**Star-Queen Vol. 1 Bonus Tracks**

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**Star-Queen Vol. 1 Bonus Tracks**

by [TheBetterAngelsOfOurNature](http://archiveofourown.org/works/14689920)

**Summary**

What if Meredith could raise Peter in space?

These are all the little happenings between Vol. 1 and Vol. 2. Join the same Star-Queen crew as they terrorize, mother, inspire, and otherwise cause problems throughout the galaxy!

(Although most will be in chronological order, there will be significant time skips. I may end
up coming back and sliding a chapter between previous chapters, so don't be surprised if the chapter numbers and titles seem to slide around a little.)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Meredith and Peter stood in the doorway of the apartment. The floors were a tile, long since yellowed by age, and the walls were soft pink. The Aakon landlady extended a wrinkled yellow hand.

“Your key,” she said, “and there's a spare in the kitchen.”

“Thank you.” Meredith pocketed the key and turned to face the apartment again. “Well, Peter, looks like this is our new home.”

Peter smiled with as much sincerity as he could, but his eyes spoke of doubt.

“Come on, baby, it'll be great. What a good find, too. Two bedrooms, a bath, and this...” Meredith gestured to the main room. “This kitchen-slash-dining-room-slash-living-room deal! Isn't that great?”

The carpeted part of the room was bare except for a beige couch. Part of the room was tile, sequestered off by counters. A tall, vaguely yellowed fridge loomed next to the counter. There was also a small square dining table and two metal chairs. A single window let in a small square of sunlight, which refracted off the tile and made the bare walls glow.

“Where is everything,” Peter asked.

“We don't exactly have the cash for a lot of furniture yet,” Meredith explained, “but we've got beds, a dining table, chairs, a few dressers – we're doing fine.”

“We could steal furniture,” Peter piped up.

“No, Peter.” Meredith closed her eyes to stop herself from rolling them. “We are not stealing furniture.”

“Yondu could steal furniture for us,” Peter suggested.

“No.” Meredith dug in her suitcase and extracted a dirty canvas bag. “Honey, now that we're off the Eclector, things are going to change. No more thievery. No more breaking the law. No more trouble.”

“No more trouble,” Peter echoed.

“That's right.” Meredith opened the canvas bag and pulled out four metal corner pieces. “Now take your things down the hall and unpack.”

While Peter dragged his luggage down the hall, Meredith affixed the four metal corners to the wall. When she had finally aligned them properly, she pulled out the remote and began fiddling with it. Kraglin had told her this would be easy, but Meredith couldn't understand anything about this space technology.

“Peter,” she called, “could you come here for a minute?”

“Yeah?” Peter popped his head out of the hallway. “What's up?”

“How do I work this thing,” Meredith asked, slamming her thumb randomly onto the remote.

Peter took the remote, pointed it in the middle of the corners, and swiped up on the remote. A
A whitish-blue screen appeared within the restraints of the metal corners; a communications device, one last gift from Kraglin.

“And how do we add contacts,” Meredith asked.

“Mom, it's voice activated.” Peter almost rolled his eyes. “Duh.”

“Hey, I'm still new to all this.” Meredith frowned. “Computer, show contacts.”

The screen displayed several contacts; Yondu, Kraglin, Gef, Algon, and Martinex.


Peter's grass-green eyes were locked on Yondu's name.

“Maybe we should give him a call,” Peter suggested, “and let him know we settled in okay?”

“Who, Kraglin? Good idea, Peter.”

“No, mom, I meant Yondu.”

“If we tell Kraglin, he'll tell Yondu.”

“Or we could just tell Yondu ourselves,” Peter said exasperatedly.

“He's a Ravager captain honey; he's a bit busy to worry about us.” Meredith took the remote back and swiped down, dismissing the screen. “Thanks for the help, baby; keep unpacking.”

Peter stomped off. Meredith set the remote down on the counter, sunk into one of the wooden dining chairs, put her head in her hands, and exhaled. So this was it, she thought to herself, this was her new life. Crappy apartment, no resume, no contacts aside from criminals, one hungry mouth to feed and a limited budget. She lifted her head and stared at the blank wall where the screen had previously been. She knew Yondu would be waiting for a call, but Meredith had no intentions of letting him know just how bad she was starting off planetside. Meredith knew Yondu would slide in with that sly offer of life on the Eclector, spoil Peter a little bit, and next thing she knew she'd be raising her son on a pirate ship again.

“Not happening,” she said aloud.

This was her solemn vow; she was not raising Peter on the Eclector. No matter how bad things got, she swore, she'd take care of him herself. She was Peter Quill's mother, and she intended to be the best one she could be.

“Hey mom?” Peter's voice came emanating from down the hall. “Mom?”

“Yes, honey?”

“Did you know there's a dead Orloni floating in the toilet?” Peter sounded like he was trying not to laugh. “Because there is.”

Meredith put her head in her hands and groaned.
Yondu had guessed that it would take a little over a month for Meredith to pull her head out of her ass and come back. According to the bet Gef had started, others had more faith in her; Holdon had put eight-hundred units on three years, Lunis had dropped two-hundred on ten months, and even Drazkar had wagered fifty on her lasting at least three months. Kraglin had staunchly refused to bet, much to Gef's chagrin. A month passed, and Yondu lost four-hundred units. The months wore on and on, and slowly the crew started to tense. Gef's bet had started as a joke, but as the days wore on, it became a sore point for all of them. What they had wagered on, relied on, was not to be. As Kraglin had warned them, Quill wasn't coming back.

At two months, Lunis took over cooking for the Eclector full-time. Holdon had to stop himself from saving a plate for Quill. Drazkar found himself knocking on Meredith's old door, ready to ask for bobby pins, and finding himself still surprised when it opened up empty. Gef finally went down and locked it shut himself, leaving everything exactly the way it was.

"It'll make the lass feel more at home when she comes back," Gef explained to Kraglin.

Kraglin was running out of ways to tell them Ms. Q was gone. For a time, he resorted to telling them about Ms. Q's new life, but that only seemed to encourage their thoughts of her return. Yondu didn't seem to want to hear about any of it, so Kraglin found himself sitting alone by a communications screen, chatting with Ms. Q about everything under the sun. He walked her through repairing her toilet after a dead Orloni somehow got wedged inside, something he fully blamed Peter for. He told her about skills she'd need to put on a resume and celebrated with her, albeit long-distance, when she landed a waitress job at a high-end restaurant. He'd get frantic afternoon calls from Peter when the kid needed help with homework, and frantic morning calls when Ms. Q's coffee machine was spilling all over the floor again. Kraglin started keeping that communications line open all day; it became a normal sight to see Kraglin get up in the middle of the night, woken by the blue notification light, and stumble out of the room talking to the Quills. While the rest of the Eclector pretended Meredith was coming back, Kraglin found peace in helping her move on.

Yondu hated it. He was one-hundred-percent sure that the only reason Meredith hadn't turned around with her tail between her legs was because Kraglin was helping her along. Still, no matter how much Yondu barked at him, Kraglin kept helping the Quills. Yondu couldn't stop him; what the first mate did in his own time was his own business. So, Yondu distracted himself with the one thing he could always rely on; danger.

Today, the danger's name was Martinex T'Naga.

Yondu and Martinex stood over the ramp of Yondu's ship, holding onto the overhead handles. The fighter was almost dark; they'd need stealth if this was going to work. In the dim red of the emergency lights, Martinex looked like a ruby statue. His eyes were intense. The smell of burning rubber met Yondu's nostrils.

"Marty," he muttered.

"What?"

"You're burnin' off the handle."

Martinex looked up. His right hand was melting the rubberized coating on the handle. He cursed and drew back, shaking his hand.

"Sorry," he muttered.

"You're on edge." Yondu glanced at the melted coating. "Relax. It's just another heist."
“But this one’s important.” Martinex reached up and took the handle with his left hand. “I’ve been waiting two years for this job.”

“What are we after again,” Yondu asked.

“A book.”

“What kind of book?”


“And why do we need it?”

“We don’t. I do.”

“Why do you need it?”

“Because I’ve been waiting two years to find it,” Martinex snapped, “and because I want it. Since Stakar tossed my ship to Meredith and she tossed it to your first mate, I needed a ship. You were available. You owe me a solid. That's why this is happening. Everything else can wait.”

“Damn, Marty, take it down a notch.” Yondu bared his teeth. “You're wound up tighter than a QuadX hydraulic coil.”

As if to prove Yondu's point, there was a sick cracking sound. They looked up; Martinex’s left hand had frozen the rubber solid, cracking the handle clean off.

“Dammit, Marty.” Yondu snarled and grabbed the back of Martinex's jacket. “For fuck's sake, just stop touching things.”

Martinex pressed his hands together. His palms hissed and steam rose.

“The level of anxiety I have about this is stupid,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, it is. It's just a goddamn book, Marty.”

“You don't understand.” Martinex's expression was vaguely pained. “I need that book.”

“Can't you wait until it goes on sale like everybody else,?”

“In that trade ship is the one and only signed copy of *Trade of Light* by Stria Lonely. Stria Lonely,” Martinex explained, “the galaxy-famous anonymous writer. My favorite writer.”

“The smut woman,” Yondu grunted.

“No, you big blue idiot, no. It's not smut.” Martinex gestured with his hands, becoming increasingly irate. “She's written fourteen novels, each one with a separate species pairing. She addresses political issues, racial struggles, class friction, sociopolitical problems that no one else seems to write about. Then, yes, she slides all that into this beautifully packaged erotic romance so that people don't even know they're reading complex issues! It's not smut, Yondu, it's genius.”

Martinex's eyes were wide; they glimmered in the red light.

“Marty,” Yondu said, “you got a problem.”
The Plutonian sighed and put his hands on top of his head.

“Just help me steal the book, man.”

“I will,” Yondu answered, “but don't go getting all worked up over it or we'll both get pinched.”

Martinex nodded. Yondu put a finger to the comms unit in his ear.

“Tullk,” he grunted, “how we lookin' up there?”

“Looking good, captain.” Tullk's voice came echoing down from the pilot's seat. “I've sent word to Kraglin that we've made it to the site.”

“Good. Keep 'im updated, got it?”

“Yes, captain.”

Martinex glanced at the ladder that led to the pilot's seat.

“Tullk, huh?” His voice was low. “Thought he was one of Charlie's boys.”

“Used to be one of mine. After y'all took me back, he jumped off Charlie's ship and headed back to mine.” Yondu shrugged. “He and Oblo were always good mates.”

“How many new crew members did you end up getting, anyway?”

“Too goddamn many.” Yondu rolled his shoulder. “Had to kick twenty percent of 'em off in the first few weeks.”

“Accepting all those applications was a stupid idea,” Martinex said.

Yondu snorted.

“You sound like Mery,” he said.

“Speaking of, how is your little Terran sex pot?” A grin snapped across Martinex's face. “I heard from Algon that you were taking her to Dakkam, but nobody's told me how she's settling in.”

“Don't know,” Yondu grunted, “we ain't really been talkin'.”

The ship churned as they approached the target; a huge cargo vessel floating in the upper atmosphere of Neoke. Yondu could feel Martinex's bewildered gaze on him; he pointedly chose to ignore it.

“What in the endless realm do you mean 'ya ain't really been talkin',” Martinex snarled, mocking Yondu's accent. “What is that supposed to mean? What, you haven't called her? She hasn't called you?”


“Alright, but don't think you're off the hook about this.” Martinex cocked the action on his laser rifle. “I want to know why my OTP isn't shipping.”

Yondu squinted at him, his crooked teeth bared.

“The fuck does that mean,” he asked.

“Just ignore it.” Martinex rolled his eyes. “Only Gef and Algon would understand.”
“Gef and Algon?”

“We're going to miss the target.” Tullk warned over the comm.

Yondu threw the lever, and both he and Martinex dropped out of the back of the ship. They went hurtling towards the cargo vessel, drawn by the gravitational pull of Neoke. The air that roared around Yondu was nearly deafening.

“Marty,” he howled, “gonna need to slow down!”

“On it.” Martinex pulled a round orange ball off his belt and squeezed it. “You brought your parachute, right?”

In midair, Yondu stared at Martinex.

“Ha, I'm just kidding!” Martinex laughed and stuck the orange ball to Yondu's shoulder. “No worries, man. Deep breath!”

Yondu inhaled. The orange ball swelled until it had completely smothered Yondu. Deep within the inflatable, Yondu held his breath. Having four lungs helped with this sort of thing, but they were starting to burn when he finally felt the impact. The ball absorbed most of the energy; all Yondu felt was a slight push. Then, it exploded.

“Motherfuck!” Yondu grabbed hold of an external panel. “Marty, you idiot! You use that thing at high altitude, it explodes!”

Martinex landed on the hull of the ship with a resounding boom, denting the hull with his crystalline body.

“Let me find a way in, I'll see if I can get you out.” Martinex kicked at an exhaust vent. “Be right there.”

Yondu hung onto the panel and waited, scowling at nothing. Here he was hanging off the side of a spaceship, catapulted here because of Marty and his goddamn books. Yondu had almost forgotten what being part of the family was really like. Rejoining the Ravagers wasn't all destroying Kree warships, hijacking Nova Corps weapons shipments, and harassing luxury cruiseliners. It was putting up with Stakar's monotonous history lectures, Charlie-27 harassing him about training, and Aleta's monthly calls to criticize and supervise. Krugarr was always pestering him for information, and Mainframe considered Yondu's defense grid to be his own personal pet project. Martinex had, up to this point, been the most relaxed about Yondu's return. Now, it seemed, Marty was picking up trouble right where it had left off, as if nothing had happened. That was precisely how it felt, too; as if nothing had happened, as if he'd never left the Ravagers, as if they'd never stopped being a family. It would have been perfect, Yondu reflected, if not for that small, cold reminder that he had once lost it all.

Meredith ignoring him didn't help either. Alright, so it wasn't ignoring him; she didn't call much, that was it. She talked to Kraglin more than Yondu. When she did call, she scarcely said two words about herself. He could only figure that she was pissed at him. They didn't leave on bad terms, but maybe it'd finally settled into her thick skull that he'd been a jerk-bag to her for months and abducted her from her home planet. If that was it, he figured, that was fine, but for fuck's sake could she talk to him about it? Sometimes he vacillated between telling himself to let her go, and telling himself that kidnapping her back would only piss her off a little bit.

The exhaust vent in front of Yondu burst open in a blaze of pale blue light. Martinex crawled out of
it, covered in dirt and oil marks and flashing a glittering grin.

“All aboard,” he said.

They gripped hands. Martinex pulled Yondu through the vent and dumped him onto a cold metal floor.

“Alright,” he said, “controls first?”

“Nah.” Yondu got to his feet. “Let's just get to a data port and find your damn book. We can get in and out of here quick.”

“No hijacking the whole ship? Alright.” Martinex held his hands up as if in surrender. “I was figuring you'd be all for crash landing this sucker.”

“Let's get your damn book,” Yondu grunted.

The two Ravagers paced down the hallway. Yondu kept his arrow out, waiting to hear a door open or a raised voice. Martinex pointed to a wide green circle surrounded by switches and buttons.

“There's our data port,” he said.

Yondu kept an eye out while Martinex accessed the data.

“Alright,” Martinex said, “it's in crate 229-14. Cargo hold is one floor down.”

Yondu grunted and snapped the stun pack on his blaster.

“Best not make this a fight if we don't have to,” he advised.

“Fair point,” Martinex allowed.

They took a left at the end of the hall and descended a staircase. Below was an enormous cargo hold filled with floor-to-ceiling metal shelves. Storage crates were magnetized to the shelves so nothing would fall during transit.

“229-14,” Martinex recalled.

They paced down to section 14, their footsteps echoing through the dimly-lit cargo hold.

“So,” Martinex began, “she's not talking to you.”

“She ain't called me in a couple months. That's all I know.”

“Has she called anyone?”

“Talks to Kraglin,” Yondu shrugged. “Boy talks her through repairing whatever shit she's breakin' down there.”

“She talks to your first mate but not to you.” Martinex shook his head. “Wow. Consider yourself snubbed, man.”

“It ain't a snub.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No, it ain't.”
“Yes, it is.”

“No,” Yondu snarled, “it ain’t.”

“Dude.” Martinex gave him a cutting look. “She hasn't even called you to tell you 'thanks for not letting me die of cancer’?”

“She said it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Yondu didn't meet Martinex's eyes. “Left me one of 'er stupid Terran tape boxes.”

“What?”

Yondu dug in his pocket and pulled out a cassette tape. On the side in pen was written, *Ravager Mix: Vol. 1.*

“Came with a note,” Yondu grunted, “so it ain't like she left on bad terms.”

“Good.” Martinex put his hands behind his head as he walked. “I was worried that she was pissed at you.”

“Maybe.” Yondu looked up at the shelf number: 220. “We're getting close.”

“229 is right up there.” Martinex pointed to the next top shelf. “That's our crate.”

Martinex grabbed the metal shelf and started climbing.

“When you say 'maybe', what do you mean? You mean that she might be mad at you? What for,” he asked.

“No goddamn idea, Marty.” Yondu's voice dripped sarcasm. “Maybe for kidnappin' her off her own damn planet so she's got to work her ass off to get back?”

“Oh, right.” Martinex laughed as he scaled the shelf. “I totally forgot that's how she got here.”

“How could you forget?”

“I don't know, she just kind of fit in out here.” Martinex grabbed the crate and pulled; it didn't budge. “Hey, could you disengage the mag lock?”

Yondu tapped the crate number into the keypad at the base of the shelf. There was a faint humming noise followed by a faint pop. Martinex tugged on the crate and it slid right out.

“Thanks.” With the crate in hand, he descended more slowly. “Do you really think she's pissed at you?”

“Might be, might not be. Won't know until she calls again.” Yondu took the crate from Martinex and set it on the ground. “Your damn book better be in here.”

“It is.” Martinex knelt down and inserted a narrow silver bar into the lock mechanism. The display shuddered slightly, and the box popped open. “Dope.”

“What was that,” Yondu asked.
“This? Mainframe and I dreamt it up.” Martinex spun the silver bar expertly in his fingers. “Lockpick, data scrambler, and virus injector all in one. I'll get you one, if you want.”

Yondu grunted in affirmation. Martinex sifted through the box's contents, carefully laying the other books aside as he searched.

“There it is,” he said softly.

The cover was emblazoned with tons of tiny white dots, like a starscape. Trade of Light was embossed on the front, visible only due to the gloss of the letters. There was a high-pitched whine in the room; it took Yondu a second to realize it was coming from Martinex.

“You're shittin' me,” Yondu said.

“Yondu it's the limited-edition cover.” The Plutonian scooped up the book, grinning like a fool. “This is dope as gold, Yondu!”

“Why can't y'just read it on a datapad like the rest of the goddamn universe,” Yondu complained.

“Because digital information is transient, corruptible, and easily damaged.”

“Alright, Stakar.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Can we go?”

“Would a datapad have this, Yondu?” Martinex opened the inside cover; in spidery, curling script was signed Stria Lonely. “It's hand-written. Her signature!”

The gleeful expression on Martinex's face made Yondu want to punch him in the mouth.

“You're goddamn embarrassing,” he said instead.

“Let's get out of here before security shows up.” Martinex tucked the book protectively under his arm and stood. “I need to get this back to Mainframe and Krugarr.”

“Why?”

“This signature is the key to cracking the mystery of who Stria Lonely, the million-unit author, really is,” Martinex said.

Yondu cracked a grin and patted Martinex's shoulder.

“Atta boy, Marty. Find out who she is,” Yondu said, “and you can hold that bitch ransom for a fortune.”

“What? No,” Martinex said, “I'm going to meet her. She's my favorite author, Yondu. I've literally salivated over her books. I would sign up to become her personal sex toy in a heartbeat.”

Yondu stared at Martinex.

“Marty,” he said, “you got problems.”

As they walked along, Martinex flashed a diamond grin, shrugging.

“Some of us have sexy thoughts about anonymous galactically-acclaimed novelists,” he said, “and some of us have sexy thoughts about Meredith Quill lying naked in the captain's quarters of the Eclector.”
The image flashed into Yondu's mind against his will – barely-covered curves, curly blonde hair, silver moon eyes, her expression a blend of embarrassment and anticipation – and burned into his mind's eye. He grabbed the back of Martinex's jacket, snarling.

“You knock that off,” he said, turning purple, “or I'll turn that book of yours into a soggy slop of shit.”

“If you don't want me to discuss preferences, don't bring them up.” Martinex calmly removed Yondu's hand. “You have your kinks, I have mine.”

They hurried up the steps as fast as they could, making a beeline for any exit they could find. Yondu's face was uncomfortably warm; he was certain he was solid purple.

“It ain't a kink,” he muttered.

“Yondu, man, let it go.” Martinex rolled his eyes. “You get off on it. Own it. Appreciate it. What's the use of living life vanilla?”

“And what, yours is getting off on not knowin' who you're getting off on?”

“The list of what sexually excites me is a bit long to get into right now, but the important part is that I get off on a lot of different things, Yondu, and you're not one of them.” Martinex's voice carried a bit of an edge. “So your opinion on it is completely irrelevant.”

“Jeez, Marty, calm your shit.” Yondu peered around a corner, then turned it. “You started the damn conversation.”

“Did not.”

“'Personal sex toy,'” Yondu quoted.

“Alright, fine.” Martinex's face soured. “I was excited.”

“Don't get excited, get focused.” Yondu scowled. “At any moment, this job could go to shit.”

The lights slammed off. They stood in pitch darkness, holding their breath. Red beacons began to pulse in the hallway, and a slow but steadily increasing siren began to scream through the halls.

“Like that,” Yondu spat, “that could happen.”

Meredith made friends with her next-door-neighbor pretty quickly. Ellyn was a young woman, a hybrid Dakkamite, prone to wearing over-sized sweaters, ironed dress pants, and gold-rimmed glasses. Ellyn was a freelance writer, so she had one indescribably useful talent that Meredith could rely on; she was always available to babysit Peter.

“Thank you so much,” the Terran said to the Dakkamite hybrid, “I really appreciate this. This shift just came up, and I need the money.”

“Don't worry about it.” Ellyn spread her narrow hand wide and tapped her thumb to her chest; a Dakkamite sign for no worries. “I've got your boy taken care of, Ms. Quill.”

“You're an angel,” Meredith breathed.
Ellyn laughed and shook her head, sending her honey-colored ponytail swishing back and forth.

“I'm your neighbor, that's what I do.” Ellyn held open the door for Meredith. “Go on, or you'll be late.”

“Right.” Meredith swooped down and pressed a kiss to Peter's cheek. “Bye, baby.”

“Have a good day at work, mom!” Peter waved until the door had closed behind his mother, then grinned at Ellyn. “Miss Ostari.”

“Peter.” Ellyn returned the grin. “Hit it, kid.”

Peter jammed the aux cord for the communications screen into his Walkman; his music boomed out of the screen. The two of them dropped onto the couch; Peter pulled out a handheld video game, and Ellyn turned on her keyboard. The silvery machine hummed with energy, and a light blue display hovered above it. As her fingers flew across the keyboard, holographic words appeared.

“We have those at school,” Peter said.

“Yeah. This one's brand-new. Lightweight, great for travel.” Ellyn's cobalt blue eyes remained focused on her text. “It's got an external data port, too.”

“How's the charge?”

“I bought a solar adapter.”

“Nice,” Peter said.

After a few more minutes, Ellyn dug a bag out of her purse. She tore open the glossy white plastic and started munching on some brittle green chips.

“They're green,” Peter observed.

“Healthy, organic Kallusian seaweed.” Ellyn shook the bag at Peter. “Mmmm, tasty!”

“Ew!” Peter laughed and pushed it away. “Gross.”

“It's actually pretty good.” Ellyn shrugged and kept eating. “I need all the energy I can get to finish this stupid manuscript. So, kid, how's it been?”

“Oh, you know, the usual.” Peter hooked one leg on the back of the couch. “School, mom freaking out over money.”

“Still taking night classes with your friend?”

“Kraglin? Yeah, he's still teaching me things.”

“And you still haven't told your mom?”

“Gee, mom, did I mention I stay up until midnight learning hacking from a criminal?” Peter's voice dripped with sarcasm. “Oh yeah, I have no idea why it's so hard for me to get out of bed in the morning.”

“Alright, alright.” Ellyn started a new paragraph. “You know, one of these days she's going to find out.”
“Yeah,” Peter snorted, “I don't see that happening. She's too worried about her getting-to-Terra money.”

“Hey.” Ellyn spared him a glance away from her screen. “Don't knock it, kid. She's trying to overcome the impossible.”

“I wish she'd figure out that we can stay here.”

“Who knows?” Ellyn shrugged. “Maybe when you grow up, get a girlfriend, and settle down, she'll figure out that space is where you belong.”

Peter grinned.

“Aha. I see that grin. One more thing you aren't telling your mother. So,” Ellyn said, “you're still picking up ladies, aren't you?”

“Krita, then Moroo, then Olysarya.” Peter counted on his fingers. “And then I broke up with her and now I'm dating Qinari.”

Ellyn shook her head.

“I can't even keep up with their names anymore,” she said.

“Just because you can't get a boyfriend,” Peter countered.

“Hey, kid. Watch it.” Ellyn's twilight-blue eyes glared daggers over her gold-rimmed glasses. “There's a difference between don't have and can't get.”

“Right.” Peter rolled his eyes. “That's why you're single.”

“You're fixing for a beating, kid.”

“Fight me,” Peter mumbled.

The soles of Peter's shoes lifted in the air, followed by the rest of his legs. Peter's knees lifted over his waist; before he knew it, he was levitating three feet above the couch.

“Hey hey hey hey!” Peter started waving his arms, trying to grab the back of the couch. “Ah, I didn't mean it!”

“You know if you turn upside down,” Ellyn said cheerfully, “all the blood will rush to your head. Keep it up long enough and you'll pass out.”

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry.” Peter yelled.

Peter bounced as he landed on the couch, rolling off and sprawling on the floor. He looked up at Ellyn. She had turned off her display and was looking at him with a twinkle in her eyes.

“I forget you're only half Dakkamite,” he mumbled.

His babysitter winked.
Yondu and Martinex were running for their lives. While he sprinted, Martinex stuck Trade of Light into his jacket and zipped it up.

“Exhaust vent,” he suggested.

“No time. Gotta get to a pod.” Yondu jerked his head towards an upcoming data port. “You said you could scramble some data with that little silver stick of yours. Best find us a way to a pod and scramble the shit out of everything else.”

“On it.”

Martinex stuck the silver bar into the data port and started typing. Yondu's head snapped left and right, waiting for the first sign of movement. He heard commotion to his right. An unleashed animal came skidding around the corner on all fours. Ridges of black spines curved out of its back, contrasting sharply with its red skin and yellow eyes. It snarled, showing blunt, blackened teeth.

“Goddammit,” Yondu cursed, “they got kiggs. Any damn time, Marty!”

“I’m working, I'm working!” Martinex’s fingers flew across the keyboard. “Kill that dog thing!”

Yondu drew his blaster and fired; the stun bolts ricocheted off the kigg's skin as it charged forwards. Cursing, Yondu yanked off the stun pack. The kigg dove for Yondu's leg, its alligator-like mouth wide open, and bit. It swept Yondu flat on his back, knocking the wind out of him. The kigg's blunt teeth didn't break skin; instead, the kigg started tearing its head back and forth, trying to rip Yondu's leg off. Bellowing, Yondu fired; the blaster bolt seared off the kigg's fleshy ear. The kigg backed away, howling. Yondu stumbled to his feet, quickly examining his leg for signs of blood.

“Okay, escape pod is at the other end of this level,” Martinex said, “and we'd better move fast. They've sent reinforcements. I've shut down all the staircase doors, but that won't hold them forever.”

Yondu fired at the kigg, boring holes into its abdomen. It whimpered, twitched, and laid still. The two Ravagers bolted down the hallway; Martinex cleared the kigg corpse in one bounding leap. They turned the corner at the end of the hallway and nearly ran into three more kiggs. The kiggs rounded on them and snarled.

“Hi, pretty doggies.” Martinex laughed nervously. “Run the long way?”

“Run the long way,” Yondu confirmed.

The Ravagers went sprinting in the opposite direction.

“This floor is shaped like a big circle! If we can gain ground on them,” Martinex yelled, “we can engage the escape pod before they catch up!”

“Got it, ah, Marty.” Yondu's chest began to catch. “Ah shit. Ah!”

Yondu sneezed; his steps faltered a bit.

“What are you doing,” Martinex said.

“Can't breathe,” Yondu wheezed, “chest tight.”

The Centaurian doubled over, coughing. Martinex grabbed his arm and dragged him along; the kiggs were right behind them.

“Now? Of all the times to do this, you pick now? Yondu,” Martinex snarled, “we need to have a real
talk about you and your stupid allergies!"

“If you’d told me there were goddamn dogs on this job,” Yondu coughed, “I woulda sent you with Kraglin.”

“I didn't know there were dogs on this job!”

“You didn't even find out what we were facin' before you threw us on this?” Yondu sputtered with rage. “Goddamn it, Marty!”

“Less talking, more running.” Martinex shot a few white-blue beams from his right hand; ice formed over the ground behind them. The kiggs wiped out, their four legs sprawling out under them. “That should help.”

Martinex pulled Yondu to the other end of the hallway. Yondu coughed, slamming his chest with his fist. The escape pod door glinted in the red emergency lights. There was a dialpad stuck to one side of the door. Martinex jammed his silver bar into the dialpad and started hacking it.

“Come on, you sexy silver son-of-a-bitch,” Martinex muttered, “give me that sweet, sweet escape pod.”

Yondu rolled his eyes. Even after all this time, Marty still had the same damn habits; he flirted with everything that held still long enough. Over on the ice, the kiggs were still in pursuit. One of them had rolled off the ice and was getting to its feet.

“Marty,” Yondu said hoarsely, “hurry.”

Martinex jammed a code into the dialpad. The light flashed red.

“What? Denied? Denied? That's the code,” Martinex said, “that's the code!”

“Marty!”

Martinex turned just in time to see a kigg launch itself at Yondu. He intercepted it in midair, grabbing the kigg with his hands. The kigg howled as Martinex's left hand froze its blood and his right hand set it aflame. Martinex threw the beast; the lifeless corpse rolled across the ground. Breathing heavily, Martinex looked to Yondu.

“You okay,” he asked.

Yondu sneezed. Martinex went back to hacking the escape pod. Yondu turned around just in time to see another kigg, smaller and leaner, cross the ice.

“Shit,” Martinex hissed.

“Keep hackin’.” Yondu drew a knife. “I'll take the bitch.”

“Why don't you just arrow them all,” Martinex asked.

“Yeah,” Yondu coughed, “because I can whistle like this.”

“Oh. Right. Allergies.”

The spines on the kigg's back stood straight as it charged Yondu. He dodged to the side, then tackled the kigg as it rushed past. The two landed on the floor. The kigg's maw was open, searching for something to sink its teeth into. Yondu winced as he felt several of the spines find purchase in his left
side. He jammed the knife into the kigg's neck. Pale yellow blood welled up from the stab wound, juicing over Yondu's hand and clothes. As the kigg writhed in its death throes, some of the spines broke off into Yondu's side. He rolled off the beast, coughing.

“Aha!” The dialpad glowed green, and Martinex tore open the escape pod door. “Got it, Yondu. Yondu?”

Yondu wheezed, a long and high-pitched sound. Martinex laughed.

“You sound like an Orloni on helium,” he said.

If looks could kill, Yondu figured the one he was giving Martinex could murder his whole species. You know, he thought, if they weren't already dead. Martinex hooked his arms under Yondu's shoulders and dragged him into the escape pod. A few alarmed yells told him that the guards had finally made it down to their level. Martinex cursed, took back his silver bar, and slammed the eject button. The door of the pod sealed tight before the pod shot itself far out into space. Martinex watched the cargo ship shrink as they catapulted away from the danger. He leaned back, unzipped his jacket, and slid the book out of his jacket. Beside him, Yondu groaned.

