense heat he gave off.

“What are you doing,” she hissed.

“Dancin',” he answered.

“This is not dancing.” Meredith could feel Yondu's breath on her neck. “This is definitely not dancing.”

Yondu's left hand roamed to her hip, holding it against his. There were bodies all around them, and
all she could smell was ship oil, leather, and whiskey. Her breath caught in her throat.

“Yondu,” she said, “if you don’t knock it off, you are in a world of hurt.”

“Don't make promises you won't keep, Star-Queen,” Yondu muttered in her ear.

Meredith tread on his foot, glaring at him.

“Steel-toe boots, Mery.” He grinned. “Can't feel a thing.”

“I will kick you somewhere you can feel,” she snapped.

“Why you so angry? We're just dancin',” Yondu said.

“Dancing is one thing. This,” Meredith huffed, “is something else.”

“Is it?” Yondu ran his nose along her neck. “Don't seem like that to me. Maybe you're readin' into shit, Mery.”

She opened her mouth, closed it, and flushed pink.

“You're teasing me,” she muttered.

“Finally figured it out, huh?” Yondu chuckled, showing his jagged teeth. “Yeah Mery, I'm just teasin' you.”

“Don't,” she snapped, “not ever like that.”

There was a steely edge to her voice that made him frown.

“Fine.” Yondu touched her curls gently. “Maybe I ain't teasin'.”

Meredith blinked, surprised.

“If you're not teasing me,” she asked slowly, “what are you doing?”

Yondu's grip on her waist tightened. In the sea of moving bodies, they were the only ones who stood still. They were, at least for the moment, invisible.

“Come with me,” he said in her ear.

Meredith swallowed, blood rushing to her face. She allowed him to lead her out of the room, slipping into an abandoned hallway. Yondu leaned against the wall, his hands on her waist.

“Gotta proposition for you, Quill,” he said.

“Fine.” Meredith crossed her arms. “Let's hear it.”

“I'm thinkin' we could partner in some physical stress-relievin' exercises of the oral variety,” Yondu said calmly, “for the sake of recreational activity.”

“So...you're saying you just want to make out,” she said.

“Wouldn't mind it myself,” Yondu said.

“Is this about what Stakar said?” Meredith put her hands on her hips. “Because that's not happening.”
“No. I meant what I said, dammit. You ain't like other women. You ain't no one-night stand. You're part of the ship,” he said, “and we're gonna treat you like it. This ain't about getting in the sheets.”

“What is it about?”

“Way I see it, you ain't done nothing like this for eight years.” Yondu slipped his arms around her waist. “Figured it'd be nice to do it just for fun.”

“Then for fun, huh?” Meredith's eyes narrowed.

“Just for fun,” he said.

“What makes you think I'd think this was fun?”

“You liked it before,” Yondu said, “right outside the bridge.”

“You're a shit kisser,” Meredith lied.

“You kissed me back.” Yondu tightened his grip around her waist. “You liked it.”

“You son-of-a-bitch.” Meredith's hands tightened into fists. “You arrogant, selfish jackass.”

“Don't start with the dirty talk, Mery.” Yondu chuckled. “The boy might hear momma and daddy fightin'.”

Meredith turned scarlet. “Shut up.”

“Come on, Mery. You're drinkin', I'm drinkin', Peter's asleep and there ain't nobody else here.” Yondu's normal growl was practically a purr. “Let me have one more taste of that Terran pepper.”

“Pepper, huh?” Meredith crossed her arms, ignoring the heat in her cheeks. “Is that what I'm like?”

“Like kissin' whiskey,” he said.

Meredith glared at the ground. Kissing whiskey. Fine, she thought, he was being a little smooth.

“Why should I,” she asked.

“What have you got to lose,” he said.

“My dignity,” she said crisply.

Yondu barked a laugh.

“Don't be so high-and-mighty; you kissed me first,” he said.

Shit, he had her there. Meredith stared at Yondu, the heat in her face burning her skin.

“Fine,” she snapped, “one more and then you leave me alone and we never speak of this again.”

Yondu smiled.

“Sounds good, Star-Queen.”

“Don't tease me,” she said.

Meredith grabbed the front of his jacket and kissed him. His lips were rough and warm, and the heat
from his body seemed to settle deep into hers. She wrapped her slender fingers around the lapel of
his jacket, trying to keep her head. His left hand gripped her waist; his right roamed down to her hip,
grazing it with his rough palm. The kiss made her head spin; suddenly she was holding onto the front
of his jacket just to keep standing. He broke off from her mouth, then started kissing her cheeks and
neck.

“That was for the crate,” he said, “if we're still doin' the one-for-each-life-savin' thing. This is for
Neoke. Not crashin' into a canyon. Not infectin' me when you bit me in the goddamn neck.”

“I said one kiss, dammit, not fifty.” Meredith huffed. “What is it with you? I kiss you once and
suddenly all this?”

“Say that thing you call me.” Yondu's hand rubbed her back. “Go on.”

Meredith reddened.

“Make me,” she muttered.

That was the wrong thing to say. He made a growl of protest in his throat and nipped her neck
slightly; the sharp, unexpected peck of pain made Meredith gasp. Yondu kissed up her neck, ending
just under her ear. Meredith shivered.

“Say it for me, little momma,” he murmured, “just this one time. Please.”

Meredith's face was scarlet and her heartbeat was in her ears. Their eyes met, blood and silver. Her
gentle voice was barely audible.

“Stop teasin' me, big daddy.”

He kissed her again, deep and slow, and this time it was all she could do not to melt. Meredith's head
buzzed, her thoughts dissipating. He seemed to sense that he was getting to her and chuckled in his
throat. Yondu kissed her so avidly that Meredith couldn't help but kiss him back. Any thoughts of
propriety or conduct were completely wiped out by his lips on hers. Yondu's body was warm and
firm against her; every muscle in his body tensed and shifted against hers; her mind flashed back to
their encounter in the hall, to his muscles rippling under a blue veneer of skin. A small sound of
interest escaped her, and he drew his tongue across her teeth. Instinctively she opened her mouth,
and the kiss deepened. Against her will, Meredith made a satisfied sound in her throat. Her brain was
pleasantly numb; this was nice. She gratified his kisses with hers, slipping her arms about him gently.

Nothing about Yondu was gentle. He turned her around and pressed her back to the wall, kissing her
fervently. He was completely indulging himself; it was his only damn chance, Yondu thought, and
he was taking it. He heard a small noise of arousal from her throat, barely audible over the heartbeat
pounding in his ears, but still there. She wasn't shutting him down. She liked this, and he sure as hell
liked her liking it. Yondu gripped her tightly, feeling his own fire spark. She was sugar and whiskey
and pepper all at once, and it was goddamn delicious. He kissed her greedily; Yondu might have
been a changed man, but he was still a Ravager.

Shit. Something was wrong with his chest. His four lungs were burning in pain; he realized he’d been
kissing her so hard that he'd forgotten to breathe. Yondu pressed his forehead against hers, forcing
their mouths apart. They stared at each other, both of their chests heaving, catching their breath. Her
hands were on his chest, and his were rubbing on her waist. His fingers grazed the bottom hem of
her shirt as the silence in the air crackled between them.

“That,” he said, “was for savin' all our goddamn lives.”
Meredith breathed audibly, unsure of what to say. It was a hell of a thank you, if that was what it was. He had her back to the wall, his huge body towering over her tiny frame like a shelter from some passing storm. She looked between his crimson eyes, her teeth biting gently into her bottom lip. There was a question here, she thought, but she had no idea how to ask it.

“Enjoy the damn party,” he grunted.

The tails of his coat fluttered as he walked away. Meredith was left in the hallway, her heartbeat racing and her cheeks flushed. The slight quiver of anticipation in her body faded, leaving only frustration and a faint sense of guilt. She sunk her hands into her curls.

“That son-of-a-bitch,” she said.

“Well then,” a voice chuckled, “I didn’t think I’d ever see the day.”

Meredith’s head whipped to the side, her already messy curls going everywhere. Stakar Ogord was leaning against the wall with a scarlet cigarette in his hand.

“So, Ms. Quill, how are you?” His wide grin was almost wicked. “Enjoying the party, I see.”

“Stakar.” Meredith pressed her hand to her forehead. “How long were you there?”

“He calls you Star-Queen.” Stakar stood up properly and strutted towards Meredith, his cigarette leaving a trail of smoke in the air. “That’s very interesting.”

Meredith crossed her arms, her face as red as his cigarette.

“I’ve been called worse,” she muttered.

“No doubt. Here I was thinking maybe I’d gotten your number all wrong. When I met you at Mareet’s,” Stakar said, “there was something about you. Something a little different, I suppose you’d say.”

Stakar took a long drag from his cigarette.

“Different how,” Meredith asked.

“Contrary.” Stakar let the smoke spill from his lips as he chuckled. “Mery, Mery, quite contrary.”

Meredith waved the cinnamon-scented smoke out of her face.

“Heard that one before on Terra,” she said, “so you ain’t being clever.”

“I mean it. Everything about you seemed contrary to what I expected. When you tell me, ‘tumor-ridden Terran mother’, I expect some dumpy woman who can barely move. Instead,” Stakar said, “everything about you was sharp, clear, distinctive. I saw a Ravager-in-Terran-clothing.”

Meredith’s face reddened.

“I think that’s a compliment,” Meredith said, “so thank you.”

“I know Yondu. I know how he thinks, the kinds of processes his mind goes through. At Mareet’s, you told me he kept you because you cooked and cleaned.” Stakar chuckled and tapped some ashes off his cigarette. “I knew right away that wasn’t it. You were too contrary, too intriguing.”

Meredith’s face reddened.

“You’re as bad as he is,” she said.
“Flirting is Martinex's game, not mine. After all, I'm a married man,” Stakar said.

“Married, huh?” Meredith grinned. “How's the wife?”

“As vexing as ever. We split for the...” Stakar frowned. “I think it's the thirty-ninth time? No matter, it won't last long. It never does.”

“You two split a lot?”

“Of course.” Stakar lifted his cigarette to his lips. “She's psychotic. She's infuriating. Sometimes the very sound of her voice makes me want to stab myself in the ears with a blunt knife. She's the most hideous creature I've ever beheld. I can't trust her worth a damn; half the time I want to kill her.”

“And the other half?”

“I practically worship her. I dote on her constantly. I serve her like a besotted slave.” Stakar blew a thin stream of smoke into the air. “I'd die for her. I adore her. She is the heart of my heart, the reason for my living. Love is too fragile a word for the way I feel about Aleta.”

Meredith raised her eyebrows.

“Wow,” she said, “talk about mixed feelings.”

Stakar chuckled.

“It does seem a little backwards, doesn't it? But you see, that's what I meant when I said I had your number all wrong.” Stakar took another draw from his cigarette. “I believed I'd seen something in you that would... speak to him, in a way. After I saw you two together, I doubted it. As affectionate as you are, he was uncommonly polite, distantly humble.”

“Polite and humble?” Meredith laughed. “Stakar, he's just trying to make sure I'm not uncomfortable around you. He wants me to make a good impression. No idea why; I ruined any chance of that back at Dr. Mareet's.”

“You've made an excellent impression. You argue constantly,” Stakar said, “and I remember with great fondness the way you threatened to skin Yondu and turn him into a purse.”

Meredith laughed.

“It reminded me instantly of Aleta and I,” Stakar said, “and so, naturally, I assumed you two were involved.”

“No,” she said, “we're not.”

“Pity,” Stakar sighed, “I was hoping you'd be the woman who kept my son-of-a-bitch son in line.”

Meredith chuckled.

“You know, Yondu told me about how you freed him,” she said, “how you were like family. I see it now; you're quite the father figure.”

The cigarette drooped in Stakar's mouth. His eyebrows contracted together slightly.

“Yondu told you about that,” he said slowly, “he told you about how I freed him.”

“Yes, that was early, before we were even friends.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “He told me about
Hala and Dal-Char and how you wouldn't talk to him after he broke the code. Then later, after we were friends, he told me about you and your archeology.”

Stakar dropped his cigarette onto the floor and stubbed it out with his foot.

“That's it,” he mumbled, “I've had it up to here with that Centaurian prick.”

“What?” Meredith frowned. “What did he do?”

“He told you about his parents, about me, about everything.” Stakar threw his hands up in the air. “By the stars, he might as well just marry you at this point.”

Meredith's face burned; she pressed a hand to her cheek and felt the heat.

“We aren't like that,” she said.

Stakar scowled, and Meredith saw Yondu's likeness in the expression.

“That boy is the dumbest piece-of-shit I've ever laid eyes on. Beautiful woman, tells her everything, she can cook and clean...” Stakar put his hands on his hips. “I've taught him nothing.”

Stakar's frustrated expression was exactly the same as Yondu's; Meredith couldn't help but laugh.

“Maybe it's because I'm going back to Terra,” she said, “and he's not exactly the type to settle down. Not to mention, we just blew up my ex-boyfriend.”

“That means you're single,” Stakar clarified.

“And also that I'm emotionally unstable.” Meredith crossed her arms. “So I probably won't be getting into any romantic relationships any time soon.”

“Maybe,” Stakar said, “but from what I saw three minutes ago, it's not for lack of interest.”

Meredith's face felt like someone was holding a blowtorch to it. The corners of Stakar's mouth turned up.

“You're very fond of him, aren't you,” he asked.

“Yondu is my best friend,” she said firmly, “but that's all we are. I care about him a lot, but just as friends.”

“Friends,” Stakar repeated.

“Yes.”

“Just friends.”

“Yes, Stakar.”

“Which is why you were exchanging saliva in the hallway,” Stakar said.

Meredith's face burned.

“That was one time,” she said, “one goddamn time.”

“You may be familiar with one of my favorite phrases.” Stakar held his hands behind his back, smiling politely. “Yondu is very fond of repeating it. It goes, 'one time can happen again'.”
“Oh really?” Meredith crossed her arms. “Don't bet on it, meat-for-brains.”

Stakar laughed.

“He's absolutely right about you. Full of pepper, that's what you are. Come along.” Stakar offered her an arm. “He'll be wondering where you're at.”

Meredith kept her arms crossed.

“I ain't taking your arm,” she said.

A grin hovered around Stakar's mouth; Meredith had seen the same expression on Yondu's face, but she couldn't recall exactly when. Stakar's arm shot around her waist and he scooped her up, throwing her over his shoulder like a bag of potatoes.

“Hey!” Meredith kicked her legs.

“Should have taken my arm, Ms. Quill.”

“Yondu,” she yelled, “get your goddamn Admiral to put me down!”

“Ah, a classic love story.” Stakar walked down the hallway with a jaunty spring to his step. “The lovely damsel-in-distress calls for rescue.”

“I will cut your ass,” Meredith said.

“Language, language, Ms. Quill.”

There was a sharp whistle. Stakar grinned and closed his eyes.

“And the white knight appears,” he said, “with his trusty sword.”

Stakar opened his eyes; Yondu's arrow was hovering in front of them, spiraling slowly.

“Or,” Stakar added, “his trusty arrow as it were.”

“Put her down, goddamn it.” Yondu was walking down the hall, scowling. “She ain't cargo.”

“Of course.”

Stakar set Meredith down. She immediately kicked him in the shin, and Stakar winced.

“Knock that off.” Yondu grabbed her arm. “Come on, he's just workin' you up.”

Yondu pulled her away from Stakar, his face slightly purple. Stakar sighed as they walked away. He put a finger to his ear, activating his comm link.

“Gef? It's Stakar Ogord. About that bet you talked me into,” Stakar said as he watched Meredith and Yondu enter the party again, “I was wrong. Denial does beat desire.”

“That grouchy self-centered fuck-for-brains,” Yondu was muttering, “gettin' off watchin'...fuck, that shit-faced dick-guzzler.”
Meredith let herself be pulled through the crowd. Yondu sat her down in a chair and got her a whiskey. He sat down next to her, shifting his weight.

“You okay,” he asked.

Meredith took the whiskey and held it in her fingertips. They’d gone from just friends to making out back to just friends again. Her eyes flicked from him to the whiskey.

“Yeah,” she said, “I'm fine. But I think I might go to bed soon, if that's okay.”

“Lock your fuckin' door, alright? Ain't nobody gonna hurt you,” Yondu said, “but that don't mean they won't drag your mattress out to the hallway as a joke.”

Meredith laughed, then took a sip of her whiskey. She could feel Yondu's eyes on her. Heat rose to her cheeks as she purposefully stared at the table. The feeling of rough lips on her own and large hands gripping her was still way, way too fresh. She sat down her whiskey and stood up.

“Actually I'm pretty tired, I think I'll go to bed right now.” Meredith rounded the table. “Finish my whiskey for me, won't you? Night, Yondu.”

“Let me walk you back,” Yondu said, standing.

“No, no, I'll be fine.” Meredith gave him as big of a smile as she could muster. “I'm not sick or drunk; I can handle anything these losers throw at me.”

Yondu paused, then sat back down.

“Night, Mery,” he said.

“Night, Yondu,” she repeated.

Yondu watched her go, then grabbed her glass of whiskey and tossed it back. Even whiskey couldn't burn away the taste of Terran left in his mouth.

Meredith paced back and forth in her room with Peter's headphones over her ears, gripping the Walkman in her right hand. She needed something to distract her, anything to distract her. The kiss in the hall... Ugh. Meredith ran her free hand through her curls. Eight years with no sex whatsoever left a woman awfully malleable to that sort of thing, and Yondu... She was like clay in his big blue hands. Meredith could feel those rough hands grazing her hip, wrapping around her waist, cupping her face.

“Stop torturing yourself,” she groaned.

There was no way in hell that she was getting into bed with that big blue asshole. That was unquestionable; the last thing she needed was to get knocked up by another space man. The problem was, and she hated to admit it to herself, that a part of her wanted to. A very small, burning part of her wanted to go up to him and put her arms around him, call him big daddy and watch him turn purple, get him somewhere private and make him follow through on that kiss. Eight years was easy when no one was around to turn you on, but now that he'd flicked her switch, she was running like a Corvette.
Meredith's natural curiosity was working against her; she'd had a taste, but now she wanted to see what he could do. Or, she could take point this time; she wouldn't mind making him fall apart for her. Meredith had a sneaking suspicion that she could do it, too. Something about that appealed to her deeply; after all, Meredith liked to take care of people.

Meredith tore off the Walkman and tossed it on the bed; music was not helping her right now. Stop thinking about it, she told herself, stop thinking about that right now. Meredith did not sleep around; Ego was a one-time deal. Meredith closed her eyes and pressed a cold hand to her warm forehead. 'One time', as Stakar had said, could happen again.

"Shut up," she said to no one in particular.

Meredith opened her eyes. Her hospital gown hung at the very back of the group, waving at her from behind the old shirts and jackets the Ravagers had donated.

"Hey, old friend," she said, "been awhile since I wore you, huh?"

The gown didn't answer. Meredith chuckled and put her hands on her hips. As she stood there, the smile faded off her face.

"I'm going back home. It would be wrong to start something with him and then hop off to Terra."

Meredith crossed her arms. "He's a space pirate. He's a good papa for Peter, but I need someone who's going to love me. Love me, not just screw me, get bored, and leave."

The gown hung there.

"And he doesn't love me, does he?"

The gown still just hung there.

"Does he?" she asked softly.

The hospital gown failed to produce any epiphianic statements. Meredith huffed.

"You're no help at all," she said.

Meredith set the Walkman on the desk by her bed, then threw herself on the bed. She let out a long sigh, staring at the ceiling. The bed was warm and comfortable; Meredith curled on her side and stared at the door. This was just a temporary thing, she told herself, it'll pass. He wasn't even her species, for goodness sakes, and he probably slept around with more women than Meredith could count. She was not going to be be one of them, she told herself firmly. Never again would Meredith have a one-night-stand with some space man who didn't give a fig about her, or about settling down and raising a family. Yondu didn't care about her at all. It was just teasing, she reminded herself, just teasing. Meredith didn't want that big blue asshole any more than he wanted Meredith, and she was convinced he definitely didn't want Meredith.

The cap'n wanted Ms. Quill; there was no edging around it now. After the party was done, Yondu and Kraglin were left with cleaning up the mess. Yondu was twice as distracted as normal, snapping at anyone who asked where Meredith was and shooting small looks at the door, as if debating going through it himself. Kraglin watched him pace back and forth across the bridge, wiping lipstick off his lip.
“Ms. Q's,” Kraglin asked casually.

Yondu stopped. Kraglin figured that if anyone else besides Kraglin had said that, Yondu would have killed him right then and there. But Kraglin was the first mate, and Kraglin knew Yondu trusted his first mate.

“Yeah,” Yondu grunted, grabbing a trash bag.

“Heard Stakar sayin' something about that during the party.” Kraglin dropped some empty bottles in the trash. “You stopped kissin' her. Why?”

“Ain't right to take a woman to bed what's just lost her man,” Yondu lied.

“Cap'n, you catch more women on the rebound than I can count on a million fingertips.” Kraglin raised an eyebrow. “Come on, now, what was it?”

For a moment, all Kraglin could hear was the churning of the ship and the air of the exhaust.

“I wanted her,” Yondu mumbled.

“Shucks, cap'n, what did you think was gonna happen?” Kraglin picked up the trash bag. “Kissin' her was just gonna let off steam?”

Yondu didn't say anything.

“Oh.” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck. “Guess that was it, huh?”

“Thought she'd push me off, say she hated me or some shit. Figured she'd toss ice water on me, put out that fire.” Yondu's palms were sweaty. “Didn't play out like that.”

“No water?”

“Gasoline,” Yondu said.

Kraglin let out a low whistle. “Damn, cap'n.”

Yondu let air out through his nose and looked out the window, keeping his eyes on the stars in front of him.

“Did she like it, though,” Kraglin asked.

In the secret parts of his mind, Yondu could hear that small, nearly inaudible sound of arousal that had escaped from Meredith's throat.

“Yeah.” The corner of his mouth turned up. “She liked it.”

“That's good. At least she's movin' on over Ego, y'know, keepin' her options open. She's still real young,” Kraglin said, “she should get out there and land a few fellas.”

Yondu laughed.

“You think she's the type to land a few? Hell no,” Yondu said, “she ain't hoppin' in the sheets with nobody. Not her style, 'specially not after Ego.”

Kraglin nodded.
“So she don't hate you and she liked what you did. What are you gonna do about it,” he asked.

“Nothin’,” Yondu said, “not a goddamn thing.”

“Oh. Huh,” Kraglin said.

“What,” Yondu said with a challenge in his voice, “you don't believe me?”

“I believe you, cap'n, I'm just wonderin' why you're not doing anything.” Kraglin shrugged. “Nice lady like Ms. Q is one-in-a-million. Figured you'd be keen on keepin' her as your full-time woman.”

“What? Hell no,” Yondu said.

“Why not?”

“She's a Terran,” Yondu explained, “she belongs on fuckin' Terra. What's the point of landin' a full-time woman if she's just gonna skip off in a decade or two for some mud rock?”

Kraglin's eyebrows contracted; a small frown marred his face. He picked up a few more bottles and threw them in the trash, then grabbed a mop.

“What is it, Kraglin,” Yondu asked.

“I mean, every man to his own, cap'n,” Kraglin said, “but I figured a decade or two of havin' a full-time woman what actually gave a damn about you is better than never havin' one at all.”

Yondu didn't have an answer to that. Kraglin mopped up the spills while Yondu threw all the trash bags together. Kraglin threw a salute, then dragged the bags off, leaving Yondu alone on the bridge with his thoughts.
I'm Not In Love

Chapter Summary

It's just a silly phase they're going through.

(Teensy chapter is teensy.)

Yondu was staring out at the starscape, his hands folded behind his back. The lights on the bridge were low; it was still early morning. Most of the crew was asleep, but Yondu couldn't seem to nod off. Standing on the bridge, he let his eyes rest on the stars. A trace of cinnamon-scented smoke slithered through the air.

"Put it out," he grunted.

"What is it with you and my cigarettes?" Stakar paced up, flicking the scarlet cigarette. "I swear you do this just to annoy me."

"If you had four lungs, you'd hate smoke too. Put it out," Yondu said.

Stakar dropped the cigarette and smashed it with his foot.

"We're leaving soon," Stakar said, "but I wanted to make sure I wished you a proper farewell."

Yondu grinned. "Missed you, you stupid ol' son-of-a-bitch."

"Missed you too, you big blue asshole."

Yondu's smile faltered. He stared back out at the starscape.

"What is it," Stakar asked.

Yondu's voice was barely audible.

"Mery calls me that," he said.

Stakar took a deep breath. He stood next to Yondu and stared out at the millions of stars that speckled the sky.

"You're in love with her," Stakar said.

"Hell no."

"Don't deny it. I saw the way you looked at her." Stakar chuckled. "You're smitten."

"No, it ain't love." Yondu bared his teeth. "That's the goddamn problem."

Stakar's eyebrows contracted.

"Explain," he said.
“You always told me that love was the most dangerous thing in the goddamn universe. Love was unchangeable, irreversible, and fuckin' crazy.” Yondu's eyes never left the starscape. “You said people in love would do anything. Love came before everything. It destroys a man.”

“It does,” Stakar said.

“Then whatever the fuck I'm feelin', it ain't love. If it were that, I'd be doin' everything I could to get them Quills back to Terra,” Yondu said, “and then I'd stay there. Wouldn't need no goddamn ship; I'd never want to leave. I'd put her above everything.”

“And you're not willing to stay on Terra,” Stakar said, “I see.”

The stars glittered like diamonds; Yondu could pick out individual galaxies, floating nebulas where stars were born.

“You remember what you told me about the stars,” Yondu said, “about 'em whisperin'?”

“Yes.” Stakar scanned the starscape. “They speak to us. They call us. They whisper into our ears a song so sweet that it pulls us to the very edges of the galaxy. Starlust, we call it. It makes us Ravagers. Their song is our anthem, and we have no home except the stars.”

“I still hear it,” Yondu said.

“And if you stayed on Terra, it'd drive you apart. You would hear the call and have to answer.” Stakar sighed. “I understand.”

“The boy hears it, too.” The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. “Saw it the second day we had him. He came up right to this window, looked at 'em, and hoo boy, he was hooked.”

“Aha,” Stakar chuckled, “so the legacy continues.”

“Legacy?”

“The boy's practically your son already, Yondu, you're not fooling me.” Stakar grinned. “And you will train him like I trained you, and then he'll find some poor boy with the starlust, and then it'll continue on and on from there.”

Yondu groaned, but he was grinning.

“Fuck. I fell for that one, huh? One more goddamn lunatic added to the mix,” he said.

“The boy will make a fine Ravager. He's a lot like his mother.”

“He is. Boy looks and acts like her so goddamn much that sometimes I forget which Quill I'm talkin' to,” Yondu chuckled.

“That's not true,” Stakar said.

Yondu took a deep breath.

“No,” he said, “that ain't true. Mery's... different. I'd know that voice anywhere. Swear I can hear it my goddamn head sometimes.”

Stakar studied Yondu's profile.

“Are you sure you're not in love with her,” Stakar asked.
“No,” Yondu said, “not love. I still hear the call. The boy hears it too, I know he does. Just hope she doesn't try to pin him on Terra.”

“At this point, that would be impossible.” Stakar chuckled. “No one can taste of the forbidden fruits and not return for that second bite.”

Yondu grinned.

“Just like no one can kiss a Terran once and not repeat the action several times in a secluded hallway,” Stakar added, “to the point where one is sexually arousing said Terran.”

The desire to punch Stakar was strong, but Yondu crossed his arms and glared out the window. He couldn't help it; whenever he was around Stakar, he felt like a bumbling, resentful teenager again.

“Can't fuckin' believe you were watchin' us, you fuckin' pervert,” Yondu said.

“I can't help it, I'm a curious man. Tell me, why is it that you fell first,” Stakar asked, “and she's only now interested?”

“Same thing as how wants Terra so damn much that she ignores this.” Yondu gestured to the stars. “She was so caught up in Ego that she wasn't payin' attention.”

“Still hearing an old call instead of pursuing that which lies before her.” Stakar raised his eyebrows. “She is exceptionally stubborn.”

“That's the biggest understatement in the whole damn galaxy,” Yondu grunted.

“I like her,” Stakar said.

“Thought you might. Same damn kind of person; you both find all that shit about space so goddamn interesting.” Yondu bared his teeth. “You know we crash-landed on a tribal planet and all she could talk about was how the fuckers scraped bark off trees to eat?”

“Did they?” Stakar's eyes sparked with interest. “How could she tell it wasn't animals?”

“Concentric geometric shapes or some shit, I don't remember.” Yondu scowled. “But fuck it all if she didn't want to know their religion, language, government, all that shit you used to go on and on about.”

Stakar laughed; the sound echoed off the walls of the bridge. Yondu looked out the window. The cluster eighteen degrees to the left; that was the Milky Way, Yondu knew. He stared at it, imagining the floating blue planet that Meredith longed for. Maybe Terra called to Meredith the way the stars called to Yondu. The thought tore at him, clawing at his heart. Then, small memories found their way to the surface of his mind. Flying the Eclector at warp speed, breathing in the air of Emris, seeing the glittering sands of Arazine, greeting a brand new species, meeting Algon and the merchants, soaring through the skies by herself; she'd always had the same expression. Wonder, pure and undiluted wonder.

“She's got starlust as bad as the boy,” Yondu said, “I know she does.”

“Maybe.” Stakar linked his hands behind his back. “Maybe.”

Yondu crossed his arms. Stakar studied his expression for a moment or two.

“I'm so sorry I keep asking this,” Stakar said, “but are you completely sure that you're not in love
with her?"

"Stakar," Yondu said in a warning tone.

"Because it's completely possible to be in love with two things at the same time." Stakar spread his hands wide. "And it might be that you love her and being a Ravager. Have you considered that?"

"You said it would come before everythin' else."

"I did, I did," Stakar sighed, "I'm just suggesting alternate solutions."

"Alternate solutions?" Yondu squinted. "Look, either she goes to Terra or she don't; there ain't any 'alternate solutions'."

"She's not going to Terra anytime soon. Those Asgardians are paying the Nova Corps a pretty hefty sum to keep Terra off the intergalactic road map." Stakar crossed his arms. "That issue with the Infinity Stone frightened them all. It'll be at least a decade, maybe even two before they even think about allowing anyone in. Asgard is one of Xandar's most powerful allies; they won't risk angering them."

"It's just one woman and her kid," Yondu said.

"Returning to Terra," Stakar clarified, "which means the Nova Corps would have to admit that someone made it through the blockade to start with. It'd be highly embarrassing; they'll do anything to deny it."

"So she's stuck out here for good?"

"I didn't say that. The blockade's importance will fade as Terra becomes less of a hot topic. They won't be able to deny her access; eventually there will be a price tag on her return, and by then she'll have raised the necessary funds. A more interesting question," Stakar said, "would be, 'is the boy returning with her?'"

"Maybe. Maybe not." Yondu leaned his elbows on the banister. "She understands that the boy will always belong here. He ain't just a Terran."

"Apparently, neither is she," Stakar said.

Yondu's chest compressed in a loud sigh.

"What the fuck do you want from me," Yondu said.

"Honesty." Stakar linked his hands behind his back. "As I always have. Honesty to me, honesty to yourself, and honesty to them."

"You think I'm lyin'?"

"You've had a long bad run of lies for the past few years, Yondu. You can fool them, you can fool yourself, but you'll never fool me." Stakar's lidded eyes were as hard and cold as ice, but they twinkled slightly. "I know you too well. You're me."

Yondu looked out at the stars, avoiding Stakar's gaze.

"It ain't love," he said.

Stakar opened his mouth to snap at Yondu, but Yondu cut him off.
“But if she don't get out of here right fast,” Yondu muttered, “it's gonna be.”

“So you're letting her leave?”

“Yep.”

“Just watching her go,” Stakar said, “and let the chips fall where they may?”

“That's about right, yeah.”

Stakar took a deep breath, letting it escape through his nostrils.

“You,” he said, “are a masochist.”

“I know it's gonna hurt, idjit,” Yondu snarled, “but that ain't the goddamn point. I'm a Ravager captain, dammit. Think about it; every goddamn person in the galaxy would hurt her to try and get to me. Ain't that why you're always splittin' with Aleta?”

“I split with Aleta because we're both hard-headed and easily provoked to jealousy, not because I'm an Admiral.” Stakar smiled dreamily. “That, and because the make-up sex is phenomenal.”

Yondu put his face in his hands. “Dammit, don't you start with that.”

“What, a man can't be proud of his wife? It's not every day you meet a woman who can take an eleven-inch-long-”

“Stakar, dammit, I'm serious.”

“And her hips, dear God.” Stakar breathed a sigh. “I swear that woman could make me shoot off just by walking into the room. She did, once, on our honeymoon, but that was because I'd been watching her get dressed, you see, and I have a hell of an imagination.”

“Stop,” Yondu said, his eyes wide, “I don't want a goddamn play-by-play!”

“Are you sure?” Stakar cracked a grin. “I could give you some pointers about how to really get them screaming. It's all in the angle, you see.”

Yondu hung his head.

“I hate you so goddamn much,” he said.

Stakar laughed and clapped Yondu on the back.

“Relax, Yondu. I know Aleta's practically your mother. You don't want to hear me talk about how I smashed her insensible on Ilyth.” Stakar gave a satisfied sigh. “We made quite the mess; had to throw out the mattress. She blacked out, you know; didn't walk right for two days.”

Yondu's large hand gripped the front of Stakar's jacket, his eyes wide.

“Shut. Up.”

Stakar howled with laughter, his face turning bright red.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” he said, “I haven't been able to tease you about that in forever.”

“So what, you're takin' this time to just fuck around with me?” Yondu grunted and crossed his arms.
“Goddamn it, Stakar.”

“Don't say you expected me to change,” Stakar said.

“No.” Against his will, Yondu broke out into a grin. “Some things don't change.”

Stakar chucked and clapped his hand on Yondu's right shoulder. Yondu put his arm over Stakar's, grabbing Stakar's left shoulder. The two looked at each other with crooked grins.

“I missed you, you stupid ol' son-of-a-bitch,” Yondu said.

Stakar blinked rapidly in defense against the tears forming in the corners of his eyes. Yondu had never seen Stakar cry, but he didn't have time to be shocked; Stakar pulled him into a rib-crushing hug.

“Missed you too, son.” Stakar's voice was strong, but it quavered a little. “Welcome home.”

Yondu wrapped his arms around the Arcturan and squeezed.

“Glad to be back, pop,” he said.

Meredith was in the kitchen on her hands and knees, fixing the leak in the sink. Behind her, Peter sat on the table, kicking his legs. Peter had been doing a lot of thinking lately. He'd been thinking about space and about Terra, and about his mom and about Yondu. He'd been thinking an awful, awful lot, and he'd come to a question that he didn't have an answer to. So, he decided to ask his mom.

“Mom,” Peter said, “are you in love with Yondu?”

Meredith's head whacked against the top of the counter.

“Frick!” She winced and rubbed her head. “Ow...”

“Are you okay?”

“Fine, baby, just a bruise.” Meredith ran her fingers through her hair. “What did you say?”

“Are you in love with Yondu?”

Peter's big green eyes were so hopeful. Meredith sighed and straddled the seat of the mess hall bench. She patted the space in front of her.

“C'mere, baby,” she said.

Peter sat, swinging his legs. He looked up at Meredith with a little smile on his face. If he was any cuter, she was going to cry.

“Peter,” she said calmly, “what makes you ask that?”

“You're so nice to him.” Peter's voice was bright. “So you must like him a lot. And he's so nice to you, and you don't have my real dad anymore– ”

“Thank God,” Meredith muttered.
“...so I thought maybe you and Yondu could be really happy together. And then he could be my dad and you would be my mom and Kraglin would be my brother and we could live in space.” Peter's eyes lit up. “And you wouldn't have to leave because you'd be happy here.”

“Oh baby.” Meredith scooped him up in her arms. “If you ain't the sweetest thing in the galaxy I don't know what is.”

Peter hugged her, burying his face in his mom's curls. Her hugs were the best; soft and kind and loving. Peter could never be unhappy in his mother's arms.

“So we can be a space family?” Peter's voice rose hopefully.

“Baby, I...” Meredith sighed and put her hand to her forehead. “Honey, I appreciate what you said and I think that's a really pretty thought, but I have to go back to Terra.”

“Why?” Peter's face turned red. “What's so special about stupid Terra?”

“Peter!” Meredith frowned. “Don't you talk that way about your home planet, young man.”

Peter crossed his arms and wouldn't meet her eyes. She sighed and wrapped her arms around him tightly.

“Peter, baby, this is the hardest thing I've ever had to do.” Her voice was soft, yet firm. “I don't want to be apart from you for a second. But you belong out here, sailing the stars and doing great things, and I just... I don't, baby. I don't belong here.”