“Oh, thank the stars.” Martinex exhaled. “You're okay.”

Yondu slumped against the wall of the pod with his left side slick with kigg blood. He coughed, pounding his chest with a fist.

“You call this okay,” he wheezed.


Yondu was coughing too much to strangle his brother properly, but he gave it his best damn shot.

Yondu came back from his mission soaked in kigg blood and popping allergy pills. Ravagers' eyes widened as they watched Yondu and Martinex stride through the halls of the Eclector, stepping in perfect harmony.

“If I'd known there'd be dogs,” Martinex started.

“Marty.” Yondu pulled a kigg spine out of his side. “Shut the fuck up.”

Martinex grinned apologetically. On the bridge, Kraglin was flying the ship from his position in the co-pilot's chair. Stakar Ogord was leaning against Gef's desk; both of them were laughing. As soon as Yondu entered the bridge, Stakar put out his cigarette. He looked both of his sons up and down.

“So,” he said, “rough day?”

“Dogs,” Yondu fumed.

Stakar looked at Martinex.

“For the record, captain,” Martinex said, “I didn't know there would be dogs.”

“Next time study their operations before you pull the job. Did you get what you were there for,” Stakar asked.

“Yes,” Martinex said.
“And are you going to tell me what that was for?” Stakar raised his eyebrows. “Or do I have to ask Yondu?”

“Uh... well, captain...” Martinex's eyes flicked to Yondu with a silent plea. “Yondu, you tell him.”

Yondu exhaled; the things he did for family.


The gratitude in Martinex's eyes almost made up for the kigg spines in Yondu's side. Stakar looked between the two of them and grabbed for a cigarette that wasn't there. He sighed and gestured to Martinex.

“Alright then, keep your secrets. Come on; Aleta expected us in the Cerberus system an hour ago.” Stakar gave Yondu a look. His expression was everything stern and authoritative, but there was a glimmer of amusement and approval in his hooded eyes. “Good work.”

It was all Yondu could do not to break out into a grin. Stakar lifted his finger and tapped it towards Yondu with a smile. Martinex lingered for another moment, grinning his widest. He punched Yondu in the shoulder; Yondu returned the hit much harder.

“Ow.” Martinex rubbed his shoulder. “I get it, I get it, I owe you...”

“Damn right you do. Now get lost,” Yondu said, “and next time, no dogs.”

“Right, right.” Martinex laughed as he followed Stakar out. “Next time we'll destroy a puppy mill or something.”

The door shut behind Stakar and Martinex. Yondu tore off his jacket and shook it; drops of kigg blood splattered violently onto the floor. Gef winced as some of the flecks hit his desk.

“Where to, cap'n,” Kraglin asked from the co-pilot's seat.

Yondu was staring at the pale yellow kigg drops on the floor. His eyes were focused, yet seemingly unseeing.

“Dakkam,” he said.

Gef and Kraglin looked up in surprise.

“Dakkam, cap'n?” Kraglin began to prep the ship. “What do we need on Dakkam?”

“Nothin’.” Yondu scowled. “Just get goin’. As soon as Ogord and Marty go, find the nearest hyperjump and make tracks.”

“Yes, cap'n.”

Yondu dropped into his pilot's seat. His collar was warm; this was stupid. This was showing weakness. This was being ridiculous. He had to come up with a reason to go to Dakkam that didn't have to do with the Quills. There were no bounties on Dakkam. Nothing he had in inventory was worth the trip to sell. Yondu tapped the fuel meter and scowled; when had the damn thing gotten so low?

“Kraglin,” he barked, “go check the meters down in engines.”
“Readings say they're fine, cap'n.”

“I didn't ask you what they said,” Yondu snapped, “I said go check 'em.”

Kraglin sprang to his feet and made tracks towards the engine room. A few Ravagers stood by the engine room door; new hires, he remembered, a group of misfits.

“We're headed out?” One of them had stringy black hair and deep eyes; Halfnut, Kraglin remembered. “Where to?”

“Don't question where the captain's going.” Kraglin eyed the fuel meters; the captain was right to be concerned about how low fuel had gotten. “You'll live longer. Trust me.”

“We're on the damn ship.” The ugliest of the new hires had a voice like a pig gargling gravel. He had some stupid self-given name, Kraglin recalled, something like Electoscowl or Knifetooth. Taserface, that was it. “Shouldn't we know where we're going?”

“Dakkam,” Kraglin said, “now get back to work.”

“What's on Dakkam,” the hire asked.

“Fuel.” Kraglin's voice was as calm as lake waters as the lies flowed from his lips. He didn't even look up as he addressed the new hires. “Fuel cost on Dakkam's dirt cheap right about now. Milky Way fuel prices are so low that it's worth the extra jumps. Not that it's any of your goddamn business, Taserface. You and Halfnut get back to scrubbin' the floor before I decide that you ain't worth the cost of processin' your oxygen.”

Taserface and Halfnut tensed. Kraglin's head turned towards them. His expression was as stone-cold as the ice blue of his eyes. Taserface and Halfnut shrunk back and let the door close behind them. A smile played around the edge of Kraglin's mouth before he paced back to the bridge.

It was nice to be first mate.

Meredith closed the door behind her, kicked off her silver flats, and groaned.

“What a day,” she said.

“Ms. Quill.” Ellyn shut off her keyboard and stood. “Good shift?”

“Good enough.” Meredith set a white box on the counter and stretched. “Another long day, but great for tips.”

Ellyn gestured towards the tight black dress that functioned as Meredith's uniform.

“Guessing that had something to do with it,” she said.

Meredith shrugged.

“They make us all wear them,” she confessed.

“Ms. Quill, I think you should prioritize getting a better job. Something that pays more,” Ellyn said, “and lets you stay home.”
“Why,” Meredith chuckled, “are you tired of babysitting?”

“No, nothing like that.” Ellyn chuckled and picked up her purse. “Guess I should head out. Peter, your mom's home.”

Peter came rushing down the hallway and tackled her in a hug. Meredith's cybernetics moved her body fast enough to catch him and spin him around. With her boy in her arms, Meredith instantly felt wonderful. Ellyn watched them with soft eyes.

“I'll head out,” she said.

Meredith reached for her interface to pay Ellyn. As she transferred the units, Ellyn and Peter's eyes met. They had a running arrangement; every unit Ellyn got from Meredith, she gave back to Peter. It seemed wrong to charge Meredith to sit around in her house and write all day, Ellyn figured, and it wasn't like Ellyn needed the money. She hugged Meredith and Peter good-bye, and Meredith locked the door behind her.

“How was my baby's day,” Meredith asked.

“Great! Grelk and I got put together in Engineering,” Peter said, “and we smoked the other teams.”

“Grelk, huh? Isn't that the little Mobian boy who came over the other day to study?”

“No, Mom, that was Miramor. Grelk is the furry one.”


“Yeah, him. He's cool.” Peter sat at the dining table and swung his legs. “So what's for dinner?”

“You favorite.” Meredith picked up the white box off the counter, her eyes sparkling. “Leftovers.”

Meredith had brought home three sealed containers of food. She took off the biggest lid; arranged in artistic circles were cuts of blue meat, elaborate twisted vegetables, and what looked like purple rice. The other plates held a tropically-colored salad and a deep crimson pudding decorated with edible gold stars. Peter's eyes widened.

“Some rich Aakon fellow changed his order last second,” Meredith explained. “He ordered a three-course meal, too, and the boss said I could take it home for handling that difficult customer.”

“What is it,” he breathed.

“This is some kind of fish from Mando,” Meredith explained, pointing to the meat, “and the vegetables and rice are from Xandar. The salad is from a flora-filled wild planet; they have to pick the leaves when they're very small, because they grow into gigantic woody plants and become inedible. The pudding is made from a kind of plum that the Pheragots grow as a peace offering. Pretty cool, huh?”

“It's awesome,” Peter said.

The two Terrans sat down and began the meal with dessert first, as always. Meredith smiled to herself, keeping quiet; she knew that Peter cared more about the exotic locations the food came from than the actual meal, but she didn't mind in the least. This was her way of showing him a little bit of adventure. He could enjoy things from far away while still remaining put, and Meredith had no doubt that one day her boy would be visiting those planets. She leaned her head on her hand and chuckled; she could quite clearly imagine a Pheragot offering him a plum as a peace offering, and him chatting
on about how his mother had brought home a pudding once.

Three pounding booms shook the door. The Terrans jumped; Meredith set down her fork, and Peter picked up a knife. Slowly, Meredith got out of her chair and went to the door. She peered through the keyhole.

“You're shitting me,” she muttered.

“Mom?” Peter eyed the door, still gripping the knife. “Who is it?”

Meredith sighed. She threw open the door and leaned, blocking the entrance with her arm. In the doorway was a familiar blue scowl on top of a ragged Ravager jacket.

“Yondu!” Peter leapt out of his seat. “Hell yeah!”

The boy bolted to the door, ducked slightly under Meredith's arm, and plowed into Yondu with a hug. Meredith took several deep, calming breaths.

“Nice to see you, Yondu.” She slowly took her arm down off the door. “When did you get here?”

“Just now.” Yondu pushed the boy off with one hand and casually picked at his teeth with the other. “Been a while, Mery.”

“So what's up,” Meredith said, “why are you here?”

Yondu scowled.

“What,” he said, “I can't just drop in when I want to?”

“This is my house, so no.” Meredith crossed her arms. “You can't just drop in. It's nice to see you, but call next time.”

“You call this a house?” Yondu snorted as he stepped over the threshold. “This is a goddamn closet with a stove in it.”

Meredith closed her eyes tightly. This was it, she thought to herself, this was exactly why she didn't want him here.

“It's better than living in a cargo room,” she said.

Yondu turned around and fixed her with his crimson eyes.

“Bigger,” he said, “but that don't always mean better.”

“My chairs have backs to them, my bed has more than one blanket, I have a couch, and my kitchen isn't infested with Drazkar's fur,” Meredith said. “So yeah, I'd call that better.”

Yondu's eyes bored holes into hers. She glowered back. Peter looked between the two of them and frowned.

“So, Yondu,” he said hopefully, “do you need me for a job or something?”

It worked; the glaring contest ended as Yondu turned to Peter, chuckling.

“Nah, kid. We was in the neighborhood,” Yondu said, “just fuelin' up. Prices is dirt cheap out here, I tell you what.”
Meredith exhaled, her shoulders sagging.

“Figures,” she mumbled.

“Yondu, you've got to see this! My buddy Grelk and I made a prototype fuel flange,” Peter babbled, “and it was almost exactly like the one on the Eclector.”

The boy raced off without another word. Yondu and Meredith were left alone in the living room. Meredith's arms were crossed so firmly across her chest that her silver scars shone in the weak light. There was no mistaking the tightness of her mouth or the intensity of her stare.

“Why you glarin’ at me, Mery?” Yondu's voice was unusually low. “You pissed at me or somethin’?”

“Oh, I can't imagine why I'd be irritated with you right now. Barging into my home uninvited without calling first? No,” Meredith said cynically, “that wouldn't tick me off, right?”

“Fuel was cheap. I didn't plan on comin' down here, Mery.” Yondu bared his teeth and crossed his arms, mirroring her pose. “Just happened to be in the system, alright?”

“Just happened to be in the system?” Meredith's voice was slick with sarcasm. “Yeah, I believe that.”

“Why else would I bother comin' down to your shitty little apartment?” Yondu was purpling slowly. “Ain't got no other reason to be here, do I?”

“See, and there you go.” Meredith turned her back on him and rounded the counter into the kitchen. “I knew it. I knew that was why you came down here.”

“The hell you talkin' about, Mery?”

“You didn't come here for fuel,” she said acidly, “you came here to bother me.”

“Somebody's got a high-ass view of herself.” Yondu rounded the counter, growling. “I wouldn't cross half a parsec for you, dumbass.”

“Oh, of course.” Meredith's voice was mockingly sweet. “You came all the way down here just to visit me and Peter and be a polite lil' sweetheart, I'm sure.”

Yondu's face was entirely purple.

“Startin' to think I shouldn't have come at all,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Startin' to think? Ha.” Meredith started gathering dinner back into the boxes; her back was turned to Yondu so he couldn't see her increasing tears of frustration. “I've been thinking that since you showed up at the damn door.”

“So that's it, then.” Yondu refastened the front of his coat, doing his best to cover the aching in his heart with anger. “Shit, should've guessed it myself and fucked off somewhere else. Not like you'd care, hm? Bitch.”

“Bitch?” Meredith wheeled around, her eyes filled with tears of rage. “Who the hell do you think you are? This is my home, Yondu.”

“Home?” Yondu spat on the kitchen floor. “Mery, this is a shithole.”

“It's all I can afford right now.” Meredith put one box of the leftovers in the fridge and grabbed
another. “Better than the Eclector!”

“Like hell.” Yondu couldn't help but roll his eyes. “You're livin' on leftovers like a pair of goddamn Orloni feedin' in a dumpster.”

Meredith dropped the box of food she was holding. Salad leaves in shades of pale yellow, teal blue, chartreuse, and fuchsia went scattering everywhere.

“Now look what you've done,” Yondu scowled.

He didn't get an answer. Yondu's eyes snapped up; his chest locked in a vice. Meredith was doing everything she could not to cry. Her lower lip was shaking violently, tears were brimming at her eyes. Yondu was completely sure she could barely see him through the sheer amount of liquid. Worst of all, her chin was held as high and strong as it would go. Understanding struck Yondu like a bolt of lightning; this was Meredith's life now. Low-income apartment, shitty leftovers, ugly furniture, and no doubt a real drainer of a job, and here she was defending it.

“Yondu!” Peter came in holding a poorly-constructed fuel flange. “This is... oh. Mom, are you okay?”

Meredith's eyes were as wide as saucers. She quickly wiped her eyes on her sleeve and let out a strained, watery laugh.

“Sorry, baby. I got a little emotional and dropped the salad.” Meredith lifted her shoulders. “Guess it's a two-course meal now.”

“Mom, are you okay?” Peter dropped the fuel flange on the counter. “You're crying, mom.”

“It's fine, honey.”

“No it's not.” Peter pushed her to the dinner seat. “Relax, I'll reheat dinner.”

Yondu and Meredith watched in mild disbelief as Peter retrieved the leftovers from the fridge and began to reheat them.

“Are you staying for supper,” he asked Yondu.

“No,” Yondu and Meredith chorused.

Peter frowned. Yondu sat in the small dinner chair across from Meredith, scowling.

“I bet you want me to apologize for ruinin' your dumpster dinner,” he said under his breath.

“Maybe I should have gotten a dog,” Meredith muttered, “and trained it to kill anything big, stupid, and blue.”

“Wouldn't work,” Peter said loudly, “dogs are colorblind.”

“Go ahead, brainless.” Yondu's biting reply was nearly inaudible. “I'll shoot the thing. I'm allergic, I don't give a damn.”

“He is allergic,” Peter allowed.

“Stay out of it,” Meredith and Yondu snapped at Peter.

Peter turned around and kept reheating dinner, his ears red. Yondu slid his arrow out of its quiver
and began twirling it in his fingers. He stared at the floor as heat rose from his collar into his face. None of this had gone the way he'd expected it to.

“If you're doin' this bad,” he grumbled, “why ain't you called me for help?”

“Because I don't need you,” she hissed.

“I didn't say you needed it,” Yondu said, “I said you're allowed to fuckin' ask. Mery, you're raisin' a boy alone on a goddamn foreign planet makin' minimum wage.”

“And what's wrong with that,” Meredith challenged.

“Stars,” Yondu cursed, “stop jumpin' down my throat and let me talk for a goddamn second. Bein' too stubborn to ask for help ain't good for Peter and it ain't good for you.”

“Firstly, that's rich coming from you. Secondly,” she said, “I ask Kraglin for help when I need it.”

“That ain't the kind of help I'm talkin' about here.” Yondu leaned his elbow onto the table and dropped his voice so Peter couldn't hear. “You're used to raising Peter alone. You're used to parenting alone and livin' and strugglin' alone. Doesn't mean that's the way it's got to be.”

“It's how it should be,” Meredith mumbled, “I'm his mother.”

“And you're a damn good one,” Yondu allowed, “but I bet if you were talkin' to any other mother in the same situation, turnin' down help because she's too proud, you'd tell that bitch that pride is important, but it's more important that the kid be provided for and turn out right.”

Meredith looked at the floor. The orphaned, murderous Ravager had a better understanding of parenting than she did; she had to admit, it stung a little bit.

“Peter was worried sick about you,” she murmured.

Yondu, deep purple, muttered something incoherent.

“What was that,” Meredith asked.

“I said you were right for bein' pissed-off.” Yondu stuck his arrow back in its quiver. “Gef had a bet goin' on the Eclector about whether or not you'd get back to the Eclector.”

“Kraglin mentioned it, but he wouldn't tell me anything more than that it existed.” Meredith frowned. “What about it?”

“I bet that you'd fail,” Yondu admitted, “seein' as I didn't have much faith in you doin' well planetside.”

“Knew it,” Meredith said.

“I was wrong.”

A small smile spread along Meredith's mouth.

“I'm sorry,” she teased gently, “what was that?”

“Don't milk it,” he growled.

“Okay, okay.” Meredith smiled. “Just glad to hear you say it.”
“You're doin' alright. It ain't good,” Yondu said, “but it ain't as bad as I thought it'd be. I figured you'd be either livin' off charity, shacked up in some kinda commune, or Peter'd be stealin' to put units in your pocket.”

“Definitely not,” she replied.

Yondu grunted. Peter brought over the reheated fish and rice.

“Dinner,” he claimed.

“I'd better go.” Yondu stood up. He put a hand on Peter's head, scarcely a touch. “Take care of your momma, boy.”

Peter's fierce expression was enough to make Yondu chuckle.

“I'll see you to the ship, at least.” Meredith stood. “Don't want you getting arrested.”

Yondu hesitated, but nodded. Meredith grabbed her keys and walked him to the door.

“Mom,” Peter called, “shoes.”

“Oh, right,” she said.

Yondu watched Meredith pull on her shoes one at a time. As she brought each leg up to slip on the silver flats, the black dress pulled up to reveal leg above the knee.

“Why you wearin' that,” Yondu asked.

“This?” Meredith gestured to the tight black dress with a pronounced frown. “This stupid thing is my work outfit.”

Yondu's body went rigid.

“It's not what you think,” she said quickly, “it's a high-end establishment. But, as you can see, my legs are a little long for the uniform, that's all.”

Yondu's blood-red eyes flicked from her silver flats to the worn-out makeup on her eyes.

“How much for a table at the place you work,” he asked.

“Don't even think about it; the last thing I need is my boss getting on my case about bringing sixty or so Ravagers to work.” Meredith's eyes lidded. She opened the door and gestured to it. “Come on, let's go.”

Chuckling, Yondu paced through the door. Meredith waved to Peter as she shut it.

“I'll be back in fifteen minutes,” she called.

“I'll keep dinner warm.” He waved back. “Don't let him kidnap you without me on board, okay?”

Meredith shut the door and followed Yondu down the stairs and onto the street, heading to the dock. They paced down a street, its surface broken by the streetlights that cut through the watery darkness like harpoons of light.

“You know walkin' along with a Ravager in that dress,” Yondu said, “people are gonna talk.”
“People talk about us no matter what I wear.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “Stakar Ogord can testify to that.”

Yondu's collar was uncomfortably warm. He tugged on it with a thick blue finger.

“Marty too,” he muttered.

“Martinex? Really?”

“He went on and on today accusin' me of pissin' you off,” Yondu said, “sayin' that was why you weren't callin' or talkin' to nobody but Kraglin.”

“I wasn't calling because I didn't want anyone to know how hard it is to scrape by down here,” Meredith said, “and because I didn't want you swooping in and kidnapping us again.”

“You sure about that? You'd have a lot less bills to pay.” Yondu cracked a grin. “Though you might have t'keep the dress.”

Meredith swatted his elbow with her hand, her cheeks pink.

“I'd wear old t-shirts and baggy pants,” she snapped, “and I'd shave my head again if it meant you jerks would leave me alone.”

“Shave off all this?” Yondu took her long blonde curls and let them slip through his fingers. “Waste of a lot of long months of growin' it out.”

They passed under one of the streetlights; the cylindrical beams of light set her curls to a cold, pastel gold. Shadows lay across Yondu's face like velvet cut-outs, setting his casual expressions to something wakeless. Meredith inhaled; Yondu swallowed. His hand withdrew from her hair and he stuffed both of them in his coat pockets. Meredith's head snapped straight, eyes firmly fixed on the dock in the distance, where the Eclector stood waiting.

“So, everything's okay on the Eclector?” Meredith rubbed her arms. “Everybody hanging in there?”

“Yeah, Stakar's got us workin' on some jobs here an' there.” Yondu swallowed. “Keeps us busy.”

The small talk was throttling him now. One of the unexpected negatives of having the trained mind of a battle-slave was that when Yondu wanted something, his brain located all the opportunities for him to get it. There was a turn in the road that led to a sleek lattice gate. Yondu could already smell the flowers; doubtlessly it led to some private garden.

Jump the gate, his mind offered, get her in the garden, kiss her until she wants you again.

Yondu damned himself for being so smart.

“What the hell is this,” he heard himself say as they passed the black gate.

“Private garden,” Meredith said.

Yondu tried to take a step forwards and push himself past the opportunity. Instead, his foot landed on the bottom of the black lattice gate and propelled him over it.

“Yondu,” Meredith hissed, “the goal was not to be arrested!”

On the other side of the lattice gate, Yondu grinned at her.

“It's just a goddamn flower garden,” he said, “there ain't no security. What, you scared, Star-Queen?”
“I am not scared, I'm smart.” Meredith's cheeks reddened. “Now get back over here this instant, Yondu Udonta.”

“Make me,” he said.

Meredith backed up a step or two and eyed the gate.

“You're going to make me late getting home,” she muttered, “and Peter's going to worry.”

*Right, the boy.* Yondu's mind calculated without his permission. *You'll have to make this quick.* Yondu had never wanted his mind to shut up more, but he had to admit he was pretty damn clever. This promised to be, at the very least, a lot of fun, and after what he'd gone through with Marty he could use a little fun. He grabbed the lattice gate and grinned at Meredith.

“You can't make it over in them slippy shoes,” he said.

Meredith grabbed the lattice gate and glared at him, her nose two inches away. Yondu could see the streetlights reflecting in her silver eyes. His forehead hit cold metal; he had been leaning in to see them.

“You better come back over here,” she muttered.

“How you gonna make me,” he taunted.

“You are such a child.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“Am not,” he said, “and you're the one what can't even climb a gate.”

“I can climb this no problem. It's just like a cattle gate back home. Smaller is all,” Meredith said, “but you're not tricking me.”

“Idjit,” he said.

“Asshole,” she replied.

“You're really makin' me want to come back over there, ain't ya?” Yondu leaned back, laughing. “Callin' me an asshole ain't really persuasive, Mery.”

“Yondu,” Meredith said crisply, “please come back over here before you get us both in trouble.”

“Lemme think about it.” Yondu squinted. “Nah.”

“Yondu!” Meredith stomped her foot. “Get your big blue butt back over that gate or so help me I'll come over there.”

“If me bein' here means you comin' over here, Mery, then why would I move?” Yondu shook his head. “You're bein' fuckin' illogical.”

“Ugh, you're worse than Peter.” Meredith put her face in her hands. “Yondu, please come back over
here so I can get you on the Eclector and I can go home and eat dinner because I'm hungry and I don't have time for this.”

Yondu paused, then shoved his foot in the lattice again and vaulted back over the gate. He landed next to Meredith in a flutter of coattails.

“All right,” he said, “let's go.”

Meredith stood, frozen in shock, and had to hasten to keep up with him.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Much as I enjoy pissin' you off, you can't exactly afford to skip meals.” Yondu poked her side, which made her laugh. “Look at you, you're like a walkin' toothpick. We done spent months on the Eclector keepin' you fed; I ain't about to let you go hungry now.”

“You're sweet,” she mumbled.

Yondu loathed and loved it.

“But don't ever show up here again like that, telling me how to live my life!” Meredith jammed her finger in Yondu's face, her expression fierce. “I am doing the best I can with what I've got, and if I hear another word about how my house doesn't measure up to your standards I'm going to explode. Who was the one who couldn't get so much as a cup of coffee on his own ship? You! You can't even cook for yourself, and you come into my house acting like the big man? Not happening.”

Yondu laughed. He held his hands up as if in surrender, flashing his crooked teeth at her.

“Damn, Star-Queen, point a goddamn gun in my face why don't ya?”

“Don't tempt me.” She crossed her arms. “I'd do it.”

“You threatenin' me?” Yondu shook his head, chuckling. “Damn Terrans.”

The hug threw him off balance in more ways than one; the surprise of it made his face flush, and the shock of the weight pushed him further back than expected. He stumbled for a moment, then wrapped his large blue arms around Meredith.

“Damn Terrans,” he muttered again.

Her only response was to tighten the hug.

“Thanks for visiting,” she said.

“But don't do it again anytime soon?”

“Yeah.”

Yondu chuckled, put his hands on her shoulders, and straightened her.

“You need help,” he said, “you call me, y'hear?”

“If Kraglin can't fix it,” Meredith promised, “you'll be next on the call list.”

“I ain't talkin' about broken sinks and bad climate conditioning units. I'm talkin', the boss starts touchin' you in places you don't like or somebody tries to mug you. I'm talkin' something comes up
and you can't make rent. I'm talkin' the boy gets in trouble, and don't cut me off,” Yondu added
because Meredith had opened her mouth, “because the two of us know more n' anybody that kid can
find trouble in a heartbeat. I'm talkin' you're stressed as shit and sobbin' all over yourself like the
crybaby you are.”

“Way to end that with a mild insult, Yondu.” Meredith grinned, shaking her head. “Nice.”

They were nearly at the dock now. Yondu held up a hand to stop Meredith from walking any
further.

“About the worst damn thing you could do for me right now is for them to catch me walkin' back
with you in that dress at this time of night, alright? Them rumors of Stakar's, they don't die easy,” he
said.

“I bet.” Meredith smiled and hugged herself. “Don't get arrested in the short walk between here and
there, alright.”

Yondu snorted.

“Like I could screw up that badly,” he said.

Meredith raised her eyebrows.

“Who do you think taught it to Peter,” she said briskly.

Yondu purpled, turned his back on her, and walked off.

“Don't get arrested,” she called, “and tell Kraglin I said hi!”

“I'll tell him, I'll tell him.” Yondu scowled. “Go on, get back to your boy.”

He could hear her leaving. An irregular feeling was shifting in his chest; something akin to relief and
joy, but barbed with what could have been disappointment, or shame. Yondu kept his hands in his
pockets, trying to clear his head. Yeah, he knew he had some thrice-accursed fuck-forsaken soft spot
for Mery, but he'd told himself to let that go. Right now neither of them had time for that kind of
sentimental bullshit. He knew what he wanted, all right, but what they needed was more important,
and right now what they needed was a friend. Meredith needed someone she could complain to
about her job, and Yondu needed someone to complain to about his family. They were friends, he
reminded himself, no matter what anybody else thought.

With benefits would be nice, his brain added. His body tightened in approval at the thought. Nice,
pleasurable benefits. On the Eclector, in the captain's quarters.

Yondu needed to learn where the off-button was on his own brain.

For the second time that day, Meredith closed the door behind her, kicked off her silver flats, and
groaned. Peter stood by the dinner table; he had reset the table and kept the food warm for his
mother.

“Twenty minutes,” Peter said.

“Sorry honey, but he doesn't shut up.” Meredith crossed to the dinner table. “Let's just eat, alright?
I'm starving.”
They sat down to dinner.

“So,” Peter said through a mouthful of rice, “what was he really here for?”

“He said fuel.” Meredith had to talk between swallows; after a long shift and having to deal with Yondu, she needed to refuel herself. “But I think he was angry at me. I haven't been calling him. Not really letting him know if we were doing okay.”

“And that made him mad?”

“Well, Peter, whether intentional or not, ignoring someone tends to anger them.” Meredith dabbed at her mouth with a napkin. “Especially when that person is your friend.”

“And you two are still friends, right?”

Meredith's hand paused at her lips. You could have kissed him through the bars, whispered 'please, big daddy' and he would have hopped over that fence in a heartbeat, she reminded herself, and probably offered to switch between 'big daddy' and 'sugar daddy' if it meant another kiss.

Meredith's face was burning. That was not happening. She was not trading her affections for Yondu's preference or his units. It didn't matter if it would work or not, she told herself firmly, it was the principal of the thing. She'd tried being deferential to space men with egos, and it'd landed her a tumor for heaven's sake.

“Mom?”

“Hm?” She looked at her son with wide eyes. “What honey?”

“I heard you and Yondu arguing.” Peter's face was acutely anxious. “You're still friends, right?”

“Yes, honey.” Meredith put down her napkin. “We're still friends. Just friends.”
Peter comes down with a case of flox pox. There's only one doctor that will take a patient with no medical records, and there's only one person Meredith knows to call if she needs to get off planet.

(Glad to be back, folks! Money was a little tight this past week (spent more than I should've on my birthday) but we're back in business!)

Of all the work-related calls Yondu was expecting, one from Meredith Quill was the last on the list. They’d finally fallen back into the habit of communicating with another, but that was mainly through messages. Quick texts every once in a while let them catch up with each other silently without everyone commenting about it. This was the first time she'd called him onscreen. Her curls were pulled up into a messy bun; he could see dark circles under her eyes.

“Yondu,” she began, “I'm gonna need your help on this one.”

So Meredith Quill finally needed some looking after. It was about time, Yondu thought. He put his hands on his hips and nodded.

“What d'you need,” he asked.

“What can you do about this?” Meredith pulled Peter in front of the screen; the boy's face was festooned with red pustules. “The school said it's called flox pox? Is it contagious? Can I get it? Is he okay?”

“Flox pox?” Kraglin laughed. “I ain't had a bout of that since I was seven years old.”

“Boy's still buildin' immunity.” Yondu shook his head. “Look at what you done now, boy.”

“My face itches,” Peter said brightly.

“The point is,” Meredith continued, “I have no idea how to treat this. I tried treating it like chicken pox, but that hasn't helped. We need Dr. Mareet.”


“If I come down with this, Yondu, I can't go to work. I'm already staying home to take care of Peter,” Meredith said, “despite the fact that I have no idea how to treat this. I need Dr. Mareet, and I need someone to get us to her.”

“Dakkam doctors not good enough?”

“Dakkam doctors want a history of Peter's medical records and a bunch of other things that are sitting in a safe on Terra.” Meredith exhaled and let go of Peter's shoulders. “I need a reliable, cheap doctor who doesn't care that I don't have medical documents.”

“You need Mareet,” Yondu confirmed.
“Yes, that's what I'm saying. Look.” Meredith said, “can you take us to her or not?”

“Can,” Yondu said as he examined his schedule, “but it might take a few days to swing by.”

“How much is this going to set me back, Yondu?”

“Set you back?” Yondu's head snapped up. “The hell you talkin' about, Mery?”

“Cost, Yondu.” Meredith grabbed her own datapad and started tapping things. “I know it costs to change course and spend all that fuel on our account. Plus, Dr. Mareet is cheap, but not free.”

“Listen, Mery. You get back on this goddamn ship and teach Lunis to cook more than five kinds of meal,” Yondu said, “and I'll label it trainin' costs and we'll break even. Dr. Mareet treats Ravagers on Stakar's bill.”

“I'm not a Ravager,” she replied.

“No,” Yondu said, “but the boy still counts.”

Peter broke into a grin. Meredith took one glance at his pustule-ridden face and sighed.

“Okay, Yondu. You've got yourself a deal.”

“We'll swing by in a couple of days,” Yondu promised, “so don't go pickin' at'em or scratchin' your face, you hear, boy?”

“Yes, Yondu.”

“And don't get your momma sick.”

“Okay.”

“And for star's sake,” Gef shouted, “don't get any of us sick!”

“Yeah, Mery? Probably put the boy on quarantine before you load him up here,” Yondu muttered, “since most of these son-of-a-bitches ain't up to snuff on their flox shot.”

Meredith nodded.

“Quarantine,” she said, “can do.”

“Mery,” Yondu said, “this ain't what I meant when I said 'quarantine'.”

Yondu had landed on Dakkam to find Peter wrapped head-to-toe in food preparation wrap. Holes had been cut for his eyes, nose, and mouth, but the rest of him crinkled with each step. Meredith hovered next to him like a nervous Terran satellite.

“Are you sure?” She frowned. “I mean, I can't exactly put him in a bubble.”

“I'm a mummy,” Peter said.

“You're an idjit.” Yondu exhaled. “Mery, you can't wrap the boy up like a goddamn baked potato.”
“I can and I did. Why,” she asked, “was that the wrong thing to do?”

“No, just...” Yondu gestured towards the ramp. “Can't wait until Mareet gets a load of this.”

“Ready Peter?” Meredith smiled at her son. “Best behavior, alright?”

“Yes, mom,” Peter replied.

The boy waddled up the ramp. Meredith and Yondu fell into step behind him.

“How long’s he been sick,” Yondu asked.

“About a week.”

“Anythin' else wrong with him?”

“No, just the pox.”

“Good. Take him down to your room,” Yondu said, “out of the way of the crew.”

“I want to be on the bridge,” Peter protested.

“The last thing I need is you getting your Terran germs all over my ship.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Cargo room with your momma, you hear?”

“Yes, Yondu,” Peter said dully.

Meredith smiled slightly. The ramp closed behind them; Yondu led her and Peter through the Eclector.

“You know,” she joked, “I can get there myself. I still remember.”

“And I remember that there ain't no luck keepin' that boy out of trouble unless he's got two pairs of eyes on him at all times.” There was a pause before Yondu smiled. “Good to hear you ain't dumb enough to forget that quick.”

“Same to you,” she chuckled.

As they paced through the halls, Meredith noticed a lot of unfamiliar faces. A few of the pilots gave her courteous nods when they passed through the hangar. The Suzarra was hanging in all its glory, spotless and well-kept as usual.

“If he loved that damn ship any more, he'd marry it,” Yondu grunted.

Peter and Meredith laughed. Holdon paced up the steps with a large crate on his shoulders.

“Quills!” The grin slid off his face when he saw Peter. “What happened to you, little Quill?”

“I'm quarantined,” Peter chirped.

“Excellent.” Holdon scooted around the boy. “Don't come any closer.”

“Boy,” Yondu snapped, “come along.”

Meredith took Peter's hand and tugged him along. It wasn't easy to match pace with Yondu's fast walking, but she kept up as well as she could as Yondu led them through the ship. His eyes kept flicking to the corners, as if checking them for something. He kept the Quills close; unusually close,
Meredith noticed.

“Yondu,” Meredith asked warily, “is something wrong?”

“What?” Yondu scowled. “No, why?”

“Because you've been personally escorting us to each room,” Meredith said, “like you're afraid something's going to grab us in the fifteen feet it takes to get from the bridge to the bathroom.”

Yondu's crimson eyes flicked to Peter. It was a subtle movement, but combined with the grimness of his jaw and the way his shoulders tensed, Meredith figured she got the message; not in front of the boy. Meredith bit her lips together and said nothing. Yondu led them down to the cargo bay and hit the door panel. The portal didn't budge.

“Dammit.” Yondu put a finger to his ear. “Gef, open Quill's room.”

There was a buzz; the door slid open.

“You had it locked off,” Meredith observed.

“Nope.” Yondu strode in. “That was all Gef. Seemed to think you'd be comin' back real quick.”

“What a vote of confidence,” Meredith said sourly.

Her poor mood couldn't last. The room was precisely the way she'd left it; clean, quaint, and slightly homey. Kraglin's old quilt was still draped over the bed. Meredith skimmed her fingertips across the soft, tattered top and smiled. Yondu's eyes dug into her like shovels.

“Feel free t'get comfy,” he said.

“Don't tempt me.” Meredith sat on the bed. “Last time I thought I was going to be a short-term visitor, I ended up staying for months.”

Peter's eyes burned with unspoken hope. Meredith kissed his forehead and made for the door.

“Stay here, baby,” she said, “Yondu and I are gonna talk.”

“Yeah, okay.” Peter nodded. “You two should talk about how long we can stay here.”

“Peter,” Meredith warned.

“It'd be full-time work with no location costs,” Peter added, “and a great health insurance plan.”

“No, Peter.” Meredith laughed. “Stay here, okay?”

She shut the portal behind her. Yondu put his finger to his ear and grunted, “Lock it back up, Gef. Don't let anybody in but Kraglin, me, and Quill.”

Meredith bit her lips together again. Yondu grabbed her by the arm and tugged her a little ways down the hallway, secluding her by a cargo hold.

“So,” she said, “what's going on?”

Yondu shifted from foot to foot.

“I need t'keep you and the boy from mixin' with the crew again,” he mumbled.

“Because then they're gonna expect to keep you.” Yondu crossed his arms, refusing to make eye contact. “Since that ain't happening on account of you're so damn keen on stayin' on Dakkam, you and the boy need to lay low.”

“They can't seriously expect this to be a permanent arrangement,” Meredith argued.

“They've been betting on you coming back for months, Mery.” Yondu gave her a look. “If they thought nailin' your shoes to the ground was a way to keep you here, they'd do it.”

Meredith exhaled slowly.

“That is both incredibly sweet,” she said, “and incredibly annoying.”

Yondu growled at the word 'sweet', but let it go.

“Stick to your room and the kitchen, you hear? Don't let that boy anywhere he ain't supposed to be, and for fuck's sake,” Yondu requested, “teach Lunis how to cook some goddamn lauhka.”

Lunis was doing his best at cooking; Meredith realized that fairly quickly. She also realized that he had a natural talent for burning things to a crisp. For the second time that afternoon, she shoveled burnt food into the trash can.

“They eat it. If it's burned,” Lunis said, “they'll still eat it.”

“Honey, you're Ravagers.” Meredith sighed and set the pan in the sink. “You'll eat anything.”

Lunis shrugged. Meredith handed him a bunch of what looked to be long, pale green carrots.

“Are you familiar with these,” she asked.


“They're called *kitai kudi*,” Meredith explained, “and they're very nutritious. I want you to chop them up for me, okay?”

Lunis drew a foot-long, wickedly-sharp knife from his belt. He examined the light as it gleamed off the metal, and then began dicing. He had incredible speed and precision; the slices were uniform in thickness. Meredith raised her eyebrows.

“Ravager.” Lunis offered her the cut root. “Good with knives; bad with cooking.”

“You're not bad, Lunis, you just crank the stove up too high. This is going to be much easier. This is salad.” Meredith tossed him a head of deep green leaves. “You can't burn a salad.”

Meredith let Lunis dice the vegetables while she grilled some leftover lauhka. She cut it into slices and chilled it by placing it near the cooling vents. They tossed the vegetables and leaves with the grilled lauhka and set it out for lunch. Naturally the Ravagers were wary of anything that Lunis had a hand in, especially when he was still holding his knife, but they were too hungry to question it. Within minutes, they'd noticed the difference.

“Thank the stars.” Kraglin laughed and piled his plate. “Shit, Ms. Q, did I miss your cookin'.”
“You can always come down to Dakkam,” Meredith said, “and I'll whip you up somethin' to eat. We don't have much, but we're blessed enough to say there's always food in the house.”

Kraglin took his plate and sat next to Tullk. He remembered Tullk; he'd been a veteran Ravager when Kraglin was still earning his flight stripes. They began wolfing down the salad.

“Good, innit?” Kraglin chuckled. “We had fare like this all the time back when Ms. Q was the cook.”

“Holy shit.” Tullk spoke through a full mouth. “Why didn't the captain hire her?”

“She's not a Ravager,” Kraglin said.

“As if that matters.” Tullk swallowed. “This is the best fare I've ever had on a ship.”

There were some grunts of assent from other Ravagers at the table. Kraglin gave Ms. Q a side glance; she was busy serving up salad to the line of Ravagers forming at the door. He allowed himself a small smile. Leave it to Ms. Q to fall right back into helping people, he thought. It had been a long while since she'd last stepped foot on the Eclector, but Kraglin figured that Terrans never really changed.

Peter needed a bathroom. There were two problems with that; one, he had been told not to leave his mother's room, and two, he was wrapped head-to-toe in plastic. Peter shrugged and slammed the door panel. He waddled out of the room and headed down the hall. The bathroom wasn't far, he figured, and if he got this plastic wrap wet in the shower it would slide right off.

If any of the Ravagers thought it was odd to see a young, unaccompanied Terran covered in plastic wrap, they didn't say a thing about it. A few of the ones he recognized gave him odd looks, but allowed him to pass unhindered. Peter made it to the bathroom door and hit the door panel. Inside, a pilot was washing his tentacles. Under a nearby sink, a maintenance worker was taking out some busted pipe. His long, greasy curls were bound in a top-knot on his head.

“What happened this time,” the pilot asked.

“Someone mouthed off to Taserface again.” The maintenance worker scowled. “He's got a hell of a temper.”

“Hi,” Peter interrupted, “do either of you have a knife or scissors or something?”

The pilot and the worker looked at Peter as if he'd appeared out of thin air.

“Isn't that the Terran,” the worker asked.

“Yeah, that's just Quill.” The pilot rolled his bulbous eyes. “What did you do this time, slimeball?”

“Nothing,” Peter protested, “I'm just covered in plastic wrap and I need to go to the bathroom.”

The worker slid out from under the sink and sighed.

“Fine, get over here.” He drew a pair of shears from his belt. “And hold still, alright?”

The worker slit the plastic off Peter's body; the pilot gathered the shreds and pitched them in the disposal. Peter did his best to stand still, but it was difficult with how much he needed to go. As soon as the maintenance worker had cut off enough, Peter popped out of the plastic sleeve and ran to the
stalls.

“Thank you so much,” he yelled.

“Don't say that,” they yelled back.

The pilot shoved the remainder of the plastic into the disposal, then left the room, shaking his head.

“Figures,” he muttered, “the moment the Quills are back on board, everything starts to get weird.”

Although Peter had gotten taller in the last few months, he still needed to stand on his tiptoes to wash his hands in the sink. The maintenance worker was still repairing the other sink; Peter watched him work for a minute.

“Do you need help,” Peter asked.

“I can do my damn job,” was the reply.

“Yeah, but I want to help. What kind of tool are you using? What's it made of?” Peter squatted on the floor to get a better look at the plumbing. “Is that foam an adhesive or is it for the water?”

“It's for the water,” the worker replied, “it stops up the pipes to let me work. When I'm done, I pour an acidic solution down there. The foam is made of a base; the acid dissolves the base, the chemicals mix, and what ends up going down the pipes is a harmless neutral solution.”

“Wow,” Peter said.

The maintenance worker lifted his head. He looked at the boy; tan hair, green eyes, covered in flox pox no less. A kid, Oblo decided, just a kid.

“What did you say your name was, kid?”

“Peter,” was the answer.

“Peter.” The maintenance worker yanked off his leather glove and offered a rough-skinned hand. “Name's Oblo.”

“Nice to meet you,” Peter said.

The two shook hands before the worker went back to fixing the sink.

“So you want to help, do you? Can you operate an omnitool,” Oblo asked.

“Can I operate one,” Peter asked sarcastically.

“Alright, alright.” Oblo jerked his head towards the omnitool lying next to him. “Grab that, start cutting that pipe to size.”

Peter took the omnitool and flicked open the saw. He found the notches in the pipe and cut them carefully. Oblo checked his progress occasionally through his peripheral vision. The kid was detail-oriented, precise, and took orders well. Good kid, Oblo decided instantly, good help.

“Done,” Peter announced.

The boy handed Oblo a section of pipe; Oblo snapped it into place.
“Tool,” he said.

Peter handed him the omnitool, which Oblo used to meld the ends of the pipe. Oblo scanned it; the job was watertight. He filed off some of the rougher edges, then slid out from under the sink.

“Ready to see whether or not we fucked up,” he asked.

“Yeah!” The boy was grinning. “If we screwed up, we get yelled at!”

“Only if someone finds out we screwed up.” Oblo took a blue bottle from his belt, unscrewed the cap, and poured a clear yellow liquid down the pipes. “Here goes nothing.”

A crackling sound emanated from the pipes. Peter's eyes widened, but Oblo didn't move.

“Just taking the foam out,” he said.

After the crackling stopped, Oblo turned on the sink. The water shot down into the pipes. Peter craned down and inspected the seals.

“I think it worked,” Peter said.

“Can't trust your eyes, kid.”

Oblo drew a papery sheet of cloth from his back pocket. He wrapped it around the pipe and waited. Nothing happened.

“Good,” he muttered.

“What's that,” Peter asked.

“This?” Oblo held up the paper. “Moisture paper. Watch.”

Oblo let the tiniest corner of the paper touch the running water; it instantly expanded like a marshmallow.

“Swells on contact,” Oblo explained.

“That is so cool.” Peter poked the marshmallow bulge. “Where can I get some of that?”

“Any plumbing trader. Sometimes home stores.” Oblo squeezed the water out of the papery cloth before shoving it in his back pocket. “Cheep stuff.”

“Can I have some,” Peter begged.

Oblo squinted. What kind of a kid wanted to play with plumbing equipment? Terrans were weird.

“Okay kid, whatever you want.” Oblo handed Peter the moisture paper. “Consider it payment for helping me out. Looks like we're done here. You better scram before someone catches you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't know much about you,” Oblo said, “but I know the captain's been keeping you pegged up and out of trouble. Best get back to wherever you came from before trouble finds you, alright?”

“Good point.” Peter grinned. “Thank you!”

“Don't say that,” Oblo yelled as the boy ran out.
Peter didn't heed him any mind; he went barreling down the hallway with the moisture paper in his fists. He couldn't wait to tell his mother all about it. He rounded the corner and smacked face-first into a pair of thick legs. Peter fell backwards on his rear, grimacing.

“Watch it,” a voice growled.

Standing over Peter was the ugliest thing he'd ever seen. The man had rippled skin like he'd been burned, tufts of unruly hair, and eyes as yellow as piss.

“Wow,” Peter said, “you're really ugly.”

The man grabbed Peter by the front of his shirt and lifted him as if he weighed no more than a ham sandwich. Peter's eyes widened.

“You're the little Terran rat, aren't you?” The man had worse teeth than Yondu. “Awfully mouthy for a little brat.”

“Could you stop talking?” Peter wrinkled his nose. “Your breath smells like you've been eating Orloni poop.”

The man lifted Peter higher, pressing his head against the ceiling.

“I could throw you across this hallway like pitching a beer can,” he snarled.

Peter looked down at the ground; it seemed terribly far away.

“Put me down,” he said.

“You think you can give me orders just because you and your scrawny mother are Yondu's pets?” Taserface snorted. “He should have airlocked you both the moment he had you on board.”

Peter's expression hardened.

“What did you call my mother,” he asked.

“Scrawny. Weak,” Taserface, “a toothpick, a twig.”

Peter's fist entered Taserface's mouth, shoving the moisture paper into the man's throat. It expanded immediately, cutting off Taserface's air supply. The Ravager dropped Peter, who fell to the ground with a cry. Peter grabbed his ankle, fighting tears; Taserface shoved his fingers in his mouth, trying to pull the thick moisture paper out of his throat.

It was then that Kraglin turned the corner. His eyes snapped from Peter's position to the shreds of moisture paper Taserface was tearing out of his mouth. Kraglin flicked open his omnitool, grabbed Taserface’s jaw, and shoved a dehydrator down into his throat. It sucked up the moisture paper, leaving Taserface coughing. Kraglin let the Ravager fall to his knees, going immediately to Peter and scanning his ankle.

“Just a little twist, Pete.” Kraglin was remarkably calm for someone who'd just walked in on a crisis. “We'll get somethin' cold on it and you won't feel a thing.”

“He threw me on the ground,” Peter accused.

“He choked me,” Taserface said with a raspy, dry voice.

“You're both idiots.” Kraglin scooped up Peter like a sack of potatoes. “Taserface, get back to the
“Goddamn engine room where you belong. This wouldn't have happened if you weren't at your post, you hear? Cap'n's gonna roast your ass if you do it again.”

“Fine,” was the reply.

Taserface shuffled off down the stairs, still choking on the dryness of his throat.

“What an asshole,” Peter muttered.

Kraglin gave Peter a glare that could freeze magma. Peter shrunk in.

“You,” Kraglin said, “weren't supposed to leave your mother's goddamn room.”

“I had to go to the bathroom,” Peter protested.

“Where the hell did you get moisture paper?”

“Oblo was fixing the sink in the bathroom. He let me have a sheet because I helped.”

“And you chose to shove it down somebody's throat, is that right?”

“He called mom scrawny and weak!”

“Right,” Kraglin said scathingly, “and that gives you the right to kill somebody, is that it?”

Peter bit his lips together and glowered.

“It don't, Peter. You got to learn to control that damn temper of yours or it's gonna get you killed one day.” Kraglin carried Peter through the Eclector. “If you don't learn how to act like a man instead of a goddamn little girl throwin' a hissy fit, you're gonna get you and everybody around you into some major goddamn trouble.”

The kitchen portal was propped open, allowing Kraglin to carry Peter in unhindered. Meredith saw her boy in Kraglin's arms and dropped the salad tongs into the bowl.

“Peter!” She cupped her son's face in her hands, salad forgotten. “What happened, baby?”

“I got into a fight,” Peter said, “and my ankle hurts.”

“He pissed somebody off,” Kraglin explained, “and they picked him up. Peter did somethin' stupid to 'em and so they dropped him.”

Meredith's eyes were steel.

“Who,” she asked.

“Ms. Q, that ain't important right now. Peter's hurt,” Kraglin said, “he needs ice.”

“Ice.” Meredith's attention changed completely. “Right, ice.”

Kraglin watched Meredith dig around the freezer chest for some ice. All she could find was a bag of frozen berries, which she pressed around Peter's ankle. Peter sat on a mess bench with the cold bag around his ankle while Meredith finished serving lunch. Yondu came strolling in a half-hour later; Meredith was washing out the bowl. He froze in the doorway.

“Where's the damn food,” he demanded to know.
“Got you covered, captain.” Lunis brought him a bowl of salad. “Quill set it aside. Laukha salad. Tastes good.”

Grumbling, Yondu dropped onto the bench next to Peter. He made it halfway through his lunch before realizing that Peter was there.

“Came to the kitchen to be with your momma, did you?” Yondu eyed the thawing bag of berries. “The hell's that for?”

“My ankle hurts,” Peter complained.

“Flox pox first and now his ankle.” Meredith ran a hand through her thick gold curls. “Peter, baby, could you stop getting hurt?”

“What happened to his ankle,” Yondu said through a mouthful of salad.

“Somebody picked him up in the air because he was annoying them,” Meredith explained, “and apparently Peter did something to them and they dropped him.”

“Who's 'them',” Yondu growled.

“I don't know, ask Kraglin.” Meredith sunk into the seat across from Yondu. “I've been serving lunch so I've got no idea what's been going on.”

Yondu chewed slowly, letting his eyes roam around Meredith's face. The dark circles that had hung under her eyes while she was sick were starting to reform. She wasn't sleeping well, he figured, probably because of the boy. She was still thinner than he was comfortable with, and the way her shoulders bowed spoke of stress and late nights worrying.

“You doin' alright,” he asked.


“You look like somebody's been putting you through the wringer.” Yondu swallowed. “Work okay?”

“Work's fine.”

“You getting out and about like you should?”

“More or less.”

“Got somebody to talk to down there?”

“I've got Ellyn.”

“Who?”

“Peter's babysitter. Nice girl.” Meredith tapped her fingers on the table, staring at Peter. “I've been doing fine.”

Her listlessness was irritating. This was not how Meredith was supposed to be; she was bright and hopeful and resilient. She was unhappy, or at least unsatisfied, and there was nothing Yondu could do about it because she wouldn't let him do anything about it. Yondu growled and filled his mouth with more salad.
“I'm going to take Peter back to the room, alright?” Meredith stood and helped Peter off the bench. “Sorry we've caused you trouble, Yondu.”

“Don't worry about it. I'm used to it by now,” Yondu replied.

Meredith grinned and bumped him with the side of her hip. Yondu tilted his head down over his salad bowl so she couldn't see him smile. He heard the portal door slide shut. Yondu waited until Lunis had left the kitchen to put a finger to his ear and call his first mate.

“Kraglin,” he said, “where are you?”

“Pilotin', cap'n, as you said.” Kraglin sounded somewhat surprised. “Why?”

“Boy's got a bust ankle.” Yondu set down his fork. “How'd it happen, Kraglin?”

“Here's what happened, the best I can figure. Pete leaves his momma's room to hit the bathroom. In the bathroom, Oblo's fixin' that sink. Pete helps him out, so Oblo gives him a sheet of moisture paper. Pete goes runnin' to show his momma,” Kraglin explained, “smacks into Taserface. Pete mouths off, sets off Taserface's temper. All he does is pick Pete up, but makes a raw comment about how skinny Ms. Q is. Peter shoves the moisture paper down Taserface's throat and so he drops him. Pete's ankle gets twisted a bit, and Taserface starts chokin' on moisture paper. I had to dehydrate it myself just to stop him from chokin’.”

Yondu pulled out his arrow. He examined the tip, watching the light gleam off the yaka metal.

“Second time this week that temper's caused me trouble. I'm thinkin' I oughta just take out the source,” he said.

“Cap'n, if you kicked off every Ravager who ever had a fight with another, the Eclector'd be empty. Pete pissed Taserface off; it ain't a hard thing to do. Sure, tell that goddamn ugly son-of-a-bitch to mind his post and calm his shit,” Kraglin suggested, “but if you kill him or kick him off, you'd have to kick off or kill everybody else after.”

Yondu stowed away his arrow, mildly disappointed in how rational Kraglin's answer was.

“No fun,” he grunted.

“Sorry, cap'n, but you got to remember that Ms. Q's on board.” Kraglin chuckled. “Best behavior, right?”

“Right,” Yondu muttered, “best behavior.”

Yondu's fist slammed thrice on the door. Corky opened it with one hand, a book occupying the other. What to Expect When Your Krylorian is Expecting was printed across the spine in bright pink letters. Corky didn't even look at them; he just pointed to the welcome mat.

“Get that dirt off your boots, Udonta. This is a hospital, not a barn.” Corky wandered towards the sitting room. “Dr. Mareet will be with you shortly.”

Yondu and Meredith exchanged a look. Peter wandered into the hospital, absentmindedly scratching at his pustules.
“Knock it off or they’ll spread.” Yondu smacked Peter's hand. “Go on, sit down.”

Peter plopped right down on the floor. Meredith looked around with interest.

“You changed the décor, Corky,” she observed.

“We fixed the damage that someone,” Corky said with a pointed glare at Yondu, “did a few months ago.”

“If you could call that damage.” Yondu leaned against the wall and pulled out his arrow. “Couple dents, that's all.”

Corky covered his sour expression with his book. Meredith sat on the loveseat with her hands in her lap. She'd done it; Peter was going to see a doctor. Meredith exhaled in relief. The sooner Peter was cured of flox pox, the sooner they could go home.

“Udonta?” Dr. Mareet stepped into the room. “Oh, Ms. Quill, it's you.”

Dr. Mareet's lab coat was slightly taut across her tummy; Meredith smiled.

“You're starting to show, doctor,” she joked.

The Krylorian flushed a deep beet red. Corky chuckled.

“I know. I've become terribly paranoid about it.” Dr. Mareet laughed. “Whatever you’ve come here for isn't communicable, I hope?”

“Here’s your patient.” Meredith pointed to Peter. “Flox pox epidemic at school.”

“Flox pox?” Dr. Mareet raised her thin eyebrows. “Hasn't he had his vaccinations?”

“I don't have any of Peter's official paperwork, and the doctors won't treat him without the papers. I was hoping you could help us out,” Meredith said.

“Of course. All Ravagers are supposed to receive yearly vaccinations. They rarely do,” Dr. Mareet said, glaring at Yondu, “but we have a standard set of shots.”

“Shots?” Peter got to his feet. “Whoa, nobody said anything about shots?”

“You're afraid of a bitty needle?” Yondu snorted. “Wuss.”

“He's used to seeing them jammed into me, Yondu.” Meredith frowned. “Peter, do you want me to go in with you?”

Peter nodded; Yondu made a noise of disgust.

“He's eight years old, Meredith; he can handle it.” Yondu pulled out his arrow. “This is the kind of thing he should be worried about stickin' him, not a lil' needle.”

“I hate needles,” Peter said, “I hate them.”

“The needles I use are professional-grade, young man. You won't feel a thing,” Dr. Mareet promised, “and it's the only way I can give you vaccinations. You don't want your mother to keep spending money every time you get sick, do you?”

“I'll come with you,” Meredith said.
“Don't do it.” Yondu examined his arrow. “You're just babyin' him. He can handle it. He's a Ravager.”

Peter's eyes flicked between Meredith and Dr. Mareet.

“I'll try it by myself,” he said slowly, “and if it hurts, I'll call mom in.”

“Good compromise.” Dr. Mareet whipped out a datapad. “Follow me.”

Peter gave his mother a few more nervous looks, but obediently followed the doctor out of the waiting room. Meredith rubbed her arms. Yondu tossed his arrow up and whistled; the arrow did a few lazy zooms around the furniture.

“The last time you did that in here, you stabbed my wife in the side.” Corky didn't look up from his book. “Stop it, Udonta.”

Scowling, Yondu snatched his arrow out of midair. Meredith pulled her feet onto the loveseat, hugging her knees to her chest.

“Why you so nervous,” Yondu asked.

“Peter hates hospitals,” she reminded, “and he hates needles.”

“He'll be fine.” Yondu dropped onto the couch like a bag of blue bricks. “He's eight years old, Mery.”

“That's not very old by Terran standards. For goodness' sakes,” Meredith said, “I was still afraid of balloons when I was that age.”

“Balloons?”

“There was a boy in my class named Billy Edison who thought the most hilarious thing in the world was to pop a balloon in my face. When I was eight, almost nine, I punched him in the face.” The corner of Meredith's mouth turned up. “He didn't bother me much after that.”

“Eight years old, punchin' people.” Yondu chuckled. “Sounds like Quills to me.”

“Oh hush.” Meredith bumped him with her shoulder. “I'm sure you got into plenty of trouble when you were eight years old.”

Yondu gave her a look.

“Mery,” he said, “I murdered people when I was eight years old.”

“Oh. Oh, right. I'm so sorry.” Meredith bit her lips together. “...I'm sorry.”

“Don't worry about it, Mery.” Yondu meant to shove her playfully, but he ended up pushing her hard enough to sprawl her sideways on the loveseat. “Shit – I forget how damn light you are.”

Meredith gave him a shocked, withering look; Yondu chuckled and pulled her upright.

“I learned a long damn time ago that it don't do to hover over shit like that. Sure, my life was shit, but that's then. This is now,” Yondu said, “and now ain't too shitty at all.”

Meredith's smile had a way of lighting up her eyes; Yondu swallowed.
“That's a wonderful way to think about it,” she said.

“That's one of Aleta's things. Can't change the past; all you can do is prep for the future.” Yondu shrugged his huge shoulders. “She says it all the damn time.”

“Well, she's right.” Meredith held her head high. “We're here, now, and that's what matters.”

A few more minutes passed in silence. Yondu fiddled with his arrow. Meredith hugged her knees. Corky flipped through his book.

“Udonta,” Corky said eventually, “how are you paying this evening?”

“Bill Stakar,” Yondu grunted.

“Not possible,” Corky said.

Meredith and Yondu both looked up in alarm.

“Stakar hasn't reinstated your tab. I can't charge him for any of your crew's needs. You can always pay now,” Corky suggested, “and have Ogord reimburse you.”

“Fine,” Yondu said.

“What? No.” Meredith's head whipped around. “Yondu, you don't have to – he's my son, I can handle it – it's not that expensive.”

“Eight-hundred-and-fifty units for a full vaccination set and curing the pox,” Corky offered.

“I can do it.” Her voice was brave, but Meredith's face paled. “I've got that much saved up.”

“I pay,” Yondu said, “that's what we agreed on.”

“No.” Meredith opened her interface and started moving money around. “I've got the units, Yondu.”

“Stop worryin' about it.” Yondu swiped her interface away. “It ain't a big deal, Mery. I got it.”

“It's nearly a thousand units, Yondu,” Meredith huffed, “it's a big deal.”

“Ain't it my fault you're out here in the first place? Ain't it?” Yondu put his elbows on his knees and leaned. “It's the least I can do, Mery.”

Meredith opened her mouth to argue, then squinted at him.

“You're being nice to me,” she realized.

“Bein' fair,” he corrected.

“I thought Ravagers were never fair.”

“They ain't, but we don't cheat our own either.”

“I'm not a Ravager.”

“Damn it, woman.” Yondu bared his teeth. “You're as good as.”

“I don't need you to take care of me,” Meredith said, “I can take care of myself.”
Yondu's eyes slid down her body. Meredith reddened, pulling her knees closer to herself.

“It ain't about what you can and can't do, Mery.” Yondu shrugged. “You're poor as shit; I ain't. Simple enough.”

“You don't have to take care of us,” Meredith repeated.

“Somebody's got to,” he grunted.

“Yondu,” Meredith said exasperatedly.

“Mery,” he mocked in the same tone.

Meredith opened her interface again, tapping rapidly. Yondu swiped his open and tapped it once. Corky glanced up, set down his book, and picked up a datapad.

“Thank you for the payment, Udonta.” Corky picked up his pink book. “You'll have to be faster than that, Quill.”

“What? Yondu!” Meredith's curls bounced as she turned her head to glare at him. “Yondu, I told you I had it covered.”

“You can pay me back by teachin' Lunis how to make them panned cakes.” Yondu leaned back on the couch, closing his eyes and kicking his feet up on the coffee table. “Just good business, Mery.”

“Jerk,” she muttered.

A jagged grin wound its way across Yondu's face.

“Here I am shellin' out units for your boy,” he chuckled, “and you call me a 'jerk'?”

“I didn't ask you to.”

“You didn't need to.”

“So what, you just get to do things like that whenever you want to?”

“Ravager,” he reminded.

Meredith huffed. Yondu opened his right eye slightly and watched her. Meredith put both feet flat on the floor and grabbed the edge of the couch cushion. Her face was pink – upset, he supposed, or maybe embarrassed – and she kept shooting dark glances his way. Yondu arced his back slightly; his shirt tightened over his chest. He watched her eyes snap to his chest, then dart away. The corner of his mouth twitched up. Keep starin', Mery, he thought, I don't mind.

Meredith's fist slammed into his side with all the speed and accuracy of a striking rattlesnake. Yondu doubled over, yelling more out of shock than pain.

“The hell was that,” he snarled.

“That's for not listening to me,” she snapped.

“You lil' viper,” he cursed.

Meredith raised her eyebrows, then went back to staring at the hallway. Yondu pushed her over onto the couch with one hand, still scowling. She popped up; her curls bounced around her enraged
expression.

“Hey,” she cried, “what gives?”

“You pushed me first,” he said.

Meredith shoved him with her shoulder. Yondu took one hand and pinned her against the backboard of the couch. She slapped at his hand; her fast-twitch muscle enhancements made her unusually quick, Yondu observed, but she was still weak compared to him. She struggled a little more, but ended up glaring at him over his upper arm.

“Let me go,” she demanded, “right now.”

“Once you calm your shit and stop hittin’ people, I will.” Yondu rolled his eyes. “Damn, Mery, I can't take you anywhere.”