“You belong with me,” Peter said, “and I belong here, so you belong here with me.”

Meredith pressed a kiss to his hair.

“I don't even know if this Garthan Saal guy is going to be able to pull the strings, okay? I'll only be gone for a little while, just long enough to plead our case. If everything goes well then we can go home.” Meredith stroked Peter's soft hair. “You'll grow up on Terra at least. And if you don't want to stay, then... well, you don't have to.”

“But you'll come with me, right?” Peter grabbed her hand. “You'll come too?”

Meredith smiled; there were tears in her eyes.

“We'll see, baby.”

“I don't want to be in space without you,” Peter said.

“You're never without me, baby. I'm your momma. I'm part of you. As long as you're doing the things I taught you to do and being a good boy,” Meredith said, “we're as close as we are right now.”

“But I want you really here,” Peter complained.

“Baby, it's fine.” Meredith stroked her hair. “I'm not letting you get away from me until you're eighteen, you hear?”

Peter hugged her tightly; Meredith sighed.

“Look, Peter, you'll stay with Yondu while I go to Xandar and get all this sorted out. It might not even work out, honey.”
“I hope it doesn’t,” he muttered.

“Peter,” she said in a warning tone.

“Sorry. I want to see grandpa again, I really do. I miss grandpa,” Peter said, “but I know if I stay on Terra I’ll miss Yondu and Kraglin too.”

“You’ve known them for four months, baby.”

“What’s that got to do with anything,” Peter countered.

Meredith opened her mouth, then closed it.

“Fair point, baby,” she said.

Peter grinned.

“But the point still stands that we have to go home. That's it, Peter, that's final. When you're eighteen and an adult, you can make your own decisions and go where you want to go. But until then,” Meredith said, “I am your mother and you go where I go. Do you understand?”

“Yes mom,” Peter mumbled.

“Good.” Meredith hugged him tightly. “Everything I do, I do for your own good.”

“I know, mom.” Peter hugged her back. “But it’s gonna suck.”

Meredith tried not to laugh, but Peter could feel her chest shake.

“Suck, huh? What, school isn't as fun as flying a spaceship?”

“Not even close. I learned better math when Yondu taught me to calculate units than I did with old Mrs. Sherman.” Peter made a face. “She should be a Ravager.”

“Mrs. Sherman was a very sweet lady,” Meredith said.

“To you,” Peter said.

“She would have been sweet to you too, if you hadn't been sending spitballs into her hair.”

Peter giggled. Meredith slid him off her lap and went back to working on the sink. Peter swung his legs, thinking.

“Mom?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“You never said no,” Peter pointed out.

“What?”

“I asked you if you were in love with Yondu and you didn't say no.”

Meredith exhaled.

“No, honey. I'm not in love with the guy who abducted us into space.”
“Even though you're really really nice to him?”

“We're friends.” Meredith tightened the bolt under the sink. “That's it. I'm very nice to my friends.”

“Oh.” Peter hugged his knees. “Are you best friends?”

“I'd say he's my best friend, yeah.” Meredith looked over her shoulder, ducking under the cabinet to meet Peter's eyes. “Don't go repeating that, baby. Yondu has a reputation to uphold and I don't think being friends with a scrawny little Terran would do much good for it.”

“Okay.” Peter voiced his other question. “Mom, is Yondu in love with you?”

“No, honey.” Meredith laughed as she checked the sink for leaks. “He is definitely not in love with me.”

“How can you tell?”

“I'm not his type.”

“Because you're not blue?”

“Because I'm not his type. When you're older, you'll understand.” Meredith backed out of the cabinet and shut the door. “This is one of those adult things.”

Peter made a face.

“I don't like the adult things,” Peter said, “they don't make any sense.”

“Why not, honey? What doesn't make sense?”

“Why don't you and Yondu love each other? He's super cool and you're super cool,” Peter explained, “and he has a special whistle and you have a special voice. He's a bad cook but you're a good cook, and you're a bad shot but he's a good shot.”

“Honey,” Meredith laughed, “being in love has nothing to do with what you can do and everything to do with the heart. It's trust, it's caring, it's putting the other person first.”

“You mean exactly like you and Yondu,” Peter said.

Meredith sighed. She put her hands on Peter's shoulders and looked him in the eyes.

“If Yondu was in love with me, he'd go stay on Terra with us.” Meredith's eyes were serious. “If I was in love with him, I'd stay in space forever. Neither of those things are happening, Peter.”

Peter's shoulders sagged, a light dying in his eyes.

“Oh,” he said.

Meredith turned on the faucet, then checked the pipes. There were no leaks. Satisfied, she dried her hands on her pants and turned around.

Peter was nowhere in sight.

There was something undeniably satisfying about owning one's own ship, Kraglin reflected. He
could spend as much time in it as he wanted. He could tweak it to his own specifications without having to run it by a pilot or the cap'n. Kraglin could even lie in the bunk with his eyes closed, just reveling in the fact that this bunk was his. He'd seriously started to consider sleeping there permanently when someone shouted his name.

“Kraglin!”

Kraglin jolted up, then scrambled to get off the ship. Hopefully no one had told the cap'n that Kraglin had been spending the day mollycoddling his ship. He threw the loading ramp lever and paced down the ramp, his ears red.

“I'm here, I'm here, keep your shirt on,” he said.

Peter stood at the bottom of the ramp, a small frown on his face.

“Kraglin,” he said, “can you explain some stuff to me?”

“Sure, Pete.” Kraglin grabbed his omnitool and started fiddling with the loading ramp lever. “What's the matter?”

“What does it mean when someone's got a type,” Peter asked.

“Means they only like one kind of person,” Kraglin answered.

“What's Yondu's type?”

“Shucks, Pete, don't think he has one.” Kraglin chuckled. “From what I've seen, the cap'n pretty much goes for whatever he's in the mood for. Tall, short, small, big, red, blue, green, whatever. As long as a lady's halfway decent-lookin' and willin' to have a little fun, he takes 'em up on the offer.”

“The offer for what?”

Kraglin winced.

“That's grown-up shit, Pete,” he said.

“Ugh.” Peter tilted his head back, scowling. “I hate adult stuff, it doesn't make any sense!”

“Look, Pete. Here's the skinny on it, alright? Cap'n likes women who are a little fast and a little easy.” Kraglin stowed away his omnitool. “Always beautiful, and usually pretty tough.”

Peter reflected on that.

“What do you mean easy,” Peter asked.

“They like kissin' and huggin' and touchin' a lot, and they don't care who's on the receivin' end of it.”

“Oh.” Peter sat down on the ramp. “Hm.”

Kraglin stepped back off the ramp far enough that he could get a full view of his ship. His ship, the Suzarra. A wide grin stretched across his face.


The grin disappeared, and Kraglin's face flushed blue.
“What? No, Pete, hell no. Your mama's anythin' but easy.” Kraglin put his hands on his hips. “Look, Pete, easy ain't always a good thing.”

“But mom loves hugging and kissing and she likes everybody,” Peter said.

“It ain't the same.”

“Why not?”

“It just ain't, Peter, okay?” Kraglin sighed and paced back up the ramp. “Why you even askin’?”

“Because I asked my mom if Yondu was in love with her,” Peter said, “and she said no and that she wasn't his type.”

Kraglin turned around, his face warm.

“You asked Ms. Q if the cap'n was in love with her?” His voice was hushed, almost hoarse. “Pete, are you nuts?”

“Why wouldn't I ask,” Peter challenged.

“Because Ravagers don't do love, Peter!” Kraglin counted on his fingers. “We don't do gratitude, we don't do love, and we don't do charity. That's it, dammit.”

Peter's eyes lidded.

“Right,” he said scathingly, “and the ship you're standing in is what, exactly?”

Kraglin turned blue.

“This ship was Ms. Q's decision,” he said, “and Ms. Q ain't a Ravager.”

“Uh-huh.” Peter stood up and put his hands on his hips. “Riiiiiiiiight.”

“Shut up, Pete,” Kraglin snapped.

“Whatever!” Peter threw down his fists as he stomped away. “You're worse than mom.”

Kraglin scowled as he watched Peter walk away. That kid was asking for trouble, saying that kind of thing. Those rumors about the cap'n and Ms. Quill were getting all stirred up, and Kraglin wasn't so sure that was a good thing. The cap'n, in love with Ms. Q? Kraglin snorted and shook his head. So they'd made out a little; the cap'n did that all the time with all sorts of ladies. Ms. Quill wasn' the type to go fallin' in love with space men. Kraglin paused, reflecting on Ego. Alright, so maybe she was, but not space men like the cap'n. Ms. Quill was all heart and hope and soul; the cap'n was brains and brawn and fire. Of course they were attracted to each other; any brainless dipshit could see that. But love? No, Kraglin thought, not love.

At least, not yet.
His Parents

Chapter Summary

He's brought trouble, illegal materials, problems, and complaints to the Table, but this is the first time he's ever bothered bringing a girl home.

People notice.

Not all approve.

(I LIIIIIIIIIVE! Have an extra-long update! So sorry about the lack of updates, but work's been laying on the hours. I have four days off coming up (yay for time, not-so-yay for pay) so I'll do what I can to post as often as possible. Thank you for your understanding!)

Meredith woke up to empty skies outside the Eclector. All the Ravager ships she'd seen yesterday were gone. She paced to the bridge; it was early, so only Yondu and Gef were on deck. Yondu picked at his teeth with a metal toothpick, avoiding her eyes.

“The other Ravagers,” Meredith asked, “where did they go?”

“Ilyth,” Yondu answered, “and that's where we're goin'.”

“Ilyth? I thought we were going to Xandar,” Meredith said.

“We will.” Yondu stuck the metal toothpick into the foam of his seat. “First Ilyth. Then Algon's stupid flyin' sea-bucket. Then Xandar.”

“Algon?”

“If he finds out I dropped you off on Xandar without bringin' you to him for whatever fuckless celebration he's cooking up, he'll spit and roast me.”

“Fair point.” Meredith leaned against the railing, staring out at the stars. “So. You and Ogord okay?”

“Yeah,” Yondu replied, “we're okay.”

Meredith's mouth curved into a soft smile.

“Glad to hear it,” she said.

Gef's piggy little eyes flicked between Yondu and Meredith as he rapidly edited the odds on his datapad.

“Gef,” Yondu barked.

“Aye, captain?” Gef nearly dropped the datapad before shoving it into his desk. “Course set and systems are green.”

Yondu grabbed the controls and started flicking switches. Meredith sat in Kraglin's co-pilot seat and
“Gonna want to put on a seat belt for this one,” Yondu grunted.

Meredith snapped the belt around her waist. Yondu threw on the warp drive and bolted for the nearest jump. The ship soared through; stars became streaks as the ship barreled past the speed of light. Yondu spared Meredith a glance; she was staring into the oncoming tunnel of darkness, her eyes lit only by the lights on the bridge. Yondu chuckled; that was starlust, plain and simple.

The ship lurched. Some of the trash on Gef's desk went flying forwards, skidding on the ground. Meredith's seat belt kept her firmly in place.

“Nice call,” she said.

Yondu grunted and turned the Eclector towards a huge planet. The surface was patched with green and periwinkle blue, mostly obscured by soft white cloud formations. The planet looked soft, delicate, like a pearl rolling in the blackness. Parked right outside the atmosphere was a huge mass of twisted metal, a patchwork conglomerate of ships fused-together and melded into one great ugly port. Meredith could see flashing neon lights and trash floating past.

“What is that,” she asked.

“Ilyth,” Yondu said, “home of the Table.”

“That's Ilyth?” Meredith pointed towards the hodgepodge spaceship. “It's hideous.”

“That's the Hub,” Yondu explained, “where we dock to go down to Ilyth. Ilyth's the planet, see, and it's for captains only. The Hub's where the crew stay.”

“It's where Ravager ships go to die.” Gef pointed at the hundred of different colors and shapes that made up the Hub's thrusters. “When we can't use it anymore, we weld it to the Hub. It may look ugly as hell, but it's got more guns on it than a fleet o' Shi'ar destroyers.”

“Wow.” Meredith blinked as the Eclector soared under the Hub, looking for a docking port. “That's incredible.”

“It's flyin' ugly space junk,” Yondu said.

“It's still incredible.” Meredith went to the window and stared at the Hub, her eyes wide. “Imagine all the time it's taken to collect all those ships.”

“Hell,” Yondu snorted, “I bet Aleta's responsible for half of 'em. Woman runs through ships like other women run through shoes.”

“Aleta... She's Stakar's wife, right,” Meredith asked.

“Yeah,” Yondu grunted, “that's her.”

Meredith turned to Yondu and gave him a wide smile.

“Will I get to meet her,” she asked.

“You won't like her,” Yondu warned.

“Why not?”

watched.
“She’s nothin’ but edge and nasty as a rabid Orloni,” Yondu said, “and if she had it her way, lookin’ at a lady the wrong way would be punishable by castration.”

Meredith blinked.

“That’s extreme,” she said, “but not entirely unadmirable.”

Yondu grunted again and docked the Eclector; the ramp and tether connected. Yondu grabbed the mic unit and bellowed across the intercom.

“We’re docked, boys. Go on, get the hell off my ship.”

There was a collective roar from the Eclector; Meredith could see on the screens that every Ravager was fleeing the Eclector.

“What will they do,” she asked.

“Drink. Fuck. Screw shit up.” Yondu leaned back in his chair and stretched. “Ravager shit, most likely. Ain’t many rules ‘cept the code on the Hub, and plenty of free drink, free dances, and free food.”

“Why don’t you just stay there forever,” Meredith asked.

“Limit’s up to two weeks,” Gef said, “and then the prices kick in.”

“I’m assuming they’re outrageous?”

“Three-hundred units for a drink,” Gef said glumly.

“Wow.” Meredith’s eyes widened. “That is outrageous.”

“So dockin’ visits ain’t all that long,” Yondu stood up. “C’mon. You’re comin’ with me to Ilyth.”

“I am?” Meredith blinked. “Why?”

“You think any of those other captains are gonna believe it when I say I done blew up Ego?” Yondu scowled. “Think, woman. You’re the only damn witness. If they don’t believe it, they’ll press Stakar to get rid of me again. Gonna be hard enough convincin’ ’em I ain’t gone soft or nothin’.”

“So I’m your witness to the event.” Meredith sighed. “Okay. Ready when you are.”

Yondu escorted her down to the hangar bay. Peter was gamboling around in the hangar, and ran up to hug his mother.

“Mom,” he said, “did you see the ship outside? It’s huge!”

“It’s called the Hub, baby, and it ain’t safe for someone your age.” Meredith picked up Peter and held him on her hip. “Yondu, Peter’s coming with us, isn’t he?”

“Not a goddamn chance,” Yondu said.

“What?” Alarm shot through Meredith. “Why not?”

“It ain’t safe for someone his age,” Yondu quoted, “especially not with all the goddamn ruckus we’re gonna have to deal with. Leave him here, let Kraglin keep him on the ship.”
Meredith bit her lips together and held Peter close.

“Are you sure,” she asked.

“Mery,” Yondu said exasperatedly, “are we gonna go through this every damn time I ask you to do something?”

“No, no,” Meredith turned pink and put Peter down. “I'm sorry.”

“Where are you going, mom,” Peter asked.

“Ilyth, baby,” Meredith knelt down and smiled at her son. “It's just a little trip down planet-side. Shoudn't take long.”

“Five days tops,” Yondu grunted.

“Five days?” Meredith and Peter wheeled around to face him, their eyes wide.

Yondu grunted in affirmation.

“Five days is way too long, Yondu!” Meredith gripped Peter's hand. “What would we even do for five days?”

“One day for everyone to show the fuck up and settle in, three days for the Table,” Yondu said, “and one day to pack up and get the hell out of there.”

“And Peter can't come at all,” Meredith asked.

“Not unless you want him around one hundred of the galaxy's deadliest pirates,” Yondu said.

Meredith sighed.

“Peter, you'd better behave while I'm gone.”

“But mom, I don't want to be babysat!” Peter hugged her legs. “I want to go with you and Yondu! Please? Please please please please? I'm eight years old, I can handle it.”

Meredith laughed and hugged him tightly.

“Next time,” she promised.

Peter pouted.

“Best pack a bag, Mery,” Yondu warned.

“I will.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “I'll go do that right now, before I forget.”

Yondu did his best to keep his eyes on his ship, but still stole a glance or two at Meredith while she walked away. Five days with Yondu; no wonder she'd wanted Peter around. After what they'd done in the hallway, Yondu was surprised she wasn't holding a blaster to his head by now. He'd kissed her good and hard, that was for damn sure, but here she was, still around. For now, he firmly reminded himself. She was on her way to Xandar, and then Terra. Her time on the Eclector was coming to an end, and that should not have bothered Yondu as much as it did.

Something small and hard bonked into Yondu's knee. He looked down; Peter had punched Yondu's leg. The little Terran was glaring up at Yondu with a fierce expression, his little eyebrows contracted
under his mop of chestnut hair.

“You better take good care of my mom,” he said, “or I'm going to do something really really bad to your ship.”

Half of Yondu wanted to hug him, and the other half wanted to kick him down the stairs. He settled for pushing the Terran away and baring his teeth.

“You keep that shit up,” he said, “and I'll have Kraglin roast you on a goddamn spit.”

“You're a spit!” Peter puffed up with anger. “You better take good care of my mom!”

“What the hell do you think I'm gonna do, kill her? You frickin' idjit, I'm the one what almost died fightin' your jackass father to keep her alive!”

“I know,” Peter said.

“Then what the fuck do you think I would do, idjit?”

“It's not you.” Peter crossed his arms and glared at Yondu. “You said there were going to be a hundred really dangerous Ravagers and if one of them hurts my mom, I'm gonna hurt them!”

Yondu regarded Peter for a moment.

“Boy,” he said, “if one of 'em hurts your mother, I'll personally hand you a loaded fuckin' gun and we'll kill 'em together.”

Peter blinked in surprise.

“Don't tell your momma I said that,” Yondu grunted, “or she'll chew my ear off about gun safety and shit.”

Peter laughed. Yondu didn't. He paced up onto the ship and began checking his ship, baring his teeth at nothing. He hadn't thought about Meredith getting hurt, but now that Peter'd brought it up, the thoughts were racketing around his head like grenade shrapnel. Meredith Quill, the soft crybaby Terran woman, on a planet full of the most savage, bloodthirsty Ravagers in the universe? How the hell had he ever thought bringing her to Ilyth was a good idea? Yondu threw his flight jacket into the pilot's seat, scowling. Stakar, Aleta, Mainframe, Charlie-27, Krugarr; Martinex alone had been irritating, but the whole family messing with Meredith? Yondu had no way of guaranteeing her safety except what he could do by himself, and against the captains of a hundred Ravager clans... Yondu was good, but he wasn't sure he was that good. Yondu eyed Ilyth's image on the screen, debating.

“Cap'n?”

Yondu jumped.

“The fuck, Kraglin,” he snapped, “don't do that.”

“Sorry, cap'n.”

“Don't say that.”

“Sor–er, right, cap'n.” Kraglin stood at the top of the loading ramp, his hands in his pockets. “I got the crew all off and lil' Quill is still on.”
“Good.” Yondu picked up his flight jacket. “You're in charge of keepin' the little runt out of trouble while I go planet-side.”

Kraglin grimaced.

“Great, cap'n.”

“It'll be fine,” Yondu grunted, “just show him some shit and keep the little brat busy.”

Kraglin shifted from foot to foot, squinting slightly.

“You alright, cap'n,” he asked.

Yondu pulled on his flight jacket, not meeting Kraglin's eyes.

“Fine,” he said.

Kraglin studied the back of Yondu's jacket for a moment.

“Okay, cap'n,” he said, “okay.”

Meredith had stuffed her pillowcase with enough clothes for a five-day reprieve. She'd said a tearful goodbye to Peter, who had insisted it was more of a tearful see-you-later. Now she was in the co-pilot's seat, and Yondu wasn't talking.

“Can I put on music,” she asked.

“No.”

Meredith’s eyes flicked from Yondu's hard face to his knuckles, pale blue on the steering mechanism, and back again.

“Hey,” she asked, “are you okay?”

“I'm fine, idjit.” Yondu didn't even turn his head as the ship soared towards Ilyth. “Why the hell's everybody askin' me that?”

“Because you're as tense as a tightrope, Yondu.”

“Am not.”

“Right. The sweat on your neck and the way you're trying to strangle the steering thing, that really gives away how completely relaxed you are right now.”

Yondu snarled, showing jagged teeth.

“I'm handlin' it,” he said.

Meredith crossed her arms, a sour taste in her mouth.

“What did I do,” she asked.

“What? Nothin', moron.”

“So I didn't do anything wrong.”
“No, you didn't.”

“So what happened that made you not trust me anymore,” she asked.

Yondu's shoulders tensed.

“It ain't a matter of... Fuck, Mery, it's just stupid shit,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, “so tell me stupid shit.”

“Stupid motherfuckin' nosy-ass Terrans,” Yondu cursed.

The corner of Meredith's mouth turned up.

“So,” she asked.

Yondu let out a long, exasperated breath.

“Look, Mery, I'm flyin' into a goddamn shitstorm here with nobody to back me up but you, and no offense, but you ain't exactly the kind of person they're gonna be impressed by. It ain't you personally,” he clarified, “but these people... they ain't like Kraglin, if you know what I mean.”

“Cruel?”

“Merciless,” Yondu said flatly.

“Oh.” Meredith bit her lips together. “I thought you said they were your family?”

“Only the top five. Stakar, Aleta, Krugarr, Charlie-27, Mainframe, they're all more like Martinex. Deadly,” Yondu said, “but not completely fuckin' crazy.”

“And the rest?”

“Hard people. Freed battle slaves. Pirates seekin' a purpose. Anybody Stakar and Aleta have picked up over the years, more like.”

“What keeps them together?”

“Stakar and Aleta.” Yondu exhaled as they began to descend into the atmosphere. “No matter who you see, just remember; they'd smash their skulls on a rock before they let an Ogord get hurt.”

“And Stakar and Aleta would die for you,” Meredith said, “so doesn't that mean these captains won't hurt you, either?”

Yondu reflected on that.

“Guess so,” he said, “but no promises.”

“Then we'll be fine.” Meredith smiled as the atmosphere burned against the front window. “We've just got to trust the Ogords.”

Yondu's ship broke through the clouds. Deep shadow-dappled forests and majestic lilac mountains rose up to the sky. Meredith could see hundreds of white-roofed buildings spread out among the scenery. A few gleaming ships soared past, bedecked with Ravager symbols. Meredith's eyes widened.
“This is Ilyth? It's beautiful,” she said.

“Yeah, it ain't too bad to look at.” The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up as he steered the ship downwards. “Better lookin' than Ego, anyway.”

“Anything looks better than Ego,” Meredith said.

Chuckling, Yondu flew the ship down and docked it next to several others. Meredith could pick out the gold circles and navy colors of Stakar's men, but there were also olive green ships with great brass skulls on them, ships decked out in white digital camouflage, and blood-red ships splashed with streaks of black and purple.

“Wow,” she breathed.

“Other captains, checkin' in.” Yondu's eyes raked over the ships. “Stakar, Charlie-27, Mainframe, Aleta. Figures Martinex would be late, but hell knows where Krugarr is nowadays. Slithery red bastard's always goin' here or there lookin' for shit, pickin' stuff up for Stakar and Aleta.”

“I can't wait to meet Aleta,” Meredith said.

Yondu shifted in his seat.

“Mery,” he said, “you know not everybody's gotta like you, right?”

“What?”

“I said, you know not everybody's gotta like you. It don't matter if everybody here thinks you're annoyin' and silly and full of shit,” Yondu said, “because they're dangerous, but so are you. You ain't gotta be afraid of any of 'em.”

Meredith stared at him.

“Yondu Udonta, are you trying to give me a pep-talk?”

“No!” Yondu scowled, turning purple. “I'm tryin' to make sure you don't embarrass the hell out of me.”

Meredith bit her lips together, trying not to smile. Yondu landed his ship next to the other Ravager captains, shut off the engines, dropped the landing ramp, and exhaled.

“Are you ready,” Meredith asked.

Yondu forced his shoulders back, locked his jaw, and took a deep breath.

“Yeah,” he said, “ready.”

Meredith and Yondu stepped off the ramp into rosy-tinged sunlight.

“Yondu Udonta,” a deep male voice chuckled.

Yondu's head whipped right. Leaning against the olive green ship was a huge, dark-skinned man wearing odd military fatigues. He had been hidden by the ship while they landed; Meredith hadn't
even known anyone was down here. The man smiled widely and threw his large arms in a wide gesture of welcome.

“About damn time,” he said.

Meredith barely had time to be surprised before Yondu bull-rushed the man. The man let out a booming laugh, picked up Yondu by the front of his jacket, pinned him against the ship, and held a golden knife to his throat. Meredith reached for a gun on her hip that wasn't there; she hadn't carried one since Ego. Yondu glanced down at the knife and his chest swelled.

“You kept it,” he said.

“Of course.” The man in the military fatigues sheathed the knife and let Yondu slip to the ground. “It's my favorite knife.”


Meredith edged forward. Charlie-27 patted her on the back with a wide hand.


“I'm Meredith Quill.” Meredith offered her hand. “Of Earth.”

“So I hear.” Charlie-27 smothered Meredith's hand in his own, gently shaking it. “I'm from Jupiter, myself.”

“Jupiter? The gas giant?”

“Gas giant.” Yondu snorted. “That's Chuck, all right. Big and full of hot air.”

Charlie-27 put his elbow on Yondu's shoulder and leaned. It didn't look like much, but Yondu immediately began cursing, his knees shaking under the massive weight.

“You fuckless dick,” Yondu hissed.

Smirking, Charlie-27 stood upright again.

“Jupiter's intense gravity means us Jovians need incredible muscle mass just to be able to maneuver on our planet.”

“That's incredible. Jupiter, hm?” Meredith chuckled. “Guess that makes us space-neighbors.”

Yondu turned slightly purple; Charlie-27's eyes flicked from Meredith to Yondu and back again.

“Guess so.” Charlie-27 crossed his arms. “You're the Terran who killed Ego?”

“Yondu helped, but yeah. That's me.”

“Hm.” Charlie-27 looked her up and down. “I expected you to be bigger. At least six feet. And carrying a gun, at least.”

“Mery ain't a Ravager,” Yondu muttered.

The corner of Meredith's mouth turned down infinitesimally.

“Stakar and Aleta are waiting inside the house. Krugarr's prepping the Table, and I think Mainframe is running a defensive diagnostic. Again.” Charlie-27 lifted his eyes to the sky. “I highly doubt anyone is stupid enough to attack the Table with all of us here.”

“I can think of some idjits stupid enough,” Yondu said, “but they're already here.”

Charlie-27 chuckled and patted Yondu on the shoulder.

“I'll see you later.”

“Damn right you will, Chuck.”

Charlie-27 paced towards an enormous building that looked to function as a hangar; Yondu led Meredith away from the ships, heading towards the largest of the buildings. It was white, with a gleaming copper-colored roof, and the windows were curved and clean.

“Home of the Table,” Yondu said.

“What is the Table?”

“I'll have to show you later. Right now, we gotta find Stakar. Regulation says we check in with him first and he'll tell us where we're stayin',” Yondu said as he opened the red-and-copper door.

“That sounds like you,” Meredith teased, “always following the rules.”

“After what I did, I ain't even riskin' a goddamn protocol infraction.” Yondu shook his head as Meredith and he paced down the white-tiled floors. “I ain't givin' 'em shit for reasons to get rid of me.”

“Why would they want to?”

“I don't fuckin' know, Mery,” Yondu said scathingly, “why the fuck would anyone not want me around? Ain't I a ray of sunshine?”

Meredith grinned.

“You're just the sweetest, nicest, most golden little sunspot that e'er winked at a daisy,” Meredith said.

Yondu threw back his head and barked a laugh. It was the first real laugh Meredith had heard from him since Stakar had left the Eclector, and it made her smile. They were both still grinning when they turned the corner and nearly ran into a dark-haired woman.

“Watch where you're going,” she snapped.

“Get the fuck out of our way,” Yondu snarled.

The woman's eyes flashed, and both her and Yondu's hands went to their pistols. They leered at one another before the woman smirked and crossed her arms.

“So it's true,” she said, “the temper remains unchanged.”

“Damn right it does.” Yondu bared his teeth, but something in his voice told Meredith he wasn't as angry as he sounds. “And don't test it.”
“Wouldn't dream of it,” the woman said curtly. “Who's your friend?”

“Aleta,” Yondu grunted, “this is Mery. Mery, this is Aleta.”

Meredith's face lit up, and she held her hand out.

“It's a pleasure to meet you,” she beamed.

Aleta's mouth soured. She shook hands with Meredith, dropping contact as soon as possible.

“The Terran,” she said to Yondu.

“Meredith Quill,” Yondu confirmed.

“My husband tells me a lot about you, Meredith Quill,” Aleta said.

“All good things, I hope.” Meredith smiled up to her eyes. “I'll admit, I'm not the best with first impressions.”

Aleta's beetle-black eyes lidded.

“Noted,” she said.

Meredith's heart gave a slight pang; Yondu's jaw locked.

“Where's Stakar,” Yondu asked.

“I'm right here.” Stakar came pacing down the hall, his navy-and-gold robes fluttering as he walked. “Ms. Quill, an absolute pleasure to see you again.”

“Hello, Stakar,” Meredith said.

Stakar lifted Meredith's hand and kissed it; Yondu growled in his throat. Aleta's eyes snapped from Stakar to Meredith to Yondu and back again, her expression never changing.

“I'm going to go shoot,” she said.

“Splendid. Yondu, you and Ms. Quill are in Room 20-J.” Stakar linked his hands behind his back, smiling. “And now that the protocol nonsense is taken care of—”

“Nonsense,” Aleta cried.

“You fuckin' breathe regulation, old man.” Yondu scowled.

“— I can show the lovely Ms. Quill my antiquities.” Stakar drew himself up, smiling widely. “Yondu told me you had a particular interest in foreign cultures.”

“I do,” Meredith confirmed.

Aleta blinked slowly and walked away. Yondu looked between Meredith and Aleta's retreating back, and frowned.

“Are you coming, Yondu,” Stakar asked.

“Comin' where?”

“I was going to show Ms. Quill the museum, if you'd like to join us,” Stakar offered.
Yondu's response was a derisive snort. He walked away, headed down the same halls as Aleta. Meredith watched Stakar's face fall a fraction, and she frowned.

“A lifetime of lifetimes,” Stakar said, “and sometimes I think he doesn’t even care.”

“I felt the same way about Peter.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “I mean, there's just so much on Earth he's never seen, so much to learn there, and he doesn't even want to go back. He just doesn't feel connected to it like I do.”

“When a foreign species cares more about your home planet than you do,” Stakar said, “I think the issue is not with the foreign species.”

“My papa told me that old men read history, but young men make it. Maybe he'll be more interested in it when he's older,” Meredith said.

“I certainly hope so.” Stakar's face soured. “He could do with some growing-up.”

Meredith laughed. Stakar led her down the hall, which emptied into a huge room walled with tile. The furthest, largest wall, was covered with runed stone tiles. Stakar gestured to them grandly.

“Behold my Centaurian dictionary,” he said.

“That's... wow,” Meredith said, gaping at the sheer size of the wall. “That's one expansive language.”

“The runes are phonetic,” Stakar explained, “each mark representing a sound.”

“That's amazing.” Meredith's eyes traced over all the marks. “I mean, imagine having to develop an alphabet that can register every tone of every sound.”

“Yes, exactly!” Stakar's eyes lit up as he gestured to the rune wall. “And even the slightest deviation can completely change the meaning.”

“They're beautiful,” Meredith said.

“Pick one.” Stakar gestured with one arm. “Go on, I insist. Quiz me.”

Meredith closed her eyes and pointed randomly.

“Good choice,” Stakar chuckled.

Meredith opened her eyes. She had pointed to a rune characterized by a few sharp up-ticks over a long, smooth line.

“Bhkta,” Stakar said, “one of my personal favorites. The literal meaning is ‘the moment when one becomes aware of an unavoidable danger’. It is the period of time between action and reaction, the pause, the inhale, the breath.”

“Really?” Meredith's eyes widened. “Wow.”

“See, and how is it that you understand that it's fantastic and amazing and Aleta and Yondu just stare at me and blink?” Stakar threw his arms in the air. “Does no one value archeology anymore? Is the vastness of time and the unlimited creativity of sentient thought just dull to them? By the stars!”

Fuming, Stakar paced back and forth in the hall. Meredith laughed, covering her mouth with her hands. He looked just like Yondu.
“Maybe Yondu doesn't see it as particularly interesting because he already knows it instinctively.” Meredith smiled, shrugging. “We see bhkta as a rune, a mark of understanding. He feels it as just a part of his instincts, just part of who he is. It's not fascinating to him, it's just natural.”

Stakar's pacing slowed to a stop.

“Is that it,” he asked, “is he just...Do I bore him with these talks?”

Meredith held two fingerprint slightly apart from each other.

“Little bit, Stakar,” she said.

“Oh.” Stakar sighed. “Am I boring you, too?”

“What? Heck no,” Meredith said, her hands on her hips, “I think it's fascinating. Tell me more, seriously.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Stakar's eyes darted between Meredith's as if expecting to catch one of them lying.

“You are a very unique person.” Stakar offered her his arm. “Come, let me show you some of the runic manuscripts I've deciphered.”

Meredith willingly took his arm. Stakar led her to a tall, slightly narrow room. It was filled with sleek computers and sturdy glass displays, in which rested relics. Meredith's eyes widened at all the holographic displays that popped up as they walked by.

“Relics of Centauri-IV,” Stakar explained, “rescued from the Kree. I hope to one day return them to the planet.”

“They're amazing.” Meredith let go of Stakar's arm to examine a huge stone pillar. “How old are they?”

“Hundreds of thousands of years old. Many of them are historical records marking the split of the religious sects the Centaurian culture. Even more are gravestones,” Stakar explained, “listing the events and deeds of a warrior's life before he passed. I wish the Kree hadn't moved them; traditionally these stones would be erected over the precise spot a warrior died. If they hadn't been moved, I could have marked graves, sites of historical battles, places of great spiritual significance to Centaurian culture.”

“Wow,” Meredith said.

“Yes,” Stakar chuckled, “very wow. Here, look at this.”

Stakar directed Meredith to a sleek silver computer. He tapped on the holoscreen and brought up a huge document.

“This is my treatise on Centaurian culture. Over eight-hundred-thousand words on everything from their fierce warrior culture to their agricultural methods.” Stakar flicked his wrist; the words blurred as he scrolled through the immense document. “The combined information on thousands of Centaurian lives, pieced together by yours truly.”

“That must have taken forever,” Meredith said.
“I am more-or-less immortal, Ms. Quill.” Stakar smiled as he minimized the document. “I have forever. And besides, if I don't record these things down, who will? Yondu has no interest in it, and I assure you that the Kree don't care about any culture but their own.”

Meredith frowned as she looked around at the relics Stakar had rescued.

“Why are they like that,” she asked.

“The Kree? That's all they know. Long ago, when Aleta and I were young, it was the Kree who were enslaved. The Shi'ar Empire had long since enslaved their people, as well as many others. When the Shi'ar Empire finally imploded on itself, the Kree were freed. The Shi'ar picked a new ruler, Lilandra, who was kind and just. She led them to began again, peacefully. But the Kree,” Stakar said, “the Kree could not forgive. They took up the empty space that the Shi'ar had left behind and began to focus their energy on expansion. The Xandarians resisted, pushed back, and the two have been bitter enemies ever since.”

Meredith listened with rapt attention. Her wide eyes and eager expression encouraged Stakar to continue.

“You know,” Stakar said, “you aren't the first space-faring Terran to come my way.”

“I'm not?” Meredith lit up. “Really?”

“Oh no, you're not. Aleta and I, we have an old friend named Hepzibah. She's a Starjammer,” Stakar explained, “a member of a small band of privateers that inhibit the slave trade wherever they go. They'd love to meet you, especially their leader, Corsair.”

“Corsair?”

“Well, he calls himself Corsair.” Stakar chuckled. “His real name is Christopher Summers. He's as Terran as they come.”

“The Starjammers,” Meredith repeated.

“Oh yes. Yondu knows Hepzibah, of course; she's known Aleta and I forever. Then there's Raza Longknife. Quiet man, good with slaughter.” Stakar put his hands behind his back. “And Algon knows Ch'od; he's a Saurid as well.”

“Never met a Saurid I didn't like,” Meredith said.

“How many have you met?”

“Just one.”

“Algon?”

“That's the one,” Meredith said with a grin.

“Good man, that Saurid.” Stakar chuckled. “Pity he wouldn't join up with the Ravagers.”

“I can't imagine Algon shooting people,” Meredith said.

Stakar raised an eyebrow.

“Algon was once a battle-slave, same as Yondu. That Saurid may not look like he's got the steel to kill in him, but he does. And that,” Stakar said, “seems to be something you understand.”
Meredith's eyebrows contracted slightly.

“What do you mean,” she asked.

“You don't look like you've got what it takes to cross a galaxy, slay a planet, and spit in the face of death.” Stakar smiled and linked his hands behind his back. “But looks, Ms. Quill, can be very, very deceiving.”

Meredith thought about that for a second.

“Then I suppose it's good that I look and act like this.” Meredith rubbed her arms, smiling slightly. “That way when I'm careening towards a canyon wall at full-speed or blasting Kree in the back, nobody will even know what hit 'em.”

Stakar's chest shook with barely-restrained laughter.

“Yondu's right,” he said, “we'll make a Ravager out of you yet.”

Yondu found Aleta on a grassy section of the lawn, blasting holographic targets. On a nearby rock were laid many blasters of differing types and styles of origin. Yondu knew that was Aleta's thing; she was never satisfied with a single weapon, ship, or person. She kept hundreds around, and interacted only with the best one in each situation. The only person she'd managed to be satisfied with was Stakar, and that was because no one else was better suited for her, Yondu reflected. He came up behind her and watched Aleta practice.

“She can't shoot, can she,” Aleta asked.

“What?”

“The woman you brought.” Aleta reloaded and shot again. “She can't shoot.”

“Rifle yes, pistol no.”

“But she isn't particularly proficient?”

“She could stand to take a couple lessons, that's for damn sure.” Yondu surveyed the selection of blasters Aleta had brought out. “I'll tell her to ask you.”

“I would prefer that you didn't,” Aleta said in a clipped, cold tone.

“You decided you don't like her,” Yondu assumed.

“Not yet.” Aleta adjusted the sights on her pistol. “I'm still deciding.”


“He's not coming in the house. He's still angry with Stakar,” Aleta said, “and you know how Charlie is with anger.”

“Stone-cold silent,” Yondu answered.

Yondu selected a heavy Maordian revolver; it was loaded with ballistics tipped with the smallest
capsules of Maordian plasma. He shot a bullet straight into the target, which erupted in a small field of green light.

“It's because she can't shoot for shit, ain't it,” Yondu said.

“What?”

“Mery.” Yondu paused between shots. “That's why you don't like her.”

“Mostly,” she admitted.

Yondu grunted and fired again; this time, he was two inches off his mark. Aleta frowned.

“Elbows,” she said.

“I kept 'em in, dammit.” Yondu scowled. “Stop correctin' me all the damn time.”

Aleta rolled her eyes. Loading her pistol, she kept her eyes on her gun, avoiding Yondu's gaze.

“It is imperative that a spouse be equipped with the necessary skills and drive to support their spouse.” Aleta fired six shots from one blaster, then six shots from the other. “Killing is one of those skills. Her inability itself bothers me, but her lack of drive to acquire those skills is very foreboding.”

“First off, she ain't 'spouse'. Second off, you're sayin' you don't like her because she don't like killin' people,” Yondu said, “and Ravagers gotta be able to do it.”

“That's oversimplified,” Aleta said, “but yes.”

“You sure you don't like her? She's a hell of a lot like Stakar,” Yondu added.

“Wonderful.” Aleta's eyes lidded. “One more reason for me to dislike her.”

Yondu gave Aleta a sideways look.

“You really don't like her,” he said.

“No.” Aleta fired from both blasters, the bolts smashing perfectly on target. “I don't.”

Yondu nodded slowly, checking his ammo capacity.

“Because she can't shoot and don't like killin' people, or because she's the first one I ever bothered bringin' here,” he asked.

Aleta slowly turned red.

“Both,” she said.

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. He handed her the loaded blaster.

“I can't help but dislike her; nobody's good enough for my boys, you know that.” Aleta took the blaster, her face red. “You and Martinex both deserve queens.”

Yondu snorted.

“Ain't sayin' it's like that between me and her, but I brought you one,” he said, “and you won't even fuckin' talk to her.”
“Yondu, she's sweet, but sweet isn't enough. Sweet won't defend your family. Sweet is not steel,” Aleta said.

“She blew up a goddamn planet wearin' a floral dress.” Yondu grinned. “She's steel as they come, ma.”

Aleta sighed, then lifted the blaster and fired several rounds at the target.

“You think she could handle staring down the barrel at her own son and pulling the trigger to protect you,” she asked.

Yondu turned that over in his head.

“No,” he said.

“Then she's not steel.”

“Goddamn it, stop cuttin' me off. No, but,” Yondu continued, “if that boy and I was holdin’ barrels to each other's foreheads, she'd take both bullets before lettin' either of us get hurt. That's good enough.”

“You don't want her to love you more than she loves her son.” Aleta squinted and put down the blaster. “You want to be second to him.”

“Second? Hell no.” Yondu snorted. “Mery ain't you and she ain't Stakar. She puts everybody on the same goddamn table. Gives as much of a fuck about Kraglin as she does about Peter as she does about anybody else.”

“She just...loves everybody?” Aleta made a face of disgust. “That's horrifying.”

“Ain't it? Hell if I know how she does it,” Yondu chuckled, “but there it fuckin' is.”

“You actually want to be around that,” Aleta asked.

“Yes.”

Aleta took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

“A Terran,” she said.

“She ain't just a goddamn Terran.”

“No,” Aleta said, “she's your Terran. Remember what I always told you. You get one person. One person in the entire universe, and that one person is yours. You only get to choose one.”

Yondu fired a few shots; he kept his elbows in, and all of the bolts shattered on the target.

“I can't think of a better one,” he said, “can you?”

“Someone who can handle a gun. Someone steely-eyed and relentless.” Aleta opened her eyes and scowled. “She's too soft.”

“Soft.” Yondu put down the gun. “Soft? You think that woman is soft? Fuck, Aleta, what more do you want? She raised a kid on her own for eight years and died repeatedly for four months!”

“I know, I know!” Aleta scowled and threw down her fists. “But she can't shoot, she's not... she's not
“You fell in love with a single mother of one. That's it,” she said, “that's the biggest plot twist I've ever seen. *Unexpected* doesn't begin to cover it.”

Yondu bared his teeth.

“I ain't in love,” he said.

Aleta rolled her eyes.

“You,” she said, “are smitten.”

“No I ain't!”

Aleta started gathering the weaponry up, making sure the safeties were on and the magazines empty.
She looked as if she was sucking on a lemon, yet the corner of her mouth turned resolutely up.

“If you're so in love with her,” Aleta said, “I suppose I'll manage to get along with her somehow.”

“I ain't in love!”

“Then I don't like her and there's no point in pretending differently, is there?”

Aleta watched the seething Centaurian turn several shades of violet. She smirked and carried the weapons inside without a second glance. Out of all those she considered her children, Yondu had to have the worst temper. And, she added wryly, the absolute worst judgment.

Meredith couldn't find Yondu. After Stakar had excused himself to see to some defense details, Meredith had realized that not only was she alone in a huge building, but that she was also lost and alone in a huge building. She meandered through the corridors, trying her best to fight off the rising panic. She passed through an arch and heard a sniff; Meredith wheeled around. Aleta was leaning against the archway, giving Meredith a hard stare.

“Something wrong,” Meredith asked.

“Stand up straight,” Aleta said, “and let me take a look at you.”

Perturbed, Meredith stood up. Aleta paced around her like a she-wolf, lifting her arm and examining the silver scars that striped Meredith's skin. Whatever she was looking for, Meredith decided, she wasn't finding; Aleta finally huffed.

“You need to eat more,” Aleta said, “and gain muscle mass.”

Meredith raised her eyebrows.

“Excuse me,” she said.

“Muscle mass,” Aleta repeated, “you need to gain it.”

“Oh no, I heard what you said.” Meredith crossed her arms. “Where I come from, telling someone they need to eat more is just as rude as telling them they need to eat less.”

“It's advice,” Aleta said, “and where I come from, when someone wiser than you tells you what to do, you do it.”

“I didn't ask for it.” Meredith was still smiling. “But thank you. I'll take it into consideration.”

Aleta's eyes lidded slightly.

“Do you know who and what I am,” she asked.


“Then you know I could kill you where you stand,” Aleta said.

“You can try, honey,” Meredith laughed, “but if a Celestial and cancer can't do it, it's gonna take a
heck of a lot of effort.”

Aleta shifted from foot to foot.

“You are resilient,” she allowed.

“Thank you,” Meredith answered.

“But I don't like you,” Aleta added, “and I do not approve of your relationship with Yondu Udonta.”

“You don't have to like me.” Meredith shrugged. “Yondu likes me just fine; that's why we're friends.”

Aleta squinted.

“Friends,” she repeated.

“Oh no.” Meredith put her hand on her forehead. “Please don't tell me Stakar's been spreading rumors about that. Yondu and I are just friends, Mrs. Ogord, really. Just friends.”

Aleta blinked slowly.

“You must think I'm an idiot,” she said.

“No, I really don't.” Meredith frowned. “Stakar and Yondu have already told me a lot about you, and they said you were whip-smart.”

“Stakar spoke to you about me?”

“Yes.”

“All good things, I presume,” Aleta said.

“She's crazy and infuriating. Sometimes the sound of her voice makes me want to stab myself with a blunt knife. She's the most hideous creature I've ever beheld. I can't trust her worth a damn,” Meredith recited, “and half the time I want to kill her.”

Aleta's face cycled through several shades of red.

“That's my husband,” she said dully.

“He also said that he'd die for you, and that he loved you. He said you were the heart of his heart,” Meredith said, “and the reason for his living.”

“Enough.” Aleta put her face in her hands. “Stakar, you lovesick fool.”

“I thought it was sweet,” Meredith confessed.

“It is.” Aleta took her hands off her face, revealing a deep blush. “And he knows I like it and so he tells everyone he meets.”

The sound of footsteps made both women look; Stakar Ogord came striding down the hallway, bouncing on his toes.

“Aleta,” Stakar said, “Mainframe told me to come and tell you that the diagnostics on our defense system came back.”
That was as far as he got. Aleta's hand shot out with the speed and ferocity of a striking rattlesnake, seizing around Stakar's collar and pulling him into an impassioned kiss. Meredith's eyes shot wide. Stakar and Aleta wrapped around each other in a fierce embrace; Meredith backed away slowly, feeling her face heat up. Her back hit someone; she turned around to see Yondu.

“Oh thank God,” she breathed.

“What,” he asked, “what's wrong?”

“I was lost and I had no idea where you were, and then...” Meredith looked over her shoulder at the Ogords. “Then that started happening.”

Stakar's back was to the wall with Aleta's knee hooked high on his hip. Yondu bared his teeth and grabbed Meredith by the upper arm.

“Can you two fuckin' control yourselves for one goddamn day?” Yondu dragged Meredith down the hall, away from the Ogords. “For fuck's sake.”

Meredith's face was burning scarlet as Yondu pulled her along.

“Are they always that affectionate,” she asked.

“No.” Yondu made his way to a door marked 20-J. “Usually they go straight to neckin'.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, they're fuckin' obsessed with each other.” Yondu threw open the door. “We're camped in here. I just brought in all our shit, so get comfy.”

Yondu and Meredith entered; Yondu shut the door behind them and locked it. Meredith made a beeline down the small hall towards the bedroom. Yondu squared his shoulder and peered around at the small living space. There was a dining table, two straight-backed chairs, a little kitchenette, and a coffee table. Yondu noticed that the coffee table was pushed against the wall, and there was no couch. His brow furrowed.

“Yondu?” Meredith's voice echoed from the other room, tinged with concern. “I think they gave us the wrong room.”

“What?” Yondu grunted as he came in. “What makes you say th...”

There was only one bed. Two stately endtables stood on either side, and a dresser was placed on the other side of the wall. A white door stood to the left of the bed, most likely leading to the bathroom. But, no matter what else was in the room, the issue was clear; there was only one bed.

Yondu Udonta was going to punch Stakar Ogord.

“Those snot-lickin' shit-faced motherfuckers.” Yondu's eyes burned with rage. “I'm gonna kill 'em for this.”

“It's just an arrangement issue,” Meredith said, “I'm sure it's temporary. We can just request a different room, and until then I'll sleep on the couch.”

“There ain't a couch,” Yondu said through gritted teeth.

“Then give me some towels and I'll sleep in the bathtub,” Meredith said.
Against his will, Yondu laughed.

“Naw, Mery. You take the bed,” Yondu said, “and I'll take the floor.”

“Are you sure,” she asked.

“Positive,” Yondu bared his teeth in what was almost a grin. “Grew up sleepin' on a floor, remember?”

Meredith bit her lip.

“The Kree made you sleep on the floor,” she asked.

“When they let me sleep, yeah.”

Meredith's silver-gray eyes darted from the bed to Yondu.

“Just...” Meredith sighed. “Look, if it's that big of a deal, we can share the bed.”

Yondu's eyes boggled.

“You're shittin' me,” he said.

“I'm not making you sleep on the floor, okay?” Meredith rubbed the metallic scars on her arms. “I'm just not.”

“And you're okay with this?”

“Keep your hands to yourself and don't snore too loud and we should be fine.” Meredith half-chuckled. “No different than that time we shared when the hull was breached, remember?”

Yondu could feel a slight sweat break out under his collar. He hooked a finger under the collar of his shirt and pulled at it.

“You sure,” he asked.

“Yes, I'm sure.”

Without so much as a glance his way, Meredith slid herself under the covers on the far right side and closed her eyes.

“Goodnight, Yondu,” she said.

Yondu stared at the empty left side of the bed. For star's sake, they'd done this before; getting all frozen up about it was stupid. Scowling, he paced forwards, ripped the left side sheets off, and crawled in. He pulled the sheets over his shoulder, scowling.

For a minute or two, silence pressed in all around them. The fan spun slowly overhead. Lights from the landing pad outside came streaking in; the curtains seemed to glow. The sheets were cool to the touch.

“Yondu,” Meredith whispered into the darkness.

“Right here, Mery.” Yondu's voice was barely a mumble. “Go to sleep.”

“Do you think Peter's okay?”
The question hung in the air for a second, then Yondu sat up in bed, scowling.

“Dammit. Now you asked that and I ain't gonna be able to sleep until I know the little idjit ain't blown up my ship.” Yondu grabbed his comm link and set it to speaker. “Kraglin? Come in, dammit. You better not be asleep.”

Meredith sat up in bed, hugging her knees to her chest as they waited for an answer.

“Here, cap'n.” Kraglin was whispering on the other side of the line. “Just got Pete to pass out. How the hell does Ms. Q get him to sleep?”

Meredith laughed and scooted closer to the comm link.

“Singing,” she answered.

“Shucks, Ms. Q, that'd explain why I'm shit at getting him to turn in.” Kraglin's chuckle was a little crackly from static. “How's things planetside?”

“Good,” Meredith said.

“Fuckin' sucks,” Yondu said.


“Aleta's got 'er nose in the air about Mery bein' anythin' other than a second Aleta,” Yondu complained, “Charlie-27's just avoidin' the family, and Stakar's made it his goddamn mission to show Mery every rock, rune, and piece of junk he's ever picked up.”

“It's not junk,” Meredith said.

Kraglin chuckled.

“Sounds like a handful, cap'n.”

“How's things up there?”

“Aside from tryin' to keep Peter off primary systems? Pretty good. Crew's dispersed, mixin' well. Got a few check-up calls from Gef and the others,” said Kraglin, “sayin' a few of the old names are askin' around about hirin' opportunities.”

“Old names?” Yondu's brow furrowed. “Like who?”

“Tullk and Oblo,” Kraglin said, “remember them?”

“Yeah.” The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. “The sons-of-bitches who left when we broke code. They want back in, huh?”

“They said they were thinkin' about comin' back even if we still broke code. Apparently workin' for Charlie-27's a goddamn hassle. Do you want me to put 'em on the roster, cap'n?”

Yondu leaned his head back and closed his eyes. Meredith could see his face silhouetted against the light on the curtains.

“Yeah,” he said, “sign 'em up. Sign 'em all up. We need a bigger crew if we're back in the game.”

“Will do, cap'n. With permission,” Kraglin said, “I'll send out an open call for new recruits.”
“Do it,” Yondu said.

“Done,” Kraglin replied.

Yondu's grin shone slightly in the darkness. Meredith scooted left, towards the comm link.

“Kraglin,” she asked, “is there any way I could talk to Peter?”

“I'd prefer if you didn't, Ms. Q. Like I said, just now got him to sleep.”

“Well, just make sure to patch him in if he needs to call me, okay?”

“Will do, Ms. Q. I'll put your comm line on the long-distance systems.”

“Thanks, honey.”

“No problem, Ms. Q.”

Meredith smiled and laid her cheek on her knees. She was close enough now that Yondu could put his arm around her, if he wanted to. Which he didn't, he told himself firmly. He was letting all of that go.

“So everything's pretty much dandy, cap'n. Is that all,” Kraglin asked.

“That's all. Keep a weather's eye out,” Yondu said, “but catch some sleep yourself, you hear?”

“Aye, cap'n.”

The line dropped into silence, and Yondu set the comm link on the side table.

“They'll be alright,” he mumbled.

“Okay.” Meredith exhaled. “Just... I needed to know Peter was okay.”

“You're a momma,” Yondu said, “it's what you do.”

The corner of Meredith's mouth turned softly upwards.

“And you needed to know your ship, crew, and first mate were okay. You're a big ol' daddy,” Meredith said, “it's what you do.”

Yondu felt the heat in his face increase, and was suddenly glad for the darkness.

“Who you callin' old,” he mumbled.

Meredith grinned and moved back to her side of the bed.

“You cold?” Yondu heard the words come out of his mouth before he was conscious of them. “Need another blanket?”

“Little cold, yeah. These sheets are like hotel sheets, you know? I just can't get warm,” Meredith said.

It took little to no effort at all for Yondu to pull the slight Terran to the middle of the bed. He wrapped one arm around her, their bodies nearly touching, but not quite.

“This warm enough for you,” he growled.
He couldn't see the color of her cheeks, but in the silence he swore he could hear her heartbeat pick up pace.

“What did I say about keeping your hands to yourself,” she muttered.

“You said you were cold.”

“That wasn't an invitation.”

“And this ain't one, either.” Yondu was surprised at how gentle his voice was. “It's just a goddamn solution to a problem. I ain't teasin’.”

Yondu could see Meredith's silver eyes clear enough as they bored into him.

“You promise you're not teasing me,” she said.

“I promise.”

He heard her take a deep breath and exhale.

“Fine,” she said, “but... this is just for warmth, okay?”

“Don't have to tell me twice,” he said.

Meredith's arms wrapped around his barrel chest, and within seconds, he was holding her snugly in his arms. Damn, it felt good. Yondu closed his eyes and rested his cheekbone over her curls.

“G’night, Mery,” he managed to utter.

“Goodnight, Yondu,” was the soft reply.
Meredith learns a little more about the problems plaguing Yondu's newly-reforged family.

(So I haven't updated a chapter in about a month, and I'm so sorry about that! Life's been hectic, but I promise the lack of chapters has not come from a lack of writing! It's simply the fact that I don't have Internet at my place of residence, so I have to have a full day off to dedicate to driving to town, setting up in the library, and spending an hour or two posting and replying to all of your wonderful comments! Thank you so much for not forgetting about this! At over 210000 words and over 2000 kudos, I cannot actually believe how big this thing has gotten. It started as a dumb writing release and I swear I had no idea why I was bothering to write it. But now it's this big huge lovable fic and I'm so proud of how much people are liking it. Thank you, truly and deeply, for reading this!)

Yondu woke up the next morning with empty arms. He pressed his hand to Meredith's side of the bed; it was cold. Fighting the sinking feeling in his chest, he sat up and yawned. His interface told him that it was still early morning.

“Hey.”

Yondu looked up to see Meredith leaning out of the hallway door.

“You getting up or what,” she asked.

Yondu grunted. He pulled on a fresh set of clothes and was lacing his boots when Meredith came back into the room.

“Martinex came by this morning,” she said.

Yondu grunted again.

“What time did you get up, anyhow?” Yondu said, “He seemed surprised to see me up already,” she continued.

“I'll bet he was.” Yondu tucked in his laces and stood. “What time did you get up, anyhow?”

“Before dawn.” Meredith bit her lips together. “Woke up worrying about Peter.”

“I told you, he's fine. If he weren't fine,” Yondu said, “he'd call.”

“Then learn it there. Right now, we oughta be worryin' about here.” Yondu poked Meredith in the stomach. “How hungry are you?”
Meredith laughed at the poke.

“I could eat a whole stack of pancakes,” Meredith said.

“Pancakes we ain't got,” Yondu said, “but what we do got is a kitchen.”

Aleta was used to early mornings on Ilyth. Familiar fogs swept around the trunks of tall pine trees, and the slight chill in the air licked over her skin. Her leather shoes were soaked in dew from her morning walk; she left wet footprints as she paced towards the kitchen. After a lovely walk and a quiet morning, all Aleta needed was a warm cup of tea and a silent breakfast. She reached for the handle, her mind on her meal, and opened the door.

Hot, buttery air washed over her, immediately dispersing the chill of the morning. Aleta's eyebrows contracted sharply. She stepped into the kitchen and found the Terran, Meredith Quill, at the stove. Yondu and Martinex were scarfing down stacks of some kind of fluffy pastry.

“Mornin',” Yondu said through a full mouth.

Aleta felt her face contort.

“You're up early,” she noticed.

Yondu shrugged.

“Come on, Aleta. Sit down, have some of these Terran pastry things. They're delicious,” Martinex said.

“I came here for a warm scone, hot tea, and complete silence.” Aleta crossed the room with quick steps, her legs moving like the blades of scissors. “Since that plan is clearly ruined, I'll take the first two and leave in search of the third.”

“You sure you don't want some pancakes? I've got plenty of batter left,” Meredith offered.

Aleta didn't even look at Meredith as she tartly replied, “No.”

The kettle was already full of water; Aleta turned the burner on high, selected a mug and teabag, and waited. Her body was taut with a familiar energy; a mixture of irritation, anger, and contempt that drew her muscles tight. Aleta often felt like this; like at any moment, she would just snap. If she did, she couldn't promise she wouldn't send the Terran flying across the room. The mental image made the corner of her mouth turn up. She couldn't actually harm the Terran; Yondu and Stakar would be furious. Still, she reflected, nothing was wrong with some relaxing, violent mental images.

The scones were already warm; Aleta had left them in the slow-baker overnight. She handled one gingerly as she transferred it to a plate. The kettle resounded with soft ticking noises as the metal expanded. Aleta could use the automatic hot water jet, but Aleta also knew the value of patience. There was a satisfaction in doing things the long way, and Aleta had time to wait.

While she waited, Aleta kept an eye on the Terran. The fluffy-haired, soft-bodied Terran. There was something dumb about Quill, Aleta mused, something altogether ignorant and child-minded. Maybe it was the thousands of years of Aleta's experience talking, but she was sure she'd never met anyone so naïve and uneducated. It was almost a pity, she thought. Almost.
Aleta could hear Yondu and Martinex chewing. She had forgotten how irritating it was to be around people who chewed with their mouth open, especially Martinex. The sound of his crystalline teeth hitting each other as he chewed forcefully was enough to put Aleta even more on edge than she already was. That was going to get very old very fast, she reflected. They were adults, for goodness sakes, she shouldn't have to teach them how to eat without making someone want to kill them. She had to focus on something, *anything*, to distract her from the sound. There was a light stream of steam beginning to emanate from the mouth of the kettle; Aleta watched it trail into nothingness.

“Mrs. Ogord,” Meredith said hesitantly.

“What.”

“Would you like some coffee? Just made a fresh pot.”

“I don't drink coffee. Stakar prefers coffee,” Aleta said, “I prefer tea.”

“Okay, no problem.”

Aleta watched Meredith pour coffee into three mugs.

“Martinex,” the Terran asked, “how do you like your coffee?”

“Just, like, dump sugar into it, okay?”

“Can do. Yondu, same as usual?”

“Yeah.”

Meredith dumped sugar into the first mug, sprinkled a little into the second, and left the third black. She carried the three mugs to the table with ease, setting the sugar-laden mug in front of Martinex and the black coffee in front of Yondu.

“Drink up,” she said.

“Thanks, Mery,” Yondu grunted.

Martinex spat a spray of coffee over the table, splashing the pancakes and staining the tablecloth. Yondu yowled and jumped back about two feet; Meredith leapt towards the wall to avoid the spray.

“For fuck's sake,” Yondu snarled, “you're supposed to drink it, not aerosol it!”

Martinex coughed, slamming his fist into his chest.

“You,” he choked out, “you said *thank you*.”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything? You've spat your disgustin' mouth juice all over the goddamn table!” Yondu threw down his napkin in disgust. “I ain't eatin' that.”

“Martinex, you got coffee everywhere.” Meredith sighed and ran a hand through her hair. “I'll get the towels.”

“How was I not gonna spit coffee everywhere? That selfish ungrateful blue moron just said *thanks,*” Martinex said, “and not even sarcastically! Come on!”

Meredith rolled her eyes and went back to the stove. Aleta's eyes flicked between the coffee-stained cloth, Yondu's slowly purpling face, and Meredith whipping drawers open as she looked for towels.
Aleta reached out and slid the towel drawer open. Meredith seized a handful and threw them to Yondu.

“Thanks,” Meredith said to Aleta.

Aleta shut the drawer. Yondu threw a towel in Martinex's face, and the two started to clean up the breakfast table. The kettle shrieked as steam shot out. Aleta jumped; she'd forgotten her tea. She snatched the kettle up just as Meredith went for another towel; Meredith's shoulder bumped Aleta's elbow, and a stream of boiling hot water splashed out of the kettle. It seemed to freeze in the air for just a moment, a glistening thin line hung in midair like liquid crystal, before falling towards the Terran's back. Aleta didn't even think; she shot her left arm out and intercepted the water.

“Fuck,” she snarled as the burning water made contact.

“What? Oh!” Meredith stood up; when she saw the reddened, angry skin on Aleta's arm, her eyes widened. “Oh shit, I'm sorry!”

“It's fine,” Aleta said.

“Let me get some cold water on that, I'm so sorry.” Meredith threw on the cold water on the faucet. “I'll get some ice for you.”

“No,” Aleta said.

“No, really, it's no problem.” Meredith threw open the fridge, her curls bouncing everywhere, “Shit, where's the ice...”

“I said no.”

Meredith stared at the hot steam curling harmlessly against Aleta's arm.

“I don't burn,” Aleta explained.

“Oh,” Meredith said.

“Be more careful.” Aleta examined the reddened skin; already it was healing. “That almost landed on your back.”

“I'm sorry,” the Terran said, “I didn't mean to bump you.”

“Don't apologize,” Aleta snapped, “I'm fine.”

Aleta poured the hot water into her tea mug and handled her lukewarm scone. She took a half second to survey Martinex and Yondu's work cleaning the table, sniffed slightly, and left the kitchen. What a morning; breakfast wasn't even over yet and already the boys were chewing with their mouths open, the Terran was throwing herself in harm's way, and Martinex had spat coffee all over the kitchen table. Aleta strolled down a hallway that was completely open on the right-hand side, held up by smooth white arches. She dropped onto one of the white oval benches and took a deep breath. The chill of the morning set her skin to tingling again. Soft nature sounds were all she could hear, nearly drowned out by her own deep breaths. Aleta took a sip of her steaming tea and smiled. Finally, some serenity.

“Good morning, my love!” Stakar came bouncing down the hallway in full Ravager attire with a grin splashed across his face. “I see you've found breakfast, splendid!”
“You're joking,” Aleta snarled, “I can't get five minutes of quiet on my own damn planet?”

Stakar froze; it was a microexpression, but Aleta could see the shock and hurt flick over his face.

“I'm sorry,” she immediately blurted, “it's been a rough morning.”

Stakar nodded, slipping off his leather gloves.

“Tell me what happened,” he said.

“The morning was fine, but then the kitchen was full of Terran pastries and that stupid airhead almost burned herself with the kettle and Yondu and Martinex chew with their mouths open.” Aleta stuck her hands in her hair, eyes wide. “Can you believe I nearly forgot how irritating that was? All I wanted was a quiet morning and I got them.”

While she spoke, Stakar brushed the leaves off the bench and sat down next to her.

“Aleta, love,” he said, “that's what this means. It means being part of a family again, and that means all the old peeves resurface.”

“I know that, but I just...” Aleta sighed and leaned into him. “I've wanted us all to be together for so long, but now that Yondu's back and we're all united under one banner again... I find myself wishing it was just you and I again.”

“You and I?” Stakar raised an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Even absorption has its perks, Stakar.” Aleta's voice was nearly inaudible. “Being alone, with you, in a quiet dark place where it was just us, nothing else, just silence and softness and us.”

Stakar stroked her cheekbone with his hand.

“I didn't know you missed it,” he said.

“Usually I don't. Usually I'm grateful that we're apart.” Aleta smiled and tilted her head up to look at him. “This way, we can actually see one another.”

“And touch one another,” Stakar said.

Aleta blushed slightly as Stakar lifted her hand to his lips. He kissed each of her knuckles, then her palm, ending with a kiss on her wrist.

“It will be fine, Aleta.” Stakar reached out and wrapped her up in his arms. “I know it's a lot to take in. I'm having trouble coming to terms with this as well. It's not just you. We're all adjusting. You're doing splendidly, love, and I couldn't be more proud of how strong you've been.”

Aleta closed her eyes and leaned into his embrace.

“Charlie will come around,” she said, “and Krugarr stopped blaming you years ago.”

“It's not Charlie and Krugarr I'm worried about,” Stakar said, “it's Yondu.”

“He doesn't blame you either.”

“He should.” Stakar's grip around Aleta tightened. “He needed me, and I abandoned him.”

“No.” Aleta's head snapped up, her eyes fierce. “Don't start thinking like that. You know where that
leads.”

“I know, love, but I just can't help it.” Stakar pulled Aleta into his lap, holding her tightly as if for security. “Why am I like this? Why is it that whenever they need me, I'm never there?”

“It's not your fault.” Aleta put her hands on Stakar's face and forced him to make eye contact. “Look at me, Stakar Ogord. What happened to Yondu was not your fault. What happened to Tara was not your fault. What happened to John was not your fault. What happened to Sita was not your fault.”

It'd been a long time since Aleta or Stakar had said their names out loud; at the mention of their children, tears gathered in Stakar's eyes.

“I should have listened to you,” he said.

“You're mind was addled. Your memories were looping over themselves. People were in danger that you needed to help. What happened was not your fault, Stakar. It's a byproduct of eternity; sometimes, the things we need to take care of slip through our fingers like stardust,” Aleta said, “and there's nothing we can do. What's important is that we have something to hold onto in the whirlwind that is time. Someone to keep us sane, to remind us who we are.”

Stakar pressed his forehead against hers; Aleta could see a single tear drop from his nose, but when he spoke, his voice was clear and firm.

“I am nothing without you,” he said.

“Wrong.” Aleta slipped her hands in his. “We are nothing apart, either of us. We need each other. Absorbing each other was never the answer; without the other there as an anchor, we become lost.”

“Memories begin to loop,” Stakar said, “and we forget who we are.”

“Absorption wasn't your fault. You were afraid, you were dying, and I knew I could save you. I knew there was a chance that we'd lose ourselves in it,” Aleta admitted, “but I couldn't lose you. I can't live alone, Stakar. You know that.”

Stakar pressed his thumbs into her palms, rubbing them slightly.

“Even apart,” he said, “never alone.”

“None of it was your fault, Stakar. Or mine. Or Yondu's, or Sita's or John's or Tara's. It's people like Ego that hurt us, people like Era and the Badoon and the rest of the monsters that stalk the stars. It's their fault, Stakar. And now we're back,” Aleta said, “and we can soundly kick their asses.”

Stakar chuckled, then pressed a kiss to Aleta's lips.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you too.” Aleta smiled. “You, and this cobbled-together excuse-for-a-family unit that you got us into.”

“They're not so bad when they eat with their mouths closed,” Stakar pointed out.

“I don't know if I can live through another meal with Martinex.” Aleta closed her eyes. “I can hear his teeth hitting each other, Stakar. I can hear rock on rock every time he chews.”

Stakar chuckled, wrapping his arms around her waist.
“So first things first,” he said, “we have to teach them how to eat.”

Aleta laughed. She snuggled into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder and closing her eyes.

“Better morning,” he asked.

“You're here,” she said, “of course it's a better morning.”

She felt him press his lips to her hair and smiled. The rest of the world could be as stupid and loud and irritating as it wanted, but it would never be as lovably stupid and loud and irritating as her husband.

Yondu had told Meredith to get comfortable, so Meredith was going back to the ship. It wasn't that Ilyth was uncomfortable, she reflected, but she didn't exactly feel welcome, either. She opened the huge hangar door and slipped in. The hangar was lit only by bare lightbulbs suspended from the ceiling. A huge, dark form was hunched over under the light, cleaning a long knife.

“Hello, Charlie-27,” Meredith said.

“Hello, Quill.”

Meredith watched the knife catch the light as Charlie-27 cleaned it.

“Like it,” he asked.

“It's beautiful,” she said, “I've never seen anything like it.”

“It is yaka metal.” Charlie-27 twirled the dagger between his huge fingers. “Everything that did not go into making Yondu's arrow, he gave to me.”

“Why?”

“I killed Dal-Char.” Charlie-27 smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “I strangled him with my bare hands and smashed his skull open like an egg.”

Meredith's eyes widened.

“So, in return for my actions, Yondu gave me this. A way to honor all that I'd done in freeing the Centaurians, I suppose. Or maybe,” Charlie-27 said, “just a way to thank me for killing the bleedin' Kree bastard.”

“That's... You must mean a lot to him,” Meredith said.

The dagger paused, the handle resting in Charlie-27's outstretched hand.

“I can't be sure. Yondu never tells anyone anything about how he regards them,” Charlie said, “positively or negatively. He simply acts as if everyone already knows.”

“He does that to Kraglin all the time.” Meredith frowned. “Poor kid never knows if he's doing great or doing terrible.”

Charlie-27 let out a deep, resonating sigh.

“Yondu's never been good with communicating,” he admitted.
“So I've seen.” A wry smile tinged Meredith's mouth. “Getting through to him is like trying to get a bull to understand etiquette.”

“You've managed better than others.” Charlie-27 flicked a rock at Stakar's ship; the impact scratched the paint. “Don't let his lack of reaction bother you. You're doing just fine getting along with everyone here.”

“Not Aleta,” Meredith said as she sank to sit on the ground next to Charlie-27.

“Aleta doesn't like you because she doesn't know you, and worst of all, she doesn't care to know you.” Charlie-27 flicked a stone at Aleta's ship, with the exact same results. “That's not your fault, mind you. That's all on her. She's just embarrassed.”

“Embarassed?”

“The family split when Yondu left; we couldn't agree on what to do. Aleta, Krugarr and I wanted to stage a full-frontal assault on Ego. Guns blazing, as many bleedin' weapons as we could carry.” Charlie-27 let out a deep chuckle. “We weren't ready to give Yondu up without a fight. It would have been glorious.”

Meredith eyed all the weapons on the ships that surrounded them.

“I don't doubt it,” she said.

“But Mainframe crunched the numbers, said we wouldn't win without someone of Celestial strength. Krugarr argued he could handle Ego; he probably could have. Slithery scarlet worm's got more tricks up his sleeve than a coat full of hookers. We were prepared to do it anyway, to take the risk, damn the odds.” Charlie-27's wide smile tightened. “But Stakar ordered us to stand down. Hid in his regulation. Aleta followed next; she wasn't risking a row with Stakar. They're very sensitive when it comes to their charges versus their relationship. Krugarr went to study with some doctor, trying to figure out if he and I could do it alone. That idea fizzled, and I was left.”

Meredith hugged her knees, frowning.

“And you weren't dumb enough to stage a full-frontal assault on a killer planet alone,” she asked.

“Oh, I was.” Charlie-27 flashed a white grin. “I was ready. Locked, loaded, ready to blast that bleedin' planet to smithereens.”

“What happened?”

“Aleta.” Charlie-27's grin became plastic. “She told me if I fired off so much as one round, they'd boot me out along with Yondu.”

“Oh.”

“I wanted to do it anyway,” Charlie-27 said, “but Yondu asked me not to. He said they needed me more than he did. That it was my responsibility to stay.”