Teeth dug into his upper arm; Yondu inhaled, his eyes widening with the pain. Meredith chomped down a little harder, still giving him daggers with her eyes. Yondu stared at her in complete disbelief.

“That's not sanitary,” Corky muttered.

“Let me go,” Meredith said through a mouthful of Centaurian flesh, “or I'll draw blood.”

Yondu let his arm fall. Meredith scooted to the far side of the loveseat; her face was bright red.

“You bit me,” he said indignantly.

“I've done it before,” she retorted.

Absentmindedly, Yondu's fingertips ran over the raised scar she’d left on his neck. He traced them more often than he liked to admit to himself. He rubbed the sore spot on his arm; she hadn't broken the skin, so he'd likely heal up in a matter of hours.

“Mom?” Peter's voice came from down the hall. “Hey mom, guess what?”

Meredith jumped to her feet. Peter came running down the hall with a huge grin on his face. He pointed to a series of stick-on bandages on his arm. Someone had cut them out in the shape of Ravager flames.

“I've got cool Band-Aids,” he bragged, “and I didn't even cry at the needle?”

“Really? That's wonderful, baby! I'm so proud of you.” Meredith scooped up her son and hugged him tightly, choosing to focus on his bravery rather than the series of criminal symbols stuck to his arm. “You did great, Peter. So brave!”

“Dr. Mareet just covered my eyes and pinched my arm a couple times, and then she poked me with the needle and it didn't even hurt.” Peter clung to his mother; his cheeks were flushed with youthful excitement. “They weren't even big needles.”

“Of course they weren't.” Dr. Mareet chuckled as she entered the room. “Child-sized needles. Scarcely thicker than a butterfly's wing.”

Yondu looked at the stick-on bandages, then raised his eyebrows.

“You're shittin' me,” he grumbled.
“If you say half a word about what I did to ease this experience for Mr. Quill,” Dr. Mareet snapped, “I will tell the loathesome story of when I gave you your first innoculations.”

“Was Yondu afraid of needles,” Peter asked.

“Yondu tried to eat the injection pods,” Corky replied, “seemed to think they were pills.”

Meredith bit her lips together to prevent herself from smiling. Yondu turned purple and got to his feet.

“Let’s get out of here,” he grunted.

“Oh, and the flox pox?” Meredith held Peter out slightly. “How’s that, Peter?”

“All better.” Peter raised his pustule-free arms. “See?”

Meredith hugged her son tightly; over his shoulder, she looked at Yondu with gratitude in her eyes. Yondu felt his chest expand with irrational pleasure. It was a weird thing, feeling good; Yondu wasn’t used to it. Feeling good about doing decent things for other people was new, too. He led them out of Dr. Mareet's hospital and back onto the Eclector. Meredith carried her son the whole way, listening to the riveting tale of his injections. Meredith cooed and enthused over every detail. She was proud of her boy; Yondu could tell. Peter showed the other Ravagers his stick-on bandages. The ones that knew him chuckled, and soon Yondu found himself chuckling too.

“Dumb boy,” he mumbled, “brave boy.”

The Eclector had docked back on Dakkam. Meredith woke Peter up early in the morning, hoping to get them both off-ship before the Ravagers started pestering her with requests to stay. Gef had already offered her a copious amount of units to stay just one more night; Meredith had been seriously tempted, but Yondu had swept in and shooed Gef away. Yondu had been unusually polite to her since they left the hospital. Meredith was starting to believe that he thought she was mad at him. Their altercation at the hospital had been embarrassing; the more she thought about it, the more ridiculous her actions seemed. After all they’d been through together, she had no right to snap at him for offering help. It was her pride, she mused, getting in the way again. She needed to apologize, so she pulled him aside when the ramp dropped down.

“Hey,” Meredith said, “can we talk for a second?”

Yondu turned his head. He’d given her a wide berth since the hospital; figured she was pissed at him for overstepping his boundaries. Plus, he was still trying to shake her out of his head, and the more time he spent around her, the harder that would be. He jerked his head towards a cargo crate; they crossed behind it, hidden from view.

“What’s wrong,” he asked.

“I owe you one.” She was hugging her jacket to her chest tightly. “For taking care of Peter. I’m still getting used to this whole ‘living in space’ thing, and, well, it’s nice to have someone I know I can call. You were right; I needed the help.”

Yondu put his hands on his hips, forcing himself not to smile.
“About goddamn time your stubborn ass learned it,” he grunted.

It worked; she laughed.

“Yeah, yeah. You know,” she said, “I'd be a lot more likely to ask for your help if you didn't rub it in all the time.”

“I ain't rubbin' it in,” he protested.

“Are too.”

“Are not.”

“Are too.”

“Are not.”

“Are too,” she said, “and are we really starting that again?”

“You started it,” he replied.

“No I didn't!”

“Did too.” Yondu grinned. “And here we go again.”

Laughing, Meredith fiddled with the zipper of her leather jacket. She drew it up and down; Yondu found himself transfixed by the motion.

“Yondu?” Her voice had softened significantly. “About the whole bill thing. Do you want me to pay you back?”

“This again?” Yondu bared his teeth. “I get that you're pissed, but let it go, Mery. I don't need your damn money.”

Meredith didn't meet his eyes as she muttered something. Yondu grunted in confusion.

“I said,” she said a little louder, “thank you.”

There it was again; that unusual flush of satisfaction, running through his body like oil through a pipeline.

“Don't say that.” Yondu chuckled. “It ain't charity, it ain't givin'; it's me payin' you back for all the good shit you've done by me.”

“Good shit?” Meredith's eyebrows drew together slightly. “Like what?”

“Well shit, Mery, I don't know. Gettin' me back in the Ravager clans, savin' the galaxy from Ego, not sellin' us out to the Nova Corps.” Yondu counted on his fingertips. “Feedin' the boys, getting the coffee machine up and runnin', takin' care of my sorry ass.”

Meredith laughed.

“Okay, okay. I meant what I said, about you not listening to me. You can't just walk all over what I decide to do with my money. But,” Meredith admitted, “you were right. I couldn't really handle that bill. I should have accepted your help gracefully, and instead I punched you.”
“And bit me,” he added.

“And bit you.” Meredith reddened. “Which is why I'm apologizing. Thank you for taking that bill off my hands; I really appreciate it.”

“How many times am I gonna have to tell you not to say shit like that,” Yondu grunted.

“How else am I supposed to express gratitude, Yondu” Meredith sighed.

“Easy,” Yondu said, “just don't.”

Grinning, Meredith shook her head. Her curls danced around her face; Yondu had an impulsive urge to touch them.

“Fine,” she said, “if you won't accept that kind of 'thank you', I'll do you one better.”

The soft skin of her palm pressed against his left cheek; on his right, she pressed a small kiss. It was an chaste kiss not unlike the one she'd once given Saal, but it still froze Yondu's body and set his face on fire.

“There you go. We're even now,” she said.

Yondu could think of fifty things off the top of his head that he could do to help her. That was fifty kisses, he reasoned, and that gave him plenty of chances to catch one on the mouth.

“We're even, right?” Meredith smiled at him. “Right?”

“Right,” he heard himself say.

“Good.” Meredith waved as she paced down the ramp. “Fly safe, okay?”

“What?” Yondu blinked a few times. “Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

“Don't work too hard,” she teased.

“Never do.” He cracked a grin. “Take care of yourself, Mery.”

“You too, Yondu.”

Peter bolted by, catching up with his mother. They held hands as they exited the Eclector and broke into the sunlight. Yondu watched their sun-kissed forms until the ramp closed up, blocking them from view. He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. It was unusually comforting to know that he could still take care of his Terrans, even if they were out of his sight. They still needed him, he thought, and as long as they needed him, they'd come back.
Meredith gets a call from the last person she expected, and is told something she'd never thought she'd hear from their lips: thank you.

(Short chapter is short.)

“No,” Aleta said for the fifteenth time that day, “and stop following me.”

“Yes.” Martinex dogged Aleta's steps into the kitchen. “I was given direct orders from the captain.”

“No, and I'm giving you a direct order to stop.”

“Captain overrules that; chain of command, Aleta. Also,” Martinex continued, “yes.”

“No, Martinex.”

“Yes.” Martinex pointed to the comm screen. “Aleta, you've got to do it.”

“No,” Aleta repeated.

“Oh, so you're going to pretend that it didn't happen? Are you throwing a tantrum,” Martinex asked, “or is this just being ungrateful?”

“I have nothing to thank her for and I am not throwing a tantrum,” Aleta snapped.

“Right. Nothing to thank her for.” Martinex turned towards the window; outside, thousands of Ravager ships hovered. “Let me count how many things we have to be thankful for, starting with our lives. One, two, three, four, five—”

“Martinex, stop.” Aleta slammed her fist on a panel; the window darkened. “We didn't need her help.”

Martinex tilted his head and squinted.

“Who wins in an all-out battle,” he asked sarcastically, “a hundred clans of half-drunk Ravagers, or the million highly-trained Nova Corps pilots? Who wins?”

“Ravagers.” Aleta crossed her arms. “Hands-down.”

“Right, until Garthan Saal shows up and neither you or Stakar can harm a hair on his head because he's your nephew. And then he claps the rest of us in irons,” Martinex said, “and we all go to the Kyln. Or worse, Asgard.”

“It wouldn't happen,” Aleta insisted.

“It could have, and it probably would have if it wasn't for her.” Martinex thrust a comm link at Aleta. “Call. Her.”
“Martinex, let me make this absolutely clear to you.” Aleta put her hands flat on the table. Her eyes
glimmered like coal. “There is absolutely nothing you can do or say to make me call her. I owe her
nothing. I loathe her involvement with our family. I refuse to associate with that Terran.”

“Fine.” Martinex lifted his hands up as if in surrender. “I'll ask the captain to do it.”

“He'd do it gladly,” Aleta muttered.

“Exactly. And then he'll offer her free things because that's what he does. He already knows she
gave up the ship, so he'll probably give her another one.” Martinex poured himself a cup of water.
He held it in his right hand until it began to steam. “Probably one of Mainframe's spare projects; he's
always talking about how much room they take up in the hangar.”

“Those are mine,” Aleta protested, “he can't give those away.”

“Technically, they're Mainframe's, and good ol' MF wouldn't mind at all.” Martinex dropped a tea
bag in his cup. “And when the captain's done giving her a free ticket across the galaxy, he'll probably
insist on her making regular visits to Yondu whenever her fuel tank gets low. He'll insist on footing
the bill, but we both know why he'd really be doing it.”

Aleta's hands curled into fist.

“What can I say? The captain ships it.” Martinex dropped onto a mess bench and propped his legs
up. “So, either you can call her and we get this done and over with, or the captain can call her and I'll
have an extra fifteen things to do this weekend. Help Mainframe get something spaceworthy,
customize the operating system for a Terran, have to call Yondu and let him know, probably
commandeer the Eclector to carry the ship, forge ownership papers – it's a lot to do, Aleta, and I'd
rather not.”

Aleta’s breathing was audible; her face was beet red from restraining her rage.

“He wouldn't,” was all she could manage.

“He absolutely would,” Martinex replied.

Aleta let out a scream and drove her foot into the bench; it lifted three inches off the ground before
coming down with a loud bang! Martinex sipped his tea as he watched Aleta tear around the kitchen.
She cursed in Arcturan, threw her arms in the air, and ended up flipping a mess hall bench across the
room. It screeched across the ground, skidding into the hallway. A few smartly-dressed pilots
paused, looked at Aleta, and then circumnavigated the table. Aleta, red-faced and breathless, rounded
on Martinex.

“Give me the damn comm link,” she panted.

Martinex flicked it down the bench. Aleta picked it up and stormed off, leaving the kitchen a disaster.
Martinex surveyed the wreckage, sipping his tea. It was always so difficult getting Aleta to say 'thank
you'.

Meredith was curled up on the couch with her dinner in her lap. Peter was at his friend's house;
Grelk, she remembered, the nice smart kid. That left Meredith home alone for the first time in a long
while. She'd taken a shower and cleaned up the apartment. A nice, quiet evening, Meredith reflected,
was exactly the change of pace she needed.

“You have one incoming call.” The communications screen lit up. “You have one incoming call.”

There was no identifying face on the screen. Meredith's eyebrows knit together. Only a few people had her number, but then she had told Peter to call her if something happened. Perhaps it was Grelk's mother; perhaps Peter had gotten into trouble again.

“Answer,” she told the computer.

A woman with eyes like jet and thin lips appeared on the screen.

“Mrs. Ogord?” Meredith's eyes widened; she shoved her dinner to the side. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong.” Aleta looked like she'd been sucking on a lemon. “I need to speak with you.”

“Alright, I'm listening.”

“It is about your recent decision concerning the Ravager clans and the Nova Corps. I received word of your decision from my nephew, Garthan Saal,” Aleta explained.

“He's definitely related to Stakar, that's for dang sure. Flirts with every female he sees,” Meredith muttered, “and he's awful particular about regulation.”

“Yes. Garthan is essentially a more stubborn, less sexually-experienced version of Stakar.” Aleta shook her head slightly. “But I digress. I wished to – that is, I'm trying to understand why.”

“Why what,” Meredith asked.

“Why didn't you take the deal?” Aleta's eyebrows knit together. “You would be home.”

“But Yondu would be in jail, or worse, and then there'd be no vigilante Ravagers out there. I mean, you're not exactly the 'good guys',” Meredith said, “but I saw Yondu save a lot of people. I decided it wasn't worth betraying you just to get me home. It was better for everyone if the Ravagers kept on doing what they did.”

“You thought the universe would benefit from our existence.” Aleta squinted so much that Meredith could scarcely see her eyes. “You are an interesting judge of character.”

“Thank you, I think. So,” Meredith asked, “was that why you called? You just wanted to know why?”

“Not exactly. What I am trying to say is that you, an unpredictable variable, have unexpectedly arrived and involved yourself in the lives of my family. Normally, when such a thing occurs, it spells devastation. When I saw how unprepared you were for life out here,” Aleta admitted, “I came to the conclusion that you were, at most, a temporary inconvenience. Your recent actions surprised me, and I am rarely surprised.”

“And that's a good thing,” Meredith asked.

“For now, yes. I wanted to thank you.” The words slid slow off Aleta's tongue as if they were new to her. “Your decision to keep our secrets from the Nova Corps was... extraordinary.”

It took Meredith a full eight seconds to process what Aleta had just said. When she finally figured out that Aleta wasn't being sarcastic, she stumbled over herself to respond.
“Thank you, but it really wasn't anything special. It was Ego's fault, my fault that we got popped off Terra. If it hadn't been for Yondu,” Meredith said, “Peter and I could be dead. He trusted me with his ship, his crew, and with meeting you. I wasn't about to pretend that meant nothing.”

“Your digression is appreciated more than you know. If the Nova Corps had discovered Ilyth and the Hub,” Aleta said, “that could have been the end of the Ravager clans.”

“I wouldn’t let that happen.” Meredith tilted her chin up. “Not after everything we've been through together.”

“Thank you.” Again, the words sounded strange in Aleta's voice. “I appreciate your loyalty.”

Meredith smiled.

“I still dislike you,” Aleta added quickly, “but I am ready to admit that you possess certain redeemable qualities that may prove valuable. Namely loyalty, determination, and an uncanny knack for surviving the impossible.”

“That last one's my specialty,” Meredith chirruped.

“So I've heard.” Aleta's mouth soured. “Well, that was all I had to say. Good day.”

Aleta ended the call. Meredith was left staring at an empty screen. Aleta Ogord, the Ravager queen, had called Meredith; “unexpected” didn't begin to cover it. She sunk down onto the couch, still staring at the empty screen.

“Computer,” she said, “call Yondu.”

The screen dialed up; there was a tone, and then the screen lit up. Blaster fire echoed from the screen; all Meredith could see was the ground as Yondu ran along. Though there was nothing she could do, Meredith still jumped up in alarm.

“Blast that thing out of the sky! Dammit, get out of the way!” Yondu bellowed orders, unaware of the call. “I gotta take this.”

Yondu's face came into view; he was standing with his back against a wall of stone. On the right edge of the screen was a sliver of sky and ground; Meredith could see Ravagers fighting what looked like giant dragonflies.

“What's up,” Yondu grunted.

“I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to bother you.” Meredith's heart ran a rapid pace in her chest. “You can hang up, I'll call back later.”

“Nah, you're good.” Yondu leaned out from cover and fired a few shots off. “Go ahead.”

“I just got a call,” Meredith said, “from your mother.”

Yondu nearly dropped his pistol. He flattened himself against the rock wall again, eyes wide.

“Yeah, exactly.” Meredith leaned forwards, putting her elbows on her knees. “She thanked me for not selling the Ravagers out to the Nova Corps and said she still didn't like me, but that I had redeemable qualities.”

Meredith bit her lips together while Yondu processed that. A screaming sound came from the screen; Yondu cursed and tossed a stun grenade. There was an explosion of static that made the screen gray.
out for a second, but the call held.

“Somebody put the screws to her and made her call you. Aleta never says thanks, not for anything. Maybe to Stakar,” Yondu said, “but sure as hell not to me, and damn sure as hell not to you.”

“That's what I figured. Should I be worried,” Meredith asked.

“No, Mery, it ain't that big of a deal.” Yondu chuckled. “Just means Stakar and Marty are makin' her behave. Why? Did she upset you?”

“No, it was just unexpected.” Meredith rubbed her arms. “Thanks, Yondu. I wanted to make sure I didn't do anything that was gonna make your life more difficult.”

Six enormous insect legs latched onto Yondu out of nowhere. He roared and grabbed the dragonfly. It was at least seven feet long and a scintillating green. Yondu grabbed its head by the pincers and twisted, tearing the dragonfly's head off. Orange blood squirted from the neck all over Yondu's jacket. He cursed again and dropped the corpse.

“Goddamn elzori,” he said.

“Is that what that is?” Meredith's breathing was shallow. “Because I never want to see one ever again.”

“Their eggs are worth six-hundred units a piece on the black market, but it's a bitch getting to any of 'em. Fortunately I still got a pretty big crew,” Yondu said, “so as long as they don't drag off anybody who's name I know, we're good.”

“Yondu,” Meredith protested.

“Just jokin', Mery.” Yondu grinned. “Don't worry about Aleta. I'll give Marty a call, figure out what happened, and make sure she don't bother you any.”

“It wasn't a bother, really. I was just worried I'd done something wrong or maybe caused more problems for you.” Meredith rubbed her arms again. “You should probably focus on the whatever-those-are.”

“Elzori,” Yondu reminded.

“Yeah, those.” Meredith gave him a smile. “I'll call you if I need anything, alright? Hang in there, Yondu.”

“Easier said than done, Mery. Keep safe,” Yondu said, “and call me if you need somebody's head ripped off.”

She knew he was serious, but Meredith couldn't help but laugh.

“You got it. Bye, Yondu,” she said.

The call ended. Meredith sat back down on the couch, still grinning. Leave it to Yondu to pick up a call in the middle of a job, she thought. She leaned her head against the backboard of the couch and found herself reflecting on her decision. Meredith could have been home by now, sitting on her front porch, waiting for Peter to get off the school bus. A soft afternoon wind would be rustling the leaves in the peach orchard. The old porch gate would squeak when Peter pushed it open. His backpack would be full of history homework, not mechanical displays and datapads. Her papa would be sliding peanut butter onto apple slices for an afternoon snack. Papa. He had the same grass-green
eyes as Peter, the same troublemaker's grin. Her heart ached with how much she missed him. She'd let that slip away from her so easily, so stupidly.

The images were abruptly replaced with much darker imaginings. Kraglin would have gone down fighting the Nova Corps, killing the very soldiers his father had once fought beside. Stakar and Aleta would have had to watch their nephew drag off their sons in chains. Yondu, who hadn't known freedom for the first twenty years of his life, would have been clapped back in irons. A flame of anger sparked in her chest.

“No way,” she said aloud.

Maybe giving up her free ticket home had been stupid, Meredith reflected, but the alternative was selfish and wrong. This was the way things needed to be. There was always more money, she decided, but there was no going back in time to prevent the Ravagers from getting arrested. Her papa would be proud of what she'd done. She'd done good by the Ravagers, and it was starting to look like they were warming up to her, too.
Peter plans to spend mid-season break on the Eclector, but when it lands on Dakkam, Yondu is nowhere to be found. He's doing a job for Charlie-27 on the city-planet of Thuntax. Unwilling to let her baby run around on a spaceship without proper supervision, Meredith rides along until Yondu gets back.

Problem is, Yondu's been gone a while longer than he thought, and every second they dawdle is a second longer for the Nova Corps to find them. Meredith hops off the ship to retrieve him.

Did I mention Thuntax is a red-light planet?

I'm not 100% comfortable with how this is edited; it seems clunky and jagged to me. I couldn't figure out if I wanted to write Thuntax from Yondu or Meredith's perspective, so I did both. I hope that works well for you; let me know in the comments if anything seems off!

It was mid-season break at Peter's school. His buddy Grelk was going on vacation to Neoke. His teacher Mr. Mimbewf was headed home to Xandar. His other classmates were headed to various fun little areas on Dakkam. Peter had, in his opinion, beaten them all. He'd talked his mother into letting him spend break on the Eclector.

It hadn't been easy; Meredith was resistant to even spending vacation time on the Eclector, and surprisingly, Yondu hadn't been too keen on the idea either. It was Kraglin's reasoning that finally prevailed on the two of them. Granted, his reasoning was that taking Peter anywhere else without additional parental supervision was likely to cause a planet-wide catastrophe, but Peter didn't really care. As long as he got to spend some time on the Eclector, he was more than happy.

Meredith was less than happy. Or maybe she wasn't; she couldn't decide. The butterflies in her stomach bounced and flapped around like they were drunk. Packing Peter's bag felt like she was packing her son up and handing him to Yondu. When the Eclector docked on Dakkam, she stood with him in front of her like a shield. Her hands were planted firmly on Peter's shoulders.

“Remember to behave yourself,” she said for the eighth time that day.

“I will, Mom.”

“Don't talk to anyone you don't know.”

“I won't, Mom.”
“Stick close to the Ravagers you know,” Meredith said as she watched the ramp descend, “and never get out of sight of Kraglin or Yondu.”

“Mom,” Peter snapped, “if you’re so worried, why don’t you come along?”

“Pete's got a point, Ms. Q.” Kraglin paced down the ramp, nearly bouncing on his long legs. “We'd be happy to have you aboard.”

“Don't think your captain would see it that way, Kraglin,” Meredith chuckled.

“Cap'n ain't aboard, Ms. Q.”

“What,” Meredith and Peter chorused.

“What do you mean, he isn't aboard?” Meredith's voice rose steadily, her face flushing with anger. “Where the heck is he?”

“He told me he'd be here to pick me up,” Peter protested, “so where's he gone?”

“Whoa, whoa.” Kraglin held up his hands. “He's just popped off to do a bit of emergency work for Charlie-27. Ain't a huge deal; we pick him up tonight.”

“I'm not letting Peter aboard if Yondu isn't here.” Meredith's voice was as firm as stone. “He's too much trouble for one person to handle.”

“Hey,” Peter said.

“She's right, Peter.” Kraglin scratched his chin. “Guess we'll just have to bring your momma, too.”

“What,” Meredith sputtered.

“Come on, Ms. Q. You stay on until we get the cap'n and everything’s sunshine and starship fuel.” Kraglin paced back up the ramp. “Peter, you too.”

Peter broke out of Meredith's grip and went sprinting up the ramp with his bags in hand. Meredith started after him, hesitated for a fraction of a moment, then bolted up the ramp.

“Peter,” she yelled, “Peter get back here!”

“We're going on vacation!” Peter threw his arms in the air, eyes bright. “Woo-hoo!”

Meredith stumbled to a stop, fighting a laugh.

“This is nuts,” she said to herself.

“Welcome back to the Eclector,” Kraglin joked.

“I don't have any clothes packed and I didn't let the landlady know I'd be gone.” Meredith put a hand over her forehead. “I didn't even take off time for work. I'm not prepared for this, Kraglin.”

“Peter tells me you got a lady friend down there. Have her call work, tell 'em you're sick, and watch the apartment,” Kraglin suggested, “and when we get the cap'n back, we'll drop you back off. Easy as pie, Ms. Q.”

It was such an unexpectedly rational answer that it caught Meredith by surprise.
“I guess,” she said.

“See? Problem solved.” Kraglin pulled her onto the Eclector properly, letting the ramp close behind them. “Nice to see you, Ms. Q.”

Meredith watched the Eclector's ramp smother out the Dakkam sunlight and prayed she hadn't just made a very big mistake.

“No Yondu! Ice cream for dinner! Pancakes for breakfast!” Peter cheered all the way to the cargo room. “Man, this is going to be so much fun!”

“The first damn thing we're doin' is getting the cap'n back,” Kraglin muttered, “because I can't put up with Pete on my own.”

Meredith chuckled and patted Kraglin's elbow.

“I'm sure Yondu will be so pleased to have us back.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “I'm going to get an earful for showing up unwelcome.”

“You, unwelcome?” Kraglin snorted. “Bullshit, Ms. Q. He'll be as happy as a pig in shit.”

Meredith's face was unusually warm. She bit her lips together and tried to ignore the tiny spark of excitement that flitted about her chest. All meals paid off, no work to do, just cooking and stargazing the days away; it was temporary, but it still felt a little like a vacation.

Someone's shoulder bashed into hers. Meredith stumbled, out of shock more than anything, and Kraglin steadied her. Two Ravagers were carrying a cargo box down the hall; one was Holdon, and the other had bumped into Meredith.

“Watch it, Brahl,” Kraglin snapped.

The hire who had bumped Meredith, Brahl, was pallid pink and hairless. The skin on his face seemed to suction itself over the ridges and bones of his skull.

“Can't help it if I'm walking fast and nobody's looking where they're going.” Brahl sniffed; he had a flattened, multi-chambered nose. “Who's this?”

“You don't remember Quill?” Holdon set down the cargo box. “She was on just a few months ago. Her boy was wrapped in food plastic, remember?”

“Pete's stayin' on for the week,” Kraglin explained, "and this is his momma."

“Who is?” Brahl scowled. “She is?”

“Of course she is.” Holdon gave Meredith a big grin. “Ms. Quill saved the galaxy. You'd better watch yourself around her; I've seen her wipe the floor with smugglers before.”

Brahl's gold eyes snapped over Meredith, evaluating her. His gaze put her on edge; all of a sudden, she wanted either a big gun in her hands or Yondu at her side. Whatever Brahl was looking to criticize, he apparently didn't find. He and Holdon picked up the cargo crate and marched off.

Kraglin patted Meredith's shoulder.
“See,” he said, “the rest of the crew's warmin' up to you.”

“Who was the skull-faced guy,” Meredith asked.

“Brahl. He's an Acheronian,” Kraglin explained, “they all look like that.”

Meredith checked over her shoulder, making sure Brahl and Holdon were out of earshot before she spoke again.

“I don't like that guy.” She still kept her voice low. “He looked at me weird.”

“Yeah, best keep your distance from that one. He's a new hire. Has a reputation for a lot of really screwed-up shit.” Kraglin's expression hardened. “Nothin' against the code, mind you, but there's somethin' about him that don't sit right with me.”

“Have you told Yondu?”

“Even if I did, it wouldn't change anything.” There was an open panel in the wall; Kraglin pushed it shut as they walked by. “Cap'n ain't the kind to kick somebody off the ship just because they're creepy. If he was, half the crew'd be kicked off.”

Meredith chuckled. Kraglin led her to the bridge and let her call Ellyn from the Eclector. Meredith had to call five times before Ellyn would pick up the unfamiliar number.

“If this is one of those telecomms where you offer me free insurance,” Ellyn snapped, “I'm going to hunt you down and shove my stylus up your – ”

“It's me, Ellyn.” Meredith laughed as Ellyn appeared as a hologram. “I'm calling from the Eclector.”

“Eclector?” Ellyn's eyes widened behind her gold-rimmed frames. “Isn't that the name of the ship that kidnapped you?”

“Yes,” Meredith said, pleased that Ellyn had bothered to remember.

“Holy stardust! I'll save you, Mer!” Ellyn scrambled for something Meredith couldn't see. “I'll call the Corps and the military and – ”

“No!” Peter, Gef, Kraglin, and Meredith screamed all at the same time.

Ellyn dropped whatever she was holding and stood with her hands up, as if in surrender.

“Meredith,” she hissed, “are your kidnappers in the room? Is this a hostage situation? Do they have Peter?”

Kraglin put his head in his hands and sighed, “Civilians...”

“No, Ellyn, this is not a kidnapping.” Meredith spoke as soothingly as she could. “This is a Peter thing. I need you to call work, tell them I'm sick, and watch the house for a few days.”

Ellyn processed that for a second.

“Can do.” She squinted at Meredith. “Peter thing, huh?”

“He insisted,” Meredith said.

“I insisted,” Peter repeated.
“Okay, okay.” Ellyn exhaled. “Whatever you say, Meredith.”

“It’s okay, Ellyn.” Meredith gave her the most reassuring smile she could manage. “I’ll be fine. Just call work. Watch the house. Okay? Okay. See you later, honey.”

Meredith hung up. Kraglin and Gef gave her the flattest, least-impressed looks she’d ever seen.

“She doesn’t get out much,” Meredith explained, “and I don’t think she has many friends besides me. I told her how I got to Dakkam, and – in my defense, her opinion of Ravagers wasn’t good to start with.”

“Yeah, she didn’t seem too up here,” Kraglin said, tapping her forehead.

“Oh no, she's really smart.” Peter shrugged. “She says she's book-smart, people-dumb.”

“That’s a sad way to live life,” Gef sighed.

“Yeah.” Kraglin fought a grin. “You should be book-smart, money-smart, people-smart, and risk-dumb, like Gef.”

Gef’s fat lower lip twisted; Meredith and Peter laughed.

Meredith and Peter sat in an empty hallway with the Walkman between them, listening to music while the stars shot by. Both of them sat, transfixed by relief and wonder.

“Feels good,” Peter occasionally said.

“Yeah,” Meredith would reply, “it does, baby.”

That was all the conversation they needed; everything else was music. The ship stopped above a dark gray planet that glowed with thousands of pinpricks of light.

“Contraxia?” Meredith’s eyebrows narrowed. “Great.”

“We’re in the wrong system for Contraxia.” Peter stood and put his palms against the glass. “This is new.”

The Eclector soared towards the new planet. The atmosphere burned against the glass in streaks of white-blue fire; it was only thanks to the dark coating of the windows that Peter and Meredith weren’t blinded. When the clouds parted, Meredith started to wish it hadn't been there; the entire planet was a giant metal city, its narrow streets lined with neon-formed women and bright, heinous slogans.

“Of course.” Meredith covered Peter's eyes. “Of course this is where Yondu would be.”

“Mom,” Peter protested, “I've seen neon ladies before.”

“Well, you're not going to see them while I'm around. Come on.” Meredith picked up her son. “You're getting big, baby. Ten years old is right around the corner, you know.”

“Can we spend my next birthday on the Eclector,” Peter asked.
“Maybe. Yondu can take you to Emris,” Meredith suggested, “or I could save up and take you to Neoke.”

Peter’s eyes lit up, and Meredith began calculating how many shifts she’d have to add on to afford a beach trip to Neoke. They adjourned to her cargo room, where they stayed until Meredith was called onto the bridge. She asked Lunis and Holdon to keep an eye on Peter; Lunis deactivated the portal panel as soon as she left, locking Peter inside the cargo room. Babysitting was easy when you were a Ravager.

Meredith wasn’t sure what she expected when Kraglin called her onto the bridge, but she at least expected to see Yondu. Instead, Kraglin was the only one on the bridge.

“Where’s Yondu,” she asked.

“Yeah, about that.” Kraglin was fiddling with a deactivated reception processor. “We’ve got a bit of a problem.”