“Until you give him a real problem, and then he turns into some kind of strategic genius.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “I think he does it just for dramatic effect, honestly.”
Charlie-27 chuckled.

“Honestly? With how much he takes after Stakar, you might be right.” Charlie-27 stood and stretched. “Stakar said anything to you about me?”

“No,” Meredith said, “nothing.”

“Good. Glad to know I'm embarrassing him. I'm glad you're embarrassing them, too,” he said, “even if you're embarrassing me as well.”

“How am I embarrassing you all?”

“You killed Ego. You and Yondu, just the two of you. Here we were letting Yondu down because we wouldn't take the risk,” Charlie-27 explained, “and all of a sudden some sick little woman from Terra saves him instead. You showed us up. You called our bluff. You made right fools out of the lot of us, Meredith Quill.”

“I'm sorry. I mean, I'm not sorry that I helped Yondu and we killed Ego, but I am sorry that I'm embarrassing all of you,” Meredith replied.

“Don't be. Stakar and Aleta deserve this. If they thought this reunion was going to be brown-sugar-on-cinnamon-toast, they've got another thing coming.” Charlie-27 rubbed his dark-skinned hands together. “I plan to make this as awkward as possible for the two of them.”

“Oh.” Meredith bit her lips together. “And you're not worried about how that'll affect the others? Martinex, Krugarr, Mainframe... Yondu?”

Charlie-27 stared at her with his deep, coal-black eyes.

“You're worried that I'm going to make this uncomfortable for Yondu,” he said, “that me bringing up my confrontations with Aleta and Stakar will make Yondu believe that it's all his fault.”

“Yes.”

Charlie-27 linked his hands behind his head and frowned.

“Meredith Quill,” he said, “you may be right.”

The corner of Meredith's mouth turned up.

“It's been known to happen,” she said.

As Charlie-27's boots hit the floor, the sound of his pacing echoed throughout the hangar. Meredith watched him walk and chuckled.

“You and Yondu both,” she said.

Charlie-27 paused.

“What,” he asked.

“You pace while you're thinking.” Meredith rested her chin on her knees, smiling slightly. “You and Yondu both. Stakar, too.”

Charlie-27's face reddened.
“Stakar has a tendency to rub off on people,” he mumbled, “and his habits are hard not to steal.”
Meredith laughed.

“He is a little bombastic,” she said.

Meredith laughed again.

“Charlie-27!” A sharp, automatic-sounding voice echoed through the hanger. “Don't tell me you're still sulking in here.”

“Down here, MF.” Charlie-27 cupped his hand around his mouth and yelled. “Come meet Yondu's Terran!”

Meredith felt her face heat up.

“Ah, so the Terran is here.” Meredith could hear metal feet hit the stairs. “I'm coming, I'm coming.”
A robot came striding down the stairwell at a brisk pace.

“Ah,” he said, “the lady Quill.”

“Hi,” Meredith said.

“My name is Mainframe. I'm the defense coordinator and master technician.” Mainframe shrugged. “Essentially, if it's broken, I fix it.”

“Unless it's a bone, a body, or anything useful,” Charlie-27 corrected.

“I'm a technician, not a doctor,” Mainframe said, “and if you wore the armor I built for you instead of charging in guns blazing, you'd be riddled with less bullet holes.”

“And I'd have much shittier stories.” Charlie-27 rolled his enormous shoulders. “I'll take the bullets and my grievance and be done with it, MF.”

“Charlie,” Mainframe said, “guess who sent me to talk to you?”

“Stakar.” Charlie-27 pulled out his yaka knife and examined it again. “Or Aleta.”

“Both.” Mainframe crossed his metal arms. “And as you can imagine, the message is the same from either one.”

Charlie-27's mouth twisted.

“And what if I don't feel like playing nice,” he said.

“Then I imagine they're going to stop playing nice as well. And considering present company,” Mainframe said, his glowing eyes flicking to Meredith, “perhaps we ought to be on our best behavior.”

Charlie-27 growled in his throat.

“Hate it when you're right, Mainframe,” he said.

Charlie-27 stalked towards the hangar door, mumbling curses under her breath. Meredith watched him go, then raised her eyebrows.

“Wow,” she said, “he really doesn't get along with them.”

“The Ogords and Charlie...” Mainframe sighed. “Well, they’re two different kind of people. Stakar loves regulation. Aleta loves enforcing her way. Charlie-27 may be a soldier, but he’s also a risk-taker. His heart is bigger than his brain, so to speak.”

“Aw.” Meredith chuckled. “Sounds like Peter.”

“That's your son?”

“Yes.”

“Yondu's mentioned him. Called him a talented little spitpiss, which is more of a compliment than Yondu usually uses.”

Meredith put her hand over her forehead and sighed.

“Yep,” she said, “sounds like Yondu.”

“He's always been that way.” Mainframe laughed, a tin-tinged, hard sound. “He'd rather take his teeth out with pliers than say how he feels about someone.”

“So I've noticed,” Meredith said.

“Years and years,” Mainframe mused, “and nothing's changed.”

“How long have you known Yondu,” Meredith asked.

“I was there when he socked Stakar in the jaw.” A dreamy smile came across Mainframe's mouth. “Killing Kree. Punching people. Destroying injustice. Good times, good times.”

Meredith grinned. Mainframe pulled a datapad out of his back pocket, flicked through a few screens, and showed it to Meredith.

“This is us,” Mainframe said.

Stakar and Aleta were at the forefront, their chins tilted up and eyes mischevious. Charlie-27 dominated the background, a huge man with crossed arms and a kindly smile. Martinex was off to the left side of Stakar, perched on a railing. Krugarr was on Aleta's right, standing tall. Meredith's eyes latched onto Yondu, who lingered just behind Stakar and bore a familiar, crooked grin.

“Good times,” Mainframe sighed, “happier times.”

“They'll be back,” Meredith reassured, “now that you're all together again.”

“Will they?” Mainframe stowed the datapad away. “I'm not so sure. Old wounds run deep, and the people you love have the greatest capacity to hurt you. Yondu's never going to trust us the same way; I don't blame him. He knows there's a line. We're not unconditional anymore.”

“But...” Meredith's eyebrows contracted. “But even after he left, you still cared.”

“Yes. We cared.” Mainframe put his hands in his pockets. “But not enough. Not nearly enough.”
“Oh,” Meredith said in a small voice.

“Part of it is his fault, honestly. Not only will Yondu never tell the truth about how he's feeling, but he takes every opportunity to degrade and insult. It can be difficult to deal with, and when you care about someone and they love to hurt you, it becomes nearly impossible. He did his best to drive us away,” Mainframe admitted, “and at times, it seemed like it would work. Finally, he offended our moral code, and...”

“And he finally did it,” Meredith said, “he finally drove you off.”

“Only temporarily.” Mainframe managed a smile. “I think we all knew we'd see each other one last time. Though, I personally thought one of us would be dead by now.”

Memories flashed through Meredith's mind; a crate, a crashing ship, a wall of stone, tendrils of energy, a Kree commander holding Yondu's arrow to his own throat.

“Honestly,” she said in a flat voice, “it would probably have been Yondu. Him and danger just... it's ridiculous.”

Mainframe burst out laughing.

“You're not wrong,” he said, “he's a magnet for trouble. Half the misadventures we got into were because Yondu couldn't sit still, be quiet, and keep his hands to himself.”

Meredith laughed too. The door to the hangar bay opened again; this time, Yondu entered.

“The fuck you two laughing about,” he growled.

“You,” they answered.

Yondu halted, his face briefly cycling through a few shades of purple. He ended with a grimace, stalking towards his ship.

“Assholes laughin' at me behind my back,” he mumbled.

“Oh come off it,” Mainframe said, “you laugh at everyone.”

“Yeah, but to their face,” Yondu pointed out.

“That doesn't make it better, Yondu,” Meredith replied.

“Does too. It's honest.”

“Does not, because you're doing it just to hurt them.”

“And laughin' behind somebody's back, Mery? How you classify that?”

“We were actually being honest. You are a magnet for trouble,” Meredith said, “and half of your problems happen because you couldn't sit still, be quiet, and keep your hands to yourself.”

Yondu tensed, his teeth bared. For a split second, Meredith thought he was going to snap at her, but he tossed his head back and barked a laugh.

“Aight, fine.” He paced up the ramp of his own ship. “You ain't wrong.”

Meredith let out a laugh, half-amusement and half-relief. Mainframe's eyes flicked between Yondu's
back and Meredith.

“He’s got a temper,” Mainframe said.

“I know.” Meredith crossed her arms, smiling. “I'm used to it.”

“She goes out of her way to piss me off,” Yondu yelled from inside the ship.

“Do not,” Meredith protested.

“Do too.”

“Do not.”

“Do too.” Yondu came back down the ramp with a green rucksack in his arms. “You're doin' it right now.”

Meredith cracked a grin.

“What are you taking out, your laundry? Want Aleta to do it? I wasn't good enough,” she asked.

“You fold shit,” Yondu admitted, “and Aleta never folds shit.”

“You do his laundry?” Mainframe made a disgusted noise in his throat. “You have my deepest sympathies.”

“This ain't laundry,” Yondu snapped, “it's food. It'd spoil on the Eclector so I dragged it down here. Figured I'd toss it in the larder, let Charlie destroy it.”

“Do you want help carrying anything,” Meredith asked.

“I got it, Mery.” Yondu rolled his eyes. “I ain't Peter.”

“I know you're not. Peter's cute,” Meredith quipped, “and you're ugly as sin.”

Yondu barked another laugh, showing jagged teeth.

“Ain't she a charmer, Main,” he asked.

“She's certainly pegged you, that's for sure.” Mainframe held open the hangar door; Yondu and Meredith passed through it. “Hideous as a nightmare.”

“You're a robot,” Yondu grunted, “you ain't got nightmares.”

“Oh ha ha, let's point out that Mainframe isn't organic. In the past few years,” Mainframe snapped, “I should hope you would have expanded your repertoire.”

Yondu chuckled. Meredith, Mainframe, and Yondu made their way to the central building. Yondu had barely opened the door when Stakar came bursting out of it, red-faced and teeth bared. Mainframe and Yondu went rigid, but Stakar simply pushed past them. Yondu looked to Mainframe.

“You gonna handle that,” he asked.

“Suppose I'll have to,” Mainframe replied.

The metallic Ravager let out a short sigh, then paced after Stakar. Meredith bit her lip and looked to Yondu.
“Is he going to be okay,” she asked.

“Stakar or Main?” Yondu shrugged. “Guess it don't matter. They'll be fine, they been doin' this for years. Chuck just pissed off Stakar is all. Ain't a big deal.”

“If you say so,” Meredith said.

Yondu and Meredith entered the building. Already they could hear Charlie-27's booming voice and Aleta's snappy tones.

“I don't suppose they taught you anything about respect in your Jovian military,” Aleta said.

“Respect means not leaving your bleedin' comrades behind, Aleta.” Charlie-27 had his arms crossed as he glared down at her. “Family means family, dammit.”

“I know what family means!” Aleta's eyes were fire. “You have no idea how difficult this was for Stakar and I!”

Meredith sensed something shrink beside her. Yondu was drawing himself backwards, his face purple and his eyes distant. Meredith fought the urge to curse. She'd just told Charlie-27 not to do this to Yondu, and here he was, doing it.

“Y'all mind shuttin' your mouths for half a damn second,” she heard herself say.

At the sound of Meredith's interjection, Aleta and Charlie-27 looked at her.

“This doesn't concern you, Quill,” Charlie-27 warned.

“It does now.” Meredith crossed her arms. “Y'all gonna keep arguing or can we just focus on getting along for three days.”

“Perhaps my husband ought to have informed you about Arcturuan sayings. One is particularly applicable here. Salatuus araan,” Aleta said scathingly, “Arcturan for, 'to learn one's place'.”


“It's how Terrans say 'you poor stupid fuckin' bitch','” he explained.

Aleta's eyes shot wide, her face coloring. Charlie-27 roared with laughter, slamming his huge hand on Meredith's back.

“That's it! That's it! I bleedin' like her!” Charlie-27 picked up Meredith and put her on his shoulders. “And you said she was soft.”

“She is,” Aleta muttered.

Meredith's eyes widened; she was high up on Charlie-27's shoulders, her face red. She'd gone from irritated to terrified in the blink of an instant.

“Um,” she managed to say.

“Chuck!” Yondu's voice boomed from across the courtyard. “Dammit, Chuck, put my goddamn Terran down.”
“Why don't you make me, you blue-skinned barrel of braggadocio!” Charlie-27 laughed. “Come on! If you want her, come and take her!”

Yondu growled and rushed Charlie-27, headbutting him in the gut. Charlie grunted, but kept Meredith high on his shoulder. Charlie-27’s enormous hand grasped Yondu’s forehead, holding him at arm’s length. Charlie-27 chuckled as Yondu attempted to break the hold by slamming his palm against Charlie-27’s elbow.

“Good form,” he said, “but try asking nicely.”

“I ain't askin' nicely for my own goddamn Terran,” Yondu snarled.

“You Terran,” Aleta asked sourly.

“The Terran.” Yondu stood up straight, his face violet. “Just give her back, dammit.”

Charlie-27 looked between Yondu and Meredith with a smiling eye, then pulled Meredith off his shoulder and dropped her into Yondu’s arms.

“Here,” he said, “keep her.”

Yondu put Meredith down, scowling.

“You big Jovian fuck,” he began.

“No time for that.” Aleta pressed a finger to the comm link in her ear. “The other captains are here. Table's starting to convene.”

“Fuck. Mery,” Yondu said, “you’d better wait in the room until they call you. I don't want you around these assholes.”

“Why not?” Aleta's voice was as cool and crisp as a dry autumn wind. “You said she's not soft. Let's let her prove it. I’m sure after Ego a bunch of Ravager captains is nothing to her. After all, she's put up with you.”

“She has a point,” Charlie-27 said.

Yondu bared his teeth, preparing a crushing reply, but Meredith's hand on his forearm halted him.

“I can handle it,” she said.

“Mery, trust me. It ain't a matter of what you can handle. You don't want to be around these morons, alright? They ain't like Kraglin, alright? They're vicious, nasty, hateful punks and you don't need to be around 'em.”

“I have to be there to explain what happened with Ego, don't I?” Meredith's eyes were calm silver seas. “It's better for me to learn to handle it now, rather than come in and be nervous later.”

“You ain't listenin' to me again,” Yondu snapped.

“Yondu,” Meredith said exasperatedly.

“Mery,” Yondu said in the exact same tone.

“By the stars, I can't take any more of this.” Aleta stomped away, her face red. “Just decide and be done with it. I'm going to the Table.”
Charlie-27 watched Aleta stomp off and chuckled.

“Meredith Quill,” he said, “you seem to have a particular talent for pissing her off.”

“What did I do?” Meredith blinked. “Was it something I said?”

“No, just something you're doing.” Charlie-27 laughed under his breath as he walked off. “She's so overprotective...”

Meredith bit her lips together, her eyebrows contracted.

“I feel like I'm missing something here,” she admitted.

“Look, don't worry about them. Worry about you. It ain't that I don't think you can handle this,” Yondu explained, “but these assholes are the worst fuckin' kind of assholes. They're Ravager assholes.”

“So were you,” Meredith pointed out.

“They ain't like me,” Yondu slid his large blue hands onto Meredith's shoulders. “Look, Mery, this ain't a joke.”

“I know it's not. This is important to you, I get it.” Meredith put her hands over his. “I'm not stupid. I know this isn't going to be easy. But if they're going to believe me, they're going to need to believe I'm the kind of person who can blow up a planet. And the kind of person who blows up a planet isn't the kind of person who hides in their room while you face all these assholes alone.”

“Mery,” Yondu sighed.

“Yondu, I'm serious. I'm coming,” Meredith said, “and you can't stop me.”

Yondu's crimson eyes flicked between Meredith's.

“No,” he admitted, “I can't. We go to the Table together.”
The Table

Chapter Summary

Ah! Briefly have Internet for the weekend, so here's a

DOUBLE

UPDATE

!!!

First, let's all gather 'round the Table and hear the tale of Meredith Quill...

The Table was an enormous round stone slab with ninety-nine stone chairs set around it. Clearly some editing had been done to the chairs; most had padding thrown over them, or had been carved in some way. Yondu's was fitted with a foam seat; Meredith could see some rusty metal toothpicks jammed into it.

“You treat this thing worse than your pilot's chair,” she muttered.

“What d'you mean,” Yondu asked, picking his teeth with a fresh metal toothpick.

“It's stained, it's got holes in it, and would you stop stabbing your toothpicks into the furniture?” Meredith huffed. “Honestly, how has either seat lasted this long?”

“Stop naggin' me and sit.” Yondu snapped his fingers, and a large Xandarian with facial tattoos brought Meredith a wooden chair. “You stand too long and you're gonna pass out.”

Meredith dropped into the wooden chair, then scanned the table. Stakar and Aleta were seated not far away; Meredith could see them conversing in low tones. Their hands were entwined on top of the table. Whether this was an affectionate gesture or an outward display of solidarity, Meredith couldn't decide. Mainframe's chair was covered in metal machines; he was plugged into half of them, jamming to a song Meredith couldn't hear as he waited for the meeting to begin. Charlie-27 was hunched over the table, cleaning his yaka knife and refusing to make eye contact with anyone. Martinex climbed over a few Ravagers, then dropped into the seat between Stakar and Yondu.

“S'up,” he said.

“Hey Martinex.” Meredith smiled. “How've you been?”

“Shitty,” Martinex said with an air of cheer, “absolutely fuckin' horrible. Had to herd these losers onto Ilyth and to top it all off, I just found out my favorite author, Tontorius Pavel? He got eaten by a Calathrian dawn-spider last night.”

“A Calathrian... what,” Meredith asked.

“Big eight-legged spider,” Martinex explained, “pale grey. On Calath, the morning sun evaporates a lot of water, which makes this huge fog. Dawn-spiders hunt in that fog. Apparently Tontorius Pavel was out for a walk when the damn thing jumped him.”
“Is that normal,” Meredith asked.

“No. A full-sized Calathrian is about four feet, and dawn-spiders usually don’t eat anything smaller than six feet.” Martinex leaned his head back and sighed. “Poor Tontorius. Small enough to fit within the hearts of millions, and just big enough to constitute a dawn-spider’s breakfast.”

Meredith nodded, her face warming slightly. Sometimes she’d forget, but occasionally something would happen to forcefully remind her that she was in space.

“What did Tontorius write,” Meredith asked to be polite.

“Romance novels.” Martinex’s eyes seemed to glaze over with a sparkling sheen. “Have you ever read 'A Frost Voice' by Pavel?”

“No,” Meredith confessed, “I can’t say that I have.”

“Okay!” Martinex spun to face her, his expression lit. “So it starts out with this Xandarian named Eglador Markitus, right? He’s an ice-runner, bringing frozen off-world water to desert planets. Well, there’s this planet called Marzine, and on it he meets these indigenous people who think he’s some kind of ice wizard, but their shaman's daughter, Kaleek, she figures out that he’s actually space-faring and it turns into this great story about a space-faring man and this no-less-intelligent-but-totally-naive woman who finds her place alongside him in the stars and it’s beautiful. Man, I gotta loan you my copy.”

“That sounds awesome.” Meredith beamed to cover the fact that she hadn’t caught half of what Martinex was going on about; he’d simply spoken too fast. “I’ll take a look when I’ve got the time.”

“Don’t bother.” Yondu reached over and pulled Meredith away from Martinex. “Everything Marty reads is garbage.”

“It isn’t garbage, it’s art,” Martinex said.


“Twelve,” Martinex said curtly, “and I’ll have you know that they’re handled very tastefully.”

Meredith reddened; so it was one of those books. The snap of a cracking whip distracted her; a tall blue-skinned woman was stalking towards an empty seat. Her eyes were onyx, and her head was crowned with slate-blue juts of bone. In her hand was a long black leather whip. Crystals, coins, and small gold beads were entwined around her bone crest, dripping around her neck and slinking over her shoulders.

“D’fara,” Yondu growled.

“Ex-Kree battle slave. Her and Yondu were a thing for about a week before she tried to steal the Eclector and leave him stranded on a savage planet.” Martinex kept his voice low as he explained to Meredith. “See the scar on her neck?”

Meredith craned her neck; there was a round white scar glowing against D’fara's deep navy skin.

“Yondu nearly pierced her jugular; would have killed her if Stakar hadn’t called him off at the last second. Still,” Martinex said, “he left her with some bitchin' scars and a chip on her shoulder.”

“She’ll complain about him getting back in,” Meredith assumed.
“Oh, count on it.” Martinex chuckled. “But if it looks like there's no way to get rid of him, she'll come schmoozing to Yondu and Stakar like nothing's ever been wrong.”


“Pathetic,” Yondu finished.

“D’fara's gotten to where she is because she's cruel, crafty, and good with words, not because she's brave or honorable.” Martinex tapped his crystalline fingers on the stone Table. “Fortunately, she's small fish.”

“She ain't got the crew or the brains to be a threat.” Yondu picked at his teeth. “Just another speck in the cosmos.”

“Careful,” Martinex warned. “that speck will be the first person to wheedle and whine about why your ass shouldn't be here.”

“I tell you, I ain't worried 'bout her. What I'm worried about is why's this takin' so damn long,” Yondu cursed.

Martinex jerked his head towards the empty seat between Aleta and Charlie-27.

“We're missing our saucy scarlet superworm,” he said.

“Goddammit Krugarr, hurry the fuck up.” Yondu stabbed his metal toothpick into the foam of his seat repeatedly. “Fucker's always late.”

A wizard is never late, a disembodied voice said, nor is he early. He arrives precisely when he means to.

Meredith squinted as she turned around. A crimson creature was slithering towards her. His torso transitioned seamlessly into a snake's tail. His skull was narrow and tall, and a pair of red fins fanned out from the sides of his head. His dark eyes were pulled up in what Meredith swore was a smile, yet he had no mouth at all. He moved his wrists, and a stream of light appeared in his hands.

Hello Meredith Quill of Terra, he said.

Meredith could hear his voice in her head, but his mental touch was so warm and welcoming that Meredith wasn't afraid.

“Hello. Did you just quote Tolkien,” she asked.

Indeed. Meredith could feel Krugarr's chuckle in her head like a cozy tingle. Tolkien is one of my favorite Terran authors, along with Wordsworth, Byron, Shakespeare, and Rowling.

“Rowling?” Meredith blinked. “Who's that?”

She'll be big in the 2000s, Krugarr assured.

“When you're done chattin' it up,” Yondu interrupted, “could you sit your scaly tail down so we can fuckin' start?”

Krugarr blinked slowly.

Your impatience is oddly refreshing, he said.
“Hurry the fuck up!” Yondu's fists tightened. “We've been waitin' for two hours.”

So refreshing. After a long time of pondering eternity, Krugarr mused as he slowly slithered to his seat, the immediacy is a breath of fresh philosophical air.

“You're movin' that slow to piss me off,” Yondu growled.

So. Refreshing.

“Krugarr,” Stakar warned.

Krugarr slithered into his seat. The Ravagers stared at Stakar. He slid a long red cigarette out of his sleeve and pulled out a lighter. Meredith could hear the click as the flame sparked to life. Stakar lit the cigarette, took a deep draw, and exhaled cinnamon smoke.

“Alright,” he said, “let's begin.”

The room erupted into chaos. Hands and claws were slammed onto tables, rude gestures were made across the table, and froth flew as a hundred Ravager captains spewed forth curses, screams, and oaths of the bloodiest sort. Meredith went rigid, her back sticking to the chair like she'd been glued in. A huge yellow man smashed a tattooed Kallusian into the table head-first; a bloody tooth skidded towards Meredith. Martinex flicked it away with a sigh.

“I hate politics,” he said.

“Will you lot shut the fuck up?” Aleta's voice cut through the din like a razor. “I swear the next person who speaks out of line will have their tongue stapled halfway up their asshole! Now sit down!”

The chaos collapsed into grumbles and muttered curses. Aleta's eyes slid from Ravager to Ravager until she was the only one standing. She dropped into her chair.

“Idiots,” she said.

“Thank you, love.” Stakar smiled. “As I was saying, let's begin. We're all here now, so this should be fast.”

“Why's he here,” D'fara asked, jerking her thumb towards Yondu.

Yondu bared his teeth.

“D'fara,” Aleta snapped, “if you don't want to taste the inside of your own asshole, keep your mouth shut.”

D'fara's lips sealed in a frown. Stakar flicked his cigarette ashes towards D'fara.

“We'll get to that,” he said, “but we've got to begin at the beginning. Martinex and I represent the first Ravager clan, and we have no complaints. Second?”

“No complaints,” Aleta said.

“Third?”


“Fourth?”
“Nothing worth mentioning at the moment.” Mainframe's eyes never left his datapad. “Some logistics issues, but those can be covered in due time.”

“Noted.” Stakar looked to Krugarr. “Fifth Ravager clan?”

_No complaints_, Krugarr broadcast.

And so it continued. Meredith listened as Stakar asked each Ravager clan if they had any complaints.

“What constitutes a complaint,” Meredith whispered to Martinex.

“Any issues with the code, with serious funding issues, or anything so dangerous that Stakar ought to know about.” Martinex kept his voice as low as he could. “This is just a run-through of any serious matter that needs to be attended to first-hand.”

“Sixty-eighth has a complaint,” a high-pitched voice said.

“See?” Martinex smiled. “Here we go.”

“List the complaint,” Stakar said.

The speaker was a small woman. She would have looked Terran, Meredith thought, if not for the shock of cotton-candy blue hair that tufted up on the top of her head.

“I've lost my first mate, twelve ships, and half of the Koolootus. The whole aft end's been shredded by Kree. If we're not going to take them on ourselves,” the speaker squeaked, “can we at least acknowledge that they're a threat to more than Xandar?”

“The Kree threat has been acknowledged,” Aleta said.

“Has it?” Charlie-27 frowned. “Mikootoo is right. She's lost her first mate, and Klimm was a good man. We're being hit just as bad as anyone.”

“Mainframe,” Stakar said, “change official targeting parameters. Allow for first-strike engagement on ships designated Kree.”

“You want to provoke them,” Aleta asked.

“They hit us first,” Stakar said, “so we hit back.”

“Thank you, Admiral Ogord.” Mikootoo reclined back in her seat. “Sixty-eighth has no further complaints.”

“So everything is handled immediately?” Meredith's eyes widened. “Wow, that's incredible.”

“Ravagers don't beat around the bush. We want something, we take it. We hate something, we kill it. We have a problem, we fix it. Stakar loves regulation, but he hates bureaucracy.” Martinex cracked a grin. “So, maybe we're the biggest bunch of dirty space pirates in the galaxy; our government works faster and more efficiently than half the universe.”

“You're not wrong,” Meredith allowed, admiring how quickly the process seemed to go.

“Ninety-eighth has no complaints,” a purple Kallusian woman said.

“Ninety-nineth?”
A strange silence seemed to press in on all sides. Everyone was looking to Yondu. He had drawn himself up fully, his jaw and chest jutting out, but Meredith could tell by the way he tensed that he was nervous. She bit her lips together and reached out to touch him. A flash memory of him throwing her on her back and holding an arrow to her throat made her hesitate, but she slid her hand onto his forearm, under the Table where no one could see.

“Ninety-ninth had a complaint,” Yondu said, “but we took care of it.”

“What complaint was that,” Mikootoo squeaked.

“Just a killer Celestial planet.” Yondu pulled his metal toothpick out of the foam of his seat and began picking his teeth with it. “No big.”

“Celestial... Do you mean Ego?” D'fara squinted. “You dealt in kids for that asshole!”

“We'll get to that next.” The tone of Stakar's voice rendered D'fara and Yondu silent. “For now, we honor the hundredth.”

All the Ravagers bowed their heads. Not knowing what else to do, Meredith lowered hers slightly.

Under the table, Yondu took her hand. Stakar broke the moment of silence with, “Hail to the hundredth. Hail to the horns of freedom.”

“All hail,” ninety-nine Ravager captains yelled back.

While Stakar put out his cigarette, Meredith leaned closer to Yondu.

“What's the hundredth,” she whispered.

“The dead,” he answered.

Meredith tightened her grip on Yondu's hand, feeling some relief in the warmth.

“Captain Yondu. Ms. Quill.” Stakar's voice snapped Meredith back to reality. “Would you care to explain the circumstances under which your appearance at this meet became necessary?”

Yondu and Meredith looked at each other. Their grip under the table tightened.

“Well,” Meredith began slowly, “it started on Terra, the day that I died.”

The entirety of the tale took about five hours to tell. Meredith and Yondu explained as much as they could in-between answering the onslaught of questions slung at them from left and right. The Ravagers wanted to know the who, what, when, where, and why of everything, but what seemed to intrigue them most was the how. Meredith couldn't tell if they were impressed or creeped out by how she'd survived cancer with her immortality, but at least they'd believed it. And, after five hours and with her voice nearly as rough as Yondu's, they decided they believed her. More importantly, Meredith thought, they believed Yondu. When Stakar explained the implications of what Ego's actions would have done to the entire universe, the Ravagers swore at his memory and spat on the ground. The more they explained, the more the Ravagers believed. Finally, Stakar nodded.

“Thank you, Ms. Quill and Captain Udonta.”

Meredith sat back in her chair in relief. Yondu just nodded.
“Now,” Stakar said, “are there any complaints against Captain Udonta?”

“Speak now or forever hold your peace.” Aleta tapped her fingers against the Table, glaring at the Ravagers. “Because if you speak later about it, I'll cut you into pieces.”

The pause that followed was perhaps the longest in Meredith's memory.

“Look,” a pleasant male voice said, “I think I can sum up what we're all thinking.”

The entire room turned to look at a narrow-faced man with white-blue eyes. A blue feather was weaved in amongst his nest of jet-black hair, and when he smiled, he had sharpened teeth.

“Breaking the code is a significant frickin' thing. We all know that. I've got a kid myself, a daughter, and if anyone ever trafficked her away, I'd eat their eyes. And honestly, if it were under any other circumstance, I would take Yondu's intestines out with my bare claws because I know how much he hurt those mommas.” The man gestured with his blackened, bird-like talons as he talked. “But this isn't under any other circumstance. This is under the circumstance where he saved all our asses. Mine, yours, my daughter's, everybody's. So you ask if I have any complaints, and I feel like I do, but I don't know if I have the right to complain against a man who's saved my life.”

There was a murmur of agreement.

“Thank you, Varuna.” The ghost of a smile slid across Aleta's face. “Once again you show the promising political skill of voicing a blanket opinion without clearly stating your own.”

“What can I say, Mrs. Ogord.” Varuna grinned. “I got a gift.”

“Do you have a complaint or not, Varuna,” Stakar snapped.

“No.” Varuna tilted his head as he looked at the Ogords. “We trust you. You trust him. He saved our asses. We ain't complaining.”

There was another sound of general agreement, and Stakar exhaled.

“Alright. That's done. Anything else we need to cover,” he asked.

No one spoke.

“Then this meeting of the one-hundred Ravager clans is officially adjourned.” Stakar stood. “We will reconvene tomorrow.”

There was a commotion of noise as all the Ravagers stood and made for the exit. There was a predictable bottleneck at the door; Yondu held Meredith back, letting everyone else file through. Meredith was taken aback by his politeness, but realized the truth when she saw his scowl.

“You don't want them behind you,” she said.

“Perfect opportunity to put a knife in my fuckin' back,” Yondu said, “and in the commotion, nobody'd know who did it.”

“I thought they agreed everything was okay.”

“What people say and what people believe in their hearts are two different things,” Martinex offered, “especially among people who never say what's in their hearts.”

“Oh.” Meredith's shoulders dropped. “So everything's not okay.”
“It might be, it might not be.” Martinex watched Ravager clan fifty-one try to shove each other through the door. “But it's best to err on the side of caution in matters like this.”

“Marty, can you take her back to the room?” Yondu grimaced at nothing. “Gotta talk with Stakar and Aleta and I don't want nobody walkin' off with her.”

“You're trusting me to take care of your girlfr–”

That was as far as Martinex got before Yondu's fist slammed into his stomach.


Meredith blinked. Martinex's hand gripped her arm and dragged her into the crowd. She got a last fleeting glimpse of Yondu's face, his expression of barely-masked worry and frustration, before she was caught up in the masses.

“Come on. Move quick, hands to yourself.” Martinex pulled her through the throng of bodies with ease. “Don't worry about them, just focus on moving forwards. You're with me; you'll be alright.”

“Is everyone really that dangerous?” Meredith hastened after Martinex. “I can't even walk by myself? I thought the code…”

“It'll protect you from a lot of things, but you're no Ravager. That means smashing your skull open and auctioning off your spinal tissue is completely legal.” Martinex yanked Meredith down a narrow hallway lined with white arches. “And I'm guessing that's not how you want to go.”

“No, it isn't.” Meredith huffed. “Is it always this hectic?”

“Yeah. Don't worry, it's not your problem.” Martinex pulled up to a door, poked in a passcode onto the interface, and pulled Meredith in. “What kind of movies do you like?”

“Huh?”

“Movies. Vids. Audio-visual-projections of narrative.” Martinex let go of Meredith's arm and firmly locked the door behind them. “What kind of narrative do you like?”

Meredith squinted.

“I'm sorry, this is all a little fast for me,” she confessed.


“No, I got that part.” Meredith put a hand on her forehead. “I mean why did you just drag me through a crowd away from Yondu and why am I locked in...where am I?”

“My room,” Martinex said.

Meredith looked around. The room was full of surprisingly warm colors, accented with pale lavenders and brass fixtures. Posters were plastered on the walls featuring dramatic poses and extravagant lettering. There was gigantic black screen on the wall and an accompanying purple sofa facing it. A huge bookshelf dominated the wall next to the kitchenette.

“This is actually pretty nice,” Meredith admitted.

“I like my comfort,” Martinex grinned.
Meredith couldn't help but laugh.

“It's so... homey. I don't know,” she said, “I guess I expected you to be a black-leather-couch and pin-up-poster kind of guy.”

“You mean you expected me to be Yondu.” Martinex snorted as he hung up his flight jacket on the brass coat hanger. “Plutonians such as myself focus on style, Meredith, not image. I like my movies. I like my books. I like my room to feel relaxing. I don't care if it's cool to have chrome and neon lights and edgy furniture. I wanted a place where I could get my friends together to get plastered and play some games, and also just come home, read a book, and take a nap.”

“You really like to read.” Meredith admired the bookshelf. “Why aren't these all datapads? I thought tech was the thing here.”

“I like taking my datapad with me when I travel, but Stakar taught me how important it is to have physical copies.” Martinex smiled as he stroked the spine of a leather-bound book. “With one bomb, one EMP detonation, one evil AI virus, everything digital is gone. I like to have the physical copy. I like to be able to touch the story like it touches me.”

Meredith raised her eyebrows.

“Wow,” she said, “you're really nothing like your brother.”

Martinex laughed.

“You know what? I'm going to take that as a compliment.” He crossed to an interface on the wall and began to scan through it. “So, what kind of movies do you like?”

“What do you have,” she asked.

“Romance, inspirational movies, comedies, a couple really tasteful tragedies.”

“Emotional movies,” Meredith observed.

“Plutonians feel emotion very deeply compared to most other species. We're a lot like Terrans in that regard.” Martinex spared her a grin before returning to the interface. “We prefer narratives that force us to feel, especially uncomfortable feelings.”

“Why?”

Martinex shrugged.

“Maybe it's not all Plutonians,” he said, “maybe it's just me.”

Meredith's eyes darted around the room as her brain began to click things together. Yondu's family were undeniably strange, but if Meredith was going to survive here for more than a day, she was going to have to try and figure them out. She stared at Martinex's back.

“You avoid things that make other people uncomfortable, then, but you'd rather face them yourself head on.” Meredith tilted her head. “Like why you're not telling me why you dragged me away from Yondu and locked me in here to distract me with rom-coms.”

Martinex winced.

“Was I that obvious,” he asked.
“No, I had to think about it.” Meredith smiled slightly. “You can just tell me what's going on, you know.”

Martinex sighed as he turned around.

“Actually, Quill, I can't. I understand why Yondu doesn't want you knowing and I think it's a good idea that you be kept in the dark on this one,” he said, “for your own safety and for Yondu's.”

“How can I keep myself or Yondu safe if I have no idea what's going on? Look, if it's that big of a deal, I'm sure I'll understand. What,” Meredith asked, “you think once I find out I'm going to just run into danger to hurt somebody? You think I'd deliberately hurt Yondu?”

“What? No,” Martinex said, “no that's not it. We just don't want you to freak out.”

“I'm locked in a room with a bibliophilic space pirate on a planet full of people who might want to hurt me.” Meredith almost laughed. “Martinex, I think I'm already a little freaked-out.”