“What kind of problem,” Meredith asked.

“So the cap’n planned to be back about a half-hour ago.” Kraglin exhaled. “And while I’ve called him and I know he’s alright, I don’t know where he is, and he ain’t back. Every second we spend dawdlin’ here is a second more for the Nova Corps to be on our asses.”

“So go get him,” Meredith said.

“I’d love to,” Kraglin said, “but this ain’t the kind of planet you leave a ship unattended.”

“No one’s going to steal the Eclector, Kraglin.”

“I ain’t worried about losin’ the ship,” he explained, “I’m worried about losin’ the crew. If I wasn’t here to keep these idiots on board, they’d be down there blowin’ money and stars knows what else.”

“Then I’ll go,” she replied.

Kraglin winced visibly.

“It ain’t really safe for you to go,” he said.

“Kraglin, I’ll be fine. I’m Terran, remember?” Meredith grinned. “We’re pretty good at avoiding death.”

“Thuntax is a red-light planet, Ms. Q.” Kraglin put down the reception processor. “It ain’t death I’m worried about.”

“Oh,” she said.

“We’re just gonna have to wait until the cap’n comes back,” Kraglin decided.

Meredith stared at the floor.

“No,” she said.

“Ms. Q, it’ll be fine.”

“No, I’m not waiting here. You said it yourself; every minute we stay here is a minute longer for the Nova Corps to find you.” Meredith pulled on her leather jacket and fluffed her hair. “If they find
Peter and I here, that'll be the end of getting home. I'll take a gun with me, find Yondu, and bring him back.”

“Too risky,” he said.

“You're a Ravager, Kraglin. Isn't risk part of the job?”

“There's a Ravager-stupid risk, Ms. Q, and there's a stupid-stupid risk. Cap'n will skin me alive if you or Peter get hurt on my watch,” Kraglin said.

“Who says you're coming with me? You stay on the ship,” Meredith said, “and I'll go get Yondu.”

“Yeah, Ms. Q. I'll just sit nice n' tight, safe n' sound, while you go trapezin' through a red-light district like a hunk of laukha meat on a stick.” Kraglin's voice dripped sarcasm. “Gee, Ms. Q, can't wait for the cap'n to find out I let you do that. He'll be just fuckin' over the moon, I tell you what.”

“We need Yondu so we can get off this rock. You are the only one who can keep this place running when he's not here. You're the one who told me that,” Meredith said, “and you know if you let anybody else off this ship, they'll stay here for hours sticking their nether regions into anything that giggles.”

Kraglin chuckled.

“Be that as it may, Ms. Q, the answer's still no.” Kraglin sat down in the co-pilot's chair. “We wait for the cap'n.”

“Kraglin,” Meredith protested.

“Ms. Q.” Kraglin's voice had an edge to it that clearly said, "this conversation is over. “You worry about Pete, and I'll handle the crew. This is Ravager business.”

Meredith's shoulders tightened.

“Right,” she said calmly, “Ravager business.”

Opening the ramp to Thuntax proved to be the most challenging part of Meredith's day so far. She pulled on the lever with all her might, but it was locked down.

“Shit,” she cursed.

“Something wrong?” An unfamiliar face appeared from behind a crate. “Hey, aren't you the boy's mother?”

“Yes,” she said defensively, “and you are?”

“Oblo.” The dark-haired Ravager squinted at her. “And you aren't supposed to be down here.”

“I go where I want when I want,” Meredith challenged.

“Right. Except when the loading ramp has been locked down on the first mate's orders and no one is to leave the ship.” Oblo sat on the crate. “Except then.”
Meredith exhaled.

“Can you fix this,” she asked.

“No,” Oblo said, “not unless you tell me why you're so keen to hop off on Thuntax and leave your boy behind.”

There was an edge to his voice that took Meredith a second or two to understand.

“Oh! Oh no, that's not why I – I'm going to find Yondu,” Meredith protested, her eyes wide, “I'm going to bring him back, I'm not skipping out on – no, I would never. Peter is my baby.”

Oblo stared her down.

“Peter is the light of my life,” Meredith said, “the reason I get up in the morning. I'm stepping out to get Yondu here so we can get off this planet before the Corps show up and arrest us all. Peter and I can't get home if we've got a rap sheet.”

“You're doing this for the boy,” Oblo clarified.

“Yes,” Meredith said.

“Fine.” Oblo slid off the crate. “Here's a secret for you, then; don't use the ramp.”

“Don't use the ramp?” Meredith's eyebrows drew together. “How else am I supposed to get off this ship?”

“Amateur.” Oblo chuckled. “Follow me.”

Meredith followed Oblo down a hallway usually reserved for maintenance. A few beer bottles lay prostrate on the floor; Oblo kicked them as he passed, sending them spinning.

“Most boys don't come down here.” The roar of the ship's processes was particularly loud; Oblo had to shout over it. “Too much work to do, and it gets damn cold.”

“Why are you here, then,” Meredith shouted back.

“Because I ain't happy unless I'm fixing something, and I don't particularly care for most of the crew.” Oblo pulled out an omnitool and started detaching an exhaust vent. “Most of these assholes are people too dumb for the other clans to pick up. Kraglin and the old fellas are fine, but I prefer to keep to myself.”

“I can get that,” Meredith said, “I wasn't fond of most of them when I was here. Lunis is a great help, Holdon's a good guy, and Gef's like everybody's fat, drunken uncle.”

Oblo laughed and let the exhaust panel fall to the floor; the resulting clang was loud enough to be heard over the ship's dull roar. Oblo patted the open tunnel.

“There you go,” he yelled, “a one-way ticket off the Eclector.”

“One way?” Meredith brushed her curls out of the way; the incoming air from the vent was sending them flying. “How am I supposed to get back on?”

“If you find the captain, you'll be coming back up the ramp. If you don't find the captain, it won't matter; you'll be dead,” Oblo answered.
Meredith swallowed, eying the dark tunnel. *Maybe this wasn't the best idea.*

“Hey.” Oblo took off his flight jacket and thrust it at her. “You'll need this. Anybody asks, you're from Aleta Ogord's crew.”

“Aleta?”

“She's got a crew full of women,” Oblo explained, “and by reputation they'll rip your junk off as soon as look at you.”

“Sounds like my kind of ladies,” Meredith laughed.

“Exactly.” Oblo took a large weapon off his hip and handed it to her. “You ever fired a shotblaster?”

“No,” Meredith said, “why?”

“Shit. Oh well.” Oblo shrugged. “Take it anyway; might help you! Now go on; the maintenance crew's probably already on their way to check the exhaust panel out. It's now or never, Quill.”

Meredith grabbed the sides of the exhaust tunnel and hoisted herself up. Oblo grabbed her knees and shoved; Meredith propelled halfway up the tunnel.

“Good luck,” Oblo shouted, then reattached the vent.

“Right.” Meredith crawled through the tunnel. “Thanks!”

“Don't say that,” the Ravager yelled through the vent.

Meredith grinned. She pulled herself out of the exhaust tunnel and found herself sliding towards the ground. She landed hard, but shook it off.

“Alright,” she said to herself, “alien planet, no idea where I'm going, and all I have to defend myself is a weapon I don't know how to use.”

Meredith pulled on the jacket, tying the belt loosely around her waist. The exhaust tunnel had been full of grime; she could see the black residue on her hands. She ruffled her hair with it, dirtying herself up, and smeared a little bit of it on her face. The jacket reeked with the scents of ship's oil, leather, and Ravager sweat. Meredith put her hands in the pockets and found a few screws, computer chips, and a bright green bottle cap.

“Leather jacket, no idea what I'm doing, surrounded by aliens.” Meredith started pacing off the dock. “Heck, feels like my first visit to the Eclector all over again.”

Kraglin was a great first mate. Meredith knew that; it's why she wasn't surprised when he connected to her comm line not three minutes after she'd stepped off the dock.

“Motherfuckin' dammit, Ms. Q.” The rage in Kraglin's voice made him sound entirely too much like Yondu. “Get your skinny Terran ass back up on this ship or I swear by starlight, I'll drag you up that ramp m'self!”

“Shh.” Meredith hobbled by some sketchy-looking A'askivari. “I'm completely camouflaged, don't worry.”

“Ms. Quill,” Kraglin seethed, “this ain't a goddamn joke.”
“No, look, it's fine. Nobody's going to touch me,” Meredith said.

“The hell makes you think that, Ms. Q?”

“Because I'm carrying a charged shotblaster.” Meredith hoisted it up on her shoulder. “I'm wearing a Ravager flight jacket, and I've got an expression on like I'm gonna blast somebody's ass to pieces.”

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the comm link.

“How the hell,” Kraglin began.

“It ain't hard to get into the armory,” Meredith lied, “just ask somebody to open the door.”

“And the jacket?”

“Borrowed it from the tailor's.” Meredith wouldn't let Oblo get in trouble for helping her; it had been one of the few selfless things she'd ever seen a Ravager do. “Bit big, but I tied it with a belt.”

“Ms. Q, this really ain't safe. This ain't just Ravager stupid,” Kraglin insisted, “this is stupid-stupid.”

“Once I find Yondu, none of this stuff will matter.” Meredith ducked into an alley to avoid a group of angry-looking Dakkamite women. “Just tell me where he is.”

Kraglin exhaled on the other end of the line. Meredith looked left; a Xandarian man was barely covered by a white jacket as he thrust into a woman whose species Meredith didn't know. Red-faced, Meredith immediately stepped out onto the alley and rammed into a Contraxian.

“Hold on there, sweetie,” the Contraxian chuckled, “I ain't even got the units.”

“Sorry,” Meredith stammered.

The Contraxian's eyes slid up and down Meredith's body.

“Ravager, huh?” He winked. “Hear you ladies are hurricanes in the sheets.”

“You heard right, honey, but I ain't got time to play. I'm on orders from Aleta Ogord.” Meredith hoisted the loaded blaster up on her shoulder. “Lookin' for Yondu Udonta, actually. Seen 'em?”

“Yeah, actually.” The Contraxian jerked a thumb back towards a crooked lane lined with pink signs. “He's down by the Rose Lady, probably getting sucked off by one of Tariza's girls.”

“That's a mental picture I didn't need,” Meredith said flatly.

“For the record, you're a damn sight nicer looking than any of Tariza's girls.” The Contraxian looked at the oversized jacket and raised his eyebrows “Now, this can't be your coat. This your boyfriend's?”

“Nah, it's my husband's.” The lie came off Meredith's lips so easily that she shocked herself. “Ever gotten in bed with an six-foot tall Ravager on sheets of velvet? It's like getting shagged by a machine.”

The Contraxian laughed and shook his head.

“Damn,” he said, “the pretty ones are always married. Nice talking to you – ?”

“Dorise Kabuchken.” It was the name of one of the waitresses that Meredith worked with; old
wrinkled Dorise would have to forgive her. “Thanks for the tip on Udonta.”

“Iknis Pol.” The Contraxian fist-bumped her. “Stay cool, Dorise.”

Meredith grinned and paced down the pink-lit alley.

“Ms. Q,” Kraglin said through the comm link, “tell me I didn't just hear the name 'Iknis Pol’.”

“Why? Is he trouble?” Meredith scanned the signs, looking for the Rose Lady. “Seemed like a nice enough fellow.”

“Criminal possession of a weapon in the fourth degree,” Kraglin recited, “three counts of aggravated assault on peaceful coalitions, and if that ain't enough, he's also a lousy cheatin' card shark.”

“Oh. Well,” Meredith said, “he was awful nice to me.”

“Shoot 'im in the back if you get a chance,” Kraglin suggested, “pay 'im back for cheatin' me out of five-hundred units the last time we docked at the Lotus.”

“I am not shooting someone over five-hundred units.” Meredith went to look down an alleyway; when she heard soft, pleading cries and moving bodies, she quickly turned away. “Yeah, he's not there. Where is this Rose Lady, Kraglin?”

“Hold on, dammit, let me pull up a map.” Kraglin sighed on the other end of the comm. “You know the cap'n is gonna kill me when he finds out I let you go out all alone.”

“Just blame me,” Meredith said, “I'm the one who snuck off the ship. If I get stabbed or something, well, that's my own problem.”

“And then your problems become my problems, Ms. Q.”

“I didn't have much of a choice, Kraglin.”

“Waiting was a completely legitimate option.”

“Color me impatient.” Meredith lowered her eyes; a tall Xandarian was staring at her. “Tell me where the Rose Lady is.”

“Two doors down,” Kraglin said, “on your left. Pink metal door.”

“I see it.” Meredith crossed the street to avoid a group of cloaked men and stepped up the stairs. “Here goes nothing.”

The pink metal door was covered with a three-dimensional Krylorian statuette; the door knockers were nipple rings.

Meredith raised her eyes to the sky and muttered, “Lord, give me strength.”

She slammed the right knocker. She stood on the doorstep for a few moments before the door slung open. A tall Krylorian woman stood in front of Meredith; Meredith inhaled. From the rims of her ears to her raspberry-pink nostrils, lining her lips and dotting her eyebrows, gold rings pierced the woman's skin. A few gold chains linked from ring to ring; Meredith could see little plastic charms dangling from them. Tiny gold letters dangled from the woman's lower lip; Tariza, they read.

“Hey,” the Krylorian said.
Meredith was not going to let a little unconventional facial decoration prevent her from getting off this damn planet.

“Hey,” Meredith said, “I'm here for Yondu Udonta?”

Tariza smiled in a way that told Meredith she was clearly not welcome.

“I didn't know Yondu had a full-time woman,” Tariza said.

“He doesn’t,” Meredith said.

“Then why are you here?” Tariza leaned in the doorway, blocking Meredith's path. “Because if you're not his full-time, you should go somewhere else. I don't share.”

Meredith wanted to grab the Krylorian by the nose piercings and drag her out into the street. Instead, she smiled and hoisted her shotblaster a little higher.

“I see. I'm just here to deliver a message, that's all.” Meredith gestured to the doorway. “Could you bring him out here to me for a second? The message is from Kraglin Obfonteri, his first mate. It's very important.”

Tariza's expression soured. She closed the door in Meredith's face. Meredith took a deep breath. She hated this planet.

“Ms. Q?” Kraglin's voice came over the comms. “You found the cap'n yet?”

“Yeah. He's in a den full of Krylorian harpies,” Meredith said bitterly, “so I don't think he'll be coming out soon.”

“Krylorians, huh? Did you get a name,” Kraglin asked.

“Tariza.”

“Doesn't sound familiar. What's she look like?”

“I don't know, pink? She's full of metal.” Meredith shrugged. “The kind of woman that if I kicked her in her lady parts, my shoe would get lost.”

Meredith heard Kraglin choke, then start laughing.

“I'm serious,” Meredith said, “she's got so many piercings that it's got to be like screwing a jewelry display.”

“Ms. Q, that ain't nice,” Kraglin laughed.

Meredith cracked a grin.

“Look,” she said, “I can't help it if her voice sounds like a cat getting screwed by a grizzly bear.”

“Ms. Quill!”

“Sorry, you're right. That was out of line.” Meredith's voice dropped. “The sound of the cat would be more pleasant.”

Meredith could hear Kraglin's laughter on the other side of the phone. She grinned and pressed a hand to her warm cheeks. The door opened, and Yondu came out. A thick leather strap was thrown
across his chest; his arrow quiver was slung on his hip. Meredith half expected him to be naked, but
his flight pants were buckled on as tightly as she'd ever seen them, and his sleeveless shirt wasn't
inside-out. He stood in the doorway a moment, his eyebrows knit together as if he wasn't sure he was
really seeing her.

“Mery?”

“Yondu,” she replied curtly.

“The hell are you doin’ here?” Yondu stepped onto the street, closing the door behind him. “Thought
you were shacked up takin' Peter to school and all.”

“It's his mid-season break,” Meredith explained, “and Peter wanted me to stay on. I wanted to see
Kraglin and the boys, so I did.”

The slight stress on Kraglin's name was a bit of a low blow, she knew, but Meredith felt the petty
flow through her.

“That's right.” Yondu scratched his chin. “The boy's on the ship this week.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No,” Yondu said too quickly.

Meredith gave him a cutting look. He sighed and rolled his massive shoulders.

“I might have to move a few things around,” Yondu said, “do a little schedule-changin’.”

“Reschedule your sex life, more like.” Meredith avoided his eyes. “It's funny; I didn't know you
were so into piercings.”

“What? No,” Yondu said with a scowl, “I didn't go there for that.”

“Really?”

“You shittin' me? With her?” Yondu snorted. “She's got a lot of holes in her, Mery, but I ain't usin'
any of 'em.”

“Nothing good comes out of any of them, that's for damn sure.” Meredith slung the shotblaster across
her back; she wouldn't need it now that she'd found Yondu. “She's got so much metal in her face that
I could stick fridge magnets to her.”

“Gold ain't magnetic, Mery,” Yondu laughed.

“If any of that was higher-grade than plated,” Meredith said, “I'll eat my shoe.”

“What the hell did she say to you? You look tenser than a QuadX hydraulic coil,” he said.

“It's nothing.” Meredith still wouldn't meet his eyes. “You didn't go there for drugs, did you?”

“Mery, I got four lungs that stop up if I start breathin' so much as a cigarette.” Yondu gave her a
scathing look. “What am I gonna do, shoot up? Take pills? Metabolism would burn it out of me in
two seconds. Waste of money, if you ask me.”

“Whatever it was you went there for, are you done?” Meredith huffed. “Kraglin's been waiting for
you forever.”
Yondu's crimson eyes were locked onto something behind her. He reached over her shoulder, grabbed the shotblaster, and pulled it off.

“Mery, did you steal from me?” Yondu's voice was pretend-hurt; she could see him trying not to grin. “You pilferin' goddamn Ravager.”

“I borrowed from you,” Meredith corrected, “as I had every intention of giving it back.”

“Did you now?” Yondu hooked the gun to the strap slung across his chest. “Where'd you get it?”

“Armory's not hard to get into,” she lied.

Yondu's eyes narrowed slightly.

“I don't believe you,” he said.

“That's because I'm lyin’.” Meredith grabbed his elbow and started tugging him along. “Come on; the sooner I get off this planet, the better.”

Yondu and Meredith walked shoulder-to-shoulder down the alleyway and into the crowds. His hand never left the gun; when Meredith glanced over, she saw that the skin over Yondu's knuckles was stretched pale blue. His eyes snapped from face to face, exuding nothing but murderous intent.

“What's wrong,” Meredith asked.

“Take my arm and don't talk.” Yondu offered her his free arm; she slipped both of her hands over the thick muscle. ‘They're watchin' you. You're Terran, Mery; kind of a novelty around these parts. In a location like this, that means 'exotic', which means expensive. If we want to get out of here without people tossin' units at you and palmin' your ass, then we need to move.”

“I don't want to be a novelty.” Meredith stuck to his side. “Why are Terrans novelty?”

Yondu groaned and looked at the sky.

“Do we really gotta talk about this,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Yes, we do. Why are you making that face,” she asked.

“Look, Mery, Terrans are what we call a baseline species. Y'all ain't developed too many adaptions. Genetically, y'all are a blank slate. Couple thousand years ago, back when they was just startin' shit, Kree abducted some Terrans and altered their genes. Designed a species, Stakar said, and put 'em on specific planets to mine resources.” Yondu kept Meredith moving through the crowd. “Chuck's one of 'em. So's Martinex. Species designed usin' Terrans as a baseline, see? Everything went downhill once the Kree realized they couldn't control what they'd made, started obliteratin' the planets and everybody on 'em. What was left was folks just tryin' to survive.”

“They abducted people from Earth and turned them into aliens.” Meredith's breath caught. “Oh my God.”

“Shit move, I know, but that's how we got Chuck, Marty, Nikki – a lot of good folks got ancestry on Terra.” Yondu gave her half a smile. “What, you thought everybody knew Terra just because you came from it?”

“No, I thought nobody knew Terra at all. We're not space-faring. I figured – I don't know what I figured,” Meredith babbled, “but I didn't think – how many species were created from Terrans?”
“Plutonians, Jovians, Mercurians, lessee.” Yondu's expression screwed up in thought. “There were rumors of Neptites, but Stakar never found 'em.”

“That's amazing and horrible and I don't know what to think about that,” Meredith said.

“It gets worse. Since Terrans are a baseline species, y'all can pretty much screw anythin' that's vaguely your shape.” Yondu wasn't looking at Meredith. “Makes you a valuable asset in business like this, which is why you ain't lettin' go of my arm until you're on the Eclector.”

“Because someone's going to grab me and clone me and turn me into a different species?” Meredith gripped Yondu's arm, her eyes wide. “Don't you dare let me out of your sight.”

“No, because you got the parts to screw eighty percent of the damn planet,” Yondu chuckled, “and I don't feel like sharin'.”

Meredith's eyes snapped up to Yondu.

“Oh hush,” she muttered, “I made it all the way here without sharing.”

She was blushing; Yondu grinned. People seemed to shrink away from Yondu's eyes as they passed through the crowd effortlessly. This was the feeling Meredith had yearned for earlier when faced with Brahl; there was a safety in having Yondu around, a certainty that no matter what happened, this big blue asshole could handle it. Yondu pulled Meredith a little closer; Meredith wrapped her arms securely around his. Yondu hated Kree, she reminded herself, so there was no way any of them were going to kidnap her. Being seen in this kind of place with him would probably start a tsunami of rumors, but at the moment, Meredith didn't care. She was with him, so she was safe.

“Yondu,” she said.

“Yeah, lil' momma,” he asked casually, “what's wrong?”

Meredith chose to ignore the term of endearment, especially considering the surrounding establishments. If he hadn't gone to the Rose Lady for sex or drugs, then Meredith couldn't understand why anyone would even want to be on this planet.

“Why were you in there,” she asked.

“Lookin' for this.” With his free hand, Yondu drew from his pocket a gold bracelet. It was studded with red gems that flickered orange in the light. “One of Chuck's boys took it to impress some Krylorian female. She shot him in cold blood and took the glitter. My job was to get it back. Them women, they'd recognize anybody from Chuck's ship. Me bein' back in the family ain't common news yet, so they let me in.”

“It's beautiful. Charlie-27 has excellent taste,” Meredith decided.

“You want it?” Yondu held it out to her. “Bet you Chuck wouldn't mind. More about provin' a point to his crew anyway.”

“No, Yondu, I don't want it.” Meredith curled his thick blue fingers around the bracelet. “It doesn't belong to me.”

“It could,” he said.

“It shouldn't.” Meredith pushed his hand away. “If Charlie-27 went through all this trouble to get it back, it probably means a lot to him.”
Yondu grunted and pocketed the bracelet.

“Wasn’t hard to palm. Flash a bunch of cheap shit like it’s somethin’ real and they’ll come flockin’ to you,” he said, “and then grab the good shit while they’re fawnin’ over synthetic silicate.”

“You tricked them?”

“If they opened their skulls and poured ‘em on the table, they still couldn’t scrape together a half-decent brain.” Yondu's jaw hardened. “Bunch of gold-diggin' two-timin' cowards.”

“You sound like you've had experiences.”

“I been around long enough to see right through that shit. Women play games,” Yondu said, “and every one of ’em thinks they've got you outwitted. Bunch of fuckin’ bullshit, that's what it is.”

“Men play games too, you know.” Meredith's mouth twisted. “They dote on you and talk sweet to you, and then when they're bored, they pop off somewhere else. Women can be manipulative, I suppose, but men have a tendency to hit-and-run.”

“Men are dicks and women are bitches. Ain't never changin’,” Yondu said.

“Amen to that,” Meredith muttered.

“So, you're out here all alone.” Yondu didn't look at her. “Who's bright idea was that?”

“Mine,” she said.

“You goddamn idjit.” Yondu tugged her closer, snarling in her ear. “You realize what could've happened t'you?”

“I didn't pick up that shotblaster for show, Yondu.” Meredith glared up at hims. “Either I went ahead and found you, or we sat around with our thumbs up our asses and waited to get arrested by the Corps. Considering that me going home is entirely dependent on me not being arrested, I decided to prioritize.”

“Prioritize getting' banged up, abused, and your throat slit? Yeah, Mery,” Yondu said sarcastically, “that's real smart.”

“Prioritize Peter's safety over my own?” Meredith replied with an equally sardonic tone. “Wow, when have I ever done that?”

“If the boy was old enough to know what could've happened to you,” Yondu grunted, “he'd be pissed as fuck.”

“Well, he's not. Besides,” Meredith said, “I was only in danger half the time.”

“What half,” Yondu asked, “the half where you were walkin' around as an unclaimed prime piece of ass, or the half where you went waltzin' around carryin' a loaded weapon you ain't got a piss-idea how to shoot?”

“The half where I was looking for you,” Meredith shot back.

“Both, then.” Yondu spat on the ground. “Dumbass woman.”

“Dumbass man for forgetting that Peter was coming this week,” Meredith snapped.
“I didn't forget!” Yondu's blood-red eyes were wide with affronted anger. “It slipped my mind for half a goddamn hour, Mery. I woulda remembered the moment I stepped back on the ship. Chuck came out of nowhere with this job; what was I supposed to do, drop it? You ain't that important, Mery.”

“Of course I'm not, stupid.” Meredith scowled. “I'm not expecting you to drop your job and cater to us. I just expect you to prioritize Peter. If he's going to spend time on the Eclector, I need to know he’s in the forefront of your mind, not being shunted to the side and expected to make it on his own.”

“When have I ever,” Yondu began.

“Remember that time where Peter was on your ship killing Kree and you had no idea where he was?” Meredith's voice was flat. “Because I do. I remember that one real vivid-like.”

Yondu turned purple.

“That was one goddamn time,” he growled.

“What's that thing you and Stakar always tease me with? 'One time can happen again',” Meredith recited.

Yondu snarled. Meredith glanced at him with coolly; if he was going to throw that line in her face all the time, she was going to throw it back. He pulled her left, down a darkened alley.

“Faster to the docks,” he said.

In the alley, a pulsating blue light buzzed over them, casting periodic shadows across the ground. The sound of their footsteps echoed loudly in contrast to the buzzing light and murmur of the crowd. Meredith could hear her own breathing; she tightened her grip on Yondu's arm.

“Scared,” he asked.

“Nervous,” she corrected.

Yondu's arm slipped out of hers.

“Wait here,” he said.

“Wait here, are you nuts?” Meredith's eyes widened. “I'm not waiting here!”

“You seemed to be pretty damn fine comin' all this way alone, yeah?” Yondu grabbed hold of a gutter and started climbing. “You'll be fine.”

“You took the gun!” Meredith tried climbing up after him, but she was much too slow; by the time she climbed higher than a door frame, Yondu had made it to the roof. “What are you doing?”

Yondu peered over the rooftop, then disappeared. Meredith stared at the spot where he'd been; the blue light kept flashing over her. She let go and landed on the pavement as steady as a rock.

“You big blue asshole,” she screamed.

A rage was building in her bones. Fine, she thought, fine. Meredith knew how to get to the Eclector; just head back into the crowd and take a left at the end. She didn't need him. She stalked towards the entrance to the alleyway. Fuck Yondu, she thought savagely, she'd handle this herself.

Footsteps. There were footsteps behind her. Meredith turned around with a savage expression.
“Fuck off,” she snarled.

The flashing blue light illuminated the empty alleyway. She searched it with her eyes, trying to find a hunched shadow or flattened figure. No one was there; Meredith's heartbeat doubled. Suddenly, a thick hand slammed over her mouth and nose, pulling her backwards. Another hand grabbed her wrists, bending them behind her back. She found herself chest-first, crushed against the wall. Meredith's legs kicked backwards; her attacker held her at arm's length, so her feet made contact with nothing. Cold panic shot through Meredith like lightning; she leaned back her head and smashed her attacker's hand against the rough pavement. She was able to move his hand just enough to get her upper lip free.

“Yondu,” she screamed.

Her attacker smothered her mouth again. She stayed pressed against the wall for a few rapid heartbeats. Please hear me, she begged, I'll give you enough pepper to drown yourself in, just please, please hear me.

Her attacker spun her around to face him. The blue light above them flashed, illuminating the rough scars of Yondu's face.

“Yondu,” Meredith gasped.

“If I were a sex slaver, you'd spend the rest of your life in hell and never see your boy again. If I were a psycho, you'd be dead.” Yondu's hot breath curled against her neck. “Don't _ever_ fuckin' risk yourself like this again, you hear me?”

“You attacked me,” she raged.

“I proved a fuckin' point. Imagine if I weren't me, dammit. Anybody could hurt you. You're fast, Mery, but _fast_ ain't fast enough.” His upper lip curled, showing his savage teeth. “You should've stayed on the goddamn ship.”

“I didn't want to get arrested,” she said.

“If somethin' happens to you, what happens to the boy? You'd rather be dead than arrested? We can lie, Mery. We can say we kidnapped you. What we can't do,” Yondu thundered, “is _bring your dumb Terran ass back to life._”

Meredith found herself shrinking into Oblo's jacket. Death was something Meredith was used to thinking about, but Peter? _Her poor baby._

“Don't ever be that goddamn stupid again.” Yondu's eyes were fire. “Swear to me.”

“I promise,” she said.

Yondu let her go, then offered his arm again. Meredith wrapped her hands around it, thoroughly ashamed, and allowed him to lead her out of the alley. He'd scared her so badly that she was shaking; his point was more than proven. She shouldn't have been this stupid, she cursed, she shouldn't have taken the risk. He was right; if Peter knew what could have happened to her, he wouldn't have wanted her off the Eclector. If it wasn't for Oblo and the gun, Kraglin and his map, Yondu and – well, just being Yondu, Meredith could have been dead by now. She exhaled shakily.

There's a Ravager-stupid risk, she reminded herself, and there's a _stupid-stupid_ risk.
If Yondu Udonta had to guess the most unexpected thing he was going to see that day, he would have pegged it on the Krylorian with the lime-green strap-on applying black lipstick to her bellybutton. He would have been wrong; when he opened the door to the streets of Thuntax, he started to think that smoke in the Rose Lady had been more than just incense to cover the smell of sex. There had to be some kind of hallucinogen, he reasoned, some kind of mind-fuckery floating around in all that. He could not really be seeing Meredith Quill standing on the doorstep with a shotblaster in her hands and a Ravager flight jacket over her shoulders, looking like she'd just crawled out of a Eridani sewer system. He stared until he was absolutely certain that she was real.

“Mery,” he said incredulously.

“Yondu,” she said.

There was a cold cut to her voice that let him know that whatever she was there for, it wasn't good.

“The hell are you doin' here?” Yondu stepped onto the street, closing the door behind him. “Thought you were shacked up takin' Peter to school and all.”

“It's his mid-season break,” Meredith said, “and Peter wanted me to stay on. I wanted to see Kraglin and the boys, so I did.”

She emphasized Kraglin's name just enough to make it clear; she hadn't come to see him. Yondu pushed that detail to the side, favoring to focus on the tactical information. Mainly, that he'd somehow forgotten about the goddamn boy.

“That's right.” He scratched his chin, mentally planning around it. “The boy's on the ship this week.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No.” When Meredith gave him a look, he rolled his shoulders. “I might have to move a few things around, do a little schedule-changin'.”

“Reschedule your sex life, more like.” Meredith wouldn't look at him. “It's funny; I didn't know you were so into piercings.”

It took him a second to realize who she was talking about.

“What?” He scowled. “No, I didn't go there for that.”

If anything was a kick to the guts, it was the way Meredith eyed him like she was testing him. After all the times he'd lied to her, Yondu reckoned, it was to be expected, but it still sucked.

“Really,” she asked.

“You shittin' me? With her?” Yondu snorted. “She's got a lot of holes in her, Mery, but I ain't usin' any of 'em.”

“Nothing good comes out of any of them, that's for damn sure.” Meredith stuffed the shotblaster on her back. “She's got so much metal in her face that I could stick fridge magnets to her.”