“True. Okay, true.” Martinex rubbed the back of his neck. “Okay, just sit down.”

Meredith sat on the lavender-colored couch. Martinex sat far on the other side, his glittering hands held up as if in surrender.

“First off,” he said, “none of this is your fault, okay? Just gonna make that clear.”

“Okay,” Meredith said.

“Second off, if you tell Yondu that I told you,” Martinex said, “I'm going to have to cut out your tongue.”

Meredith laughed, but Martinex's deadpan expression killed the mirth in her throat.

“Oh, you're being serious.” Meredith blinked. “Wow. Um... okay.”

“Actually that was sarcasm.” Martinex broke into a wide, diamondesque grin. “But now you know what Yondu will do to me if he finds out, so kindly keep your trap shut.”

“Deal,” Meredith said.

“Alright. So here's the skinny: you're a major liability. Everybody knows that you and Yondu took Ego down side-by-side. What they don't know is anything about you. What, are you a Celestial, an assassin, some kind of planet-destroying psychopath? You're an unknown quantity, and Yondu know's that's a strategic advantage.” Martinex talked with his hands as he spoke. “So looking at it from that perspective, it's extremely important that nobody else see you too much. You need to remain an enigma. From that angle, they think you're dangerous and they won't come near you. If they won't come near you, they won't come near him.”

“And that's good?” Meredith's eyes contracted. “I thought this was about Yondu getting back together with these guys, not avoiding them.”

“It's about him getting back together with us,” Martinex said, “not with the rest of the captains. Even before he left, they would have gladly stuck a knife in his throat for the opportunity to take his place. After we picked him up... Look, Yondu got big fast. He was Charlie-27's little golden prodigy, Aleta's fussy favorite, and Stakar's personal archeology project.”

“They got jealous of him,” Meredith realized.
“Ravagers always do. When I joined up, it was the same thing. I was Stakar's prodigy. I was bigger than the golden boy; I was the diamond boy.” Martinex flashed a huge grin. “I smoked the crap out of everybody. I became first-mate over Aleta.”

“Wow.”

“Well, that was primarily because she was sick and tired of doing Stakar's paperwork.” Martinex shrugged. “But whatever. It was a good thing for everybody, but I tell you, I had to watch my back all the time. Still do; never know when some bitter ol' crow's about to put a knife in it.”

“So now Yondu's on a planet full of people that want to kill him,” Meredith said, “and the reasons they're not doing it are the code, his family, and...”

“And you. Or, really, the idea that you're some kind of uber-badass that no one's ever heard of. We were worried that when you told your story it'd kill the ruse, but you never clarified what happened to your planet-destroying powers. Now they're curious to see who you are,” Martinex said, “and if they find out you're just a single Terran mother trying to get home? There goes your value as an asset.”

“Which makes me a liability,” Meredith finished.

“More than you know, Quill. Yondu gives a shit about what happens to you,” Martinex explained as he leaned back, “and that makes you a target. Can you imagine how easy it'd be? Just put a blaster to your head and say 'Shoot yourself or the Terran gets it,' and suddenly we've gone from a happy family reunion to mopping Yondu's brains off the floor.”

A ghostly chill eased through Meredith's body, stealing the warmth from her blood.

“He wouldn't,” she said.

“Yes he would.” Martinex's voice was gentle, yet it carried something melancholy in its tone. “He'd do it. Yondu can't verbally express how he feels about anything; it's a byproduct of being raised in a slave camp. That doesn't mean he doesn't feel. It means he feels infinitely more than anything he's ever said, and he's told me that he gives a fuck about you and your son.”

Meredith felt as if all the heat stolen from her body was now being injected directly into her cheeks.

“You're twice the liability because of that. They know he'd try and save you,” Martinex explained, “and that you'd try and save him. The only reason one of you, or heck, even both of you haven't already been put on the no-no end of a blaster is because they don't know who you are, they don't know what you can do, and they're not willing to put their lives on the line to find out.”

“So you're hiding me from them so they don't find out. At least, not until after we've left.” Meredith bit her lips together. “If they find out I'm not a threat, they'll use me to get to him.”

“Exactly. You're smarter than you look, Quill.” Martinex smiled as he stood. “So, how about that movie?”

“Oh, put on anything.” Meredith leaned her head on her hand. “Not like I'll be able to focus on it anyway.”

“You okay with sex scenes? Dope.”

“What?” Meredith's head shot up. “No, we are not watching one of those movies.”
“Then don't tell me to put on 'anything' or that's what you're going to get.” Martinex wagged a finger at her, grinning. “What would Yondu say?”

“He'd say put it on,” Meredith mumbled.

Martinex laughed and tapped a title.

“Here,” he said, “this one's pretty tame. Just going to spoil it for you though; she dies at the end.”

“Why'd you spoil it,” Meredith asked as the opening credits appeared on the wall screen.

“Because I want you to remember that I told you, because by the time it happens, you'll have forgotten.” Martinex dropped onto the couch. “And so when I start crying like a little bitch, you'll get why.”
The aftermath of the Table, and a impromptu movie night.

“I don't like leavin' her alone with him. You watch,” Yondu growled, “he'll have some kind of fuckin' porno streamin' in there or some shit.”

“Don't get your hopes up.” Charlie-27 chuckled as he patted Yondu's shoulder. “I'm sure he'd be doing you no favors by getting her motor running.”

“We are not discussing that,” Aleta snapped.

The family was sprawled on a sectional couch shaped like an enormous donut, with a glass table resting in the middle. Stakar and Aleta were draped on each other; Stakar's signature cigarette was absent as Yondu had already thrown a fit. Aleta glared at Charlie-27, who let the subject drop. Mainframe gave Stakar a curious look.

“Aleta doesn't like her,” Stakar explained.

“Really? Why not?” Mainframe leaned forwards to see Aleta's face. “Is it the species or her personality?”


“I have my reasons,” Aleta said.

I already like her, Krugarr said, but of course I already know who she is.

“What?” Aleta squinted. “What are you on about, Krugarr?”

She killed a Celestial, Aleta. Did you really think I wouldn't do the proper research on her? She's adorable, honestly. Krugarr's eyes squinted in a mouthless smile. I was able to scry the past of her timeline. She was such a precocious child.

“You what her timeline?” Yondu bared his teeth. “Krugs, if you're fuckin' with things you shouldn't be...”

I'm not “fucking” with anything. Krugarr tilted his head, his eyes lidded. I looked at her past and analyzed it. I wanted to know who I was dealing with, and my deduction is that she is a loving, stubborn, talented young Terran who did not deserve the hand she was dealt. She's strong, and I for one admire her tenacity.


“I liked her before any of you did,” Stakar said from his lounge.

“Yondu liked her before you did.” Mainframe grinned. “And he likes her more.”

“I'm gonna put my fist in your fuck-forsaken mouth,” Yondu said.
“Don’t you dare,” Aleta snapped.

Yondu growled, but settled back into his seat. He pulled his arrow out of his quiver and began twiddling it in his fingers. He had no idea how the hell this conversation had turned into an analysis of Mery, but he didn’t like it.

“I’m gonna go find Mery,” he said, standing.

“No you’re not,” Aleta said, “you’re going to sit down and we’re going to discuss how the pay is going to work. We’ve got you back; that means we have to renegotiate your percentage.”

Yondu closed his eyes, baring his teeth. There was a time not so long ago when he would have been leaning over the table, snarling and spitting for an extra three percent, an extra dividend, just a few more units. It used to be his favorite time of the year; renegotiating how much he’d make, how much he was worth to them, the physical monetary reminder of how much they needed him. Now, it just made his stomach turn.

“Give me my standard fifteen percent,” he said, “and I’ll make do, alright?”

“Fifteen percent...” The stylus slipped from Mainframe’s fingers. “You’ve never negotiated for under twenty.”

“That was then. This is now.” Yondu crawled over the back of the couch rather than shuffle through all the legs that barred his path. “Made it on my own without needin’ a dividend, didn’t I?”

Mainframe’s metal jaw hung open; Charlie-27 reached over and closed it for him. Yondu left without another glance at them; the door swung shut with a final thud.

“I never thought I’d see the day where him not arguing with me actually hurt me a little.” Mainframe set down the datapad. “It’s like he doesn’t even care about being one of us again.”

“Of course he cares. It’s just rough, coming back to a family you know could drop you at any second.” Charlie-27 carefully avoided looking at Stakar or Aleta. “He’s a little bitter. Give him some space.”

_It’s not that._ Krugarr’s mental projection was soft, almost a smile. _He’s disgusted by it._

“We disgust him,” Stakar asked in a small voice.

_No, he’s not disgusted by us. It’s the money, the violence and the greed. The idea of sitting down and yelling at us for more money makes no sense to him anymore. Why would he argue with someone he cares about over something as trivial as five percent?_ Krugarr leaned back, slipping his willowy scarlet arms along the backboard of the sectional couch. _He’s not rejecting us; he’s rejecting who he was when he was with us. He’s disgusted by his past, and being around us illuminates that._

“Krugarr,” Mainframe said in a falsely warning tone, “you’d better not be saying what I think you’re saying.”

Krugarr nodded.

“By the stars!” Mainframe laughed and fell back onto the couch. “Lil’ baby blue’s gone and grown up! He’s spread his ugly fat wings and flown off!”

Charlie-27 laughed from his gut.
“Empty nest, huh?” Charlie-27 leaned forwards and poured himself a drink from the bottles on the table. “It'd be more touching if we hadn't thrown him out of it.”

Some baby birds don't want to leave the nest. It's warm and there's food. Only two things ever seem to get them to leave, Krugarr explained.

“And what are those,” Aleta asked.

The parents punt-kicking their baby out, Krugarr said, or the allure of sex.

“Well, we kicked him out and then he found Meredith Quill.” Stakar chuckled and poured himself a drink as well. “Despite our egregious and unforgivable errors, everything turned out alright in the end.”

Aleta's mouth soured.


“She's an idiot,” Aleta muttered.

“And so is he.” Mainframe poured her a drink. “They're perfect for each other.”

Charlie-27 and Stakar laughed, and Aleta tossed back the shot.

“Whatever she is,” Aleta said acidly, “it's far from perfect.”

“That's the beautiful thing, love.” Stakar pulled his wife closer with a smile. “So is he.”

Martinex's room was so dark that when Yondu walked in, it took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust. When they did, he saw Meredith and Martinex snuggled on the couch, illuminated only by the movie screen. A bolt of something hot and steely shot through Yondu's body, and his fingers dented the thin interface panel. His foot was through the door and well on its way to being up Martinex's rear end – he'd told him don't touch, he'd trusted him, why was it women always preferred Marty, was it the diamonds, was that it – when he realized what he was looking at. They weren't cuddling; they were huddled together close to the screen, and they were both sobbing.

“You're fuckin' kiddin' me,” he said.

Martinex and Meredith looked at Yondu with wide eyes, tears streaming down their faces. Yondu's chest gave a pang. His best friend and his girl were watching a goddamn movie together and his reaction was to get pissed and jealous? Some friend he was. Yondu froze. Wait. Fuck that thought. Not my girl. Not my girl.

Martinex and Meredith blinked at him through their tears.

“Are you two cryin',” he asked.

It was an obvious and stupid question, but it was all he could think to ask them. They nodded. Yondu sighed and closed the door behind him.

“Goddamn crybabies,” he said as he dropped onto the couch between them.
“I never see it coming,” Martinex sobbed, “like, ever. I've seen this twenty-six times.”

“She was so young and it wasn't her fault.” Meredith wiped her eyes, her body shaking. “She was trying to save her husband and... they just gunned her down.”

“Is this the one about the woman who breaks her man outta jail,” Yondu grunted.

Martinex and Meredith nodded.

“Great,” Yondu sighed.

It took hardly any effort at all for him to drop his large blue arms over both of the sobbing viewers. Meredith slumped against his chest; she was crying so hard that she’d started to hiccup. Martinex tilted his head back, silent streams of liquid glitter pouring out of his eyes.

“I'll never watch this again,” he said.

“You say that every time, Marty, and every damn time you come back to it.”

“I know.” Martinex's voice cracked as his chest heaved. “It's my favorite movie!”

With that, Martinex curled up onto his side and sobbed.

“You,” Yondu said, “are a goddamn embarrassment.”

Martinex nodded. The thought that Yondu should ever have been jealous of this sobbing, glittering mess was suddenly laughable.

“Have you seen it?” Meredith looked up at Yondu with huge, tear-filled silver eyes. “It's so sad.”

“Yeah,” he said softly, “I seen it.”

“Did you cry,” she asked.

“No.” Yondu looked towards the rolling end credits. “I don't cry.”

“Ever,” she asked.

“Ever.”

“Oh.” Meredith's head dropped onto his chest. “Okay.”

Yondu stroked his hand through her hair while he watched the credits slide up the screen. They were almost mesmerizing in their speed and contrast.

“Yondu?”

Meredith's small voice made him look down.

“Do you give a crud about what happens to me,” she asked.

One heartbeat. Two.

“Yeah,” he said, “why?”

“I'm sorry if that makes this more dangerous for you.” Meredith stared at the credits. “I'm sorry if I'm a liability.”
“Don't be.” Yondu rested his chin on her hair. “Glad you're here, Mery.”

Meredith's smile, barely illuminated by the quickly fading credits, was something Yondu needed to seize onto. It was the kind of memory, he thought, that he just needed to keep.

“Let's get you out of here,” he said, “before Marty puts in a porno or something.”

Meredith giggled.

“He tried to, didn't he?” Yondu pulled Meredith up. “Guy's got a dirty mind, Mery; don't trust him.”

“I don't have a dirty mind,” Martinex countered, “I have a sexy imagination.”

The laughs shot out of Meredith and Yondu like cannonballs.

“You stay there and pull yourself together, rock-for-brains.” Yondu opened the door. “Gonna take the Terran waterworks to bed.”

“You're going to what,” Martinex asked.

“You know what I meant,” Yondu snarled.

Martinex grinned and gestured with his hand.

“Go on,” he said, “you two crazy kids get out of here.”

Yondu took Meredith down the hall. It emptied out into a huge open pavillion, the ceiling opened up to the stars. This wasn't the right way; Yondu's eyebrows contracted.

“Shit,” he said, “wrong turn.”

“This is beautiful.” Meredith tilted her head up to look at the stars. “Wow.”

Yondu's eyes flicked between Meredith and the starscape.

“You feelin' alright,” he asked.

“I'm fine.” Meredith smiled at him. “One emotional movie isn't going to shake me up.”

“It ain't the goddamn movie. I meant are you alright with all this.” Yondu gestured to the building with a stiff arm. “All this bullshit.”

“I don't know,” she said.

Meredith wandered to the white stone rail that edged the pavillion. Below, fir trees reached up the mountain. Yondu rested his elbows on the cold stone and waited. After a moment, Meredith sighed. “I feel like...” Meredith turned pink and rubbed her arms. “Like I'm some sort of trophy. I keep getting passed around like we're all in some big game of capture-the-Meredith.”

Yondu chuckled.

“Sort of,” he said.

“I don't like it.”

“You shouldn't.” The grin slid off Yondu's face. “They're usin' you to test me.”
“Test you?” Meredith's eyebrows contracted. “Test you how?”

“Whether or not I'll go off. Whether or not I can behave myself.” Yondu looked down the mountain at the sprawling fir forest. “They want to know if I can handle getting my buttons pushed, and you're the tool they're usin' to hit them buttons. If I can handle them doin' it, see, means I can handle the other captains givin' you shit.”

“They're using me to get to you.”

“Yeah.”

“Why me,” Meredith asked.

“No goddamn idea.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Idjits are whistlin' in the dark.”

Meredith chuckled. The cool night air whispered across her shoulders, and she rubbed her arms. Yondu's eyes flicked towards her, then back at the trees.

“You want a jacket,” he asked.

“I'll be fine,” she answered, suppressing a shiver.

Yondu rolled his eyes and took off his jacket, tossing it over her shoulders.

“You freeze to death and I'm gonna be pissed as hell, you hear me?” He leaned his elbows on the railing again. “Fuck, Mery, why can't you take care of your damn self.”

“Too busy taking care of everybody else,” she countered.

Yondu grunted. Meredith pulled the jacket around her; it was significantly bigger than she was, wrapping around her like a great leather tent. The warmth from his body remained in the soft lining of the jacket. She drew it against her skin; it felt almost like flannel.

“Won't you get cold,” she asked.

“Centaurian,” he muttered.

“Oh.” Meredith shrunk into the jacket. “Right.”

They stared out at the fir trees, watching the tips bend and sway with the mountain winds.

“This really is a beautiful planet,” Meredith said.

“You got anything like this on Terra?”

“Yeah. Fir trees, brisk mountain air.”

“What else you got?”

“Sandy deserts baking in the sun. Exotic jungles filled with colorful plants and exciting creatures. Snowy expanses of permafrost and ice. Caverns filled with crystals and cold stone. Oceans,” Meredith said, “so deep that even the darkness can't touch its depths. And forests, soft forests filled with bracken, bramble, and daffodils.”

Yondu's eyes slid to Meredith, then slowly returned to the mountainside.
“You're cryin' again,” he said.

“Yeah.” Meredith choked out a laugh, rubbing the water out of her eyes. “Surprise, surprise.”

Yondu put his arm around her shoulders, chuckling.

“There go the Terran waterworks,” he said.

Meredith sniffed and leaned into him.

“Shut up,” she said.

Yondu rested his cheekbone on her head, her curls tickling his face. His arm dropped around her waist.

“You're gonna miss all this shit when you go home, Mery.”

“I know.” Meredith's silver-gray eyes were brimming with tears, yet she smiled. “But I'll have memories. If those ain't enough, I'll find a way to come back.”

“We'll be waitin' for you.” The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up. “With a goddamn flame patch and a job to do.”

“I'm not a Ravager.”

“Yet,” Yondu added.

The wind blew stronger; some of the trees waved in its grasp.

“We better get inside,” Yondu grunted, “before this picks you up and throws you over the edge.”

“I'm not that light,” Meredith complained.

“Come on, idjit.” Yondu pressed a hand to her back. “Gotta get some shut-eye.”

This time, there was no dialogue about the bed. Meredith changed in the bathroom and slipped under the covers, staring at the ceiling until Yondu came into the room. Meredith could see in her peripherals that he was shirtless; his chest was a blur of blue. Aside from a slight heat in her cheeks, she didn't react. Yondu got in on the right side of the bed and turned off the lights. He exhaled, and there was silence. Meredith turned on her right side and pressed her cheek into the cool pillow.

“You alright,” she heard him mutter.

“I'm fine.”

“You cold?”

“A little,” she admitted.

Yondu's hand pressed to her stomach, drawing her back towards him. Her entire back pressed against his chest; immediately the heat that came off of him seeped into her muscles, unwinding them.
“Relax, Mery,” he said.

“Are you okay,” she asked softly.

“What?”

“Are you okay, I asked. Are you feeling okay.” Meredith turned her head slightly. “As much as this all is for me, I can't imagine what it's like for you.”

“I'm fine.” Yondu buried his face in her curls. “Just glad I got somebody to hold onto.”

Meredith allowed herself an unseen smile and closed her eyes. Meredith tried her hardest not to think of Peter, or of Terra, or of Xandar or getting home or anything of that nature. She tried to focus on how comfortable she was in this moment, in the rhythm of her own breath and the breath of the man behind her. The man, she reminded herself, who she definitely was not in love with.

Yondu waited until he could hear her breathing slow and her body relax before running his nose through her curls. She was so small, so slight compared to him; he pulled her closer protectively. His family had made her uncomfortable; they'd done the same to Yondu, whether they knew it or not. The entire circle was welcoming him back, but having been thrown out before set it all in a new light. He knew it wasn't unconditional anymore. They might still love him, but Yondu knew if he put so much as breathed out of code, they'd toss him back to the abyss and turn their backs. There was no room for mistakes, and at the end of the day, wasn't that all Yondu was? One big blue mistake?

Tense, Yondu gripped Meredith. She stirred slightly, then returned to sleep. Yondu relaxed his grip, but pressed his lips to her curls. It wasn't as if she'd know anyway, he reasoned, and she was softer than anything he'd ever felt. His hand rubbed her smooth stomach. He'd put more than a toe out of line against her; Yondu had lied, cheated, extorted, and pressed her for kisses he didn't deserve. Still, here she was, helping him along, asking how he was, giving a fuck about him. Meredith was unconditional; if he had nothing else, at least he had her.

For tonight, at least.
Landing

Chapter Summary

Peter does what Peter does, and Yondu gets to handle that.

(I LIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIVE! My sincerest apologies for not having this up sooner, but I promise I have not forgotten this story or any of you! I know this is a short chapter, but Ilyth proved a lot harder to write than I thought.)

Meredith and Yondu awoke to screaming.

"Where's my mom? Where's Yondu? You tell me right now or I'll bite your faces off!"

"Peter!" Meredith shrieked and tumbled out of bed, rushing to the door. "Peter, baby!"

Yondu's hand went to the blaster behind the bedframe. Half-awake, he roared indistinctly and wheeled around looking for a target. The door to the room opened; Yondu leveled the blaster for a moment, blinked away the sleep from his eyes, and cursed.

"Goddammit, Kraglin," he said, "what the fuck are you doin' here?"

Kraglin, blue-faced and panting, was holding onto a squirming, screaming Peter. He dropped Peter and pointed out the window. The Eclector was perched crookedly on the front lawn, dominating most of the space.

"How the hell," Yondu began.

Kraglin pointed at Peter. Peter's eyes flicked between Kraglin's accusatory finger and Yondu's slowly purpling face. Then, he did what any self-respecting young Ravager would do; he scrambled around and started screaming for his mother.

"Mom!" Peter shot around the room like a greased weasel. "Mom, Yondu's gonna kill me!"

"You'll be lucky if death's all you get for this one, boy!" Yondu roared as he tore around the room after Peter. "I oughta string you up by your goddamn innards!"

Peter screamed, and Meredith snatched him up.

"Yondu," she snapped, "don't you raise your voice at my baby."

"He stole my fuckin' ship, Mery! If that ain't a goddamn reason to raise my voice," Yondu said, "then there ain't one."

"Kid took the ship outta port in the middle of the night," Kraglin explained, "and flew down here lookin' for Ms. Quill. And by flew, I mean crash-landed."

"Peter?" Meredith frowned at her son. "Baby, why didn't you just wait?"
“You didn't call yesterday,” Peter sobbed, “and I thought something bad had happened.”

Meredith's breath caught in her throat. *Shit.* She cuddled Peter close, stroking his hair.

“It's alright, baby. It's okay. I'm here. We're okay. You're okay. It's alright.” She spoke soothingly to her frightened son. “This ain't like Ego, Peter baby. Everything is okay.”

Yondu watched Meredith and Peter. Kraglin's ice blue eyes skimmed over the room, lingering for a moment on the double bed. His face tinged blue, and he cleared his throat.

“Sorry to barge in, cap'n.” The blue color in Kraglin's face continued to deepen. “Didn't know the livin' situation here.”

“Shut your goddamn mouth,” Yondu snarled.

“Yondu Udonta!” Aleta stomped in the room, her hair stuck out at odd angles and dressed in only a nightgown. “What the hell is the Eclector doing parked on my front yard?”

“Kid parked it, dammit.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Don't blame me.”

“Kid, what kid?” Aleta spotted Meredith and Peter. “Oh.”

Meredith's eyes were closed, humming softly to calm Peter. The boy looked at Aleta through tear-filled eyes, his lower lip quivering. All the fight left Aleta's body as quickly as it had come.

“Hello,” she said softly.

“Hi,” Peter said.

“This is your son, Meredith?” Aleta stepped forwards as if approaching a she-bear. “He looks very much like you.”

Meredith smiled and nodded.

“That's what they tell me,” she said.

Aleta's eyes locked onto Peter. The look was almost predatory, and Meredith would have been worried if it wasn't for the softness in the gaze. It wasn't possessive, but protective, and for the first time Meredith felt like she understood where Aleta was coming from.

“Do you want to hold him,” Meredith asked.

Aleta's eyes widened. Meredith handed Peter to her without a second thought. Aleta's hands shook, but she held Peter close. Peter had stopped crying, and looked around the room with a new, mild interest. Yondu kept watching Meredith.

“Aleta!” Stakar came bursting into the room. “Aleta, have you seen what's parked on the goddamn lawn?”

Aleta turned to Stakar, her face bright and beaming. Stakar's eyes slid from Aleta to Peter, and he started to chuckle.

“Oh,” he said.

Yondu seized the front of Peter's shirt, baring his teeth.
“What in the fuck-forsaken name of goddamn hell did you think you were fuckin' doin’?” Froth speckled Peter's face as it flew from Yondu's lips. “You coulda crashed the goddamn Eclector! You know how much money that'd cost me, boy? You coulda killed yerself! Coulda killed Kraglin! Coulda smashed that ship into the roof and damn near killed us all!”

Peter shrunk inwards, eyes wide. Aleta turned Peter away, frowning.

“Don't raise your voice in front of the child,” she said.

Yondu swelled with rage, his face purpling.

“He coulda fuckin' killed us all,” he bellowed.

“Well, yes,” Stakar said, “but no one else here is losing their head over it.”

“He successfully landed a ship.” Aleta smiled. “That's very good for his age.”

“Stop encouragin' him,” Yondu snarled.

“Peter, landing a ship down here was very dangerous. Never fly a ship without its owner's permission. You are hereby grounded,” Meredith said, “which means no flight training for, say, a month.”

“Assuming you both stick around that long, Ms. Q,” Kraglin reminded.

Peter's face fell, but he didn't argue. Meredith took Peter from Aleta and left the room. Yondu watched them go. Stakar and Aleta stared out the window at the Eclector.

“Well,” Stakar said, “at least it's in one piece.”

“You're welcome,” Kraglin muttered.

“But take-off's going to be a problem.” Aleta rubbed her temples. “The heat from the thrusters is going to shred the landscaping. Hopefully you have enough fuel to break orbit.”

“We got reserves.” Yondu crossed his arms. “Damn kid.”

“It shows a concern for his mother and loyalty to his family, which is very promising,” Aleta said.

“How is it that you can't fuckin' stand Mery,” Yondu said, “but if an eight-year-old crash-lands a ship onto your fuckin' shrubbery, he can't do no wrong?”

“He has a point, Aleta.” Stakar chuckled. “Your soft spot is showing.”

“He took a ship all the way down here because he was worried about his mother.” Aleta laid a hand to her cheek, smiling. “I don't care what anyone says; that's adorable.”

“That's fuckin' insane,” Yondu corrected.

“No worse than the things you started out doing, Yondu.” Stakar took Aleta's hand. “I suppose we'll have to explain this to the other captains.”

Aleta paled.

“The other captains,” she realized, “they'll know about the boy.”
Stakar stopped in his tracks.

“An additional liability,” he added, “and they know he can't defend himself.”

Stakar and Aleta turned to Yondu with grimaces of concern. Yondu spat on the ground, feeling heat shoot through his blood.

“Well fuck,” he cursed, “now they got two targets to get me with.”

“Targets, cap’n?” Kraglin frowned. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing you need concern yourself with, Obfonteri.” Aleta linked her hands behind her back. “You worry about the Eclector and let us worry about your captain.”

Kraglin hesitated. Yondu met his eyes and gave him the most imperceptible of nods. Kraglin left the room frowning. Stakar Ogord raised his eyebrows.

“You did well with that one, Yondu.” Stakar shut the door behind Kraglin. “He looked for your approval despite being given an order by a superior.”

Yondu squinted.

“Thought you were all about rewardin' the chain of command,” he said.

“Yes,” Stakar said, “but the value of loyalty cannot be overestimated.”

Yondu grunted. Outside on the lawn was the Eclector; Yondu was lucky it'd made it down to the surface in one piece. More proof that he'd made the right decision when he promoted Kraglin, he supposed. *That kid could park a planet on a pinhead.*

“Guess I'll go get some extra fuel in her,” Yondu figured, “so's we can break orbit.”

“And I'll go run damage control.” Stakar rolled his eyes. “As if I didn't have enough to do, now I get to explain to the Table why your ship is on our shrubbery.”

“I'll watch the child and Meredith,” Aleta said, “and keep them safe and out of trouble until you can figure out what to do with them.”


“Yes.” Aleta raised her chin slightly. “What, you don't think I can protect them?”

“It ain't a matter of what you can do,” Yondu said, “I'm just confused as fuck as to why all of a sudden you want to protect Mery.”

“Meredith and her son,” Stakar corrected.

Aleta reddened slightly.

“Someone,” Stakar observed with a chuckle, “wants to babysit.”

“Maybe,” Aleta challenged.

“You gotta be shittin' me.” Yondu put his face in his hands. “Fine. Fuck it. Just make sure they're in one goddamn piece when I need 'em to be. Terrans is magnets for trouble, see, so don't let 'em out of your sight for more than a second.”
“I think I can handle it,” Aleta said scathingly.

Aleta and Stakar left the room. Yondu looked out at the Eclector, sitting on the lawn like the world's largest ugly garden gnome, and sighed.

_Goddamn Terrans._

Martinex stood on the front lawn with his hands on his hips, staring at the Eclector.

“That,” he said, “is the ugliest fucking ship.”

“Don't let Yondu hear you saying that.” Charlie-27 strolled across the lawn with a hose on top of his shoulder. The nozzle was as big as a tractor tire, but Charlie-27 didn't seem to mind the weight. He shoved the nozzle onto the Eclector and locked it. Fuel rushed through the hose and into the ship.

“There.” Charlie-27 rubbed his enormous hands together. “Drink up, ol' girl.”

“Look, I know it's traditional that all ships are female, but if that ship's a woman,” Martinex said, “then she's got a face not even Yondu could love.”

“Ha ha, Marty.”

“Like it got hit by a garbage truck.”

“Yondu's going to hear you.”

“You know how they say some people got hit by the ugly stick? This ship fell out of the top of the ugly tree, hit every ugly branch, then bounced off the ugly trampoline and hit them all over again.”

“Marty, I'm gonna take your goddamn lights out.” Yondu came striding across the lawn, the tails of his coat swaying gently. “You shut your trap about my ship.”

“And then there's her captain,” Martinex continued, “who probably hit every ugly stick on every ugly tree in the ugly forest.”

Yondu seized Martinex, forcing him into a headlock.

“The fuck did I just say,” Yondu growled.

Martinex laughed. Charlie-27 reached over and pulled the two apart, his voice low and serious.

“You two,” he said, “need to behave yourselves. With the other captains planetside, we need to show solidarity.”

“No offense, Charlie old boy,” Martinex said, “but you refusing to listen to Stakar and Aleta isn't exactly a show of solidarity.”

Yondu grunted in confirmation.


“Look, Chuck, thanks for havin' my back, but this is fuckin' important.” Yondu leaned against his
ship. “I got two goddamn Terrans to keep up with now, and hell if they ain’t a handful. Danger sticks to them, see, so I need these other captains as far away from us as we can fuckin’ get ’em.”

“At least for the next two days,” Martinex finished.

Charlie-27 looked as if he had been sucking on a lemon. He kicked the ground; a chunk of dirt the size of a basketball erupted from the impact point.

“Don’t throw a tantrum, Charlie.” Martinex sighed and laid down on the warm grass, letting the sun set him to scintillating. “You’re better than that.”

“He’s right, Chuck.” Yondu fixed his large friend with his scarlet eyes. “You did good by me. Better n’ I deserved. But don’t let it mess with you, Stakar, and Aleta.”

Charlie-27 fiddled with the fuel lock for a few more moments, then exhaled.

“Fine,” he said.

Yondu nodded and pulled out his arrow, fiddling with the metal. If Charlie-27 said it was fine, then it was fine. Yondu whistled low, letting the arrow weave its red streak through the sky. So now he had Peter and Mery to worry about. This was getting out of hand.

“You’ve got that face on,” Charlie-27 said.

“One Terran was bad enough.” Yondu spiked his arrow back into its quiver. “Now I got two.”

“You might need to cut this visit a little short. Send them back up top,” Martinex said, “and then come back down and finish up at the table.”

“You nuts? One goddamn proton torpedo and they’d be space dust. No,” Yondu said, “I’m keepin’ ’em with me.”

“Your choice.” Martinex shrugged. “Have fun being their momma.”

Charlie-27 chuckled as Yondu turned purple.

“He’s joking, Yondu.” Charlie-27 patted Yondu’s shoulder.

“Of course I am.” Martinex grinned, his teeth like diamonds. “Everybody knows Meredith is his momma.”

Martinex was forced to run screaming across the lawn, pursed relentlessly by the red streak of Yondu’s arrow.
Aleta or not, Terrans can still get into trouble. AKA, Peter really needs to stop chasing after Orloni.

(AO3 has been weird lately, not letting me post, so here's hoping this works!)

Finding Peter Quill was simple; keeping track of him was hard. Aleta followed Meredith and Peter like a silent shadow, herding them away from the other captains. Aleta didn't anticipate any significant issues with the Terrans; she had a fool-proof plan. She pushed them into a room, pointed at the ground, and said very clearly, “Stay here.”

“Um,” Meredith began.

“Stay here,” Aleta repeated, “don't leave, and don't do anything stupid.”

Aleta tugged the door shut, locked it, and leaned against it. The only way in or out was through Aleta Ogord, and that meant it was impossible. Impossible, that is, for anyone but Peter Quill. The boy was as slippery as a greased Orloni. For the second time in an hour, Meredith reached through a grate, grabbed the boy by the ankle, and dragged him out.

“Airway systems are not your personal crawlspace,” she said.

“But there's an Orloni in there,” Peter protested.

Meredith leaned down. Curled up at the far end of the vent was a white Orloni. It lifted its head and chirped; a gold collar was around its neck.

“Rats,” Meredith said.

“Rat,” Peter corrected, “there's just the one.”

Meredith got on her hands and knees and attempted to crawl into the vent. She sighed; the vent was too small. She backed out and sat on the ground.

“I can get it,” Peter said.

Meredith's silver-gray eyes flicked between her son and the vent.

“Be very careful,” she said.

That was all the approval Peter Quill needed. He got on his hands and knees and crawled into the vent. The white Orloni cocked its head and watched the Terran boy approach.

“Here, Orloni,” Peter said soothingly, “come here boy!”

The Orloni didn't move when Peter grabbed it. He pulled it out of the vent and beamed at his mother.

“Look,” he said.
“Good job honey.” The corners of Meredith's mouth turned up. “You did it.”

Peter tried to hand his mother the Orloni, but she held her hands up in refusal.

“Oh no,” she said, “I wouldn't want to steal your glory. You did the job; you should get the reward. Let's show this to Aleta.”

Meredith knocked on the door; Aleta opened it, squinting at them with dark eyes.

“What,” she snapped.

“Peter found... well, he found whatever this is.” Meredith stepped aside so Aleta could see the white Orloni Peter held in his hands. “It's got a collar. Any ideas who this belongs to?”

“That Orloni belongs to one of the other captains. D'fara. She's... not pleasant to deal with. However,” Aleta said, “that stupid white mutt means a lot to her.”

“Okay.” Peter held the amiable Orloni close. “Where is she?”

“Most likely her room,” Aleta mused, “throwing knives into my walls again.”

“Oh.” Meredith blinked. “Why would she do that?”

“Some people are highly immature,” Aleta said curtly, “and take to destroying what they cannot create themselves.”

“Oh,” said Meredith.

Aleta looked at Peter play with the white Orloni and sighed; Yondu hadn't been lying when he said the Terran was a magnet for trouble. Landing the Eclector on the front lawn, crawling into every tiny space on the planet, and seizing priceless animals... Aleta chuckled. The boy was a born Ravager.

“It would be best if we returned D'fara's pet before she notices he's gone missing.” Aleta picked up the white Orloni. “She won't hesitate to accuse all of Ilyth of stealing from her.”

Peter reached for the Orloni with wide eyes.

“No, no,” he said, “I want to carry him!”

Aleta stared at the boy.

“This is a rat,” she said.

“Peter's got a soft spot for Orloni,” Meredith sighed.

Aleta blinked slowly, but handed the Orloni back to Peter.

“We need to move quickly,” Aleta said, “if we're going to get that thing back in its cage before D'fara notices.”

Meredith and Peter followed Aleta through the hallways. Aleta kept herself primed for danger; at any moment, someone could complicate this. It should have been easy, she cursed, just keep the Terrans pegged up for a while. But Yondu was right; Terrans were trouble. Aleta stopped them in front of D'fara's apartment and keyed them into the room with the dialpad.

“Go in,” she said, “put the Orloni back, and come back out. I'll make sure no one enters this room.”
“What if D’fara’s in here,” Peter asked.

Aleta opened the portal and scanned the room quickly. The bedroom was empty; the only living things in the apartment seemed to be the exotic rats D’fara kept in cages. The kitchen door was open; Aleta found no one in it. The bathroom door was slightly ajar. Aleta nodded and gestured for Meredith to enter the room. Meredith and Peter hurried in while Aleta closed the portal behind her.

“How’s Peter,” Meredith said, “find an empty cage.”

“It’s over here, mom.” Peter had already found the cage in question; the door hinges had been gnawed off. “Guess this is how he got out.”

“Great.” Meredith put her hand over her forehead and sighed. “How are we going to fix that?”

Peter dug in his pocket and pulled out an omni tool. He clipped two wires on the cage door and bent them like hooks; it was easy to snap the door back on. Peter pushed the Orloni back in its cage, latched the door, and gave it some food for good measure.

“Done,” he chirped.

Meredith stared.

“When did you learn to do that,” she asked.

“Kraglin showed me how to do some stuff.” Peter held up the omnitool. “This is his old omnitool. I was using it to help him fix some stuff on the ship while you guys were gone, and he said I could keep it.”

“Oh,” Meredith said.

Peter tottered towards the door; Meredith was reeling. Every day it seemed like her baby belonged more and more in space. Omnitools, piloting, space-gun shooting; it was a whole new world to Meredith, but Peter took to it like a fish to water. It was that ‘other half’, she supposed. Peter would never belong perfectly on Terra, or perfectly in space. The best Meredith could do, she affirmed, was raise him in the best environment Terra could supply, and then let him go free into the galaxy. It was the best of both options.

Meredith was so lost in her thoughts that she didn’t notice Peter go to the bathroom to wash his hands. He pushed the door open; a blaster poked his forehead.

“The fuck do you think you’re doing,” D’fara snarled.

Peter looked at the gun, then at D’fara’s deadened black eyes.

“Mom says it’s rude not to shut the bathroom door when you’re going pee,” he said.

D’fara’s brief moment of confusion was all Peter needed; he shoved his omnitool into the blaster and jammed his thumb on a button. A surge of power shot into the blaster, overloading it. D’fara cried out and dropped the blaster.

“Peter? Peter!”

Meredith grabbed her son and made for the door, but D’fara was faster. Pulling her other pistol from her hip, she jumped up, crawled on the ceiling, and landed between the Terrans and the door.

“Not fair,” Peter said, “she used the ceiling.”
“So.” D’fara shook her head; the coins and crystals on her clothes clinked together. “The Terrans. Yondu's pup and his little slut.”

“Excuse you,” Meredith said.

“Mom. Mom, she's got a gun.” Peter tugged Meredith back. “Now is probably not a good time.”

“You heard me.” D’fara leveled the pistol at Meredith. “Trespassing here? It's punishable by death.”

The portal snapped open. Meredith grabbed a cage and threw it at D’fara; it smacked her in the face. Aleta's hand seized the pistol, and she crushed it. Spasms of green and gold electricity arced across her hand; Peter could see the light reflect in her dark eyes. Aleta dropped the shards at D’fara's feet. D’fara wheeled around, dazed from the cage, and saw Aleta.

“Ogord,” she breathed.

“These Terrans are Yondu’s.” Aleta's eyes were stone. “I tasked them with returning your stupid white rat. Seems both you and Yondu need to learn to keep track of your pets.”

D’fara took a step back, her onyx eyes wide. Aleta seized Meredith and Peter's wrists, dragging them out of the room. Meredith took Peter's other hand, her heart still pounding. Aleta practically threw the Terrans towards an exit.

“Find Yondu,” Aleta snapped, “get on the Eclector, and stay.”

Peter needed to stop chasing Orloni. He mused, as Meredith dragged him across the lawn, that chasing Orloni was pretty much the root of all of his biggest problems.

“Honey, what have I told you about chasing those things?” Meredith was red-faced, her curls bouncing around her face as she stomped towards the Eclector. “You could have gotten killed! I should never have let you go after that thing...”

“What the fuck's goin' on?” Yondu looked up from his repairs. “Peter? Mery?”

“I've got him,” Meredith sighed, “just in the nick of time, too.”


“Someone,” Meredith said with a pointed look towards her son, “found a 'fancy' Orloni. It turns out that Orloni is a pet.”

“D'fara.” Yondu's expression soured. “She always did like keepin' rats.”

“Yes.” Meredith let go of Peter's hand and crossed her arms. “She pointed a blaster at us and yelled a lot, but it was over fairly quickly.”

“She pointed a gun at you?” Yondu's voice had dropped to a dangerous octave.

“Yeah,” Meredith shrugged, “But Aleta took care of it.”

“Aleta?” Yondu blinked.
“Aleta's been ghosting Peter all day; it looks like she's a big fan,” Meredith chuckled.

“She's got a soft spot for kids, that's all.” Yondu glared at Peter. “You lil' shit. You realize you coulda had your head blasted to bits?”

“Mrs. Ogord broke the blaster with her bare hands!” Peter held his up as if to demonstrate. “Can you do that, Yondu?”

“Hell no,” was the answer.

“At any rate, it's okay now. Aleta took D'fara away and I'm sure everything's fine. I just... I guess I panicked,” Meredith said, “and Aleta told us to stay with you.”

“Any goddamn reaction to havin' a Ravager captain pointing a blaster at you ain't panic,” Yondu said, “trust me. There ain't no such thing as 'overreact'.”

Meredith laughed.

“Probably best you hide in the Eclector for a while,” Yondu said, picking at his crooked teeth, “so's you and the boy'll be safe.”

“Is that it?” Meredith sighed and sat in the grass. “I thought Aleta just didn't want to see me anymore.”

Yondu cleared his throat. He slammed his fist into the side of the Eclector; a panel swung open, clanging against the hull.

“Boy,” he said, “gimme a hand here.”

Meredith watched Peter and Yondu work on the Eclector. She'd worked with her papa like that, she remembered, on the truck. Meredith's papa didn't like paying anybody to do something he could do himself, so he and Meredith would change the oil and rotate the tires themselves. There were some things that it took an expert to fix; a cracked windshield, or a bad transmission, but for the most part, it was just Meredith and her papa. Looking at Peter and Yondu, Meredith felt that familiar nostalgia creep into her heart, making it ache softly. She missed home.

Her back hit the grass; lying in the shade of the Eclector, she stared at the lilac sky. Kraglin had promised that Garthan Saal would be able to help, and Meredith believed him. She had to; it was her best shot at getting her and her son home. Meredith's fingers entwined with the grass beneath her; she closed her eyes and exhaled.

Meredith heard the crush of grass as someone sat down beside her.

“The hell you doin', nappin' on the goddamn lawn,” Yondu said.

Meredith opened her eyes. Yondu scowled down at her, baring his crooked teeth.

“It's been a day,” she said, “I'm taking a breather.”

“Been a day for you? Hell, Mery, your boy done dropped my ship on the lawn and stirred up the whole goddamn planet.”

“Where is Peter,” Meredith asked.

“I sent him up on the ship.” Yondu rolled his shoulders. “Damn trouble-makin' Terran.”
“Yeah, well, I did tell you it wouldn’t be a good idea for me to leave him alone that long.”

“I had Kraglin watchin’ him!”

“We had Aleta watching him,” Meredith pointed out, “and he still found trouble.”

Yondu laid his back on the grass.

“You gotta point,” he admitted.

Meredith and Yondu both sighed simultaneously, then cracked grins.

“Parenting isn’t as easy as it looks, is it?” Meredith teased.

“It ain’t parentin’ if I do it,” Yondu said.

“Right. Uh-huh.” Meredith tore up some grass and tossed it on him. “You keep telling yourself that, big daddy.”

Yondu sat up. His mouth was twisted; trying not to smile, Meredith realized.

“You be careful with the sugar-talk, Star-Queen. Get me too riled up, and I might try getting myself another taste of that Terran pepper.”

“Given the location, the presence of your parents, and the fact that most all these other captains want to put a bullet in the both of us,” Meredith said shrewdly, “that’s probably a real bad idea.”

“Probably right.” Yondu chuckled and pulled his shirt over his head. “Damn hot out here, ain’t it?”

It was now; Meredith's eyes locked onto Yondu's broad chest. His abs, his pectorals; all were the same shade of cerulean, and all were slightly shiny with sweat. Yondu rubbed his shirt on his chest, taking the moisture off.

“Do you want some water,” Meredith heard herself say.

“Nah.” Yondu rolled his shirt up and stuck it behind his head for a pillow as he lay back down. “I’m good, Mery.”

Meredith turned on her side, propping her head up on her hand. She did her best to keep her eyes on his face, but the rise and fall of his chest made that difficult.

“I remember this one.” Meredith poked a scar on Yondu's chest that resembled the head of a hammer. “That was an interesting day out.”

“First time you shot somebody, if I remember right.” Yondu reached over and poked the lines on Meredith's arms. “Like you ain't got scars yourself.”

“Nobody's perfect,” Meredith said.

Yondu shrugged. He picked up Meredith's arm and yanked it over so he could examine the silvery lines.

“Hey,” Meredith protested.

“Can you feel these,” Yondu asked as he ran his finger along one.
“Yes,” Meredith’s face went pink. “It kind of prickles, actually. Not like pain, just... sensation.”

Yondu examined her wrist, then her fingers. Her right middle finger had a silver like that ran from the tip of her finger all the way to her shoulder. Yondu tapped it.

“So you can feel that,” he grunted.

“Yes, Yondu.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “Dr. Mareet did a fine job.”

Yondu popped her finger in his mouth and sucked on the first digit. Meredith's eyes popped open. She went to pull her arm back, but Yondu's firm was hold. The warmth and wetness of his mouth mixed with the familiar sensation of prickles and pops that came from prodding Meredith's implants. Yondu drew his tongue along her finger, still staring at the sky.

“The hell do you think you're doing,” Meredith snapped.

Yondu drew her finger out of his mouth nonchalantly.

“Tastin','” he said.

“Tasting what?”

“You.” Yondu licked her palm. “Seein' as I ain't getting any pepper while we're planetside.”

“You're not getting any pepper ever, Yondu!”

He lowered her hand, his crimson eyes snapping to hers.

“Was that a threat, Star-Queen?”

“You bet your big blue ass it was!” Meredith sat up and tugged on her arm, her face scarlet. “Give me back my hand.”

Yondu let go just as Meredith tugged; she fell backwards into the grass. In a snap, Yondu was over her, with his hands on either side of her head. Meredith glared at him; he cracked a crooked grin.

“Couldn't help but get a taste,” he said, “once I noticed how you like starin'.”

Meredith's face burned. She opened her mouth to make a snappy retort, but her eyes flicked down to his chest, and it caught in her throat. She swallowed.

“Knew it,” Yondu chuckled.

“Oh shut up.” Meredith crawled out from under him; Yondu willingly let her go. “I'm going back to the Eclector, and I'm not leaving until we're off planet!”

“Perfect.” Yondu stood up and picked his shirt off the ground. “Nobody can see you starin' at me up there.”

Meredith huffed. She stomped up the ramp, her curls going wild. Yondu chuckled and pulled his shirt back over his head. At least Mery wouldn't be coming off the Eclector any time soon. Knowing she was safe made this easier; Yondu could handle the Table alone now. With Meredith and Peter on the Eclector, he reasoned, they were safe from the captains and his family.

Yondu's eyes lingered on Meredith's swinging hips.
And she'd be safe from *Yondu*, too.
Departure

Chapter Summary

After all that's occurred, what a "vacation" Ilyth turned out to be. But now, Yondu's got a much more stressful situation.

Meredith's leaving.
It's really happening.
And he can't stop it.

(Edited quickly and barely functional but HERE'S AN UPDATE!)

It was the last day of their stay in Ilyth, and Yondu was damn glad for it. His daydream about villas and soft white curtains had been just that; a silly self-gratifying illusion. The Table pressed him every day, testing his steel and snapping back at him. Aleta and Stakar walked a thin line, with Stakar keeping the peace and Aleta enforcing it. Charlie-27 had been an enormous help, literally; his presence alone was enough to intimidate any captain that wanted to make a pass at hurting Yondu. Krugarr and Kraglin kept a constant vigil over the Eclector. Meredith, for her part, had her hands full with Peter. Yondu hadn't made a move on her since the incident in the lawn; he'd told Stakar he was letting her go, and dammit, he was doing his goddamn best.

Still, there was still that unnamed tension between them, driving him up the wall. Dinner the other night had been just the two of them; they didn't say a word, but Yondu felt like it had been the loudest goddamn dinner of his life. It was almost a relief when Martinex and Peter came barreling in. Martinex had appointed himself Meredith's personal bodyguard. Yondu often found himself gritting his teeth as Martinex flounced and flirted his way alongside Meredith. Mainframe had repaired the Eclector and calculated an appropriate exit path. The days on Ilyth had been packed with work and stress, and for the first time, Yondu was glad to be leaving it.

He stood with his hands on his hips, waiting for Stakar and Aleta. They came pacing across the fog-blanketed lawn; Yondu had decided to leave as early as possible.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay for breakfast," Aleta asked.

"And hear Marty's teeth knockin' together? Hell no." Yondu chuckled. "We'll be back some other time."

"Hopefully without landing your entire ship on my lawn," Stakar said.

"That was the boy," Yondu said, "not me."

"Yes, and maybe next time don't bring..." Aleta sighed. "Well, if you do bring her, make sure you bring the boy."

"I won't be bringing her back," Yondu said.

"What?" Stakar's eyes snapped wide. "What do you mean you won't be bringing her back? I thought you –"
“I told you on the goddamn Eclector,” Yondu cursed, “I'm lettin' her go. She wants to go home, I ain't gonna stop her. Ain't my place.”

Stakar's shoulders sagged.

“Right,” he said glumly, “I remember now.”

“Honestly, Stakar.” Aleta rolled her eyes and hugged Yondu. “Don't get killed, son.”

Yondu patted her back.

“Don't kill pop,” he said.

“No promises.” Aleta leaned back and crossed her arms. “Stakar, pull yourself together.”

Stakar sighed and hugged Yondu tightly.

“I'm glad you're home,” he said quietly.

Yondu gripped Stakar tightly and grunted, “Me too, pop.”

The two men leaned back. Aleta turned to go inside; Stakar began to follow, then lifted his finger and tapped it towards Yondu with a smile. Yondu returned the gesture, then made to go up the ramp. His feet lost contact with the ground; a deep voice chuckled.

“You didn't think you could go without saying goodbye, did you?” Charlie-27 set Yondu back down. “Bloody stupid of you, if you did.”

“Thought you'd be asleep,” Yondu said.

Yes, Yondu. Krugarr slithered out from behind Charlie-27 with lidded eyes. After not seeing you for an extended period of time, we would clearly choose one night of sleep over seeing you off with well-intentioned wishes of prosperity.

Yondu grinned and fist-bumped Krugarr.

“Why the hell did Stakar have to teach you sarcasm,” Yondu said.

A warm humming sound in Yondu's head expressed Krugarr's laughter. The portal to the Eclector opened; Martinex came strolling out, yawning.

“Morning,” he said.

“The fuck were you doin' on my ship,” Yondu snapped.

“Making sure everything was ready to go,” a metallic voice said. Mainframe walked out behind Martinex, examining an interface. “You should be alright... You know you hadn't updated your system diagnostics in eight months?”

“I was gonna get around to it,” Yondu said.

“Gonna get around to...” Mainframe sighed and collapsed his interface. “How did you survive without us, Yondu?”

Martinex and Charlie-27 chuckled. Mainframe patted Yondu's shoulder as he strode by.
“Stay safe,” Mainframe said.

“Like that’ll happen.” Yondu chuckled. “Don’t work too damn hard, Mainframe.”

“Like that’ll happen,” Mainframe replied.

The corner of Yondu's mouth twitched up. Mainframe and Krugarr went back into the building, leaving Charlie-27 and Martinex.

“You know you have to come visit me,” Charlie-27 said, “somewhere where the Ogords aren't enforcing regulation.”

“Day out and about, huh?” Yondu picked at his teeth. “What're you thinkin', Chuck?”

“Kree radicals. Bullets. We smash the two together;” Charlie-27 explained, “and then we drink until we pass out.”

“Hell yeah,” Yondu said.

Charlie-27 chuckled. The Jovian picked Yondu up and hugged him, lifting him all the way off the ground.

“Say hello to Algon for me, you bloody little shit.” Charlie-27 squeezed Yondu gently. “God, I missed your stupid blue face.”

“Put me down you overgrown dipshit,” Yondu snarled.

Charlie-27 grinned and dropped him.

“See you around, Yondu,” he said before heading inside.

The lawn was empty except for Yondu and Martinex. They stared at each other; a small smile played around Martinex's crystalline mouth.

“I knew you'd be home,” he said softly.

“That made one of us.” Yondu stuffed his hands in his pockets. “And... sorry. For lettin' you down.”

“You can't let me down if I never give up on you,” Martinex said, “and I know you well enough by now. I know you always pull it out of your ass at the last second.”

Yondu cracked a grin.

“Damn lucky you're my brother,” he said.

“Yes.” Martinex linked his hands behind his back and strode off in a perfect imitation of Stakar. “Yes you are.”

Yondu almost tackled him, but he clenched his fists and let the Plutonian have this one. He was right, after all; Yondu was damn lucky to have a family like that. A goddamn argumentative dysfunctional family of idiots, but...they cared about him. In their way, at least. It was more than enough; it was more than he deserved.

“Cap'n?” Kraglin came on over the comms. “We ready to go, cap'n?”

“Yeah. Dock at the Hub, grab the crew, and then make tracks to Algon.” Yondu grunted before
walking up the ramp. “Take ‘er up, Kraglin.”

Stakar and Aleta watched the Eclector shrink into the early morning sky.

“There goes our future daughter-in-law,” Stakar predicted.

“I still don't like her,” Aleta said.

“Oh, you will. I know you, Aleta.” Stakar rested his chin on the top of her head. “Any woman who refuses to cower to that iron will of yours is fine in your book.”

The corner of Aleta's mouth turned up.

“She did tell me to go fuck myself,” she allowed.

“If that sounds too tiring, feel free to allow me to fuck yourself instead.”

Aleta closed her eyes.

“Stakar,” she said, “we were having a conversation that wasn't about sex. Let's get back to it.”

“Very well.” Stakar

“You were right,” Aleta said, “he's in love.”

“But she isn't. Not yet, at least,” Stakar added.

“What do you think of her,” Aleta asked.

“She's stubborn, curious, and has our son wrapped around her little finger tighter than a stabilizer seal. Aleta, my love.” Stakar put his arm around his wife's shoulders. “I'm really liking our daughter-in-law.”

“Fine,” Aleta said, “you're in charge of planning their wedding.”

“Of course. She will wear white regardless of her virginity. No idea what he'll wear; nothing goes with his coloring.” Stakar squinted. “Maybe gold for the both of them. Finish that primary color thing he's got going, and set her hair to brilliance.”

“And we go as the parents of the groom, hm?” Aleta chuckled. “What do we wear?”

“I will wear whatever you decide, and you will wear what you look best in.” Stakar kissed her ear. “Absolutely nothing.”

He watched Aleta's face slowly turn pink.

“Take off your pants,” she said.

“Yes! Ha!” Stakar threw his fists in the air, then wrapped his arms around her waist, kissing her neck. “I love it when you blush!”
The Eclector had docked back at the Hub, and already Yondu wanted to go back to Ilyth. Putting up with the captains was cake compared to sitting in his room surrounded by applications. Kraglin had obeyed Yondu's command to the letter; he'd sent out a wide net and rounded up every scummy pirate willing to sail under his colors. Yondu's recent fame with Ego and Meredith was a double-edged sword. On one hand, his fame meant that even the best and most ruthless wanted to join up. On the other hand, it meant every cross-eyed corpse-breath worm-muncher wanted to hop aboard the Eclector.

"Who the fuck writes a cover letter to be a goddamn Ravager," he cursed before tossing a datapad aside.

"It's considered polite." Meredith stepped in carrying a bowl of stew. "Dinner's been ready for an hour; I went ahead and served you some. Here."

She set the bowl down. Yondu didn't even look at it. Let it go, he told himself firmly, let her go.

"Yondu, are you going to eat?"

He grunted.

"Are you going to talk to me?"

He shrugged. Meredith put her hands on her hips, pursing her lips together.

"Yondu Udonta, you eat that goddamn stew before I shove it down your fat throat or so help me," she fumed, "I will get funnel and an omni-tool and I'll shove it in!"

Yondu chuckled and picked up the bowl with one hand.

"Stew, huh?"

"You had such a bad time on Ilyth," Meredith said, "I figured you deserved it."

"Wasn't so bad." Yondu drank from the stew bowl, savoring the flavor. "Except the captains. Aleta bein' a bitch. Stakar bein' a know-it-all."

"Peter landing the Eclector on the front lawn." Meredith crossed her arms. "I'm still upset about that."

"Martinex bein' a goddamn perv. Charlie-27 poutin' like a pissed-off teenager." Yondu wiped his mouth on his jacket sleeve. "Krugarr bein' uppity. You and the boy getting into all kinds of goddamn trouble didn't help either."

"It wasn't my fault," Meredith protested.

Yondu chuckled. He set the stew bowl down and put his head in his hands, staring at all the applications.

"I hate this shit," he said.

"Then don't do it." Meredith sat on the table. "Why do you need a bigger crew? You did just fine with the one you have."

"Back in the game, Mery. Means I need more hands on deck." Yondu rubbed his eyes. "Fuck it; I'll just confirm all of’em, and get rid of’em as they prove they're shit."
“That seems like a really bad idea,” Meredith warned.

“Good.” Yondu stood up and swiped a holo-screen; all of the applications disappeared. “Bad ideas are good for bad people, Mery.”

“No,” she said, “bad ideas are bad for everyone. That's why they're called bad ideas.”

“My ship, dammit, I'll hire who I want to.” Yondu scowled. “Not like you'll be around to deal with 'em.”


“You're right.” Meredith slid off the desk and hit the portal access. “Eat up, Yondu.”

The portal snapped shut behind him, leaving Yondu alone with the stew. He sat back down and cursed. Steam streamed slowly from the stew in front of him, but Yondu had never felt less like eating. He'd gone and pissed her off. After all he'd done, dragging her around on Ilyth and tossing her in front of his family, and he'd gone and pissed her off. Yondu pushed the bowl in front of him away. He didn't deserve stew.

Still, it was Mery's stew. She'd cooked it for him, and if he didn't eat it, that was a shitty way to appreciate her for the time he had left. He picked up the bowl and drank deep, holding on to every flavor.

For all he knew, it'd be the last of it he ever got.
Letting Go

Chapter Summary

Letting go of anyone you care about is difficult. It's even harder when you're a kid. While Peter throws his tantrums, Yondu throws a much quieter fit of his own.

Meredith and Algon aren't standing for it from either of them.

(Formatting has been repaired!)

“Ahahahahaha, Yondu Udonta!”

Exhaling slowly, Yondu grabbed Peter and held him up as a shield. Much to his surprise, Algon barreled right past.

“And Meredith Quill!” Algon lifted the Terran woman in his large, scaly arms. “So very alive and not dying!”

Meredith laughed, her curls bouncing around her face as Algon lifted her.

“Alive and well and I ain't planning on checking out anytime soon.” Meredith smiled as Algon set her down. “Nice to see you, Algon.”

The Saurid beamed; he was wearing enormous trousers in a strange khaki color, and Meredith could have sworn that the collared shirt stretched tight across his scaly chest was a polo shirt.

“You dressed up,” she noticed.

“I did! It is Terran, the shirt, made out of something they call a ralf laurin. It is nice to see you as well, Meredith Quill.” Algon shot a glance at Yondu. “Some people never tell me it's good to see me.”

“Some people are very rude,” Meredith said.

Yondu bared his jagged teeth in a grimace.

“Why the fuck did I ever introduce you two,” he asked.

“For units,” Peter piped up.

Algon and Meredith laughed. Yondu snorted and put Peter down.

“Come, come!” Algon led them onto his ship. “It has been ages since we last had a meal together.”

“It's been less than a month,” Yondu grunted.

“Ages!” Algon spread his claws out. “Simply eons!”

Yondu scowled; Meredith and Peter laughed.
“And this time, more shopping. No more free things, Meredith Quill.” Algon waggled a singular claw digit at her. “You hear me? You're no longer ill, so all pardons are off!”

“I don't know about buying, but I've got some things to sell.” Meredith pulled a bundle of dresses from her pack. “How much can I get for these?”

“Please do not tell me Yondu's making you sell all your pretty things for units.” Algon moaned. “Yondu, you wretched child.”

“I ain't makin' her sell it,” Yondu snarled, “she's sellin' it herself!”

“They're from Ego,” Meredith explained, “I don't want them.”

“From Ego, hm?” Algon held them up and appraised them, one by one. “Yes, yes... hm. How does fifty units a dress sound?”

“That sounds wonderful,” Meredith said.

“Sixty,” Peter piped up.

“Fifty-five,” Algon replied.

“Seventy.”

“Fifty-eight.”

“Sixty-two.”

“Fine, fine, sixty-two!” Algon roared with laughter, picking Peter up and putting him on his shoulders. “Yondu, Yondu! How certain are you that your Terrans are...”

“Not for sale,” Meredith and Yondu chorused.

“Ah.” Algon's frills fell. “So sad. You would be much happier here with me than on that wretched junk heap Yondu flies.”

“Watch what you say about my ship,” Yondu growled.

Algon chuckled and pushed Yondu and the Terrans through the doors and into the marketplace.

“Trades are up,” he said cheerfully, “and expenses are down! Just the other day I sold a lot of merchandise that hadn't moved for months! Such a lovely thing, to clear up that clutter.”

Meredith laughed. Yondu let Peter and Meredith stroll with Algon; he hung back, hands in his pockets. This was it; the last stop before Xandar. He'd have the boy a little longer, babysitting while Meredith ran through the bureaucracy with Saal, but after that, nothing. Meredith could have a way home. The thought should have been a good one, he reflected, and it would be if he wasn't such a selfish piece of shit. Meredith wanted to go home, and her being happy should have meant more than anything. Yondu's eyes flicked to the junk shack; filled with Terran shit, if he remembered correctly. A crazy thought bolted through his brain – buy all of it, tack it up in the ship, make it feel like home – but Yondu shot it down almost as soon as it was coherent. Doing all of that wouldn't make Mery stay; it'd just make her homesick. Yondu scowled at the floor; leave it to Yondu to think of something “helpful” that'd just break her heart.

“Yondu!”
Algon's voice made Yondu look up. The Saurid was looking at him curiously.

“You are lagging behind,” Algon said.

“I’m taking my goddamn time, alright?” Yondu shoved past, his hands still in his pockets. “Didn’t come all this way for you to see me, anyway.”

Yondu could feel Algon's orange eyes on him.

“He's had a stressful time,” Meredith said softly, “we're giving him space.”

Heat rose to Yondu's face as his insides broiled in anger. Fine, give me some goddamn space, why the fuck don't you hitch a ride to Xandar already – the words were on the tip of his tongue, but they wouldn't come out. Instead, Yondu snarled and stomped away. He moved quick, dodging between market stalls and pushing between scaled and gilled clients on his way to the bar.

Algon, Peter, and Meredith stared after him. Meredith sighed; Peter frowned and grabbed his mom's hand.

“Mom,” he said, “what's wrong with Yondu?”

“Everybody deals with stress in different ways,” Meredith explained, “and Yondu just gets angry.”

“No, he does not.” Algon’s voice was barely audible. “He internalizes stress. This, this is external. This is anger. He becomes angry when he's defensive, and he's only defensive when...”

Meredith waited for Algon to finish his sentence, but instead the Saurid grabbed Peter.

“Peter Quill,” he said too quickly, “have you seen our waterslides?”

“Waterslides!” Peter's face erupted into a huge grin. “Wow, can I see?”

“Of course of course of course.” Algon practically ran over to the enormous pool. “Behold, Peter Quill, behold!”

The waterslide was pretty exotic by Terran standards; it swerved and swooped along, spilling into a large shallow pool. Little blue-skinned girls and scaled children were giggling and splashing along, watched over by parents of all species. Peter looked at his mother with begging eyes.

“Oh, alright,” she sighed.

As soon as Peter hit the ground, he kicked off his shoes and socks, yanked off his shirt and pants, and dove in.

“I’m never going to get him out of there, you know. You've done it now, Algon.” Meredith looked around. “Algon?”

The Saurid was gone.

Yondu was drinking. He wasn't exactly sure what he was drinking, but it burned like alcohol and it came in a fancy bottle. It was bland and bitter, but he’d shelled out the units for it, so dammit, he was determined to drain it dry. Yondu took a mighty swig from the bottle and tilted his head back as he
swallowed.

“I knew I'd find your here.” Algon dropped onto the barstool next to Yondu. “Looking for something at the bottom of a bottle, are you?”

“Fuck off,” Yondu grunted.

“You're in quite the state.” Algon gestured to the bartender. “Anjavik, on ice. With one of those little umbrellas, please. The pink one.”

The bartender, a thin man with long webbed fingers, poured a bright turquoise liquid into a glass of ice. He poked a crazy straw and a little pink umbrella in it before sliding it down to Algon.

“Ah, thank you.” Algon slurped his drink through the straw, then smacked his scaly lips. “So. What is it this time, Yondu?”

“Ilyth was shit,” Yondu said, “I'm recuperatin’.”

Algon stirred his drink with his crazy straw, staring at Yondu.

“Would you just fuckin' go away,” Yondu snapped.

“You're angry,” Algon observed.

“No shit.”

“You're only angry when you are defensive.”

“So?”

“You are only defensive when someone threatens something that you care about.” Algon tilted his head. “And from what I have heard of Ilyth, you managed the reintegration rather nicely.”

“Whoop-de-fuckin'-do-da.”

“Which means,” Algon continued, “that whatever is being threatened has nothing to do with Ilyth at all.”

“Stop talking.” Yondu drained more of the watery swill. “You don't know shit about me.”

“They're leaving for Terra, aren't they?”

Yondu slammed the bottle down with such force that the bottom chipped; a small amount of liquor began dripping off.

“The fuck you want for figuring that one out, a goddamn medal?” Yondu shoved away from the bar and tugged his coat high on his shoulders. “Stay out of it, Algon.”

“Oh, like that's likely.” Algon chuckled and walked after Yondu, still carrying his bright drink. “There's nowhere to run, you angry little child. This is my ship.”

Yondu growled; he flicked open his coat to reveal his arrow.

“Don't piss me off, Algon,” he warned.

“How could I?” Algon slurped up some more drink, smiling. “You're already mad.”
“Then don't push me over the goddamn edge.” Yondu let his coat drop back down. “This ain't a joke.”

“I never said it was. The Quills are returning to Terra; that's quite serious. Or rather,” Algon said, “they're going to attempt to return to Terra. There's no way they'll be able to go.”

Yondu stopped, his head turned.

“What d'you mean,” he said in a low voice.

“I mean that there's no way they will be allowed to return.” Algon tossed the crazy straw. “Bah. These things take too long.”

“What do you mean, they won't be allowed?” Yondu stepped up to the Saurid. “Dammit, Algon, don't play games with me.”

“I'm not. Come now, Yondu. Don't tell me you haven't thought this all the way through. Even if the Nova Corps was struck by a sudden beam of generosity,” Algon explained, “they would still have to explain to the Asgardians how two Terrans got out of Terra. They'd have to admit that their defense was not as flawless as it appeared to be.”

“So they can't go.” Yondu's heart picked up speed, running on a selfish happiness. “They're stuck here.”

“I wouldn't say stuck.” Algon plucked out the pink umbrella and stuck it in the scales behind his left frill. “I would say, temporarily inconvenienced.”

“How temporary we talkin' here?”

“Oh, years to be sure.” Algon chuckled. “Can you imagine how embarrassing this will be for the Nova Corps?”

Yondu started pacing.

“Saal's agreed to help her out,” Yondu said, “think that'll affect anything?”

“The Denarian?” Algon's frills lifted in interest. “Meredith Quill certainly attracts attention. If she's working with a Denarian, they may be more willing to acquiesce.”

“But the Asgardians?”

“The Nova Corps would have to prove to the Asgardians that there is no way for anyone to exit or enter Terra. Perhaps they could use Meredith as an advantage; prove that they can capture whoever leaves, but I doubt that. The Asgardians are greatly fond of Terrans,” Algon explained, “and will want to protect them above all.”

“Good luck, Asgard.” Yondu's coat whirled as he paced. “Y'all ain't never met Terrans as much trouble as these ones.”

Algon watched Yondu's pacing with mild amusement.

“They do seem to have the most interesting effect on people,” he observed.

Yondu scowled and jammed his hands in his pockets. Algon sipped at his drink a little more, then sighed.
“I suppose you're thinking of kidnapping them or something,” he said in a dull voice.

“What? Hell no,” Yondu said, “I told Stakar and I'll tell you; I'm lettin' 'em go.”

“Oh. Well,” Algon chuckled, “that's remarkably mature of you. Here I was thinking you'd try some devilish underhanded manipulation.”

“Maybe a couple months ago I would have,” Yondu admitted, “but lyin' to those two just makes everything worse. I tried it; it didn't work. From now on, I'm stickin' with giving them shit as it is.”

It took Yondu a few moments to notice that Algon was standing with his head tilted back, blinking furiously.

“The hell are you doin',” he asked.

“Blinking,” Algon said through a thick throat, “so that I do not cry.”

“Cry?”

“You are being honest and open with your emotion.” Algon choked down a sob. “This is a beautiful day.”

“For fuck's sake, Algon, pull your shit together. This ain't a drama. This is me doin' what I'm gonna do. Gonna let them go,” Yondu swore to himself, “so they can get their happy Terran asses back to their home planet. Even if it takes years, they'll go wherever they want to go.”

“And what will you do,” Algon asked.

“Probably just hang back with the Ogords until I start chafin' under the rules again. Then, maybe blast through a couple Kree slaver ships until I get bored.” Yondu leaned against a merchant's stall and shrugged. “You know, back to normal.”

“That would be okay,” Algon said, “but it's not the ending I wanted for you.”

Yondu bared his teeth.

“The fuck were you thinking,” he asked.

“I was hoping that the Quills would not return to Terra,” Algon admitted, “and that you would marry Meredith and Peter would be your son and you would make a bajillion units and spend it all at my shop.”

Yondu's brain had stalled on the word “marry”.

“Are you insane?” The Centaurian's face turned violet. “Holy fuck, Algon, why don't ya wish for her to be dead? Better off dead than with a sonnuvah bitch like me, I tell you what.”

Algon lifted his eyes to the ceiling and blinked slowly.

“You,” he said, “are incomparably dense.”

“And you're livin' in a goddamn fantasy. She's got reasons for goin' home, Algon. She's got a boy to take care of, a pop to go back to.” Yondu stared at the ground. “Goin' back to Terra... I think it means about as much to her as goin' to Ilyth meant to me.”

“Oh?”
“Yeah. It won't be easy, integratin' back, and there's gonna be a hell of a lot of trouble regardless,” Yondu predicted, “but she'll be getting her family back. Means a lot to her. I ain't got the right to stand in her way, and I ain't no parent myself so I can't tell her how to raise a kid.”

Algon smiled up to his eyes.

“You should tell her how you feel about her leaving,” he suggested, “so that she makes an informed decision understanding the life she's leaving behind. Even if it does not change her mind, she will find peace in understanding how you and the rest of the galaxy feel about her. She needs to know.”

“She won't wanna know,” Yondu said, “and it don't matter.”

“It does matter. It will matter more when you've done it and can see the effect.” Algon drained the rest of his ice drink. “Trust me; tell her how you feel about her leaving, and you will find greater peace in her decision.”

Yondu groaned.

“Fuckin' know-it-all Saurid,” he muttered.

Algon laughed, his claws on his hips.

“I don't know it all,” he said, “but I know much, much more than you, Yondu!”

“Don't rub it in.” Yondu pushed past him. “Where's the Terrans?”

“I led Peter to the water slide,” Algon said, “but I do not know if he is still there.”

“He's still there,” Yondu said.

“How do you know?”

“Because I know the boy.”

“Peter Quill, if you don't get out of there right now, you're going to turn into a raisin!” Meredith shouted at her son, hands on her hips. “I am not going to ask again!”

“But mom,” Peter complained, “it's only been half an hour!”

“That's long enough. How are we going to go shopping for supplies to get home if you're sopping wet, Peter?”

“So if I don't get out we're not going shopping for things to get home with?”

“That's exactly what I'm saying, Peter.”

Peter submerged entirely. If that was the case, he was never leaving.

“Peter!” Meredith shrieked. “I am still talking to you.”