“Gold ain't magnetic, Mery,” Yondu laughed.

“If any of that was higher-grade than plated,” Meredith said, “I'll eat my shoe.”
The clipped tone was back in her voice; Yondu was starting to get the impression that maybe he wasn't the one who ticked her off.

“What the hell did she say to you? You look tenser than a QuadX hydraulic coil,” he said.

“It's nothing.” Meredith still wouldn't meet his eyes.“You didn't go there for drugs, did you?”

“Mery, I got four lungs that stop up if I start breathin' so much as a cigarette.” Yondu gave her a scathing look. “What am I gonna do, shoot up? Take pills? Metabolism would burn it out of me in two seconds. Waste of money, if you ask me.”

“Whatever it was you went there for, are you done? Kraglin's been waiting for you forever,” she complained.

His eyes slid over her shoulder, focusing on the shotblaster. There was no way she could afford something like that on Dakkam, and the design was awful familiar. He reached over her shoulder, grabbed it, and yanked it off. Yep, there was no denying that patchwork efficiency; she'd taken this off his ship. The same warped pride that he often felt for the boy swelled up in his chest.

“Mery, did you steal from me?” Yondu did his best not to laugh in her face. “You pilferin' goddamn Ravager.”

“I borrowed from you,” Meredith said, “as I had every intention of giving it back.”

“Did you now?” Yondu hooked the gun to the strap slung across his chest; he'd need it if he was going to get her out of her safely. “Where'd you get it?”

“Armory's not hard to get into,” she said.

She said it too quick and with too much ease. Plus, Yondu knew the armory was locked tighter than an Orloni's ass; he'd locked it himself as he left, just in case the new hires got any stupid ideas. She was lying to him, he realized, lying right to his face. Yondu's eyes narrowed slightly; maybe she was going Ravager a bit too fast.

“I don't believe you,” he said.

“That's because I'm lyin’.” Meredith grabbed his elbow and started tugging him along. “Come on; the sooner I get off this planet, the better.”

Alright, he thought, so she wasn't up to lying to his face yet. Yondu and Meredith walked shoulder-to-shoulder down the alleyway and into the crowds. His hand never left the gun, and he made eye contact with every person who so much as glanced at Meredith.

“What's wrong,” she asked.

“Take my arm and don't talk.” Yondu offered her his free arm; she slipped both of her hands over it. “They're watchin' you. You're Terran, Mery; kind of a novelty around these parts. In a location like this, that means 'exotic', which means expensive. If we want to get out of here without people tossin’ units at you and palmin' your ass, then we need to move.”

“I don't want to be a novelty.” Meredith stuck to his side. “Why are Terrans novelty?”

Shit. Yondu groaned and looked up at the stars. This was exactly the kind of conversation he didn't want to have. It was Stakar's kind of thing, not his, and going anywhere near the subject of sex with Terrans was a bit too close for him. Let it go, he told himself firmly, let it go.
“Do we really gotta talk about this,” he said, gritting his teeth.

“Yes, we do. Why are you making that face,” she asked.

“Look, Mery, Terrans are what we call a baseline species. Y'all ain't developed too many adaptions. Genetically, y'all are a blank slate. Couple thousand years ago, back when they was just startin' shit, Kree abducted some Terrans and altered their genes. Designed a species, Stakar said, and put 'em on specific planets to mine resources for their war.” Yondu kept Meredith moving through the crowd, stopping for nothing and no one. “Chuck's one of 'em. So's Martinex. Species designed usin' Terrans as a baseline, see? Everything went downhill once the Kree realized they couldn't control what they'd made, started obliteratin' the planets and everybody on 'em. What was left was folks just tryin' to survive.”

“They abducted people from Earth and turned them into aliens.” Meredith's eyes were as wide as saucers. “Oh my God.”

“Shit move, I know, but that's how we got Chuck, Marty, Nikki – a lot of good folks got ancestry on Terra.” Yondu smiled at her; she thought she knew so much about Terra, and here she was getting schooled on it by someone who'd only been there once. “What, you thought everybody knew Terra just because you came from it?”

“No, I thought nobody knew Terra at all. We're not space-faring. I figured.” She was talking a mile a minute; nervous, he realized. “I don't know what I figured, but I didn't think – how many species were created from Terrans?”

“Plutonians, Jovians, Mercurians, lessee.” Yondu tried to remember everything Martinex and Stakar had droned on about. “There were rumors of Neptites, but Stakar never found 'em.”

“That's amazing and horrible and I don't know what to think about that,” Meredith said.

“It gets worse. Since Terrans are a baseline species, y'all can pretty much screw anythin' that's vaguely your shape.” Yondu kept his eyes on the crowd, determined not to rake them over Meredith. “Makes you a valuable asset in business like this, which is why you ain't lettin' go of my arm until you're on the Eclector.”

“Because someone's going to grab me and clone me and turn me into a different species?” Meredith's hold on Yondu's arm was nearly painful. “Don't you dare let me out of your sight.”

“No, because you got the parts to screw eighty percent of the damn planet,” Yondu chuckled, “and I don't feel like sharin'.”

Meredith's eyes snapped up to Yondu.

“Oh hush,” she muttered, “I made it all the way here without sharing.”

She was blushing; Yondu grinned. Yondu shouldered people aside as he led Meredith towards the Eclector. Men were looking at her. Yondu met their eyes, and they looked away. That kind of message crossed species well enough; this one's mine. Yondu's chest swelled slightly, and he pulled Meredith a little closer. Her arms were wound sweetly around his; out of fear that she'd be kidnapped, true, but Yondu wasn't complaining about it. Being seen in this kind of place wouldn't do wonders for his reputation, but damn did it feel nice for people to assume.

“Yondu,” she said.

“Yeah, lil' momma?” The term of endearment slipped out of his mouth before he could catch it.
“What's wrong?”

“What were you in there,” she asked.

“Lookin' for this.” Yondu pulled Chuck's gold bracelet from his pocket, letting it catch the light. “One of Chuck's boys took it to impress some Krylorian female. She shot him in cold blood and took the glitter. My job was to get it back. Them women, they'd recognize anybody from Chuck's ship. Me bein' back in the family ain't common news yet, so they let me in.”

“It's beautiful. Charlie-27 has excellent taste,” Meredith decided.

“You want it?” Yondu held it out to her; it was probably the only piece of jewelry that she'd own. “Bet you Chuck wouldn't mind. More about provin' a point to his crew anyway.”

“No, Yondu, I don't want it.” Meredith curled his thick blue fingers around the bracelet. “It doesn't belong to me.”

“It could,” he suggested.

“It shouldn't.” Meredith pushed his hand away. “If Charlie-27 went through all this trouble to get it back, it probably means a lot to him.”

So she wasn't up to stealing, either; Yondu grunted, mildly disappointed, and pocketed the bracelet.

“Wasn't hard to palm.” It was a bit of a brag, but he couldn't help it. “Flash a bunch of cheap shit like it's somethin' real and they'll come flockin' to you, and then grab the good shit while they're fawnin' over synthetic silicate.”

“You tricked them?”

“If they opened their skulls and poured 'em on the table, they still couldn't scrape together a half-decent brain.” Yondu felt his jaw tighten. “Bunch of gold-diggin' two-timin' cowards.”

“You sound like you've had experiences,” she said.

Experiences and then some, he thought. First, it had been D'fara trying to pirate the Eclector. Yondu still had scars from two Mephitisoid sisters who didn't like him skipping out on them at dawn. That Krylorian girl – what was her name, Henja? – tried to shoot him the morning after and ended up blasting a hole through his best pair of flight pants. A lot of one-night-stands meant a lot of women, and with the kind of women Yondu was typically around, that meant a lot of danger.

“I been around long enough to see right through that shit. Women play games,” Yondu said, “and every one of 'em thinks they've got you outwitted. Bunch of fuckin' bullshit, that's what it is.”

“Men play games too, you know.” Meredith's mouth twisted. “They dote on you and talk sweet to you, and then when they're bored, they pop off somewhere else. Women can be manipulative, I suppose, but men have a tendency to hit-and-run.”

Yondu opened his mouth to shoot back, but was abruptly reminded of Ego. He swallowed his response and shrugged.

“Men are dicks and women are bitches. Ain't never changin',” he said.

“Amen to that,” Meredith muttered.

“So, you're out here all alone.” Yondu needed to push the subject as far away from Ego as he could,
for both of their sakes. “Who's bright idea was that?”

“Mine,” she said.

Cold ran through Yondu's veins. He thought Kraglin had sent her. Somebody, he thought, somebody had to have given her that gun and let her off. But no, she'd jumped ship like an idiot and gone waltzing through the streets like a fresh cut of laukha.

“You goddamn idjit.” Yondu snarled in her ear. “You realize what could've happened t'you?”

“I didn't pick up that shotblaster for show, Yondu.” Meredith glared up at him with her big gray eyes. “Either I went ahead and found you, or we sat around with our thumbs up our asses and waited to get arrested by the Corps. Considering that me going home is entirely dependent on me not being arrested, I decided to prioritize.”

“Prioritize getting’ banged up, abused, and your throat slit? Yeah, Mery,” Yondu said sarcastically, “that's real smart.”

“Prioritize Peter's safety over my own?” Meredith replied with an equally sardonic tone. “Wow, when have I ever done that?”

“If the boy was old enough to know what could've happened to you,” Yondu grunted, “he'd be pissed as fuck.”

“Well, he's not. Besides,” Meredith said, “I was only in danger half the time.”

“What half,” Yondu asked, “the half where you were walkin' around as an unclaimed prime piece of ass, or the half where you went waltzin' around carryin' a loaded weapon you ain't got a piss-idea how to shoot?”

“The half where I was looking for you,” Meredith shot back.

A strange sensation was twisting his innards; Yondu loathed it.

“Both, then.” Yondu spat on the ground. “Dumbass woman.”

“Dumbass man for forgetting that Peter was coming this week,” Meredith snapped.

“I didn't forget! It slipped my mind for half a goddamn hour, Mery. I woulda remembered the moment I stepped back on the ship. Chuck came out of nowhere with this job,” he snapped, “what was I supposed to do, drop it? You ain't that important, Mery.”

The words hung in the air for a moment, daring him to take them back.

“Of course I'm not, stupid.” Meredith scowled. “I'm not expecting you to drop your job and cater to us. I just expect you to prioritize Peter. If he's going to spend time on the Eclector, I need to know he's in the forefront of your mind, not being shunted to the side and expected to make it on his own.”

“When have I ever,” Yondu began.

“Remember that time where Peter was on your ship killing Kree and you had no idea where he was?” Meredith's voice was flat. “Because I do. I remember that one real vivid-like.”

The memory of the Kree getting obliterated over Maorda-4 lit up in Yondu's head.

“That was one goddamn time,” he growled.
“What's that thing you and Stakar always tease me with? 'One time can happen again,’” Meredith recited.

Dammit, she'd learned to quote Stakar. Never should have introduced them, he cursed, nothing but trouble. Meredith glanced at him with her big silvery eyes. Suddenly, unbidden into his mind, a flash realization; she'd come here because he wasn't at the Eclector. If something had happened to her, he realized, it would have been his fault.

He jerked her down an alleyway, his collar growing hot. This could never happen again. Meredith looked up at him in alarm.

“Faster to the docks,” he lied.

The only light in the alley was a flashing blue sign. Perfect, Yondu thought, periodic cover would make this much easier. The alley was empty, cold, echoing with every step; it was exactly the place Yondu needed. He could hear Meredith's breathing quicken; as if to prove his hypothesis, she tightened her grip on Yondu's arm.

“Scared,” he asked.

“Nervous,” she said.

Her eyes flicked from shadow to shadow. Steeling himself, Yondu pulled his arm out of hers. She had to realize what she'd done, he told himself, she had to realize this was real. This could never happen again.

“Wait here,” he said.

“Wait here, are you nuts?” Meredith's eyes widened. “I'm not waiting here!”

“You seemed to be pretty damn fine comin' all this way alone, yeah?” Yondu couldn't look at her; he grabbed hold of a cold metal gutter and hoisted himself up. “You'll be fine.”

She would be fine, he swore as he climbed up the building with ease, and he'd make damn sure of it. A little voice that sounded a hell of a lot like Aleta was urging him on. This is the only way. You have to show her what can happen if she doesn't listen to you. Fear is a tool; use it.

“You took the gun,” Meredith yelled.

He could hear her attempting to climb up after him; Yondu swung up on to the roof with ease. He made the mistake of looking down; she stared up at him with confused, panicked eyes.

“What are you doing,” she cried.

“Teachin' you a lesson,” he muttered, scarce above a whisper, “so nobody else gets the chance.”

He stepped back onto the roof. This would be simple, he promised himself, and efficient. It would not break her trust in him. He had to keep telling himself that as he ran across the roof to the edge of the building. He watched her land on the ground.

“You big blue asshole,” she screamed.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Yondu grinned. There was her pepper. Then, just as he expected, she stalked towards him, towards the entrance to the alley.

“I told you to wait there,” he hissed, “go back. Follow a goddamn order for once.”
She didn't stop. Yondu exhaled, gripped the rooftop, and dropped. He slid silently down the gutter again, and loudly stomped towards her. When she moved, the light flashed off, allowing him to step just behind her as she turned.

“Fuck off,” she snarled.

Meredith stared down the alley, wide-eyed, at the place Yondu had just occupied. He could see goosebumps on her skin.

_Do it, the Aleta-voice whispered in his mind, or someone else will try. You have to show her. This can never happen again._

It was so easy that it made him sick. Covering her mouth with his right hand and gripping her wrists with his left, he pulled her off balance. She was so surprised that she moved without resistance. He pushed her chest-first against the wall, keeping her at arm's length. His battle-trained mind could think of a million things to do if someone had him in this position; all she did was kick aimlessly. His heart pumped loudly in his chest; she was afraid, he could practically smell it on her, and he was the one who was frightening her. The sensation in his stomach doubled; everything about this was wrong.

Meredith leaned back her head and headbutted the wall, wrenching Yondu's hand against the pavement. The movement was so violent and unexpected that he hesitated; Meredith got her mouth free.

“Yondu,” she screamed.

He covered her mouth again, his chest pounding. Yondu hadn't felt like this much of a piece of shit since he'd called the boy a piss-pouring dirt-brained meat-headed son-of-a-jackass. Meredith trusted Yondu to come save her, and here he was attacking her to begin with.

_Your responsibility is to protect and to teach, the Aleta-voice chastised, not to be liked. This is how you show them. Fear is a tool._

He spun Meredith around to face him. For a moment, the only movement was the blinking of the blue overhead light. The terror faded from her eyes, replaced with anger. Yondu wanted to throw up.

“Yondu,” she said.

“If I were a sex slaver, you'd spend the rest of your life in hell and never see your boy again. If I were a psycho, you'd be dead.” Yondu covered the nauseous feeling in his stomach with rage.

“Don't _ever_ fuckin' risk yourself like this again, you hear me?”

“You attacked me,” she accused.

“I proved a fuckin' point. Imagine if I weren't me, dammit. Anybody could hurt you. You're fast, Mery, but _fast_ ain't fast enough.” He bared his teeth. “You should've stayed on the goddamn ship.”

“I didn't want to get arrested,” she said.

“If somethin' happens to you, what happens to the boy? You'd rather be dead than arrested? We can lie, Mery. We can say we kidnapped you. What we can't do,” Yondu yelled, “is _bring your dumb Terran ass back to life._”

She shrunk into the flight jacket, eyes wide. She was afraid; whether of him or the situation, Yondu couldn't tell. It didn't matter, he and the Aleta-voice decided conjointly, as long as she never, _ever_ put
herself in harm's way again.

“Don't ever be that goddamn stupid again.” He needed her to understand this; the desire was palpable, twisting his stomach and stabbing his chest. “Swear to me.”

“I promise,” she said.

He let her go immediately. She looked at him the same way the boy did after he'd screwed up; the big eyes, the shock, the shame. Yondu offered his arm again; she took it, and even allowed him to lead her out of the alley. Her hands vibrated; she was shaking, he realized. The sick feeling deepened, bottoming out into a familiar well of self-loathing. She trusted him, and he'd attacked her. To prove a point or not, he'd attacked her. He didn't know what to say; 'sorry' didn't seem to cover it, and that little Aleta-like voice reminded him he had nothing to be sorry for anyway. She needed to be scared by someone who wasn't going to hurt her or she'd do something stupid like this again and he wouldn't be there in time. The very thought made his jaw lock. Still, the fear in her eyes made his insides roil. What if she had really believed – for a second, just after seeing his face – that he would hurt her? She'd been quick to rope all men in with Ego, but Yondu wasn't that much of a jackass.

Attacked her in an alley, a different, Stakar-like voice reminded, like a brutal savage. Very suave, Yondu, way to go.

Yondu didn't know why his self-loathing talked like his adoptive parents, but he wasn't about to pay a shrink to find out why. They approached the Eclector, and a question occurred to Yondu he hadn't thought of before; if Kraglin hadn't sent Meredith, he thought, then how the hell had she shown up in a flight jacket toting a Ravager shotblaster?

“How'd you get off, anyway,” he asked.

“Same way I got the jacket and the gun,” she said.

Yondu held her at arm's length. There was a dark patch on the shoulder of the flight jacket, and a short round metal divot under the standard Ravager flame. There was more dirt on Meredith's hands than there was on the jacket.

“One of Charlie-27's old boys; I can see where the patch used to be. Maintenance rank,” Yondu muttered, “but cleaner n' usual.”

“Who helped me isn't any of your business,” Meredith protested.

“Circumvented a direct order.” Yondu put his hands on his hips. “That is my business.”

“He only did it because I told him it would help Peter. He seemed to really care about Peter,” Meredith said, “so please, please don't get him in trouble.”

He seemed to really care about Peter. The way she said it was borderline admiring. Yondu stared through her, trying to ignore the hot spark that burned in his chest. The last time he'd let that feeling take control, he reminded himself, he'd nearly destroyed the bridge. Jealousy was not an option.

“I've made enough problems today.” Meredith hugged the jacket to herself, tears in her eyes. “Please don't let anybody else suffer for what I've done.”

Yondu exhaled slowly. So, now she was holding the guy's jacket. Let it go, he reminded himself, you're supposed to be letting that go.

“Mery,” he tried.
“Please, Yondu.” That soft, desperate tone bled into her voice; now she was begging, he realized. “I’ll do anything, just don’t get him in trouble for doing a good thing. Blame me; it’s my fault, not his.”

Yondu needed her to stop using those big silver eyes and that soft, desperate voice for half a damn second so he could think properly. As it was, with her arms wrapped around herself – someone else’s jacket, not his, why wasn’t it his – and her eyes as wide as star systems, he found himself in a fairly familiar situation. The last time, she’d wanted Peter back and he’d caved like a house of cards. This time she was protecting some sap who’d helped her out, and Yondu found he wasn’t as amiable to that as he wished he was. Somebody else had been her ten-minute hero today, and he hated the fucker for it.

“What,” Yondu said gruffly, “you got a crush on him?”

*If the answer is yes,* the Stakar-voice suggested, *murder everyone except Kraglin and the boy. Only way to be sure.*

“Don’t be stupid,” she snapped.

“I’m supposed to avoid disciplining a Ravager what goes against a direct order,” he snarled, “just because you say ‘please’?”

“Please please please please,” she said.

For half a goddamn second, he cursed, just stop it with the voice. It was soft, sweet, with that gentle plea in it that said she needed him. It was intoxicating, twisted, addicting; Yondu inhaled slowly. Let it go, he roared at himself, let her go before you do something stupid.

“You’re pretty damn set on protectin’ this guy,” he forced himself to say.

“The number of people who’ve done selfless things for me and Peter is a very small number. I’d like to prevent it from getting any smaller,” Meredith said.

“And you’ll do anything to protect him, huh?” Yondu threw a challenge in his voice. “Won’t let me kick his ass?”

“Anything within reason,” Meredith clarified, “and yes, I don’t want you kicking his ass for helping me help my son.”

A mixture of rage and jealousy – goddammit, he’d given himself one damn job – welled up in his chest, heating his blood.

“Take off the jacket,” he said.

The vehemence in his voice was enough to shock them both. Meredith slipped the jacket off and handed it to him. Yondu gripped it in his hands, forcing himself not to tear it to shreds. The man who this jacket belonged to had given Meredith a gun, he reminded himself, and that gun might have saved her life today.

“Whoever he is, he’s a goddamn idiot for letting your ass run around today. But,” Yondu said, cutting Meredith off as she opened her mouth to speak, “he gave you a gun. I won’t kill ‘im, but you tell me his name.”

Meredith hesitated. Of course she did, Yondu thought; loyalty was in her blood.
“I won't hurt him. He don't even have to know. You can tell me. I swear,” Yondu said, “I won't roast him.”

Meredith swallowed instead of answering.

“Come on, Mery.” Yondu stepped closer to her. They'd nearly died together, for star's sake; she couldn't trust some other asshole more than him, not that fast. “You don't trust me?”

He held her gaze until Meredith started to laugh. She rubbed her arms and flashed him that same dumb Terran smile.

“Oblo,” she said, “Peter's new biggest fan.”

Relief and surprise flooded his system. Oblo, of course it was Oblo.

“Makes sense.” Yondu thought out loud. “Oblo lost his boy years back. Figures he'd take a shinin' to Pete.”

“He did?” Meredith's eyes widened. “That's awful.”

“Yeah, but don't go tellin' him I told you that. He's a good Ravager.” Knowing she still trusted him was such a palpable relief that he grinned. “Damn, Mery, you had me for a second there.”

“You had me for a second there,” she said, “in that damn alley.”

Yondu swallowed.

“Mery,” he said, “I teach things the way I learn 'em.”

Her eyebrows knit together in confusion, so he pressed on.

“I learned things through life-or-death. So when I try to show you why you're bein' an idjit, I do things that normal folks don't do. Side effect of bein' a battle slave.” Yondu stared at the dock floor. “If I scare you, it's because I'm talkin' about somethin' meant to scare you. If I hurt you, it's because I'm tryin' to make sure nobody else can.”

“You didn't hurt me,” she said, “you just scared me shitless.”

“You weren't scared I was gonna hurt you, were ya?”

“What, back there? No,” Meredith said, “not even for a moment. You've got a code; you're a Ravager.”

A weight seemed to roll off his shoulders. Thank the stars; if he'd made her even slightly afraid of him – hell, Yondu wasn't sure what he was going to do. He'd meant to scare her a little, but she'd shaken like a leaf on a tree. He'd gone too far again, he cursed, too goddamn far.

“You had Kraglin scared shitless, and the boy too, if he'd known.” Yondu waited a few moments, choosing his next words carefully. “Your pop woulda been terrified. Shit, whole Eclector'd be in an uproar, me included.”

“You?” Meredith chuckled. “You're not scared of anything.”

“Now, we both know that ain't true.” Yondu locked eyes with her. “I ain't gonna do that to you again.”
“That's real good to know, but don't beat yourself up about it. I – Honestly, I probably needed that. I'm stubborn,” Meredith said, “and sometimes it doesn't sink in that this – that any of this is real. Everything is so strange. It's constantly changing. Near-death experiences just – I guess I'm getting used to them. I'm taking stupid risks.”

“Ravager,” Yondu joked.

Without protest, Meredith wrapped her hands around his arm and looked at him expectantly. Yondu couldn't help but flex slightly as he tugged her along. She trusted him, she understood he wasn't trying to hurt her, and she wasn't going to do something that damn stupid again; Yondu felt all the sick, twisted feelings drain from him like emptying a bottle of whiskey.

“Hey, Yondu?”

“Hm?”

“I really hate this fuckin' planet.”

He was still laughing when the ramp to the Eclector dropped.

The first thing Yondu did was track down Oblo. Down in the depths of the ship, where steam hissed and machines roared, Oblo lived. Everybody else seemed alright to kip up in the ship proper, but Oblo stayed down here. The captain waited until the Ravager finished reconnecting some stabilizer wires before he spoke.

“Ain't it loud down here,” he said over the roar of the ship.

“Helps me focus.” Oblo closed the panel and screwed it shut. “I like loud. Drowns out the thoughts.”

“Terran got off the ship today.” Yondu kept his tone unaccusatory. “You let her off.”

“She was going to get off anyway. She's a parent trying to help her kid,” Oblo said, “there's nothing that really stops that.”

A valve busted; smoke began to fill the narrow hallway. Oblo and Yondu cursed simultaneously. Yondu wrenched the valve shut; Oblo sealed it with his omnitool.

“Why the hell does it keep doing that,” Oblo cursed.

“It's been screwed since Ego.” Yondu pulled the valve as tight as it would go. “We put the ol' girl under a lot of pressure that day.”

“Boy's father, that right?”

“If you can call him that. Didn't do much parentin', as I hear it.”

“Tried to kill him, I heard.” Oblo drew up a crate and sat on it. “That's fucked up.”

Yondu stick his hands in his pockets, appraising his mechanic.

“Word is the boy's been runnin' around lately. Worked on that bust pipe,” Yondu said.
“Useful kid.” Oblo wouldn't look at him. “Good kid.”

“Reminds you of Hank, don't he?”

The ship churned around them. In the dim light of the ship's depth, Yondu could barely see Oblo's face. The pain flicked over his expression; he covered it well, Yondu admitted, but Yondu had a lifetime of watching people hurt.

“Good kid,” Oblo repeated.

Yondu hung Oblo's jacket on the valve.

“You did good today,” he said, “keep it up.”

Oblo looked up in shock. Yondu turned towards the stairs; he was halfway up them when Oblo leapt off the crate.

“You're not pissed,” he asked.

“You gave her a gun. Probably the only reason she's still kickin' right now.” Yondu shrugged. “Charlie-27 would call that disobedience or some shit. I call it initiative.”

Oblo started to grin.

“Just don't get too goddamn comfortable around her.” Yondu eyed the mechanic. “If you catch my meanin’.”

Oblo chuckled, rubbing the back of his neck with his greasy glove.

“Yes, captain,” he said.

Yondu stepped up the stairs without another word. Of course it was Oblo. Back in the day, when Yondu was still part of Stakar's crew, he'd heard about what happened to Oblo's kid. Wife ran off with a ship and a new paramour, and they'd been attacked by a rogue Kree gang. Oblo had lost his kid in the fight, Yondu remembered, and the Ravagers gained a permanent mechanic. Work, Aleta used to say, was the ultimate healing for all wounds of the heart.

If only, Yondu thought scathingly. Oblo still felt the sting of losing his boy, no matter how much he worked; in the same way, no matter how many damn jobs he picked up, Yondu couldn't shake the feeling that he wasn't supposed to be back. The family had kicked him out, and here Yondu was, scrabbling at every job in order to prove himself. They acted like everything was fine. He exhaled, stepping into the kitchen.

“Need a goddamn drink,” he grunted.

“Alright, what's your poison?” Meredith's voice made him jump. “We got whiskey, we got some fermented whatever-this-is, something kind of clear in this blue bottle. This red stuff smells nice.”

Of course she was in the kitchen, Yondu thought. He sat down on a mess hall bench and leaned his elbows on the table.

“That 'red stuff,’” he said, “is fermented bird blood.”

“Oh. Oh my God, no.” Meredith put the bottle back with a face of disgust. “Nevermind. No, huh-uh, no thank you.”

“You should have some yukvik.” Yondu chuckled. “Real delicacy from Algon's homeworld.”
“What's in it,” Meredith asked warily.

“Alcohol made from pressed rice and tree sap,” Yondu said.

“That doesn't sound too bad.”

“And then they catch live, venomous swamp eels and throw 'em in the bottle. Let the liquor ferment with 'em in there,” Yondu said, “and sell it with the slimy lil' fuckers still inside.”

Meredith covered her mouth with both hands, shaking her head.

“No,” she said, “just no. Don't ever bring that up again. That is so gross.”

“Don't tell Algon that. Course, he's partial to anjavik,” Yondu said, “which is sweet enough to rot your gut.”

“What's that made out of,” Meredith mumbled through her hands.


Meredith took a deep breath.

“That's it,” she said, “I'm stickin' to whiskey.”

“You'd like anjavik. No bite, just sweet blue taste,” Yondu said.

Meredith gave him a look over his shoulder like he'd said something irritating; Yondu's eyebrows knit together.

“Are you in here for a reason,” she asked.

“Drink,” he reminded.

“Right. Do you want the fermented bird blood, the clear stuff, or the whiskey,” Meredith asked.

“Clear stuff's called whorewater.” Yondu pointed a finger lazily towards the cabinet. “Gimme a shot of that.”

“Can do.” Meredith got down the blue bottle and poured some clear liquid into a shot glass. “I know I'm going to regret asking, but why is this called whorewater?”

“Because it's cheap, quick, and it don't last long.” Yondu took the shot glass. “But it'll fuck you real good if you let it.”

Meredith's mouth twisted. Yondu watched her stretch up to slide the bottle back into the cabinet; the hem of her shirt lifted slightly, revealing the sharp curve of the top of her hip. His eyebrows knit together sharply.

“You're losin' weight,” he barked.

“I don't eat out much,” she said, “and Dakkam's got a real lean diet.”

“That ain't it.” Yondu drained his glass. “You ain't been eatin'.”

“Of course I've been eating,” Meredith protested, “I work at a restaurant. Meals are free there.”
“You ain't been eating enough, then.” Yondu snapped his fingers and pointed to the seat next to him. “Get over here.”

Perturbed, Meredith sat down next to Yondu. Yondu stood, grabbed her around the waist, and lifted her with a slight grunt.

“Hey,” she protested.

“Hundred-and-five pounds,” he decided, “give or take.”

Yondu dropped her back on the mess hall bench, then sat down again.

“You ain't been eatin' enough,” he said.

“'I'm fine,” she said.

“You're working hard, eating lean, and giving up what lil' you have to keep the boy in high spirits.” Yondu turned his shot glass in his fingers. “You're surviving, Mery, but you can't keep cuttin' corners.”

“Remember what I said about you telling me how to live my life,” Meredith snapped.

“Clear as day. Relivin' the memory right now.” Yondu examined his shot glass, pointedly not looking at Meredith. “You were wearin' that real short dress your shitty restaurant makes you wear.”

“It ain't that short.”

“I could see my hands getting under it.”

“That's because it's you,” Meredith quipped, “and you're a Ravager.”

“The only difference between a Ravager and any other kinda scummy piece-of-shit is that Ravagers own up to bein' scoundrels,” Yondu said, “and the rest of those assholes hide it under pressed shirts and shined shoes.”

Meredith huffed. Yondu put his shot glass down and stood.

“You want a drink,” he asked.

“Whiskey,” she muttered, “straight.”

While Yondu poured another shot and a glass of whiskey, Meredith stared at the rough texture of the table. By the time the whiskey glass landed in front of her gaze, there were tears in her eyes. She took the glass, tilted it down her throat, and pushed it towards Yondu.

“More please,” she said in a small voice.

Yondu lowered his hand; he hadn't even downed his shot yet. He set it down firmly. Meredith stared at her empty glass until whiskey filled it up again.

“Thank you,” she mumbled.

“Don't say that,” he said.

Yondu took his shot; Meredith sipped her whiskey. The Ravager captain dropped down next to her and let out an exhale.
“Why the hell don’t you just stay, Mery? We got food, we got liquor; we even got sons-of-bitches like Oblo to watch the boy,” Yondu persuaded.

Meredith shook her head.

“No? You'll let us look after him for a week,” Yondu said, “but you still don't think livin' here's a good idea?”

“No mother in her right mind is gonna let a kid run around on a ship that lands on places like Thuntax,” she said, “where there's fermented bird blood in the cabinet and the only people you can trust to look after your boy are people who've already lost theirs.”

“So you're alright with hashin' it out on some dirt planet tryin' to make it off minimum wage,” Yondu snarled, “as long as the boy gets a standard bullshit education.”

“Yep.” Meredith took a long, slow sip of her whiskey. “Peter's more important.”