Under the water, Peter held his breath. He had no idea how long he could keep this up. Three blue-skinned girls with pearls in their hair were sitting on the bottom of the pool too. One of them poked
his neck and said something. Peter just grinned at them. The girls giggled.

“Peter get up here!” Meredith was still shouting. “Peter, you’re going to drown!”

Meredith’s words were muffled by the water, but Peter and the girls still heard him. One of the girls put her finger to her lips, smiling. She pulled her finger away from her mouth; as she did so, she created a large air bubble. One of the other girls shoved it over Peter’s head.

“Thanks,” Peter said, breathing in the salty air of the bubble.

The girls giggled.

“Peter!” Meredith’s face had turned several shades darker. “Young man, when I get hold of you I’m going to tan your hide.”

“The hell you screamin’ for, Mery?” Yondu came pacing up with Algon at his heels. “Somethin’ wrong?”

“Peter won’t get out of the stupid pool,” Meredith snapped, “because he doesn’t want to go shopping.”


“Because we’re going to buy supplies for the trip home,” Meredith explained, “and Peter’s still throwing a tantrum about that.”

“Sounds like someone else I know,” Algon said.

“Can it, you scaled shit-stack.” Yondu shoved Algon. “You need help getting the boy out, Mery?”

Meredith huffed, staring down at her son in the water.

“Nope,” she decided, “I’ll do it myself.”

Meredith reached under her shirt and fiddled with something in the back. She pulled her arms inside her shirt, fumbled for a moment, and then stuck her arms back through the sleeves. Her bra fell to the ground. Yondu stared.

“What is that,” Algon asked curiously.

“Something I don't want to get wet.” Meredith shook out her curls and unbuttoned her pants. “Trust me, it’s a bitch to dry.”

Yondu’s face turned more and more purple with every inch of Meredith’s legs that came out of her pants. Meredith folded the red leather and handed them to Yondu.

“Here,” she said.

He took it without fully comprehending what he was being asked to do. Meredith tied her shirt tightly around her ribs with a fat round knot, then got in the water.

“Peter,” she said.

Under the water, Peter’s eyes widened. He tried to swim away, but Meredith dived into the water and snatched his ankles. The blue-skinned little girls shrieked and darted away as Peter was dragged
backwards. Meredith stood in the water and stomped back up the pool ramp, holding Peter by the ankle. She didn't let go until he was back up on dry floor, flat on his back and staring into the face of his mother.

“You,” she stormed, “are in so much trouble.”

Peter's eyes flicked to the pool; Yondu's foot landed between Peter and the ledge.

“You ain't rollin' back in there, boy. Don't even think about it,” Yondu said.

Meredith grabbed Peter by the forearm and yanked him upright.

“You're going back to the Eclector,” she snapped, “and you are going to wait for me there. You are grounded, mister.”

“I was already grounded,” Peter snapped back.

“And now yer double-ass grounded,” Yondu said.

“What?” Peter's eyes widened. “You can't be double-grounded!”

“Can too. Grounded once.” Yondu pointed at Meredith. “And grounded twice.” He pointed at himself.

Peter's eyes boggled. Meredith hooked him under the arm and dragged him towards the exit.

“Mery,” Yondu said.

Meredith whipped around so fast that her blonde curls went flying.

“What,” she snarled.

Yondu handed her pants back to her and nudged her bra with his foot.

“Might wanna put that on before you go back on the Eclector,” he suggested.

“Oh. Oh gracious, you're right.” Meredith hooked the bra over her shoulder and grabbed the pants, her face reddening. “Thanks, Yondu.”

“Gotcha covered, Mery.” Yondu stepped back, doing his best not to smile. “You don't go easy on that boy, you hear? He's been a goddamn devil for the past few days. Best let him have it, throw the book at him.”

“Yeah.” Meredith nodded, her expression firm. “I can do that. Discipline is good.”

“That's right.” Yondu relished Peter's horrified expression. “Let him know what happens when he pushes his momma too hard.”

With Meredith dragging him away, Peter resembled a tiny convict. He glared at Yondu for as long as they made eye contact. When Meredith was out of earshot, Yondu started to laugh.

“That goddamn little spitpiss,” he chuckled, “what a hellion.”

“Hellion,” Algon asked.

“One of Mery's words.” Yondu picked at his teeth. “Means a troublemaker.”
“Like you,” Algon observed.

“Yes, guess so.” Yondu took a deep breath. “You see what I mean about these Terrans though, don’t you. Trouble, every fuckin’ second of their lives. Can’t go five feet without screamin’ or cryin’ or blowin’ somethin’ up.”

“I see.” Algon nodded. “They make for natural Ravagers.”

“See, and that’s what I’m sayin’. Ought to grab a few more if we ever get back to Terra; a whole damn ship of ’em would be invincible. It’d be a flyin’ death trap,” Yondu admitted, “because they’d all piss me off or break some shit or cry so much that we’d drown, but Terrans sure know how to avoid death.”

Kraglin was one-hundred-percent sure that Meredith was going to kill Peter. Her grip on the boy’s arm was like iron. Kraglin hovered behind her as Meredith shoved her son into the cages.

“You,” she fumed, “are staying here until Yondu gets back.”

“But mom.” Peter grabbed the bars and started to cry. “I don’t want to! I didn’t do anything, I was just in the pool!”

“I had to go into that pool and drag you out, Peter Quill. You will listen to me whether you like it or not, you hear?” Meredith’s eyes sparkled with fire. “When I say you get out, you get out. When I say go home, you go home. And when I say we’re going back to Terra, we are going back to Terra.”

Peter broke down sobbing. Kraglin could see Meredith’s resolve waver; after all, that was still her boy sobbing behind bars. The Xandarian patted her shoulder.

“I’ll watch him, Ms. Q.” Kraglin pulled up a chair and sat down. “I kept y’all out of trouble the first night y’all was here, I can do it again. Don’t worry about him. You go dry off, get some proper clothes on.”

“Thank you, Kraglin. You let me know if you need me.” Meredith put her hands on her hips. “You hear that, Peter? Kraglin’s in charge.”

Peter, puffy-eyed and glaring, said nothing. Meredith left the room without another word, leaving Peter and Kraglin alone.

“So,” Kraglin said, “what’d you do?”

“I hid in the pool so we couldn’t go buy shit to go home with.” Peter stood up and kicked the ground. “I hate Terra! I don’t want to go home! Terra’s boring and out here is fun. I’m not human anyway, why do I have to go home?”

“Be thankful you got a home to go back to, Peter.” Kraglin scratched his chin. “Not all of us can say that.”

“You’re a Ravager, you’re lucky. You can do whatever you want.” Peter slumped back down to the ground. “I wish I was a Ravager like you.”

“You want to switch places, do you?”
“Yeah,” Peter said.

Kraglin leaned his elbows on his knees. When he spoke, his voice was unusually gentle.

“Pete,” he said, “my home planet is rubble. My family's dead. If we could switch places, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I'd rather be behind bars and goin' home than out here without a home planet to go back to.”

Peter swallowed. He wiped his tears off on his sleeve and sat in silence for a minute or two.

“Kraglin,” he eventually said.

“What, Pete?”

“I don't want to switch places.”

“I know, Pete. I know.”

Yondu's body was wobbly from fear. He walked back onto the Eclector like Mainframe with frozen joints; stiff, awkward. In his arms was a basket filled with equipment; long-range sensors, dehydrated rations, radio scramblers – everything a Terran would need to break the atmosphere and land without being detected by Terran authorities. Enough for one shot, Yondu thought to himself, just one shot to get them home.

“Yondu?”

Shit. Yondu dropped the basket and kicked it; it slid across the metal floor and into a storage closet. He slammed the portal shut and turned around just as Meredith turned the corner.

“Hey,” he grunted.

“Hey.” Meredith rubbed her arms; she was wearing jeans and one of Kraglin's old shirts now. “Sorry about earlier. I embarrassed you in front of Algon, didn't I?”

“What? Hell no.” Yondu chuckled. “He thought it was goddamn hilarious.”

Meredith ran her fingers through her curls, groaning.

“And,” she said, “I didn't pick up anything for the trip home.”

Yondu's collar was uncomfortably warm.

“Yeah,” he coughed, “about that.”

Meredith blinked. Yondu opened the portal to the storage closet and jerked his head towards the basket of supplies.

“Gift from Algon,” he grunted.

Alright, so it was one more lie; Yondu didn't care. The way Meredith's face lit up more than made up for all the knowing chuckles and teasing grins Algon had jabbed Yondu with for “buying supplies for his girlfriend”. Meredith dropped to her knees and examined the basket.
“It’s everything I need,” she breathed.

“Yeah, well, he tried to skimp you on some things so I made him toss in some deluxe shit.” Yondu put his hands in his pockets. “Not a bad haul. Didn’t cost much, either.”

“How much did it cost,” she asked.

“Bout as much as those dresses raked in,” Yondu lied.

Meredith paused. She stood up, squinting at Yondu.

“I don’t believe you,” she said.

“That’s because I’m lyin’,” he heard himself say.

“I knew it.” Meredith poked him in the chest, hard. “Alright, Yondu, how much of my money did you spend?”

“Your money?” Yondu growled. “Not a damn unit! Bought it myself, so there!”

Meredith’s silver eyes widened.

“You bought me the supplies to get home,” she said.

Yondu’s coat was way too hot. He nudged the basket towards her with his foot.

“Just take it,” he mumbled, “and don’t ask no goddamn questions.”

He tried to push past her, but Meredith slid her hand on his forearm.

“Yondu,” she said softly.

Yondu turned away from her and walked quickly into the nearest hallway, his face purpling. He was not goin’ soft, he told himself firmly, he was lettin’ all that go. Let it go let it go let it go. Uneasily he whistled; his arrow shot out and did tight corkscrews up and down the hallway. A nameless nervous energy tightened his mouth and his spine; why was it every time anything happened between him and Mery, he suddenly lost his goddamn nerve? The anxiety spiked into anger; why couldn’t he control himself? Dammit!

He could feel the arrow’s drag, the slight change of angle and pressure that indicated contact with another object. Yondu wheeled around, surprised. Meredith Quill stood just a few feet behind him, a red line of light fading next to her cheek.

He’d cut her.

“Oh fuck, fuck fuck fuck.” Yondu’s heart snapped a fast rhythm. “Shit, Mery. Aw fuck, I didn’t... You bleedin’?”

Meredith ran her fingertips along her cheek; a thin line of crimson was blossoming before Yondu’s eyes. Within seconds, it was already weeping down her face. Meredith blinked, shocked.

“Blood,” she said.

Yondu felt his ribcage crush; he’d hurt one of his goddamn Terrans. He ripped a cloth out of his back pocket and pressed it to her face. He met her eyes; she stared at him, too shocked to cry.
“You cut me,” she said.

“It was an accident,” he mumbled, “I didn't mean to.”

Meredith pressed her own hand over his, keeping the pressure on her face. She took a deep breath.

“It was an accident,” she said, “forget about it.”

Easier said than goddamn done, Yondu thought. He'd sliced her pretty little face open like some kind of psychotic brute. Dammit, why was he such a fuck-up? Yondu swallowed, locking his jaw.

“Besides, not the first time it's happened.” Meredith managed a smile. “Remember?”

Yondu's brow furrowed.

“The fuck you talkin' about, Mery,” he asked.

“My cheek.” Meredith tapped her face. “When I got zoomed up into the Eclector, the day we left Earth, you cut my cheek with your arrow.”

“I did?” Yondu blinked.

Meredith laughed and shook her head.

“You're not good with remembering details, are you,” she asked.

“It ain't important.” Yondu checked the wound; when blood kept oozing to the surface, he returned the pressure. “Why the hell's this takin' so long?”

“Terran, not Centaurian. We can't all heal that fast,” Meredith said.

Yondu grumbled and pressed harder. Meredith looked up at him.

“Are you mad at me,” she asked.

“What?”

“Something Algon said.” Meredith sighed. “It made me think that maybe you were mad at me. For leaving, I mean.”

Yondu tried to swallow the lump in his throat. Instead, he scowled.

“Guess you're too good for us now, is that it?” Yondu pulled away the bandage; the wound had stopped bleeding. “For shit's sake, Mery. You're just gonna jump ship?”

“I don't have a choice,” Meredith said, “I need to raise Peter, and this is not a safe place to do that.”

“Fine, so the Eclector ain't exactly a goddamn daycare. The boy wants to stay,” Yondu challenged, “don't he get a say in this?”

“Peter's eight years old. He's a child, Yondu. I'm his mother.” Meredith wouldn't look at him. “I don't give him what he wants. I give him what's best for him.”

“And that ain't us?”

There was an edge to his voice, but Meredith didn't shy away from it. She turned around and faced him fully.
“He needs schooling, stability, and friends his age, Yondu.” The calm level of her voice surprised Yondu. “I’ve failed him in virtually every other way. I won't let him down now. When he's an adult, he can go wherever he wants. Until then, I call the shots, and no one is going to convince me otherwise.”

Yondu shifted from foot to foot, scowling.

“Goddamn stubborn son-of-a-bitchin' Terrans,” he said.

Meredith smiled.

“Thanks for not trying to, I don't know, kidnap us back or imprison us here or something,” she said.

Heat rushed to Yondu's face; he felt a slight sweat break out. Pretend you didn't think of it. Pretend that wasn't plan B.

“After all the goddamn trouble you brought me,” Yondu grumbled, “you're lucky I ain't puntin' you out an airlock.”

Meredith laughed. They stood in silence for another moment.

“So you're not mad at me,” she asked.

“Wasn't ever pissed at you, Mery.”

“Then why wouldn't you talk to me?”

Yondu crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. He had no idea how the hell he was going to say this. Swallowing, he made up his mind. He had to say it. He opened his mouth and started whistling; his arrow cut nervous lines in the air. Meredith watched them. Yondu's eyes flicked up, then back down to the floor. Fine; if he couldn't say it in words she'd understand, he'd meet her halfway. He kept his head down as he whistled. The arrow marked red slits of light in the air: DON'T WANNA LOSE MY TERRANS.

Meredith laughed and rubbed her arms.

“We're not 'your' Terrans, Yondu. We're just Terrans,” she said, “and we want to go home.”

Without looking at her, Yondu whistled low. Meredith looked back at the words; they were quickly replaced with: DON'T WANNA LOSE MY BEST FRIEND.

Meredith put her hand over her heart.

“Yondu,” she said softly.

Yondu scowled, turning purple. He snatched his arrow out of the air and shoved it in his quiver. He wanted to be a million miles from this spot, but that meant being a million miles from Mery, and that was not an option.

“Damn crazy overemotional Terrans,” he mumbled.

Meredith hugged him. He stood there like a steel pole for a moment, then wrapped his arms around her. Meredith pressed her face into his shoulder and breathed in the scent of engine oil. Yondu laid his cheek on her head; her curls fluffed around his nose and chin. He held her tight. Don't let go. Don't let go.
“Don't wanna lose my Terrans,” he mumbled.

“Got attached, did you?”

“Kinda hard not to, Mery. You're like a goddamn fungus.”

She squeezed him, laughing.

“I'm going to miss you,” she said, “I promise.”

Yondu exhaled a sigh. So there it was; she was still leaving.

“If Terra ain't a goddamn paradise,” he swore, “I'm gonna blow the whole damn thing up because for all the trouble you're goin' through to get there... it just goddamn better be perfect, alright?”

Meredith laughed and pressed her forehead to his shoulder.

“It better be,” she giggled, “and if it's not?”

Yondu reached down and hooked his arm under her knees, scooping her up. Meredith's eyes shot wide and she made a sound like someone stepping on an Orloni. Yondu carried her like a new groom to the window and nodded towards the starscape.

“If Terra ain't good enough,” he grunted, “I'll give you all this.”

Meredith's insides were clouds. She stared up at his grizzled profile and felt a tight inner pull. It was like the javelin she had felt from Ego's power, but instead of pulling her back into her body, it was pulling her out. Towards him, she realized with a jolt. Meredith swallowed.

“If Terra doesn't work out,” she said carefully, “I'll take it.”

Yondu looked down at her. They held like that a moment – eye contact, her in his arms like a newly wedded couple – before he chuckled and set her down.

“And then that goddamn Terran trouble magnet would break the whole damn thing,” he said.

“Most likely.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “Maybe.”

Yondu stuffed his hands in his pockets, studying her. Her cheek wound was dripping slightly; he ran his thumb along it, wiping away the blood.

“Never said sorry for that, did I,” he mumbled.

“For cutting me?”

“For any of it.” Yondu sighed and leaned against the wall. “I'm sorry, Mery. I'm sorry for all of it. I kidnapped you from your goddamn family, treated you and the boy like shit, lied to your faces. I've been a real asshole to you, and you somehow still ain't killed me for it.”

“You were a big blue asshole,” Meredith allowed, “but you did a lot to fix what you did wrong, so... I forgive you, for all of it. And I'm sorry I didn't trust you, that I spoke without understanding and that I made all this more difficult than it had to be. This is all my fault anyway; if I hadn't slept with Ego...”

The corner of Yondu's mouth turned resolutely up.
“No more sleepin' with space men, ain't that what you said?”

“Yep.” Meredith smiled. “My new personal law.”

“Y’know,” he said slowly, “Ravagers are famous for breakin' those law things.”

“Yeah, I know. But I,” Meredith said, “am not a Ravager.”

Yondu snorted.

“Says you,” he said.

Meredith rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

“If four months of non-stop crazy wasn't enough to change me,” she said, “nothing will.”

Yondu looked her up and down. Silver lines that criss-crossed her body, fluffy golden curls, bright eyes, pink lips...

“You changed. You ain't the bald dyin' Terran what bit me in the neck all those months ago,” Yondu said, “and I think you know that.”

“And you're not the complete jerkass son-of-a-bitch that abducted me and Peter off Terra.” Meredith grinned and put her hands on his hips. “You're just a regular big blue asshole now.”

Yondu chuckled and put an arm around her shoulders.

“You cuss too much,” he said.

Meredith laughed so hard that she doubled over. Yondu grinned and steadied her. She came up with tears in her eyes, giggling.

“I am gonna miss you,” she said.

“Yeah, I'm pretty goddamn great.”

“Well, you got me all these supplies. That's pretty great of you. Is there anything you want before I go,” she asked.

Yondu's crimson eyes flicked between hers.

“Pepper,” he said.

She laughed.

“Other than that,” she said.

“Promise to come back,” he challenged.

Meredith hesitated.

“For a visit, or...?”

“For a long damn time,” he clarified.

“I see.” Meredith sighed. “Might be easier to just give you the pepper.”
“Your pick,” he said.

Meredith's silver eyes flicked between Yondu's crimson ones. He held still, the universe pausing for a moment. Then, she kissed him softly, her fingertips stroking his face. His large blue hand cupped the back of her neck, warm under the curls, and pulled her in. The kiss stayed gentle; Meredith cupped Yondu's face in her hands properly. It was a long kiss, sweet, and over much too quickly. Yondu pulled back when she did.

“Well damn,” he said, “what the hell was that?”

“Pepper,” she replied.

“Oh hell no it wasn't.” Yondu put his arm on the wall and leaned. “I know pepper, that weren't no pepper. Didn't taste like no pepper.”

“Missing the Centaurian blood? Sorry,” Meredith quipped, “you'll have to go without.”

Yondu leaned in close.

“More sugar than pepper,” he said softly.

Meredith blushed as red as Yondu's fin. He held her gaze for a few more moments, then put his hands in his pockets and walked away.

“You be sure about the decision you're makin'. You're goin' back, yeah,” Yondu said, “but you're also leavin' behind.”

Meredith watched him disappear around the corner. She lifted her fingers to the cut on her cheek; it felt like she was bleeding from her heart.

“I know,” she said softly, “and I'm sorry.”
Meredith leaves.

(Here it is, the penultimate chapter. Number 49. Only one left to go, and this will be finished. The longest, most fluff-ridden thing I've ever written.)

(Not gonna lie, I'm a little emotional about finishing this.)

(Or maybe I'm just crying over this ending.)

(Nah, it's both.)

For as little as she'd brought with her from Terra, Meredith was surprised how long it took her to pack. The likely cause, she mused, was that she kept stopping and fretting over every little thing. She couldn't help it; everything in her room was a physical manifestation of a memory. She'd gathered all of Peter's flight tapes. That had been a struggle, as Gef kept “forgetting” to give them to her; Meredith had to rummage through his desk herself in order to find them. It'd been like that all over the ship; the Ravagers were stalling Meredith's departure. It would have been sweet, she reasoned, if it wasn't so tiresome.

She was so engrossed in packing that the sound of her portal door opening made her jump. Meredith whipped around. Kraglin stood in the doorway, half-smiling. His eyes were red, and his hands were jammed in his pockets. Meredith's heart gave a painful pang.

“So.” Kraglin looked at the bags. “You're leaving.”

Meredith sighed. “I'm sorry, honey, but I have to go. This might be my only chance to find Peter and me a way home.”

Kraglin nodded, blinking back tears. “I know.”

She crossed over in front of him and tried to smile. “I'll miss you.”

He nodded, and a tear dropped onto his cheek. “We'll... We'll miss you too.”

“Aw, come here.” Meredith wrapped her arms around him. “Don't cry, Kraglin. It's just for a little while. We'll see each other again.”

Kraglin hugged her tightly and said nothing. Meredith rubbed his back, blinking back tears. Peter was her son by blood, but she'd come to view Kraglin the same way. He was family, no doubt about it.

“I'm always gonna be out there prayin' for you, honey,” she said, “and I'm so thankful for all that you've done for me. I didn't know your parents, but I'd bet my life that they're real proud of you; I know I am.”
Kraglin started sobbing onto Meredith's shoulder. The sound nearly broke her resolve. She held Kraglin until the shaking stopped. He pulled back, his eyes red and face streaked with water. He snorted; Meredith handed him a tissue.

“Sorry.” He blew his nose. “This ain't very first-mate of me.”

“I won't tell anyone,” Meredith promised.

“Thanks,” he said.

Kraglin tossed the tissue in the trash; Meredith grinned.

“Looks like I finally taught one of you to pick up after yourselves,” she joked.

“It ain't gonna be the same without you, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin sniffed. “It just ain't.”

“Don't worry, you'll be just fine. Things will just go back to the way they were before Peter and I showed up,” she promised.

“You been with us a quarter year,” Kraglin said, “I don't think we're just gonna go back to how it used to be.”

Meredith rubbed his shoulders, smiling. “Maybe not, but you'll be okay. You're a good young man, Kraglin.”

Kraglin drew up his shoulders and beamed down at her despite his tears. He pounded his right fist against his left shoulder; a Ravager salute. Meredith laughed and did the same.

“We'll make a Ravager out of you yet,” Kraglin said.

“I don't think so, honey.” Meredith smiled. “I'm too soft.”

“That's a good thing.” Kraglin returned the smile. “Don't change, Ms. Q.”

She kissed his forehead softly. “Don't you change either, honey.”

The two hugged again. Kraglin buried his face in her shoulder, his tears staining her jacket. He couldn't help but feel like this was the end of something that should have been a beginning, and that made him sad in a way he didn't fully understand.

Peter sat on the bunk down in the prison, hugging his knees. Yondu was standing outside the door with his hands on his hips.

“You know the door's been unlocked since yesterday,” Yondu said.

Peter nodded.

“What, you don't want to come out?”

Peter sniffed.

“You don't want to go home?”

Peter shook his head. Yondu sighed.
“Boy,” he said, “you ain’t even goin’ home today. Your momma’s goin’ down to Xandar and you're stayin’ with me until she gets back, you hear? It ain't the end of the goddamn world.”

Peter wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“I'm gonna miss her,” he warbled.

“I know, boy. That's how it's supposed to be. But she'll be back,” Yondu said, “and you'll be waitin'.”

“And then she'll take me to Earth,” Peter said.

“Yep.” Yondu crossed his arms. “Whether you like it or not.”

Peter blinked; tears ran down his face. Yondu exhaled. This was not his forte. He was still working out his own stupid feelings on the matter; he didn't have room to handle the boy's stupid feelings too.

“Look,” he said, “get your skinny Terran ass in there with your mother and help her pack. It'll make you feel better.”

“It will?”

“Hell if I know,” Yondu said, “but it's better than sittin' there cryin' like a sissy girl.”

Peter slid off the bunk and walked out of the cage, his head and shoulders hung low. Yondu watched him shuffle off. After he left, Yondu stared at the tile floor of the Eclector. He could remember Meredith mopping it down, that dumb Walkman on her hip as she sang to her Terran songs. He looked in the cage. He'd kept her in one of those; what a jackass he'd been. He found himself shaking his head slowly.

“Yondu?”

Yondu turned around; Peter was standing in the doorway.

“What, boy,” Yondu said.

“Will you miss her,” he asked.

“What do you mean,” Yondu grunted.

“You're her best friend.” Peter's face was serious. “Won't you miss her?”

For a moment, the only sound in the room was the churning of the ship and the faint roar of the engines.

“A little, boy, but don't go tellin' nobody,” Yondu said.

“Okay.” Peter ran off.

Yondu went back to staring at the cages. He'd miss her a hell of a lot more than just a little, but he'd get through it. If he could handle losing the Ogords and his family, he could handle a brief time without Meredith. It wasn't like she'd be gone forever, he reasoned. She'd be leaving soon, he thought, but what he had told Peter was absolutely the truth. Meredith would be back, and Yondu would be waiting.
Packing went a lot faster with Peter's help, even with the two Terrans taking crying breaks every few minutes. Peter seemed to have changed somehow; Meredith had no idea what had happened since she'd grounded him, but he was taking everything quite seriously all of a sudden. He was double-checking everything she needed, sternly lecturing her on keeping a weapon on her at all times, and assuring her that he'd be fine on the Eclector. Meredith would have smiled, if she wasn't so worried. She finally sent him off to find Kraglin while she packed her last things. The door opened; she looked up, expecting Peter. Instead, Yondu stood in the doorway in a sleeveless gray shirt with his captain's rank pinned on it. The scowl she'd come to know and appreciate was formed firmly on his face.

“So,” he said, “you're headin' to Xandar.”

“Yep.”

“This might not work, Mery.”

“I know.” Meredith took a deep breath. “But it's the closest thing I've got to a shot.”

“You sure you wanna do this?”

Meredith pressed a hand to her forehead and nodded.

“I've got to take this chance. Peter will be fine,” she said, “I keep telling myself that. Peter will be fine.”

“He'll be fine.” Yondu walked over to her, crossing his muscled arms. “It's you we're worried about.”

The corners of Meredith's mouth pulled up.

“Worried about me now, huh? You boys are getting' soft,” she said.

“I told you that you were having a goddamn effect,” he grunted, “and you didn't believe me.”

Yondu's captain rank was crooked. Meredith reached out and straightened it.

“You'll all be fine,” she said.

He grabbed her hand, lacing his fingers with hers. Meredith squeezed his hand slightly; he ran his rough thumb over her knuckles. It was such a gentle action; Meredith liked it. She looked at their joined hands and felt her face warm up.

“And you?” His voice was low. “How'll you get by, Mery?”

“I'll be fine, too.” Meredith smiled. “I'm pretty tough.”

Yondu laughed. “That's a goddamn understatement.”

“I've spent four months with the toughest sons-of-bitches in the galaxy.” Meredith lifted her chin.

“Whatever comes next, I can handle it.”

“'Course you can.” Yondu took a step forwards, closing the distance between them. “You're Star-Queen.”
Meredith could feel the blood in her face; she was sure she was blushing scarlet.

“You're bein' awful nice to me,” she mumbled.

“I'll be a jackass later,” he said, “even it out.”

Meredith laughed. She took his other hand in hers, grinning and shaking her head.

“So that's how you do it, huh? Be real nice now, then balance it out by being a rotten son-of-a-bitch later,” she said.

“It works,” he grunted.

Meredith tilted her head. “One day I'll figure you out, Yondu Udonta.”

He cracked a crooked grin.

“Don't bet on it, Meredith Quill,” he said.

“At this point, there ain't much left you could do to surprise me,” she said.

“Don't say that while there's a bed in the room,” Yondu growled.

Meredith couldn't help but laugh.

“You wouldn't want me,” she said, “I've slept with a planet.”

“One of these goddamn days, Mery, you'll figure out that Ravagers don't give a fuck about who you were or what you've done. Or who you've done,” Yondu added.

“Really?”

“We take you for who you are,” he said, “not for who you been.”

“Hope I get better than who I was.” Meredith sighed. “Smarter, wiser, less of a stubborn fool.”

“Don't say that, Mery.” Yondu ran his thumbs over her knuckles. “You stop bein' a crazy, impulsive, stubborn idjit and we can't be friends anymore.”

“Oh really?” Meredith grinned. “Why's that.”

“You'll be too good for me,” he said.

Meredith opened her mouth, then sighed and hugged him tightly.

“The one day where you being an asshole could have made this easier,” she said, “and you spoil it by being sweet.”

“Don't call me that, dammit.” Yondu wrapped his arms around her and held her like he'd never let go. “Someone's gonna hear.”

Meredith Quill was one goddamn crazy-ass Terran crybaby, and like it or not, Yondu wanted to keep this cargo to himself. He couldn't help it; there was something about her that soothed him, that found parts of him that had long been broken and rounded the jagged edges. She was sugar and pepper and strong and crazy. When he shared parts of himself with her, he didn't feel ashamed about it. There was no weakness in it anymore. Yondu didn't have the faintest goddamn idea why, but with
her in his arms, he felt like honed steel again. He felt like he was taking care of his own. He felt like he could conquer the entire goddamn galaxy. He felt like a Ravager. His arms tightened around hers, and he buried his face in her hair.

“Goddamn stupid fuck-forsaken Terrans too goddamn good for my ship,” he mumbled.

Meredith laughed; he felt her lips press against his neck. Yondu leaned back and gripped her shoulders with his hands. His crimson eyes darted between hers.

“Don't get too good for us, Mery,” he said.

“Too good for this? Too good for sailin' the stars, seeing the galaxy, and being free?” Meredith chuckled. “No such thing.”

“But you won't stay,” he grumbled.

“Hey. Hey, don't do that to me.” She patted his face. “I already know I'm going to worry myself senseless over you. Don't make it harder than it has to be.”

Yondu made a face, but didn't reply. Meredith laughed at his expression, then folded a few more clothes into a box.

“Kraglin came by earlier,” she said, “said that Saal would meet me at Nova Corps headquarters. Said they found me a place to stay, too.”

“They'd better. Anything they do ticks you off? You call me. They try to hustle you? You call me.” Yondu bared his teeth. “I'll fuck them over so bad they'll be pickin' their teeth out of their shit.”

Meredith laughed and hung her head.

“So what you're saying is, if I have trouble you're going to come and kidnap me?”

“Yep.”

Meredith chuckled and shook her head.

“You're something else, Yondu,” she said.

“I mean it.” Yondu sat down in the backless chair, leaning his elbows on his knees. “Somethin' happens to you, who the hell am I gonna stick the kid with?”

“Oh, you'd get used to him. Just think of all the units you could make off him,” Meredith teased, “and if he gets rowdy, just eat him.”

Yondu tried not to, but he couldn't help but grin.

“The boy hears you talkin' like that and he'll stow away in your damn suitcase,” he said.

“I wish I could take him with me. But this is going to be so stressful on its own, and I'm still not sure if my living arrangements are going to have the space I'd need for Peter.” Meredith sighed and put her hand on her forehead. “Peter will be fine. Peter will be fine. Yondu, tell me Peter will be fine.”

“He'll be fine,” Yondu said.

Meredith exhaled. The comms unit crackled to life; Gef's voice came over the link.
“Cap'n,” Gef said, “we're approachin' Xandar. They've sent a load o' ships to watch us, make sure we don't try anything fun.”

“Don't engage 'em,” Yondu grunted, “and follow the course in. Crew stays aboard. Rules are, we can't be arrested unless we're on Xandar, and as long as we're on the ship, we ain't on Xandar.”

“You can't get arrested for being in the atmosphere,” Meredith asked.

“They could try,” Yondu said, “but then we'd blab to the whole damn galaxy about stealin' Terrans and the Asgardians would grab Nova by the tongue and sling her into the sun.”

“Ah,” Meredith said, “blackmail.”

“That's the name o' the game, Quill.” Gef chuckled. “Aye, captain, Kraglin's taking 'er in.”

The comm link went dead. Meredith sat on her bed, directly across from Yondu.

“So we're here,” Meredith said.

“Yeah,” he said.

Yondu could hear his heartbeat in his ears. His collar was uncomfortably warm, and he was noticing things he should have been ignoring. Meredith was sitting on her bed, her curls softly draped over her shoulders, her hands in her lap, folded gently. Her head was slightly tilted down, but she was still looking at him; the angle showed off her long, dark lashes. She was wearing her leather jacket; Yondu could practically feel the texture as he imagined slipping it off her shoulders.

“Yondu,” she started, “I don't know how to say any of this.”

_Don't you dare say goodbye._

“C'mere,” he said.

Yondu grabbed her arm and pulled her into a kiss. It was rough, unasked for, and he grabbed her waist for good measure. She made a noise of alarm and hit his side; he laughed and pushed her backwards. Her back hit the bed. Meredith's eyes were silver platters, staring up at him with indignant alarm.

“The hell was that,” she demanded to know.

“Ain't nothin' left I could do to surprise ya, huh?” Yondu put his thumb over her bottom lip, grinning slightly. “That there, Star-Queen, was a _see you later._”

Meredith turned scarlet; Yondu chuckled and turned to leave.

“You're teasing me,” she said.

“Just keepin' you on your toes, Star-Queen.” Yondu turned with a grin. “Can't have you getting soft.”

“Big blue asshole,” he heard her mutter.

Yondu laughed and let the portal shut behind him. Meredith was left sitting on her bed with a red faced, flustered. She wanted to be mad, but he'd given her exactly what she needed; a light little kick-out-the-door, just enough of a push away for her to feel okay with leaving.
“Big blue asshole,” she said again, “always looking out for me.”

Still, her cheeks and her heart warmed. Meredith knew she was going to miss him, and she knew that he knew it, too.

There was nothing left to do. Meredith had hugged Kraglin goodbye, sobbed and cuddled Peter, and even cooked a vat of stew that she’d left on the stove for the boys. There was nothing left to do; it was time to leave the Eclector. She paced down the loading ramp with all eyes on her, and stepped out onto the streets of Xandar. They glittered with tile and white architecture, a pristine bustling metropolis. The Nova Corps headquarters was straight down the street, a street which was flooded with bustling Xandarians going about their business. They wore sleek clothes in bright colors; in her leather jacket and old red pants, Meredith felt distinctly out of place. The loading ramp closed behind her. Meredith turned, and was rewarded with a fleeting glimpse of Peter's face before the ramp snapped shut. Meredith waited and watched as slowly, the Eclector rose into the air. She swallowed; there was no going back now. She started down the street. *Here we go again.*

The comm unit in her ear crackled to life. A wave of shouting came over the comm; the discord alone made Meredith cringe. A hundred or so Ravagers were all yelling, and Meredith could hear Gef and Kraglin trying to establish some sense of order.

“Y'all calm down before the cap'n gets wind of this!”

“Oy, mates! Settle down now, settle down, one at a time. Drazkar, put the chair *down.*”

Meredith grabbed the comm unit. “Quiet!”

There was a hush.

“Ms. Quill?” Kraglin's voice echoed in the silence. “Is that you?”

“Yeah, honey, it's me.”

There was another wave of yelling.

“Quill, Quill!” Meredith could distinguish Drazkar's voice. “You actually left us?”

“I thought she'd call back. I didn't think she'd leave. Not really,” Lunis said, “not for good!”

Meredith took a deep breath. “I'm sorry, y'all, but I have to find a way home.”

“Why?” Lunis sounded like he was about to cry.

“Because home is where I belong,” she said, “and I've got to get there. I've got to get back to my papa. He's been missing his daughter for months. I've got to get back to my life, y'all. Then I can bring Peter home, and we can be a family again.”

This speech was met with some whimpers and sniffles. Meredith sighed and cupped the comm unit close.

“Listen. I'm never going to forget any of you. Thanks to you, I'm alive. If I'd stayed on Terra, I'd be dead, no way around it. Yes,” she said, “there were times where I wished with all my heart that I'd never been sucked up into space. But now I can look back and I can say that I don't regret anything
that happened, not one bit. I will always be hoping the best for you.”

Silence stretched out on the other end of the comm line.

“And I know y'all won't let me say thank you,” Meredith said, “but I can say that you're the roughest, toughest, most badass bunch of cut-throat psychopathic drunkards I've ever met. I promise, I will see you again.”

Meredith paused. She thought she could hear some soft shuffling sounds.

“Are y'all still there?”

“Yeah.” Kraglin's voice sounded as if his throat was thick. “We're just...”