“Goddammit, woman.” Yondu exhaled. “You and your sense of goddamn responsibility.”

Meredith grinned.

“You worried about me,” she teased.

“I didn't spend four months findin' jobs to keep you alive just to watch you kill yourself planet-side, Mery.”

It was harsh, but true. Meredith took another sip of her whiskey; her lips pressed around the rim of the glass, curving to it. Stop looking, Yondu ordered himself, let it go.

“I'm trying,” she said finally, “but life's hard planet-side.”

“Eclector,” he urged.

“Life ain't about takin' the easy way out, Yondu. I could shack up here,” Meredith said, “and I'd be makin' a lot more money, too. But that'd make me a substandard mom, and I can't live like that. It'd kill me just as much as livin' lean would.”

Yondu's mouth soured.

“Fuckin' fine,” he said.

“Why on Earth are you always tryin' to get me back here anyway?” Meredith laughed. “Lunis' cooking is that bad?”

“Shirts need folded,” Yondu said, “and I ain't had a decent cut of laukha since you left.”

“Figures.” Meredith rolled her eyes and pushed the half-full glass of whiskey towards Yondu. “Finish that for me; last thing I need right now is to get drunk.”

Yondu lifted the glass; he could see the imprints of her lips on the glass. His chest tightened, and he swallowed. Slowly, the bottom of the glass hit the table.

“Tariza,” he grunted.

“What?”
“I asked you what she'd done to piss you off, and you said it wasn't nothin'.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Didn't press it at the time on account of your ass bein' in danger.”

“She had a shrill voice and a shitty attitude,” Meredith said, “and that's pretty much all it takes to piss me off.”

Yondu watched Meredith for a moment; she was biting her lips together, pursing them a way he'd come to recognize. It was her momma-don't-approve face; he'd seen it so many times when she was lecturnin' the boy.

“What if I had gone there for sex,” he asked.

“Oh God, Yondu, let's not have this conversation.” Meredith pressed a hand over her forehead. “I'm trying to retain what respect I still have for you.”

“But say I did.” A grin was growing on Yondu's face. “Then what?”

“Then you'd be stickin' yourself in jewelry display and my respect for you would go down faster'n she did,” Meredith quipped, “and if Aleta Ogord knew what kind of nonsense you were getting yourself into, she'd be awful pissed at you.”

“She knows how I am.”

“Then she ought to light your ass on fire for it.” Meredith's lips thinned. “Hit-and-run men; typical.”

“Hit-and-run women,” Yondu countered.

“Only if you go lookin' for 'em on places like Thuntax.” Meredith gestured to her whiskey. “Are you gonna drink that or what?”

Yondu lifted the glass again and drank. The familiar bite of Terran whiskey burned his tongue; he wiped his mouth with his sleeve and slid the glass back to her.

“You owe me for savin' you on Thuntax,” he said.

“Excuse you? You're the one who wasn't back on time. Don't be a jackass,” she said.

“I take the boy off your hands for a week, I get your ass off Thuntax, and I offer you a job,” Yondu said, “and that makes me a jackass?”

“It was your fault we were on Thuntax,” Meredith countered.

“I didn't tell you to leave the ship.”

“I didn't have a choice!”

“Did too.”

“Did not.”

“Did too.

“Did not!”

“Did too,” he said, “and now you're yellin' at me.”
Meredith reddened, swelling with rage.

“I oughta punch you,” she muttered.

“I didn't do anything!” Yondu grinned, shaking his head. “Damn, Star-Queen, you need to relax.”

“How am I supposed to relax knowing you are going to be watching Peter?”

“You said you trusted me with him.”

“I do, but that doesn't mean I won't worry.” Meredith sat back down next to him. “Peter is the light of my life.”

“Sentiment,” he grunted.

“You better watch out for him while I'm gone or there'll be hell to pay,” she warned.

Yondu snorted; Meredith nudged him with her shoulder.

“I'm serious,” she said, “I'll come back on this ship and make you jerks scrub until I can see my reflection on these pots and pans.”

“You think you can come on this ship and give orders?” Yondu snorted again. “Try it sometime, Mery, let me know how that goes for you.”

“I got the captain to serve me a drink,” she said, “and all I had to do was say 'please'.”

Purpling, Yondu gave her a sideways look.

“You goddamn hellion,” he said.

She started laughing. Yondu shook his head, fighting a grin.

“Dumbass Terrans,” he said.

“We make good whiskey,” she offered, “and we're pretty good at avoiding death.”

Yondu nodded slowly, as if allowing that to be true. Their hands were close on the table, but not touching. Let it go, he reminded himself. With his shoulders hunched and elbows on the table, he felt like a small mountain compared to the thin Terran at his side. Meredith grinned at him, all spark and pepper, and he relaxed slightly. As long as she still had that fight left in her, he knew she'd be alright wherever she went.

“Crazy little momma,” he accused.

“Big blue asshole,” she replied.

She put her hand over his gently, as if promising she didn't really mean it. He turned his hand over, allowing her fingertips to rub into his palm. Small, gentle, circular motions; the pressure was relaxing, but the hyper-awareness that came with her fingertips brushing his skin was anything but.

Then, with a sound that cracked the air, the kitchen door opened, and Kraglin came walking in.

“Hey, Ms. Q, I wanted to tell you – ” Kraglin's cheeks blushed blue at the sight of Yondu and Meredith's hands on the table. “Oh.”
Meredith and Yondu sprung apart like same-pole magnets.

“Report,” Yondu snarled.

“We're goin' in to atmosphere, cap'n, so we should be landin' in a few minutes.” Kraglin kept his tone as level as he could. “Thought I should go find Ms. Q, let her know it's time to get off.”

Kraglin's ice-blue eyes darted to Meredith; she was blushing fiercely.

“Kraglin,” Yondu said.

Kraglin's eyes snapped back to Yondu's.

“What did you see,” Yondu asked.

“Absolutely goddamn nothing, cap'n,” Kraglin said as he threw a smart Ravager salute, “I already forgot whatever it was I didn't see.”

“Good. Now get.”

Kraglin immediately left the room. Meredith was flushing; she stared at the floor.

“Hey,” he said.

Meredith glanced at him.

“You should go get hold of your boy,” he said, “make sure he's alright.”

Meredith left the room. Yondu stared at the door and exhaled. He felt like he'd just dodged a bullet, though he was pretty sure he was the one firing the gun.

Meredith made sure Peter was completely set before she went to the hangar bay. She'd lectured him so many times on behavior and safety that even Kraglin was starting to sigh.

“Ms. Q,” he said finally, “he's goin' on vacation, not goin' to war.”

“Just – just keep him safe, alright?” Meredith hugged Peter tightly and kissed him on each cheek. “Promise me you'll be safe.”

“I promise, mom.” Peter hugged her back. “No chasing Orloni or anything.”

Kraglin chuckled, then blinked as Meredith hugged him too. She kissed Kraglin's cheek gently.

“Fly safe,” she said, “and take good care of yourself, honey.”

“Yes, Ms. Quill.” Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck, blushing slightly blue. “I will.”

Kraglin and Peter walked away, leaving Meredith alone in the hangar bay. She went to crank the lever to drop the ramp, but someone was already standing there. Meredith put one hand on her hip and looked at Yondu. He bared his teeth, trying to ignore the rapid beat of his heart as he cranked the lever, dropping the ramp onto Dakkam.

“Get off my ship,” he grunted.
Meredith chuckled and crossed in front of him. She took his face in her hands and kissed him on each cheek.

“Fly safe,” she said, “you've got my baby on board.”

“Motherfuckin’ goddamn Terran sentiment. Rots your head,” he cursed, “just the damn thing to get a man killed.”

“It ain't all sugar and whiskey, Yondu. My boy gets hurt,” she said, “and I'll roast your goddamn carcass.”

“Get off my ship,” he repeated.

Grinning, Meredith stepped down the ramp and onto the docks. Yondu closed the ramp with one hand, rubbing his jaw with the other. An unfamiliar warmth pooled in his stomach; a relaxing, soothing feeling that twinged as she walked away. She was like a drug; he got a hit, relaxed, and then tensed up when she walked away. Yondu cursed under his breath, turning his head towards protecting the boy.

Way to let it go, idjit, way to let it fuckin' go.
Looking after Peter all week has Kraglin down to his last nerve. Just when it looks like he's about to get a break, Yondu lets Peter on the job.

It was nearly time to send Peter home, and Kraglin was damn glad for it. A few days of Peter running around was all well and good, but by the end of the week, Kraglin wanted to punt-kick the kid out of an airlock. He touched everything he shouldn't have, broke half the things Kraglin asked him to fix, and the little spitpiss wouldn't shut up. He followed Kraglin like a toy on a string, yammering constantly. Kraglin was about ready to shove moisture paper down the kid's throat when Yondu finally intervened.

"Bridge, Kraglin. You too, boy." Yondu grabbed Peter away from his first mate like tearing away duct tape. "Go on."

Peter bolted towards the bridge; Kraglin's shoulders sagged.

"Thank the fuckin' stars." He closed the vent he'd been working on and got to his feet. "One more word outta him, cap'n, and I thought I was gonna lose it."

"He's just like his momma," Yondu grunted, "can't keep his damn mouth shut."

Yondu and Kraglin paced to the bridge. Kraglin kept stride with Yondu, his hands in his pockets. It was a fine thing, being a first-mate. He could give orders, get shit done, fix shit the way he wanted to – still, he occasionally looked over his shoulder to make sure the cap'n was still happy with the way he worked.

"So we got a job," he asked.

"Yeah."

"Good job?"

"Yeah."

Kraglin nodded slowly. Yondu punched the door panel that led to the bridge, and the two strolled in. Several other Ravagers awaited them, crowding around the bridge display in earnest. Yondu pushed past them and activated a display. The planet Gudam floated in front of them. A green, pastural planet marred by huge mountains and cavernous valleys, Gudam was a wild planet full of large, rare creatures.

"Are we going hunting," Lunis asked.

"Nope." Yondu moved the planet to the side. "I ain't Charlie-27."

"What are we after, cap'n?"

"Signet ring." Yondu pulled up a holoimage of a thick silver ring, embossed with an ornate
datapattern. “Belongs to Udamai Dakuta. He's a poacher. Keeps all his dirty money on an Eridani account; that signet ring has the scan pattern. We get the ring, we get three-hundred thousand units.”

Gef let out a low whistle; Drazkar grinned.

“Problem is, Dakuta keeps it on himself at all times. Right now he's runnin' a livestock wrangle down on Gudam.” Yondu closed the holoimage. “We go, we get the ring.”

“Can we kill him,” Drazkar asked.

“We shoot that son-of-a-bitch and all of his money skips out of that account, goes to his next-of-kin. Clean heist,” Yondu ordered, “in and out like goddamn ghosts.”

“Can I come,” a voice chirped.

Every eye in the room turned towards Peter Quill. The boy was perched on the edge of the rail, swinging his legs.

“Boy, this ain't a goddamn vacation. It's a job,” Yondu said.

“I've gone on jobs before,” Peter complained.

“Not like this one, Pete.” Kraglin shook his head. “You better stay up here.”

“I'm small,” Peter said hopefully, “good for thievin’.”

There were a few grunts of acknowledgment from the crew. Yondu rubbed his unshaven chin, sizing his options.

“He is small,” Yondu agreed, “and that is good for thievin’.”

Kraglin made a small scoffing noise in his throat. Yondu raised an eyebrow at him.

“He's never done a job like this, cap'n, and we ain't really got the time to keep an eye on him. You bring Pete,” Kraglin swore, “and there'll be trouble.”

“There will not,” Peter protested.

“Name one time it ain't happened,” Kraglin snapped.

The crew mumbled in agreement. Peter jumped off the railing, eyes flashing.

“I can do it,” he said.

Derisive snorts and chuckles filled the air.

“Right,” Lunis snickered, “sure.”

“No way! Too small,” Drazkar accused.

“This is a bit big for you, Pete.” Kraglin's eyes lidded. “It's a heist, not a pickpocket job.”

“You're in,” Yondu said.

Yondu could have broken the tension with his bare hands. Everyone was staring at him; he locked eyes with Peter.
“You do what I say, when I say. You do what I tell you the moment I tell you to,” Yondu ordered.

“Okay,” Peter said.

“I say jump,” Yondu tested, “what do you do?”

“Ask how high,” Peter guessed.

“No, idjit, just jump.” Yondu shoved past him. “Captains ain't got time for stupid questions.”

Yondu left the bridge. The Ravagers eyed Peter, who drew himself up to full height.

“I can do it,” he insisted.

Cacophonous groans, howls, and complaints drowned him out. Kraglin hurried out of the room after Yondu. He had to use long strides just to keep up.

“Cap'n,” Kraglin asked, “are you really plannin' on usin' Pete?”

“Course I am. He's skinny. Good for thievin',” Yondu reasoned, “and good for slippin' through them bars there.”

Kraglin took a deep breath.

“If Ms. Q were here,” he muttered.

“She ain't.” Yondu pulled out his arrow and spun it in his fingers. “Less talkin', more walkin'.”

“Cap'n,” Kraglin said firmly, “I don't see why we need Pete on this job.”

“We gotta be quick, quiet, fast. Boy's small,” Yondu explained, “good at findin' shit and keepin' quiet.”

“He don't shut up, cap'n.”

“Yeah, but he's real hard to find when he's quiet.”

Kraglin rubbed the back of his neck, sighing.

“Aye, cap'n,” he said, “whatever you say.”

Yondu's ship soared down to the surface of Gudam. There were five Ravagers on board, not including Peter; Kraglin, Yondu, Lunis, Drazkar, and an Acheronian by the name of Brahl. Kraglin had activated the modular refraction field and the stealth decoys; none of the Nova Corps environmental protection protocols picked them up.

“So this Dakuta guy,” Brahl said, “he kills animals?”

“Yes.” Yondu adjusted the ship's trajectory as they burned through the atmosphere. “If it's impressive-lookin' and rare, he wants its head. Charlie-27's had a few bad run-ins with him, and Stakar ain't too fond of 'em either.”

“Someone the Admiral doesn't like is alive?” Lunis grinned. “Yeah. Hard to believe.”

“He's a slippery lil' fucker,” Yondu admitted, “always squeezin' himself outta our hands. We take his
units, his options go way down.”

“We cripple his funds and Charlie-27 takes him out.” Kraglin chuckled. “Damn smart, cap’n.”

“I got my moments.” Yondu swerved around a large rock structure, breaking out into the sunlight. Below them, waves of grain waved in the wind, an ocean of liquid gold. “Keep an eye out for the compound.”

“Wow.” Peter pressed his nose against the glass. “So yellow.”

“Of course it's yellow, Pete, it's grain.” Kraglin forced his voice flat. “Look for the compound.”


“Good eyes,” Yondu grunted.

The ship swerved back into cloud cover, then dropped on a mountain ridge. Yondu jerked a thumb towards the exit, and the Ravagers pooled out. Peter had trouble unlatching his safety harness; Lunis punched the buckle and it came undone.

“Gotta be strong with it.” Lunis gave Peter a saw-toothed grin. “Ready for this, huh? You sure?”

“Of course I'm sure.” Peter clambered out and stood at attention next to the rest of the Ravagers. “I can do this.”

“Alright, listen up.” Yondu snapped a power pack into a heavy Jovian shotblaster. “Every son-of-a-bitch in this compound is a goddamn poacher, so don't think twice about puttin' bolts between their eyes. Nova Corps ain't gonna give a damn.”

Peter raised his hand and waved it.

“What,” Yondu growled.

“If there are Nova Corps environmental protection satellites up there,” he asked, “why are there still poachers down here?”

“Because it ain't that goddamn hard to stealth by 'em, Pete.” Kraglin exhaled. “If we can do it, they can do it.”

“And the Nova Corps doesn't know?”

“Hide the compound. Stealth the exports. Leave if the Corps show up.” Lunis shrugged. “Easy enough. Any idiot can poach.”

“Oh.” Peter lowered his hand. “Okay, I'm good..”

“As I was sayin',” Yondu continued, “Nova Corps ain't gonna give a damn if you blast these fuckers. That said, if Dakuta dies, that signet ring ain't worth much more than the metal we'd get recasting it. Do not, I repeat, do not shoot Dakuta.”

“Do not shoot Dakuta,” the Ravagers repeated.

“Which one's Dakuta,” Peter piped up.

Kraglin and Yondu sighed simultaneously.
“Big guy. Dark hair, tan skin.” Lunis cleared his throat. “Mission specs. Did you look?”

“What mission specs.” Peter asked.

Kraglin looked like Peter was literally stabbing him in the side. Yondu just tossed Peter a datapad; it held all the details of the job, including a map of the compound and a picture of Udamai Dakuta.

“Oh.” Peter gave a thumbs-up. “I'm good!”

“Dakuta never takes the ring off, so we're gonna have to pin him down and knock him out. Non-lethal force, Drazkar. Non-lethal. We need him down,” Yondu clarified, “but we also need to tie him up so he can't get to a terminal and move that money. We enter in through the southwest entrance and shut down the exits. We pin ’em in, and we move nice and slow through the whole damn compound until we nail that fucker. Understood?”

“Aye, captain,” the Ravagers answered.

“Good.” Yondu's boots crunched on gravel as he headed towards the large steel door. “Let's go get 'em, boys.”

Excited whoops pealed off the mountain tops as the Ravagers swarmed the sides. The only guard was an automated turret.

“Kraglin,” Yondu said.

“Already on it, cap'n.” Kraglin pulled out some tech from his jacket pocket, twisted a few wires together, and handed it to Lunis. “Have fun.”

Lunis cracked a needle-toothed grin, then seemed to disappear. Peter's eyes widened.

“Modular refraction field,” Yondu grunted, “standard-issue.”

“Can I have one,” Peter breathed.

“No,” Kraglin snapped.

“Give the kid a field, Kraglin.” Yondu watched Lunis' footprints move towards the access panel. “I ain't got time to listen to him whine.”

Kraglin thrust a thick metal band at Peter. Peter buckled it to his wrist, fiddling with it gently.

“Hurry up, Lunis.” Drazkar bared his canine teeth as the access panel swung open, seemingly on its own. “He's only got sixty seconds.”

“He's a fast little fucker,” Brahl said, “he'll be fine.”

The wires of the access panel lifted, hovering in the air. There were masses of them, in every color and pattern.

“Cut the green one,” Drazkar hissed.

“No.” Yondu squinted. “Red one, black stripe.”

“It'll be faster to just disable the turret. Cut the white one,” Kraglin suggested.

A series of snapping sounds filled the air as the wires sliced in half. The refraction field ended, and
Lunis was visible, standing with a knife in his hand and an expression on his face of, oh well. The door opened and the turret died; inside, all the lights had gone out.

“Good enough,” Yondu decided.

“Yeah, but we can't close that door now.” Kraglin frowned. “So much for no escape for Dakuta.”

“Means they can't pin us down, either,” Yondu countered.

“Good point, cap'n.” Kraglin charged up his pistol. “On your orders.”

“Let's go,” Yondu said.

The Ravagers filed through the door in columns of two, keeping their eyes on the corners. Lunis came up behind them, smiling to himself as he stowed away his knife. Peter hung behind; Lunis almost tripped over him.

“What's with you,” Lunis asked.

“I forgot to bring a gun,” Peter whispered.

“Oh. Hey, no big deal.” Lunis drew a small, black-handled knife from his belt and handed it to Peter. “Here. Don't run with it.”

Peter took the knife gratefully and followed the Ravagers. They came to a fork in the hallway; Yondu gestured to each side. Wordlessly, the Ravager lines peeled off down separate hallways. Lunis followed Kraglin. Peter hurried after Lunis, keeping himself as small and unnoticeable as possible. They paced down several hallways when suddenly Kraglin froze.

“Somebody's comin'.” He smacked a door panel. “In here.”

Lunis and Peter dodged into the storage room. Peter looked around at the metal crates and cages.

“Weird,” he said.


“Hide,” Peter suggested.

“We go up,” Kraglin ordered, “through the vents. Come on, it'll be better'n skulkin' around hallways all day.”

Kraglin whipped out his omnitool and unscrewed the vent on the wall. As the metal grate fell, Peter and Lunis caught it and lowered it to the ground soundlessly.

“And we're supposed to go through that,” Peter asked, eyeing the height of the vent.


The Kallusian disappeared as quickly as if he'd been swallowed. Kraglin hoisted himself up, shimmied his chest into the vent, and started to crawl. Peter looked up at the vent and took a deep breath. He jumped, fell short, and jumped again. Each time, his fingers grazed the bottom of the vent.

“Grab a goddamn ladder,” Kraglin hissed from the vent.
Peter looked around. There was a large metal barrel in the corner; Peter dragged it under the vent. The metal shrieked against the smooth floor.

“Quietly,” Kraglin and Lunis snarled.

“Sorry!” Peter huffed, then crawled on top of the barrel. He managed to tug himself up and into the vent, then looked up at the two Ravagers. “See? I can do it?”

“The fuck was that noise,” a deep voice asked.

Kraglin and Lunis grabbed Peter by the wrists and hoisted his legs out of sight just as two Eridani came into the storage room.

“Sounded like something was moving in here,” another male voice said, “did you hear?”

“Yeah,” the deep voice said, “probably something in the pipes again. Did you hear about Jzio and that big snake thing?”

“The one in the toilet? Yeah.”

“Better not be one of those in here,” the deep voice chuckled.

“Well, look around. Might be something in here,” the other male voice said.

The Ravagers held their breath as the Eridani searched the storage room. After a moment, the deep-voiced man scoffed.

“Something just fell over. If there was anything in here,” he decided, “it's gone now.”

The Ravagers waited until the door had shut behind again before exhaling.

“That was close,” Peter said.

“That was why we need you to be quiet. Come on,” Kraglin said, “let's go. These vents are industrial; four times wider than the ones on the Eclector. We've got plenty of room to stick together with.”

The Ravagers crawled through the vent. They took a left, at Kraglin's directive, and faced a narrower area.

“This'll be residential,” Kraglin decided, “where Dakuta's liable to be. One at a time, then.”

Lunis went first, crawling through the narrow vent. His knees came in contact with a grate.

“Grate here,” he warned.

“Air conditioning.” Kraglin shrugged. “Drops down when the AC's on, moves the air back through the residential section.”

“It's thin.” Lunis made it to the other side. “Watch it.”

“Alright. I'm heavier than Pete,” Kraglin said, “so I'll go next. If it's gonna give way, it'll give way under me.”

The thin grate didn't bend when Kraglin tested his weight on it, so when he crossed to the other side, he waved at Peter to follow. Peter crawled across the grate slowly, his thin fingers curling through
the crossed metal bars. A whirring sound came from behind him.

“Shit,” Kraglin cursed, “somebody turned on the AC! Come on, Pete!”

Peter crawled forwards. Kraglin grabbed, but the grate slammed down at a sharp ninety-degree angle. The Terran screamed as he went down; Kraglin's fist closed where Peter's jacket had been a half-second earlier. Kraglin cursed and looked down.

“You okay,” he called.

Below the air conditioning grate was a long, dark tunnel.

“Fuck,” Kraglin breathed.

Suddenly, the grate moved back into view. Peter was hanging at the bottom, gripping onto the grate for dear life.

“Help!” His green eyes were saucer plates. “Help help help!”

“Is there a ledge you can swing onto,” Kraglin asked.

Peter looked over his right shoulder. There was a narrow passage that ended with a heavy metal grate. Peter reached back for it; his hand could touch the other vent.

“I can get over here,” he said.

“Do it. Best to be on flat ground,” Kraglin ordered, “and then we can figure out a way to get you up.”

“Okay,” Peter said.

The boy put his foot on the vent wall and stretched his legs, moving most of his arm into the vent. He jumped at the same time he let go, catapulting himself into the vent. Pain shocked through his elbow as he landed.

“Rats,” he cursed.

“You okay,” Lunis called.

“I'm good.” Peter stuck a thumbs-up out of the vent. “Come get me, though. It's like, super dusty down here.”

Kraglin and Lunis shoved themselves out of the vent and into a rectangular hallway. The walls were dark wood; large paintings of Udamai Dakuta with various kills hung imposingly between animal horn sconces.

“Guy's kinda obsessed, ain't he,” Kraglin mused.

“Kraglin!” Peter waved from a small vent by the floor. “Down here.”

“Pete.” Kraglin dropped to his knees on the dark red carpet. “You alright?”

“It's okay,” Peter said through the vent, “I'm okay.”

Kraglin covered his relief with rage. He reached through the vent bars, trying to grab the boy.
“You get your skinny Terran ass over here,” he snarled, “or I'll have Lunis dice and fry you.”

“This vent doesn't open on this side.” Peter examined the corners. “Are there screws on your side?”

Kraglin traced his fingers around the panel, looking for a tell-tale bump or circle, anything to mark a screw or adhesive. Instead, he found thick melted metal all the way around.

“Shit,” he said, “it's welded on.”

“Can you get it off,” Peter asked.

Kraglin pulled his omnitool and stared at the vent.

“I can,” he said slowly, “but it'd be loud.”

“They would hear.” Lunis shook his head. “We'd get caught.”

“It's okay. I'll go back through the vents to where we came in,” Peter suggested, “and wait in the ship. I can get it going so when you guys need to escape, you don't have to wait for the ship.”

For the briefest moment, Kraglin hesitated.

“Fine,” he said, “but stay low and quiet, you hear?”

“Aye, first mate.” Peter grinned at him, then went crawling back through the vents. “How hard can it be?”

“How hard can it be,” Yondu yelled, “to keep track of one goddamn kid?”

“I couldn't take off the vent panel without givin' away our position. It was either Peter or the job, and he had a plan for getting back.” Kraglin kept his expression and voice level. “He'll meet us at the ship; it'll be runnin' and ready for us.”

It had taken Kraglin less than fifteen minutes to find the cap'n. When he'd shown up without Peter, he got exactly the reaction he expected; violet-faced rage.

“If that little fucker gets hurt,” Yondu snarled.

“It wasn't my goddamn idea to bring him,” Kraglin snapped back.

Yondu inhaled, turning purple. Kraglin kept his chin up, shoulders back. It was not his goddamn fault, he told himself, not by a long shot. Ain't my fault, ain't my problem. He shoved thoughts of Ms. Q aside. If something did happen to Peter, which Kraglin was confident wouldn't happen, it would still be the captain's fault, not Kraglin's.

“We get this job done fast, you hear?” Yondu grabbed Kraglin by the shoulder and shoved him towards the door. “No more goddamn slip-ups.”

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin readjusted his jacket, trying his best not to lose his temper. “Where d'you wanna go?”

“Dakuta's movin' around in the residential area. We cut that off from the rest of the compound by accessin' the security port in the ground hanger. We move back into the residential area, we find him, we pin him, we get the ring, and then we get the hell out of here,” Yondu growled.
Kraglin paced after Yondu; his heartbeat was in his ears. The cap'n brought the kid, Peter had chosen to go off on his own, and somehow, Kraglin cursed, somehow this was all still his fault.

“Never should have brought the kid,” Brahl muttered next to him, echoing Kraglin's thoughts.

“Cap'n wants him on the job, cap'n gets him on the job.” Kraglin sighed. “Orders are orders, Brahl.”

“Doesn't make 'em right,” Brahl countered.

“What, all of a sudden you're worried about Pete?” Kraglin snorted. “You babysit him next time, how about that?”

Brahl's face of disgust told Kraglin all he needed to know. Brahl dropped back; Lunis fell into step with Kraglin.

“Hey,” Lunis said, “bet I can cheer you up.”

“Yeah?”

“Kid has a knife.” Lunis showed Kraglin the empty slot where his shiv used to be. “That's good. Armed is dangerous.”

“Yeah, Lunis. Only thing better than Pete runnin' around unsupervised is Pete runnin' around unsupervised with a knife.”

The sarcasm seemed to go right over Lunis' head; the Kallusian grinned happily. Kraglin couldn't help but chuckle. He punched Lunis lightly in the shoulder.

“Good on you, armin' the kid,” he said.

“No worries.” Lunis patted his belt. “More room. New knife now, yeah?”

“Might as well. If you've got the space to upgrade,” Kraglin advised, “do it.”

“Are you two gonna keep hashin' the shit like a pair of old women,” Yondu snarled, “or can you keep your traps shut for a minute?”

Kraglin and Lunis' mouths snapped shut. Lunis dropped back, leaving Kraglin to his dark thoughts. The cap'n was usually pretty damn relaxed on a job, but once he lost track of that kid, oh boy – Kraglin didn't think he'd ever seen Yondu so agitated on a job before. Guaranteed he wouldn't be this bent out of shape if one of us went missing, Kraglin thought savagely.

Peter tested every vent until he found one that would open. He crawled out into some kind of office. What could be seen of the walls was golden yellow; one of the walls was solid arched windows, two had large dark wood double doors, and the rest was coated with knives, guns, stretched animal hides, antlers, and stuffed animal heads. A large dark wood table stood in the center of the room, partially covered by a bleached animal hide. One of the wood doors opened; Peter rolled under the table just as someone entered the room.

“Yes, I did. Because it's hot in here, that's why.” Glossy black shoes moved in front of the table. “Let me tell you something, Horadus; these are animals of the plains. They are used to sweltering heats. I am not. If anything, I've rather made this more comfortable for them.”

Peter tilted his head out slightly and looked up. He had seen those thin lips and sharp eyes on the
“No, I'm not going to turn it off. Just give them water. I did not fly fifty bloody parsecs to be told I can't shoot something unless it's been properly hydrated. You're poachers, man – who cares what condition the animal is in as long as the pelt is still good?” Dakuta stepped to the bar and poured himself a drink. “Trust me; you'll have so much cow meat to worry about that you shan't even remember we had this conversation. Yes, yes, I know. Of course, that was the deal; you get the cows, I get the bull.”

Rows of rings glittered on Dakuta's hands. Peter searched; the silver ring he'd seen as a hologram on the bridge was shoved over Dakuta's right pinky finger. Peter's eyes locked onto it. He had to get that ring.

“Work it out, Horadus; if I could solve all these problems myself, I wouldn’t pay you.” Dakuta turned around; Peter darted back under the table. “Ivalla's on her way up. Don't bother me.”

Dakuta took off his comm unit and crossed to the table Peter was hiding under. There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Dakuta said.

A large-hipped, big-breasted woman came sauntering into the room. She had a fur wrapped around her neck of a deep plum color; her dress was white and skin-tight. White heels clicked on the ground as she stepped to the table.

“Mr. Dakuta,” she said.

“Ivalla Winthrop.” Udamai stepped closer; Peter could see their shoes, white and black, nearly toe-to-toe. “You're wearing the fur I got for you.”

“It matched the garnets you bought last night.” The tip of Ivalla's heel lifted Udamai's pant leg. “I haven't properly thanked you for your generosity, Mr. Dakuta.”

“You'll find I can be a very generous man, Ivalla. Come,” Dakuta chuckled, “let me show you my latest hunt.”

The two crossed away from the table. Peter leaned to the side; he could see them look out the window.

“Bostaur,” Dakuta explained, “the golden beasts of the plains. The horns alone are worth thousands.”

“Oh, how ghastly.” Ivalla drew her hands back from the window. “Such beasts, Udamai.”

“Yes, but the pelts are as soft as velvet and as hard as woven steel.” Dakuta stepped behind Ivalla and rubbed his hands along her hips. “The cows follow the bull, you see, so if you capture the bull, you get the cows.”

“You are a clever one,” Ivalla admired.

“Nonsense, darling, I'm only relying on my savage, beast-hunting instincts. My savage,” Dakuta purred, “base instincts.”

“Mr. Dakuta.” Ivalla turned around and pushed on the poacher's chest playfully. “I'm beginning to think your motives for bringing me here were less than business-related.”
“They were,” he countered, “until you selected my rifle of choice last night.”

“Oh, I couldn't keep my hands off it.” Ivalla slipped her willowy arms around Dakuta's neck. “Will you take me out for target practice later? I have a feeling a man like you never misses a mark.”