“We're not crying,” Drazkar howled, “that's not it!”

“Nope, no we're fine!” Meredith could hear Gef sob. “It's fine.”

Meredith smiled. Ravagers; so emotional.

“Look, y'all are about to leave.” Meredith looked up at the ship. “We might lose connection.”

“We know,” Kraglin said in a small voice.

Meredith stared at the Eclector. Her heart was being pulled in a million different directions, and whether she liked it or not, part of her wanted to be on that ship.

“Are you still listening,” she asked.

There was a general murmur of assent.

“Will you boys do me one favor?” She swallowed.

“Anything,” they said.

“Take care of each other for the next few months,” she said, “especially Peter. I know he'll be alright, but I worry so much about him and about all y'all. So just do me a favor and really... just take care of your own.”

The Eclector was flying away. Meredith's throat was thick.

“Because you are worth taking care of,” she said.

“Take care of your goddamn self for a change,” a gruff voice said, “and for fuck's sake, Mery, stop makin' these sons-of-bitches cry.”

“Yondu?” Meredith blinked.

“Seriously, mom.” Peter's voice joined the link. “We worry about you, too. I know you'll find a way home one day. We all know it.”

“Just don’t hurt yourself getting there,” Kraglin said softly, “because you're worth takin' care of too, Ms. Quill.”

There was a murmur of assent. Meredith wiped the tears out of her eyes; when she looked back up, the Eclector was no longer in sight.
Meredith paused. “Are y'all still there?”

The comm crackled slightly, but the silence was real this time.

Meredith sighed.

“Bye, boys.”
Yondu owed Stakar. He didn't know how much he owed him, but as Yondu paced down the streets of Xandar, he figured it had to be a goddamn fortune. Every Nova officer he saw turned his eyes away; even the scanners didn't follow him. Yondu didn't remember how large his bounty had been on Xandar, but Stakar had turned it into nothing. He owed Stakar, and not just for the credits. Today of all days, he needed to be on Xandar, and Stakar had made it possible.

Today he found out if Meredith was taking the boy home.

Yondu didn't get nervous, dammit, he didn't. The sweat on his collar was just... it was warm out here. He yanked open a glass door to an apartment complex; this was the address Meredith had sent him. He didn't recognize it, but the glassy floors and fancy stairs told him it wasn't cheap. He had no idea how she could afford a place like this, but at this point he just accepted that Terrans were unit-magnets. Yondu leaned against the wall and waited.

Her long legs came first, stepping down the stairs in strappy heels the color of snow. Meredith Quill came out of the stairway wearing a crisp white dress Yondu had never seen before. Her hair was tamed and glossy; that, he didn't like. Her hair belonged blown out of her face, reckless and free. But the rest of her, he decided as his eyes traced over the curves of her dress, the rest of her he liked.

There was a blaster strapped to her thigh; he could see the faint outline of it through her skirt. He grinned; so she'd learned something from him after all. She was staring at the blue datapad she held in her arms, her back to Yondu.

Yondu let out a wolf whistle; the arrow shot between Meredith's legs, ruffling her skirt.

“Hey!” She turned around, her hand on her blaster, and saw him. “Yondu?”

“Hey Mery.” Yondu grinned, showing all of his crooked teeth.

“You came!” Meredith lit up; she hugged the datapad to her chest. “I hoped you would.”

“Course I did. We brought the boy; he's up on the ship,” Yondu said, “waitin' for you.”

“Good.” Meredith sighed in relief, pressing her free hand to her forehead. “I really didn't want to have to keep track of him on top of everything else today. This is going to be tough enough as it is.”

“It'll be fine, quit your fussin’.” Yondu's eyes flicked up and down. “Nice new dress you got there.”

“Apparently showing up in old Ravager clothing and a leather jacket isn't the best way to make a good impression on Nova Prime,” she said.

“Ain't never seen you with makeup on, either.”
Meredith shrugged, smiling.

“I'm not much for it myself, but Xandarians love their makeup.” She gestured to her perfectly painted face. “I walked into a salon and they gave me enough free samples to do the job.”

Yondu chuckled.

“So,” she asked, “what are you doing here?”

“You think I was gonna miss your big day? Hell no.” Yondu squared his shoulders. “I gotta be there to beat some sense into these Xandarian pricks.”

“I already have one escort,” Meredith laughed, “do I really need two?”

Yondu's brow contracted.

“What do you mean, you already got an escort?”

“Garth is walking me in there.” Meredith took a deep breath. “He figures Nova Prime will be more likely to listen to my case with a Denarian on my side.”

“Who the fuck is Garth,” Yondu snarled.

“Garthan Saal? He's the Denarian Kraglin put me in touch with. Don't give me that face,” Meredith said, “he's a really nice guy. Not Ego nice, either; Garth's actually nice.”

Yondu gritted his teeth together. Meredith ran a hand through her hair, then sighed.

“Hold on,” she said, “I need one more thing. I'll be right back.”

Meredith climbed the stairs back to her apartment. As soon as she was out of earshot, Yondu growled.

“Denarian fuckin' Saal,” he said.

The glass door to the building opened, and Garthan Saal came strolling in. He was wearing a pristine Nova Corps uniform bedecked with medals. With his smooth black hair and chiseled face, he looked like all Yondu's least favorite parts of Stakar Ogord. A muscle in Yondu's arm twitched, but he resisted the urge to punch Saal in the face. When Saal saw Yondu, he froze.

“Udonta,” he said.

“You bet your goddamn ass it's Udonta.” Yondu bared his teeth. “What the fuck do you think you're doin' here?”

“First, give me one good reason not to arrest you where you stand,” Saal snapped.

“I'll give you three.” Yondu held up three fingers.

Saal crossed his arms and frowned. “Go on.”

“Meredith,” Yondu said, lowering his ring finger, “Quill.”

As he said her surname, Yondu lowered his pointer finger, leaving his middle finger sticking up. Saal raised his eyebrows.
“And reason number three,” he asked.

Yondu thrust his middle finger at Saal, baring his teeth.

“Go to hell,” he said, “that's reason number three.”

Saal closed his eyes.

“I will never understand how Meredith managed to put up with your ilk for four months.” Saal's voice was smooth and cold as ice. “Her patience is astounding. Where is she?”

“Upstairs in her goddamn apartment,” Yondu grunted.

“Her apartment?” Saal opened his eyes and raised one eyebrow. “You mean my apartment?”

Yondu's brow furrowed.

“Meredith has been living in the guest room of my apartment for the last four weeks.” The corner of Saal's mouth twitched. “She didn't tell you? How interesting.”

It was like looking at Ego's smug smile again; all Yondu wanted to do was break Saal's jaw. There were footsteps on the stair, and Meredith came back down again. This time, her dusty black leather jacket was over her shoulders, and she was smiling.

“Hey Garth,” she said.

“The jacket, Meredith?” Saal raised his eyebrows. “I thought we were going for a professional first impression.”

“It's a Terran jacket,” Meredith explained, “and I'm Terran. Let's just go for an honest first impression, okay?”

“Whatever suits you, Ms. Quill.” Saal smiled.

Meredith looked between the crisply-dressed Nova Corps officer and the rugged Ravager captain.

“Have you two met,” she asked.

“We've exchanged formalities,” Saal said curtly.

“I told him he could go to hell.” Yondu crossed his arms. “So yeah, introduction's pretty well taken care of.”

“Great.” Meredith sighed. “You two aren't going to make this difficult, are you?”

“Of course not,” Saal said.

“Not if he doesn't,” Yondu answered.

“Thank you,” she said.

Meredith took a deep breath, lifting her shoulders and letting them drop as she exhaled. The corner of Yondu's mouth turned up.

“It'll be fine, idjit. You ain't done nothin' wrong and Nova Prime knows it. All you gotta do is walk in there and get this shit straightened out so you can go home,” Yondu said.
“Although I detest acknowledging him, the Ravager is right.” Saal smiled. “This is just a misunderstanding. I’m sure Nova Prime will be more than happy to make accommodations for you and your son to return to Terra.”

Saal stepped forwards and opened the door for Meredith.

“Thank you,” she said as she walked through the door.

Saal smiled, putting his hand on her back as he escorted her away; he pulled the door shut behind him, slamming it in Yondu’s face. Yondu heard his blood in his ears, but wrenched open the door and followed. He’s trying to piss you off, Yondu told himself, he wants you to fuck up so he can arrest you. This was for Meredith; Yondu had to keep his temper under control. He caught up to Meredith and Saal. Saal kept his eyes trained forwards, avoiding Yondu’s gaze.

“How much you think this’ll cost you, Mery,” Yondu asked.

“That depends on how Nova Prime interprets the various infractions,” Saal responded.

“I said Mery,” Yondu snarled.

Saal’s mouth twitched.

“I have no idea.” Meredith squeezed the folder to her chest. “It might be anywhere from one-thousand to one-billion units.”

“A billion units? Just to get you home? Bullshit,” Yondu said.

“The money would go to appeasing the Asgardians. Remember, it’s their blockade just as much as it is ours,” Saal explained, “so Nova Prime is having to negotiate with them as well.”

Meredith opened her datapad and examined the documents inside.

“I’ve just got this feeling that this isn’t going to work,” she said.

“It’ll be fine. You have a Denarian convinced,” Saal said with a smile, “how much more difficult will it be for you to convince Nova Prime?”

Meredith smiled up at Saal. Yondu’s chest twinged. The wind picked up, lifting Meredith’s curls off her shoulders. The Xandarian sunlight set her hair to shades of gold, framing her pale face. Damn, Yondu had missed seeing that face.

“Mery,” he said.

“Hmm?” She looked at him. Her eyes hadn’t changed; still polished silver. He’d missed those too. You look like a million fuckin’ units, woman. The words were on the tip of his tongue when, as if on cue, a gust of wind blew the datapad up; it smacked Meredith in the nose.

“Fuck,” she cursed.

Yondu laughed; Saal frowned.

“Language, Meredith,” he said.

“You watch your language, you scrawny-ass dirt-snortin’ son-of-a-bitch.” Yondu scowled, his hands curling into fists.
“Don’t, Yondu,” Meredith said.

Yondu’s jaw snapped shut, but he glared at Saal. They paced up the street to the enormous headquarters of the Nova Corps. Yondu couldn’t help but gauge the place’s defenses, the locations of the cameras, the doors, the windows...

“Stop it,” Meredith said.

“What,” Yondu grunted.

“You’re casing the place. I can see your eyes moving. Behave,” she said sharply, “or you’ll have to wait outside.”

“I ain’t waitin’ outside,” he snapped.

“Then stop casing the place.” Meredith exhaled, still staring at the datapad. “God, I hope this works. I have all the files, right? Everything I need?”

“I’ll make sure it’s in order,” Saal promised.

“Fuckin’ order,” Yondu mumbled, “bunch of soap-suckin’ bark-polishers.”

“What did you call me,” Saal asked.

“A soap-suckin’ bark-polisher,” Yondu said, “and I got a few more lined up if that one don’t do it for you, you chum-chewin’ neo-fascist.”

Meredith closed her eyes.

“Yondu,” she began.

“Alright, alright.” Yondu shoved his hands in his pockets, scowling. “I’ll keep my damn mouth shut.”

The guards at the doors tightened their grips on their laser rifles when Yondu approached. The Ravager snarled at them, but Saal held up a hand.

“He’s a witness to the defense,” he said.

The Nova Corps guards relaxed their grips, but glared at Yondu nonetheless. Saal slipped his interface over the door and it opened.

“After you,” he said.

Meredith entered. This time, Yondu was right on her heels; he cut in front of Saal, shouldering the Denarian aside. Saal’s face soured, but he allowed Yondu to pass.

The entry area was dominated by a huge spherical holostatue depecting Xandar; holoscreens of the news circled around it, echoing the events of the day.

“...outreach programs headed by Qadari Nomar...”

“...cold front moving in, unexpected for this time of year...”

“...two more outposts destroyed in the last month brings the violence to an unheralded...”
Meredith’s eyes widened. The center for the biggest law enforcement endeavor in the galaxy, and she was standing in the middle of it. Saal led her through the throngs of people to a row of sleek metal tubes. Saal swiped on his interface, and the nearest tube slid open.

“Express elevators,” he explained, “for military personnel.”

“Wow,” Meredith breathed.

Yondu snorted. The three stepped into the sleek silver tube. As soon as the curved door snapped shut, the tube rocketed upwards. Meredith could see out of the narrow vertical window behind her as they accelerated far above ground level. Her breath caught in her throat. Her papa had once gone one hundred miles per hour down an old Missouri interstate with her in the passenger seat, just for fun; judging by how quickly the buildings shrank below her, Meredith estimated they were going at least twice that. In the confines of the tube, however, it felt like nothing.

“It’s a little slower than it used to be.” Saal frowned. “Never the same after that last update. It’s more cost-efficient, I know, but time is valuable.”

Meredith leaned against the side of the tube, her eyes wide. She clutched the datapad to her chest and took deep breaths.

“What’s with you,” Yondu grunted.

“I’m rocketing upwards at over two hundred miles per hour,” Meredith said.

“Three hundred fifty,” Saal corrected.

“And you’re both acting like that’s nothing,” Meredith continued.

“It’s an elevator, Meredith.” Saal spoke slowly. “This is what they do. They go up.”

“But not at three hundred and fifty miles per hour they don’t,” Meredith said, “not on Earth.”

Saal chuckled. The tube slowed to a stop, and the door opened. Saal led the way down the hall and into a huge semi-circular room. It was filled with chairs, and the curved wall was lit up with holograms of planets. Some were bright and full of light; others were empty husks, barely flickering next to their peers.

“All the planets protected by the Nova Corps. I wish it was in better shape to show you.” Saal exhaled slowly. “The Kree are merciless.”

Yondu grunted as if in confirmation. Meredith scanned the holograms.

“There’s Neoke,” she said, “it’s still lit up.”

“Yes. We put down a Kree insurgency there a few weeks ago,” Saal said, “after they exposed themselves for some reason.”

“I pissed ’em off,” Yondu muttered, “so you’re welcome.”

“And Maorda-4.” Meredith looked at the little circle. “Why is it so small compared to all the others?”

“It’s not a high-priority to Nova. These larger planets – Xandar, Neoke, Paval – those are key military and cultural centers. They’re the Kree’s primary targets. The others,” Saal explained, “are outpost colonies, small excursions in agriculture and terraforming. Important in peace, but in war...”
Saal trailed off; his voice carried a hint of bitterness.

“You don't like that they're not important,” Meredith assumed.

Saal looked at her with his intense eyes. He nodded towards a very small planet, completely dark on the holomap.

“Yazkin-8,” he said softly, “where Jagar Obfonteri made his last stand.”

“Kraglin's planet,” Meredith realized.

“Jagar Obfonteri taught me how to fly. When my father, Vance, died, it was Jagar who taught me the importance of discipline, the relevance of honor. My family,” Saal said with a sharp look at Yondu, “had long ago abandoned the Nova and chose a vigilante path. Jagar Obfonteri taught me what it meant to serve.”

“And when the Kree came a-knockin','” Yondu reminded, “it wasn't the Nova who came running to the rescue.”

Saal's mouth tightened. His eyes locked on the dark little planet.

“‘The single biggest mistake of my life was not coming to his aid,” he confessed, “and now I see other planets suffer the same fate because Nova Corps considers them expendable.”

“Expendable,” Meredith said incredulously.

“Expendable. Non-essential to the overarching success of the Corps. A luxury in peaceful times, baggage in war times.” Saal's voice slid through the air as sharp and cold as a scissor blade. “Spare planets full of spare people.”

“That's barbaric,” Meredith said.

“That's the machine of war, Meredith.” Saal led her away from the wall. “We can't save everyone.”

Meredith's eyes lingered on the little dark planets that hovered about, but allowed herself to be led away. At the end of a hallway was a tall pair of silver doors.

“Nova's office,” Saal announced, “and she's waiting inside for you.”

“You're not coming with me?” Meredith's voice hiked up. “I thought you said you'd come with me!”

“I would, and I planned to,” Saal said, “but I can't leave him unattended.”

Saal jerked his neck towards Yondu, who bared his teeth.

“You'll have to go in alone, I'm afraid.” Saal smiled and put a hand on top of Meredith's head. “Remember. You've faced far more scary things than Nova Prime.”

Meredith exhaled, nodding slowly.

“I can do this,” she said, “I can do this.”

“If she pisses you off,” Yondu advises, “spit in her coffee.”

Meredith laughed. She looked between Saal and Yondu and felt a warmth in her chest.
“I’ve got one heck of a backup team,” she said.

“Just don’t expect that to last long.” Saal’s eyes lidded. “Trust falls with this ignoramus would end with matching concussions for the both of us.”

“You be damn grateful I’m putting up with this pressed-collar punk.” Yondu's jagged teeth ground against each other. “Damn grateful.”

“I am, to both of you. Thanks,” Meredith said.

“Stop stalling,” Saal chuckled, “get in there.”


Yondu shoved her hard between the shoulder blades; Meredith went tripping into the room, barely keeping on her feet. The door swung to a shut behind her, and she swallowed. Sitting at a crescent-moon shaped desk was a elderly woman with a dramatic white updo. She had a kind face, but her eyes were tired and hard. She smiled and slid off her half-moon glasses.

“Meredith Quill,” she said warmly, “it's a pleasure to meet you.”

“Nova Prime,” Meredith breathed.

Saal and Yondu were left alone in the hallway. Saal pulled out his blaster and examined the action. Yondu leaned against the wall, letting the tip of his arrow peek out from under his coat.

“How's my uncle,” Saal asked.

“Stakar's fine.”

“And Aunt Aleta?”

“Still kickin' ass.”

Saal nodded. He stowed his blaster back in its holster and stood in military parade rest.

“Guess you're the reason I ain't bein' shot,” Yondu said.

“That is correct. My uncle exchanged information for your protection.”

“What information?”

“Kree battle routes. All the intel they've received on transmissions, troop movements.”

Yondu grunted.

“We were able to take down two Kree destroyers with the information provided,” Saal continued.

Yondu picked at his teeth with a metal toothpick. In this situation the best way to avoid getting arrested was to keep his trap shut. He figured that without Mery around, his resistance to Saal's bullshit was pretty damn low. The two men stood in silence for what felt like eons.
“I wish I knew what was going on in there.” Saal's voice was so distant that Yondu was pretty sure he was talking to himself. “I'm worried about our little shared interest.”

“Shared inter...” Yondu's brow knit. “Are you talkin' about Mery?”

“Yes, I am talking about Meredith.”

“I ain't interested,” Yondu snarled.

“Really? Fantastic.” Saal smiled. “Then you shouldn't mind me taking her out to lunch today. I was thinking I'd take her someplace nice, expensive, classy.”

“I'm gonna punch you in the goddamn throat.” Yondu was surprised at the level of vehemence that came out of his mouth. “And them I'm gonna break your fuckin' legs.”

“I thought you said you weren't interested,” Saal said coldly.

“Fuck you,” was Yondu's response.

The silence pressed in again, much colder and harder this time. Yondu pulled his arrow out and fiddled with it.

“If that thing goes airborne I'll splatter your cerebral cortex all over the floor,” Saal said.

“You put one finger towards that blaster,” Yondu countered, “and your skull cap will be so full of holes that Mery'll use it to strain pasta.”

The quiet that followed was a burning roar in the hallway, a twisted, tense pounding of blood and anger. Yondu shoved his arrow back in its quiver. His teeth gritted against each other, his jaw locked. If he opened his mouth one more time, Yondu knew they'd get into a fist fight right outside Nova's door. That'd be a death sentence for whatever deal Meredith was working on. He had to calm down. He was not going to blow her chance, not after everything she'd done for him. For Meredith, Yondu could put up with anything.

Twenty minutes of silence passed through Yondu like jagged glass, tearing at his nerves and bleeding his heart. Finally, one of the silver doors opened. Yondu and Saal's heads whipped around. Meredith was sitting across from Nova; a hologram of Earth floated between them. Yondu's blood chilled. Meredith's eyes were locked on the hologram of Earth. She swallowed visibly.

“Meredith,” Nova said softly, “I'm offering you home.”

Meredith stood, nodded stiffly, and left the room without a second glance at anything; not Nova, not the hologram of her home planet, not even at Yondu or Saal.

“That's not good,” Saal said, “that's really not good.”

Both men took off after Meredith in hot pursuit. They barely made it to the elevator; Meredith was slamming the close door button. She was pale, but the soft skin around her eyes was reddened. Yondu made to turn right back around and head into that office – you white-haired double-tongued four-faced bitch, what the hell did you say to my Terran – but the elevator door slipped closed before he had the chance. He could see his reflection in the silver door, distorted by the curve and by his breath fogging it up.

“The fuck did she say to you,” Yondu growled.
“Don’t.” Meredith closed her eyes. “I don’t want to do this. I need you to go to the Eclector and get Peter for me.”

“She let you go home? You worked out a deal?” Saal's eyes sparked. “Meredith, that's wonderful!”

“It's not what you think, Saal.” Meredith's voice was small. “I don't want to talk about it right now, okay? Just give me a few minutes. This is a lot to process.”

Yondu's eyes flicked all over her face, as if expecting to read the answers in her closed eyelids, in the residue of tear tracks on her face. Was she going home or not – the question seemed blunt and tasteless to ask, even for Yondu. He scowled and turned his back to her.

“I'll get the boy,” he grunted.

“Thank you. Saal and I will meet you there,” Meredith said.

Yondu grunted again. As soon as the elevator door opened on the bottom floor, he made for the exit. Saal and Meredith had to hasten to keep up. Yondu muscled his way between the guards and disappeared into the Xandarian crowd. Saal made to go after him, but hesitated.

“If he gets into trouble, it'll likely be our heads on the platter.” Saal frowned. “Still, I'm not alright with leaving you alone like this.”

Meredith smiled up to her eyes. She wiped a tear track away with her wrist.

“It'll be alright,” she said, “he won't cause any trouble.”

“I doubt that highly,” Saal answered.

Meredith laughed, but it turned into a hiccup. Saal put his hand on her back.

“Meredith,” he said slowly, “I think I need to know what happened in there.”

Meredith swallowed several times, blinking.

“She made me an offer,” she said, “that I couldn't refuse.”

Saal exhaled in relief. Meredith turned her eyes on Saal; in contrast with the redness, her irises appeared like disks of liquid mercury, their shine distorted by tears.

“And I said no,” Meredith finished.
“Thank you, Garthan. For letting me stay, for helping me out, just... for everything you've done.” Meredith smiled up at him. “I really do appreciate it from the bottom of my heart.”

Saal halted her a few yards away from the ramp of the Eclector. Yondu squinted. Saal's head tilted, a small smile playing around his mouth.

“I'd ask for a kiss,” he admitted, “but I'm in uniform.”

Yondu snatched his arrow out of its quiver before he even registered what his hands were doing. Meredith laughed and shook her head.

“You wouldn't get it even if you asked, you flirt,” she said.

The arrow returned to its quiver; Yondu exhaled.

“Then again.” Saal stepped forwards. “My fellow soldiers aren't around, and what they don't know won't hurt them.”

“I thought you said you were a perfect soldier,” Meredith reminded.

Saal winked. Meredith tilted her head. After a moment, Meredith pressed a very small kiss to his cheek. Yondu could hear himself growling.

“Meredith Quill,” Saal said, “you are enchanting.”

“Oh hush.” Meredith rubbed her arms, turning scarlet. “You're a flirt, Denarian Saal, and that ain't good.”

A grin spread across Saal's face.

“Are you two gonna stand there all goddamn day,” Yondu roared, “or can I get the fuck off this burnin' pile of trash y'all call a planet?”

Meredith jumped.

“Coming,” she said, “I'm coming! Bye, Garth, and thank you so much!”

Yondu glared at Saal while Meredith scampered up the ramp, her cheeks pink. Yondu bared his teeth at Saal. Saal tilted his head, eyes lidded, so that Yondu could see the faint imprint of Meredith's lips, left there by her makeup. Yondu stuck his middle finger up at Saal and disappeared up the ramp. It closed soon after, and the Eclector left the planet's surface, escorted by Nova Corps ships all the while. The Nova Corps ships peeled off as the Eclector broke out of the atmosphere. It was nothing but a fuzzy gray shape, and then it was gone. Saal stood there, watching it disappear from the skies.

“Ravagers. What a bunch of a-holes,” Saal said under his breath.

Meredith was standing in the hangar bay, taking deep breaths. Kraglin and Peter were bringing up her luggage, throwing her sideways glances as they did so. Meredith looked pale, fragile, breakable; whatever had happened, they figured, it hadn't been good. Ravagers had started to trickle down to hangar bay, waiting to hear what had gone down. By the time Yondu arrived, a large portion of the crew had assembled. The new hires were scarce; these Ravagers were the ones who had stuck around longest. These were the closest thing Meredith had to “friends” in space. Lunis was sitting on
a cargo box, sheathing and flicking open a knife nervously.


Meredith exhaled, her head hung. Drazkar and Holdon swatted Lunis, scowling.

“Shut up,” Drazkar hissed.

“Leave her alone, you scrawny purple whelp.” Holdon shoved Lunis off the crate. “Give her some space.”

Lunis cowered under the crate. Gef leaned on the railing next to Meredith.

“Come on, lass.” His voice was unusually gentle. “Whatever it is, we'll help you.”

“They offered me a way home,” Meredith said, “and I said no.”

Her voice was soft, but in the hangar bay, it carried. Peter's mouth dropped open.

“We're staying,” he said.

“Not here, honey.” Meredith smiled weakly. “You still have to go to school.”

“Rats,” Peter said.

“But hey, Pete.” Kraglin chuckled. “School in space!”

That seemed to comfort him. Peter hugged his mom's knees; out of relief or because he missed her, Meredith couldn't tell. She hugged her son back, taking comfort in his warmth and weight.

“Boy.” Yondu's voice came low from the shadows. “Take your momma's things to her room. She and I need to talk.”

Peter grinned, grabbed Meredith's luggage, and started dragging it down the hangar bay stairs. Meredith winced as the luggage thumped and smacked from stair to stair. Yondu exhaled.

“Boys,” he said.

Without another word, two pilots grabbed the luggage between them and walked down the stairs. Peter chased after them with a big rucksack thrown over his little shoulders. Meredith and Yondu both watched him until he turned the corner.

“What'd they offer you,” Yondu asked.

“Full trip home. Expenses paid. Reperations for time spent,” Meredith said, “and a surgical skin cover so my implants wouldn't show. They'd give me a cover story. Perfect reintegration into Terran society, they said.”

“What'd they want?”

“A billion units,” she said, “or a favor.”

A hush came over the Eclector. Meredith lifted her shoulders and smiled sadly.

“A billion goddamn units,” Yondu breathed.
“She offered me a way to bypass the fine,” Meredith said, “but I had to turn her down.”

“Damn, Ms. Q.” Kraglin frowned. “What did she ask you to do?”

“She told me that if I turned in everything I knew about the Ravagers, she'd grant Peter a pardon and get us a shuttle to Terra. They'd know where Ilyth was, where the Hub was, the names and relations of all the Ravager captains. The Nova Corps could capture every clan almost simultaneously. Nova figured the bounties would cover the tax-payer's expense,” Meredith explained, “and then she could turn y'all in to the Asgardians as proof that there would never be another blockade break. She'd ship me home and that would be that, she said. Justice done, and the innocent free.”

The churning of the Eclector seemed to roar; Meredith could hear her own breathing. Gef lowered his datapad, his bushy eyebrows knit together. Yondu's expression had frozen stiff. Meredith felt heat rush to her cheeks.

“And you turned her down,” Kraglin asked incredulously.

“Actually honey,” Meredith said, “I told her that if that was what she wanted, I'd get the Ravagers all lined up for her so she could suck their goddamn dicks because what she was askin' for was some goddamn bullshit, I tell you what.”

Yondu cracked a crooked-toothed grin. There were some gasps and appreciative whistles. Drazkar's jaw dropped, a bobby pin falling out of his mouth. Kraglin covered his mouth with both hands, his face steadily flushing cerulean.

“You told Nova Prime to suck my dick,” he said through his hands, his eyes wide as they would go. “Holy shit.”

“That wasn't all I told her. I told her that those 'criminals' she was prosecutin' were the ones who saved Maorda-4 and Yazkin-8 and Neoke, and maybe if she paid more attention to how Ravagers do things, she could learn a goddamn thing or two about loyalty and bravery.” Meredith's eyes flashed; the angrier she got, the more her Missouri accent bled through. “There ain't no spare planets. No spare people. If the Kree are gonna come after Xandar, then Xandar needs to fight tooth and claw to protect its own, dammit. There ain't no such thing as expendable.”

Kraglin whooped appreciatively, breaking out into applause. The Eclector roared its approval with cheers and wolf-whistles. Meredith tugged on the hem of her snow-white dress, turning pink. Yondu stood there with his hands on his hips and grinned. Meredith flushed completely scarlet.

“Hey!” Yondu shouted over the din. “Get your slack asses back to work! This ain't a goddamn show!”

Most of the Ravagers dispersed. Only a few – Holdon, Gef, Lunis, Drazkar – remained. They stood up, as if ordered to. Meredith looked around, confused. Yondu handed Kraglin a wad of cloth, which Kraglin unfolded. Laying in the palm of his hand was a metal Ravager pin, forged in the shape of the flame. He held it up in front of Meredith's eyes.

“I'm not a Ravager,” she said.

“You don't have to be for this one.” Kraglin pinned it to her leather jacket, puncturing the thick fabric with ease. “It's a medal. We're honorin' you.”

“For what?” Meredith's eyebrows contracted. “I didn't do anything.”

“Yeah you did.” Yondu's voice was barely audible. “Kraglin, read the honors.”
“For riskin' life and limb to save the whole goddamn galaxy and all the Ravagers in it. For bringin' us all back into the fold, and for tellin' Nova Prime herself to suck our goddamn dicks. For not sellin' us out,” Kraglin said, “even for the chance to get your dream. For your reckless bravery, endless loyalty, and for bein' the best goddamn kind of fuckin' nuts, we honor you.”

Yondu slammed his fist over his heart in salute; immediately the entire Eclector followed suit. Those two great drum beats sounded throughout the bay, bringing tears to Meredith's eyes.

“Come on, Ms. Q.” Kraglin raised his eyebrows. “You know you want to.”

She shook her head, laughing, and pounded her fist over her heart in salute. The Eclector exploded again with tumultuous cheers and laughter. Yondu stood behind Kraglin; his expression was blank except for the smile in his eyes.

“The boys insisted,” he said.

Meredith blushed. She made as if to hug them; instantly, the Ravagers jumped away.

“No! Nope!” Lunis leapt over the stairs. “Not happening!”

“Load o' nonsense, the lot of this.” Gef huffed his way towards the exit. “Count me out.”

“No.” Holdon pushed Meredith a good five feet away before heading to the exit. “No.”

Drazkar hissed and scampered away, bobby pins dropping to the floor behind him.

“And that right there,” Kraglin said coolly, “is what assholes who ain't got the self-confidence they were born with.”

Kraglin hugged Meredith tightly; she hugged him back.

“Figured it was only right, after all you'd done.” Kraglin stepped back, rubbing the back of his neck. “Stakar's idea, really.”

“Oh, that's sweet of him.” Meredith sighed. “Tell him thank you for me, won't you?”

“I'll do it right now.” Kraglin backed towards the exit with an expression that looked like relief. “You two just... Y'all can talk this out.”

Kraglin left so quickly that Meredith half-believed that he was running away. She looked to Yondu for an explanation, but he was staring at the ground with his arms crossed.

“You didn't sell us out,” he said, “and you had damn good reason to.”

Meredith swallowed.

“I guess it didn't seem right,” she said, “after all we'd been through together.”

Yondu grunted.

“Was that a thank you,” Meredith asked.

He scowled and jammed his finger on her badge.

“You got your damn thank you,” he snarled.
Meredith examined the badge. It was a little heavy and tugged on the front of her jacket, but she found herself smiling as she traced the edges. On the back, she noticed two letters; SQ.

“Is that supposed to be MQ,” she asked, “for Meredith Quill?”

“What the hell do you think it's supposed to stand for, you idjit,” Yondu sighed.

Meredith's cheeks reddened.

“This wasn't Stakar's idea, was it,” she asked.

Yondu said nothing.

“This was your idea, wasn't it?”

Yondu stood up and made for the exit.

“This was your idea, wasn't it Yondu? Oh no you don't!” Meredith grabbed him around the chest and hugged him. “You do not get away without me thanking you for this!”

“The whole goddamn point,” Yondu said as he tried to pry Meredith off, “is that you don't thank us! Who the fuck thanks somebody for a goddamn thank-you? Stupid – goddamn – Terrans!”

He pushed her off; Meredith stumbled backwards. The small of her back hit the rail, and her legs went up. She paused for a split second like that – poised just so, her eyes wide in confusion as her body began to shift its gravity – before Yondu grabbed her by the jacket and pulled her forwards into his arms.

“Stop tryin’ to die for one goddamn second!“ He crushed her in a hug. “For fuck's sake, Mery!”

Perhaps it was the adrenaline or the emotions crashing around her, but Meredith started to laugh and cry at the same time. She pressed her face into his chest and half-sobbed, half-giggled.

“You beautiful dumb Terran bitch,” she heard him exhale, “you death-seekin' psycho-momma.”

“There was a compliment in there,” Meredith giggled, “somewhere under the anger and the grumpiness.”

Yondu took a deep breath and put her upright.

“You need to get the hell off my ship,” he said, “before I do somethin' stupid.”

“I was on your ship for months and it didn't stop you from being stupid then,” Meredith quipped.

Yondu put a finger to his comm link.

“Gef,” he said, “tell me there's a star system nearby I can dump this smartass off on.”

“Dakkar's nice this time of year,” Gef suggested.

“Set it as a course destination,” Yondu ordered, “and for fuck's sake, don't let the boy near the controls this time.”

“I didn't know,” Gef insisted, “the boy just smacked the controls and next thing I know we're on Berhart again!”
Yondu flicked off the comm link.

“Peter was trouble while I was away,” Meredith assumed.

“You don't know the goddamn half of it.” Yondu headed towards the exit, scowling. “Let's go.”

Meredith laughed. They paced down the hallway, side-by-side. Footsteps peppered the floor behind them; they turned just in time to see Peter rocketing down the hall towards his mother. Meredith scooped him up.

“I missed you, mom,” Peter said.

Meredith pressed her forehead to his, smiling.

“I thought about you every day,” she promised.

Meredith set him down. Peter took his mother's hand and began listing all the exciting things that had happened to him since she left. Most of them were simple ship occurrences, but there was a story about stealing diamonds from a duchess's purse that made her whip her head towards Yondu.

“The bitch thought he was cute,” Yondu said defensively, “and the crabby ol' witch had it coming anyway.”

Meredith put a hand to her forehead and sighed. Peter kept on talking about everything he'd done and all the things he'd learned. Meredith was so engrossed that she almost didn't notice Yondu taking her hand. He slid their joined hands into his pocket, flicking his coat over them so no one could see. Yondu never looked at her, his expression unchanging. He squeezed her hand slightly; Meredith smiled, still looking at Peter, and squeezed back. It was nice, she thought, to be home.

Chapter End Notes

Hey.

I dislike bothering with self-gratifying author rambles, but here I feel that I cannot avoid one. Thank you, for your support and your readership. I'm an author "IRL", and my main problems have always been setting, timing, and most of all, finishing things. I've never finished anything of this magnitude before, so this is quite significant to me. I've never thought of myself as a writer because I've never WRITTEN anything to completion. This multi-chapter fic started out as as a minor distraction (there's a reason why the first tag is "Why Did I Write This?) and then became a form of self-discipline. It's evolved since then into a challenge; if I can finish this, I can finish anything. Which brings me to You.

They tell us that when we write, we ought to write to an "invisible friend"; an ideal reader who is eager to read what it is we have written. Someone we do not want to disappoint, someone who drives us to put pen to paper. Or, in this case, fingers to keyboard. You are those "invisible friends". You are those ideal readers. You are the people I write to, and I thank you for that. Especially, of course, those of you who consistently commented throughout the year. I recognize your icons and user handles and I look forwards to all of you individually. Thank you for your support, your patience, and your enthusiasm. I have enjoyed reading your comments as much as you enjoyed reading Star-Queen!
THANK YOU.

Star-Queen will return in Star-Queen Vol.2! Until I'm ready to go with that (I want to be at least ten chapters ahead before I start posting; that should help with my update pacing) I'll be posting "Bonus Tracks" for Star-Queen. This adventure isn't over.

--TheBetterAngelsOfOurNature--

End Notes

(Comments will be replied to whenever I can, and kudos make my day.)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!