“Never,” Dakuta swore.

Peter cringed as the two adults started sucking face. Peter had no idea why this woman was so interested in rifles and shooting ranges, but he didn't have time for this. He needed to get that ring off, but Peter had no idea how he was going to get that done. He could threaten the nice lady with the knife, but with all the guns and knives on the wall, Peter didn't fancy his chances against Dakuta. He stayed low, and waited.

“You know,” Dakuta said, finally breaking his mouth off Ivalla, “I had something made for you. A new dress.”

“Oh, Udamai, you are generous.” Ivalla kept pressing her open mouth to the man's neck. “What is it? Medugor snakeskin?”

“Winter wilbit fur,” he answered, “caught from Halton-2.”

“Wilbit fur?” Ivalla's eyes widened. “But they're impossible to catch; they teleport!”

“Nothing is impossible for Udamai Dakuta.” He pushed her hips towards the two double doors. “It's waiting for you on the bed.”

The woman opened the double doors and let out a cry of delight. She turned the corner and disappeared. Peter kept his eyes on the ring. He was still brainstorming how to steal it when Ivalla posed in the doorway.

“How does it fit,” she purred.

It was definitely too small, Peter decided. The white fur barely covered her rear end, and the top was a huge ring of fluff.

“Like something out of a man's wildest dreams,” Dakuta answered.

“Wild, hm?” Ivanka bent her finger. “Come show me your aim with that rifle.”

“In a minute, my sweet.” Dakuta crossed to the table Peter was hiding under. “Let me finish my drink. A man of my tastes finds it difficult to lose his societal inhibitions, even in the face of such base, seductive power.”

Ivalla giggled and disappeared. Peter could hear Dakuta draining his glass.

“Udamai,” Ivalla cried from the other room, “are you going to leave me like this all day?”

“My sweet, I haven't even loaded my rifle,” Dakuta chuckled.

“You have hands. Use them.”

“As you command, temptress.”

Dakuta began slipping off his rings and setting them in a seashell bowl. Peter waited until he could see Dakuta's right pinky finger; it was bare. He'd taken the ring off; this was Peter's big chance. Dakuta crossed to the double doors and held them open with both hands.
“You know, Ivalla,” he chuckled, “I think that rifle will be ready sooner than expected.”

Dakuta closed the doors. Peter didn't care if that guy was going to load fifty rifles, and he sure as heck didn't want to know why people would have a shooting range in their bedroom, or why she had to wear such ugly furs to shoot in. Adults were weird, Peter decided. He darted out from the table and dug through the seashell bowl. Peter plucked out the silver ring, then searched for something to tie around it. One of the pelts adorning the wall had long, thin strips of leather hanging off the bottom; Peter took Lunis' knife and cut one off. He slipped the ring on the cord and tied it around his neck, then tucked it in his shirt.

“Take that, Kraglin,” he muttered, “I told you I could do it.”

Peter went to the main door and cracked it open. Two Eridani guards stood outside. Peter closed the door and backed away from it. No going out that way, he decided. The windows were locked shut, probably to protect Dakuta's extensive collection. Peter had no choice but to crawl back into the vent and hope he could climb up the grate.

The grate still hung. Peter reached out for it, but couldn't get close enough. He leaned out; his fingertips brushed the bottom rung. With difficulty, he managed to grip it. He pulled himself out of the vent, but when his full body weight yanked him down, his grip dissipated. Peter fell.

Peter screamed. The vent curved slowly; Peter found himself rocketing down the vent on his back. When the curve flattened out, Peter could see a square of golden light at the end. Still screaming, Peter shot out of the vent and landed in an enormous pile of grain. He slid down it, stumbled to his feet, and brushed grain off his clothes as he looked around. He had landed in some kind of cage; three walls of steel and a huge barred door. Lying in the corner was an animal.

Peter had never seen anything quite like it before. It had the hooves and horns of a longhorn bull, but the tail and mane of a male lion. Golden-brown fur covered its body, with the exception of the thick black mane that encircled its muscled neck. It had a beak like a triceratops; ivory-white tipped with black, the same as the horns. The heavy black hooves had horseshoes tacked into them. Peter stared at it; this was the kind of thing he'd never see on Earth. The animal sniffed at him, then snorted; the air from its nose blew Peter's hair back.

“Whoa,” he said.

The beast turned its head to the side, eying Peter. He froze in place. Slowly, the animal turned in a few circles and laid its head down; apparently, Peter thought, kids didn't justify a threat to this thing.

“You're the biggest four-legged thing I've ever seen,” he told it.

The animal yawned, showing flattened teeth.

“You eat plants, huh? Yeah,” Peter said, “my mom makes me eat those, too.”

A thick metal band gripped the animal's back leg. Chain linked the shackle to a large metal strut in the wall. Peter reached up and grabbed the chain; each link was so thick that he could barely wrap his hand around it. Peter frowned.

“Why do they have you chained up,” he wondered.

The animal lifted its head in interest as Peter touched the chain. It took the chain in its bony beak and gave it a hopeful tug. When nothing happen, it groaned and spat the chain out.

“You want to be free, huh? Can't say I blame you.” Peter put his hands in his pockets, looking
around the cage. “This looks totally boring.”

The front of the cage held a sturdy barred door. Peter lifted the lock; a code lock, he realized, standard-issue. All Peter had to do was tilt the lock perpendicular to the light; he could see the fingerprints on the code. Three buttons had smudges on them, and the code lock needed four keys. Peter tapped experimentally; on the third try, the lock disengaged.

“Seriously, a child could do this.” Peter laughed at his own joke, pocketing the code lock. “Guess you're coming with me.”

The animal behind him moaned like a fog horn.

“What,” Peter asked, “you want to come with me, too?”

Sad, cow-like eyes slid from the chain to the door. Peter looked at the shackle on the beast's leg; it had a code lock as well.

“You know, Kraglin's taught me a little about code locks. If you let me closer,” Peter persuaded, “I could probably get that off of you.”

The animal opened its beak in a yawn. Keeping his eyes on its horns, Peter edged closer. The animal snorted a few times, but did nothing else as Peter approached. He fell to his knees and examined the code lock.

“Ten units says they used the same code twice,” Peter said.

He tapped it in; the shackle opened.

“You owe me ten units,” he said to the animal.

The beast pulled its hoof out of the shackle, then shook it. Slowly, the animal got to its feet and honked happily. It pranced about, throwing its thick, gold-furred body into the walls.

“Whoa, whoa!” Peter had to back into the corner to avoid the trampling hooves. “Calm down, buddy!”

The animal tossed its head in triumph, then rammed its head into the door impatiently.

“Buddy,” Peter decided, “you're gonna be Buddy.”

Buddy's response was another headbutt. Peter edged towards the door and swung it inwards. No sooner had the door swung open than Buddy charged out headfirst. Peter laughed, watching the beast trample and kick in the open air.

“Feels good to stretch your legs, doesn't it? I get that way on long ship rides,” Peter said.

Buddy's back legs shot out, striking the cage; the resulting clang made Peter cover his ears and cringe. He ran out, letting Buddy attack the bars.

“You keep up that racket,” he yelled, “and they're gonna come back!”

Buddy turned towards Peter and tossed his mane. His left hoof scraped the ground, and he lowered his horns.

“Whoa, whoa whoa.” Peter held up his hands, a bolt of panic shooting through his body. “Don't even think about it, Buddy!”
The animal charged. Peter screamed and ran. His feet lost contact with the ground; he stared in disbelief as Buddy picked him up by the back of his jacket, holding him with his beak. The animal tossed Peter onto its back. The black mane was thick and coarse, like horse hair; Peter wound his hands into it, finding his footing. Buddy stood still while Peter found his seating.

“This is the coolest thing I've ever done,” he breathed.

Just like that, they were off. Buddy's hooves clattered against the hard metal floor as they went careening out of the cargo area. A few Eridani guards came running out with electric prongs in their hands; Buddy leaned his head down, clotheslining them with his horn. The Eridani whacked against the ceiling before slamming onto the floor.

“Yeehaw,” Peter cheered.

The hallway ended in a ninety-degree turn. Buddy slid sideways, his hooves grasping for traction. Peter had to swing his leg out of the way to avoid being crushed between Buddy's flank and the wall. Buddy got to his feet, shook his main, and began a pleasant trot.

“Good idea. Speed seems dangerous right now,” Peter said.

“There!” An Eridani guard-captain came running down a stairwell with a gun in his hands. “The bull bostaur, it's loose!”

“Suck a dick,” Peter yelled.

The Eridani dropped his gun and ran away screaming, “And it learned to talk!”

“Oh. Wow.” Peter and Buddy watched the guard-captain bolt up the stairs. “Guess he didn't see me. That's cool, that's cool.”

Buddy sniffed the gun, then snorted. Peter let go of the mane, dropped to the ground, and grabbed it.

“Electro-magrifle. It's loaded, at least.” Peter aimed down the sights. “Is this what they were using on you? Jerkbags.”

Buddy lowered his horns, emanating a loud, rapid honking. Peter went to touch him again, but Buddy snapped and huffed.

“Oh, you don't like the gun. Hey, no problem.” Peter put it down and kicked it against the wall.

“What you say goes, pal.”

Buddy snorted and shook his mane. Peter climbed back up onto the bostaur, his nose filled with the straw-sweat smell of its mane. He managed to seat himself again after a few moments; Buddy pawed the ground impatiently.

“I'm done, I'm done.” Peter wound his hands in the mane again. “Let's go, Buddy.”

“Let's go, boys.” Yondu gestured down the hall. “Keep it down.”

The Ravagers followed him in lines of two, stepping over the Eridani corpses.

“These Eridani can't shoot for shit,” Brahl chuckled.
“Shut up.” Yondu held up a hand. “You hear that?”

The Ravagers paused. A low rumbling sound grew from the west end of the hallway. Yondu's eyebrows slid together; he peered down into the hall. The rumbling grew into a mountainous thunder.

“Cover,” Yondu yelled, “cover!”

The Ravagers dived behind the steel wall. The floor shook with the pounding of hooves as a herd of bostaur cows shot by at high speed, led by a black-maned bull that pranced and tossed his head. Something red flashed within the sea of equine bodies. It was the boy. He had his arms wound in the bull's mane and a wild and reckless grin splashed across his face.

“Yeehaw,” the boy laughed.

Yondu's bellowed curses were drowned out by the thrum of the herd. The bull made a wide turn, then angled back towards the export door.

“Open the door,” the boy called, “hurry!”

Yondu tore up the stairwell, crashing into the railing. He seized the wheel and began to crank it; within seconds, Kraglin was turning it with him.

“Is this a bad time to remind you I thought bringin' Peter was a bad idea,” Kraglin yelled.

“Shut up and crank,” Yondu spat.

Steel shrieked against steel as the massive doors slid open. Sunlight and the scent of grain broke through the musty air. The bull let out a triumphant keening, and the herd shot through the door like water through a crack. Yondu hurried down the stairwell. The cows pressed through the door, their wide bodies occasionally glancing off the steel. The Ravagers were left staring out the open doors at a heavily-trampled grain field, watching the bostaur herd curve and slide across the plain in a thundering, victorious freedom. After a few minutes, the bull bostaur broke from the herd. It came galloping off the plain, stopping only at the door. It hooked its head behind its neck, took the boy in its beak, and dropped him in front of Yondu. The bull snorted, tossed his mane once or twice, and then rejoined the herd.

“Bye, Buddy!” Peter waved as the bostaur faded into the horizon. “Thanks for the ride!”

Again, Peter's feet lost contact with the ground. Yondu held him up by the scruff of his shirt, baring his teeth. There was a vein jumping in his temple, and a deep violet color was blooming across his face.

“Boy,” he snarled.

“Okay, but before you get mad?” Peter pulled the leather cord out of his shirt and dangled the signet ring in front of Yondu's eyes. “I got it.”

Yondu stared at the ring. Peter's heartbeat rang in his ears. Then, like the breaking of sunlight through the midst of a storm, Yondu started to laugh. He ripped the ring off the cord like breaking thread, then put Peter back on his feet.

“I told ’em you were goddamn useful.” Cackling, Yondu stuffed the ring in his pocket. “Pack it in, boys; we got what we need.”
Whooping with delight, the Ravagers gripped, shoved, and punched Peter in the only expressions of congratulations that they knew. To avoid such commendations, Peter ducked under their arms and dropped back behind Yondu. Kraglin came up next to him; the first mate's face was turning a dark blue.

“How the hell,” he snarled.

“Guess I'm better than you thought I was,” Peter said coolly.

Kraglin glared at him.

“Don't get cocky,” he muttered.

Peter stuck his tongue out at the Xandarain, who scowled and crossed to walk next to the captain. Yondu was examining the signet ring with a grin on his face.

“Told you bringin' the boy was a good idea,” he said.

“Aye, cap'n.” Kraglin knew better than to argue. “You was right.”

In his jacket pockets, Kraglin's hands curled into fists.
The Parent-Teacher Conference

Chapter Summary

After Peter gets himself in a pickle, Yondu is brought in to smooth the situation over. Meanwhile, Kraglin is sent to ward Meredith away from the meeting.

(You asked, I answered; Yondu Goes to School. :P Man, this chapter took forever!)

Yondu's life had finally started cruising the way he wanted it to. His family had stopped pressing him. Mery was still keeping him updated on her life and sending him little messages like, *Fly safe!* that made his mouth twist up at the sentiment of it all. Kraglin had turned out to be the best damn decision Yondu ever made; the kid was a natural first mate, as commanding and loyal as they came. He and Yondu had their spats, mostly over the boy, but Kraglin was a damn good first-mate. Even Stakar had mentioned, in passing but still there, that Kraglin was likely to shape up into a fine captain under Yondu's command. Yeah, Yondu reckoned as he leaned back in his pilot's chair, he figured now was about the time something bullshit would happen.

The comm screen lit up.

“Unidentified caller, captain,” Gef called.

“Location?”

“Dakkam.”

“Patch it through,” Yondu snapped.

For a moment, the screen was simply static. Slowly, it faded to reveal Peter Quill. Yondu swore loudly.

“You little spitpiss,” he snarled, “where the hell are you? Why ain't you with your momma?”

“Shh, shh!” Peter grabbed the sides of the comm screen. “I had to hack the school's comm link to get this out to you, okay? Keep it down.”

“You hacked it, huh?” Kraglin gave Peter a thumbs-up and a grin. “Nice goin', Pete.”

“Yeah, I'm amazing, we've covered that already. This is serious,” Peter hissed, “I need your help.”

“What'd you do this time,” Yondu grunted.

Peter paled.

“I got caught,” he said.

“Doin' what,” Kraglin asked.

“Disassembling school property,” Peter said.

“That ain't too bad,” Kraglin said.
“And then reassembling it into firearms and trying to sell it on the street. Also,” Peter said quickly, “I might have stunned the janitor.”

Kraglin and Gef busted out laughing. Yondu rubbed his chin.

“Not bad, boy, but you should know better than t'pawn shit like that. Lots of rats on the street,” Yondu advised, “so always have your buyer laid out before you pull the job.”

“That's great advice but not exactly the help I need here. The principal wants to have a parent-teacher conference. I can't bring mom,” Peter said, “but if I don't bring somebody, he's going to suspend me.”

“Just a bitty suspension,” Kraglin reasoned.

“Not to mom. She'll flip out. She'll have to hire Ellyn to watch me for a month, or worse,” Peter groaned, “she'll take time off work and then she'll be stressed and pissed-off.”

“You got yourself into this jam, boy; get yourself out.” Yondu pulled a metal toothpick out of the foam of his seat and began picking his teeth with it. “I ain't got a solution for you.”

“I'm calling you because you are the solution, doofus.” Peter's voice had the same snap as Meredith's. “I need an adult to show up and pretend to be my dad.”

Yondu almost choked on his toothpick; he nearly gagged as he pulled it off the back of his tongue.

“You're big and intimidating,” Peter reasoned, “so if you go in there, they'll roll over easy. No suspension, no mom, no problems.”

Kraglin covered his forehead with his hand; a very Meredith action, but one he'd assimilated.

“Pete,” he said calmly, “there ain't no way in hell that's gonna work.”

“Why not,” Peter challenged.

“First off, idjit, he's a goddamn Ravager cap'n. Somebody's gonna recognize him, and the cap'n ain't the type who's exactly gonna de-escalate that situation.” Kraglin gestured with his free hand. “Secondly, ain't nobody gonna believe Yondu's your pop because he's blue and you ain't. And thirdly, Pete, because Ms. Q would literally fire lasers out of 'er eyes and kill us both stone-dead.”

“Kraglin's got a point.” Yondu stuck his toothpick back into his seat with more violence than normal. “Nobody's gonna believe that you're my blood.”

“So we're gonna need Kraglin to sell the deal. Blue blood, right? If they don't know anything about Centaurians, it might be enough to convince the principal. We roll into the school,” Peter planned, ignoring Kraglin's expression of horror, “we tell them you're my dad and Kraglin's my older brother. They buy that, they'll buy anything.”

“And when it don't work?” Kraglin's voice was rising in anger and volume. “Because there ain't a lot of people dumb enough to believe Centaurian-plus-Terran-equals-Terran, but I guarantee you that ain't nobody dumb enough to think Centaurian-plus-Terran-equals-Xandarian, Pete.”

“He's got a point,” Yondu said.
Kraglin's shoulders sagged in relief; Peter looked like he was about to cry.

“We'll have to get some damn good-lookin' adoption papers instead,” Yondu decided.

Kraglin jumped; his legs slipped off the console and slammed to the ground.

“You're fuckin' goddamn kiddin' me,” he snarled.

Yondu's eyes slid onto him. Kraglin, blue-faced, sank back into the co-pilot's chair. Sulking wasn't usually his style, but this was goddamn ridiculous. If Ms. Q was here, she'd agree.

“Why the hell can't we just kill the goddamn principal,” he snapped.

“Too messy. Might be connected back to Quill,” Gef offered, “and that's the whole reason you're pulling this elaborate charade.”

Yondu grunted in affirmation. Peter laughed in relief.

“Good,” Peter said, “great. Awesome.”

“One more detail, boy.” Yondu leaned forwards. “How you gonna pay for this without your momma knowin’?”

“Shit.” Peter scowled. “Come on, Yondu; I'm calling you from a hacked school comm, for heck's sake. Can we talk about the money later?”

“Nope.” Yondu's finger strayed towards the comm link. “Sorry, boy.”

“Wait wait wait! I've got money, I've got money. Three hundred and seventeen units,” Peter shouted, “all mine! Mom doesn't know about it, I swear.”

Kraglin and Yondu's expressions hardened simultaneously. The matching cold venom in their eyes made Peter swallow.

“You been keepin' money from your momma,” Yondu snarled.

“Look, I keep a lot of things from mom. There's an Orloni racing run right behind the arcade; I get a bit from there,” Peter said, “and Ellyn gives me the money that mom gives her for babysitting.”

“She oughta charge a damn fortune to watch you, boy.” Yondu scowled. “The hell did you plan to do with that cash?”

“Use it to make more money, duh.” Peter rolled his eyes. “You think mom's going to make a billion units working as a waitress? We scrape by down here, Yondu. Mom's able to put away about a hundred units away a week, and if something happens to the sink or the fridge or something? Forget it. At this rate, she'll be a hundred-and-two before she can go home.”

“And what happens,” Kraglin snapped, “when your momma finds out you been keepin' this shit from her?”

“I wouldn't be hiding this from her if she wasn't so uptight about everything. I get it; we have to stay legit if we're going to make it to Terra. But news flash, mom; nobody's going to just drop a billion-unit tip while she's waitressing!” Peter gestured with his hand, an uncharacteristically unpleasant scowl on his face. “We made tons of money working with you guys, but no way is she going to go back there either.”
“Have you told Ms. Q that’s what you think,” Kraglin asked.

“Imagine trying to convince mom that I should be taking risks for money.” Peter rolled his eyes. “Not happening.”

“If your momma knew what you were doing,” Kraglin started.

“Who’s going to tell her? You? Wow, let me add to that conversation that you’ve been teaching me hacking by night. Yondu?” Peter gestured towards the captain. “Yondu wouldn’t tell her!”

“I might.” Yondu rolled his enormous shoulders. “Might just let her roast your ass for this one, boy.”

“Reminder: I will get suspended. That means we go from making one hundred units a week to making zero units a week. Losing money, actually,” Peter said, “and extending the time that mom has to waste her life at that stupid restaurant.”

Yondu turned it over in his head.

“Three-hundred and seventeen units,” he said.

“It ain't worth getting screamed at by Ms. Q,” Kraglin muttered.

“Again,” Peter said, “who’s going to tell her?”

“I am.” Kraglin lifted his head, fixing Peter with his sharp gaze. “I gave your momma my word; no more secrets, no more keepin’ shit from her.”

“Unless Yondu orders you to keep your mouth shut,” Peter countered.

“If the cap’n says ‘don’t tell Ms. Q’, she’s supposed to be the first one t’know.” Kraglin pointedly didn't look at Yondu. “I gave ‘er my word.”

“You promised her what,” Yondu growled.

“It seemed like the right thing to do at the time,” Kraglin said coolly.

“So you're sayin’ if I pull this job with the boy, you'll tell Mery?” Yondu squinted. “That's what you're sayin’?”

“I'm sayin' this entire job sounds like bullshit,” Kraglin said, “and if I were Pete I'd get suspended and chuck that three-hundred-and-seventeen units at my momma, because then she wouldn't be losin' money and everythin' would be sunshine and ship fuel.”

Kraglin was blue-faced. Yondu rubbed his chin.

“You got a point,” he said.

“You're seriously going to just let me get suspended? I'm trying to help here.” Peter's slight Missouri accent intensified. “Great, just heckin' great.”

“It's your fault for botchin' the sale,” Kraglin said.

“Screw off,” Peter snapped.

“Watch it, boy.” Yondu's fingers tapped at his armrest. “What day is the meetin’?”
“Cap'n,” Kraglin began.

“Don't.” Yondu held up a hand, silencing Kraglin instantly. “What day, boy?”

“Next Monday,” Peter answered.

For a long moment, Yondu and Peter locked eyes.

“I'll be there,” Yondu said.

Yondu hit the comm button with his fist; Peter's mingled expression of joy and relief disappeared off the screen. In the stunned silence that followed, Yondu leaned back and picked at his teeth with a metal toothpick.

“Why the hell,” Kraglin thundered.

“It's m'fault.” Yondu flicked the toothpick up and down in his mouth. “I taught him this. This bullshit he pulled, this is my doin'. I gotta kick his ass for this one.”

“You – you ain't serious.” Kraglin's eyebrows knit together. “You can't seriously be goin' behind Ms. Q's back again.”

“Course not,” Yondu said, “I'm sendin' you down there to tell her personal-like.”

“Gee fuckin' wilikers, cap'n,” Kraglin said scathingly, “ain't that a happy lil' job.”

“I need you to go down there, Krags. Ain't nobody gonna be able to break it to her. If I do it, she'll scream at me. Boy does it, she'll tan his ass. But you?” Yondu pointed at Kraglin, tapping his finger in midair. “She'll listen to you. Trusts your judgment, like I do.”

Kraglin's expression faltered. He leaned back in the co-pilot's chair and propped his feet up on the console.

“Aye, cap'n.” He sighed. “Whatever you want to do, I'm for it.”

“Good,” Yondu turned his attentions to the Eclector. “Because I'm gonna need you on this one. If she busts in on this, it'll got to hell faster'n you can say, 'oh shit'.”

“How am I supposed to keep her from goin' Terran crazy and chargin' in there like a runaway bostaur?” Kraglin leaned his head back and exhaled. “She'd run right over me, cap'n.”

“Talk her down,” Yondu suggested, “keep her rational. You done it before; you can do it again.”

“Kinda like talkin' down a volcano, cap'n. Whatever it is you're gonna do with Pete, it'd better be fast is all I'm sayin',” Kraglin warned.

“It'll be fine.” Yondu shifted his shoulders. “I can handle this.”

“I can't fuckin' handle this,” Yondu breathed.

Clothes were hanging out of his drawers, tossed on the bed, and trodden on the floor. Yondu didn't own civilian wear, and he had no goddamn idea how to dress like a dad. The only father figure he'd
ever known was Stakar, and Yondu had a feeling that big gold arcs and navy blue Ravager leathers weren’t gonna cut it.

“Captain?” Oblo poked his head in. “Heard from Gef that the boy called. Everything okay?”

“Oblo! Thank the fuckin' stars. You've been a dad,” Yondu said, “you can do this shit, right?”

“Do what shit, captain?”

“How the fuck do civilians dress?”

“Depends on the civilian, captain.” Oblo stepped into the room, careful not to trod on the sleeping rolls or discarded clothes. “Is this undercover work?”

“Yeah, for the boy.” Yondu rubbed the back of his neck. “Fucker's in it deep, and it's my fault.”

“Right.” Oblo sighed. “What's he asked you to do?”

“It's a job. Boy's payin' me to pose as an authority figure to get him off his charges,” Yondu explained.

“And your authority figure is a civilian?”

“Yep.”

“What does this have to do with me having been a dad,” Oblo questioned.

“Are you gonna help or what,” Yondu snapped.

Oblo started searching through the clothes. It'd been months since Meredith had been aboard, so nothing was folded; Oblo tossed the clothes from drawer to drawer.

“Do you have a white button-down,” Oblo asked.

“What, am I goin' in a goddamn suit?”

“You want to look authoritative to a civilian? Wear a solid-color long-sleeve button-down.” Oblo picked up a pair of dark-colored flight pants. “These will do. Got a flight harness anywhere?”

“Yeah, why?”

“A white button-down, flight pants, and a harness is the standard look of an off-duty shuttle pilot.” Oblo handed the pants to Yondu. “That was what I wore to work when I was a civilian. Try that, see how it works for you.”

Yondu grunted and took the pants in his hand.

“This is some fuckin' bullshit,” he muttered.

“Whatever it is, the kid must be in it deep.” Oblo put his hands in his pockets. “What'd he do?”

“Dismantled government property and sold illegally manufactured weapons on the street,” Yondu said.

“Damn,” Oblo chuckled.

“Yeah, and I'm the son-of-a-bitch who taught it to him. Figure it's my job to get him out of it,”
Yondu said.

Oblo gave Yondu a long look.

“What,” Yondu asked.

“Nothing, captain.” Oblo gave a Ravager salute and headed for the door. “But if it's that bad, I'd tuck
your shirt in if I were you.”

The portal door shut behind Oblo. Yondu picked up the shirt and pants, one in each hand, and
exhaled.

“What the hell am I doing,” he grumbled.

It was a fair question. Here he was trying to dress like a fuck-forsaken civilian, flying half a quadrant
to show up at a school for the sake of the boy. The kid wasn't even in real danger. Still, Yondu
reminded himself, this was all his fault. He'd taught the boy everything he knew; Yondu shouldn't
have been surprised to hear Peter was putting those practices into action. Yondu tossed the clothes
onto the bed and began shoving everything back into the drawers. He'd go and fix the problem he'd
created, and hopefully Kraglin could keep Mery away long enough for Yondu to get away without
his head being jammed on a spike.

Yondu had never attended a formal school. He'd never been in a proper classroom or met a
government teacher, and as he examined the low-slung tan building Peter had sent him to, Yondu
was glad of it. With its heavy doors and soulless architecture, Yondu could have mistaken it as a
prison, save for the severe lack of security. He stepped through the doors and glanced in the glass
window to his left; there was no secretary at the door. Besides the faint hum of a vending machine,
Yondu couldn't hear a thing. It was scarily quiet, eerily clean, and practically void of security; Yondu
hated it immediately.

Yondu's footsteps clapped echoes down the hall as he searched for the room number Peter had given
him. He found the door; a low wooden bench was just outside it. Yondu inhaled; he could smell
Terran. When he opened the door, he found himself in a small white-washed office filled with
houseplants. A man with glasses and thinning black hair sat behind a wooden desk; across the desk
sat Peter Quill. He gave Yondu a hopeful grin.

“Boy,” Yondu thundered.

Peter Quill shrunk in like he'd been deflated.

“Mr. Quill,” the man with the glasses assumed.

Mr. Quill. Holy shit, they thought he was Mery's husband. Yondu swallowed; for the first time, a
slight anxiety built in him. If she knew he was doing this – she does know, he told himself firmly, so
get on with it.

“Yeah, that's me.” Yondu hoped he sounded braver than he felt. “Mery's husband.”

The words were oddly-shaped in his mouth, pressing against him in awkward ways. He let them fall
between him and the principal. Yondu shoved a stack of forged adoption papers in the man's hand; the principal scanned it, then smiled.

“It's nice to meet you, Mr. Quill.” The principal extended a hand; Yondu shook it. “I'm Iquar Pettrin. I'm the principal here.”

“Nice t'meet you,” Yondu lied.

“Have a seat?”

Yondu fit himself into the metal chair next to Peter. The boy didn't look up. Small dark spots on his pant legs told Yondu that the boy had been crying.

“What happened t' you,” he asked.

Peter sniffed.

“Mr. Quill,” Pettrin asked, “has your wife informed you of the purpose of this meeting today?”

My wife. Yondu had to process that. He's talking about Mery. He thinks you're hitched to Mery.

“Yeah,” he managed.

“Mr. Quill.” Mr. Pettrin leaned over the desk. “Do you remember how difficult school was for you?”

Images of cracking whips, bloody fists, and mouths open in soundless screams shot through Yondu's head.

“Wasn't great,” he said.

“Exactly. So many people have very poor, very bad experiences while at school. We try to provide a safe place for our students to learn,” Mr. Pettrin explained, “and creating weaponry from school devices indicates that Peter might not be interested in that.”

“Are you suggestin' my boy is gonna hurt people? Look,” Yondu countered, “he ain't the brightest star in the sky, I'll give you that, but he ain't violent. This lil' spitpiss wouldn't hurt a goddamn Orloni, trust me.”

“Mr. Quill,” Mr. Pettrin sighed, “he's clearly got a fascination with weaponry.”

“No shit. What kid his age ain't into breakin' shit and blowin' shit up? Hell,” Yondu chuckled, “if he didn't get into it, I'd think there was somethin' wrong with him. As it is, kinda smart of him, ain't it? Good self-defense instincts.”

The boy finally raised his head a little. Yondu put his arm around the boy's shoulders; if he was going to do this whole pretend-parenting thing, he reckoned he oughta look right doing it. Peter smiled up at him; the corner of Yondu's mouth turned up.

“It was stupid of 'im to do it at school,” Yondu allowed, “but he ain't violent. Trust me; I tried getting him to shoot people and he just wouldn't do it.”

Mr. Pettrin and Peter's eyes widened simultaneously. Peter elbowed Yondu in the ribs.

“Don't talk about that,” he urged.

“What? I told you to shoot somebody and you wouldn't do it.” With his free hand, Yondu picked at
his teeth. “Said your goddamn momma would flip 'er shit.”

“Are you saying you tried to get your child to murder someone,” Mr. Pettrin said, outraged.

“Wasn't murder. Self-defense,” Yondu clarified, “completely different.”

“So you put your son in situations where he would need to shoot people to defend himself.” Mr. Pettrin was slowly turning red. “That's what you're saying.”

“Yep,” Yondu said.

Mr. Pettrin's hand went to the stapler on the desk. His chest was pumping with breath, as if he'd like nothing better than to slam the stapler between Yondu's eyes. Yondu rolled his shoulders threateningly. *Come at me, little man.*

“We lived somewhere really dangerous before we came to Dakkam. He taught me to defend myself,” Peter blurted, “that's it. We lived in one of the outlying systems.”

Mr. Pettrin let go of the stapler. His eyebrows knit together as he leaned back in his seat.

“You're refugees,” he said.

“More or less.” Peter lowered his head again. “Where we come from, it's normal to do stuff like I did. I guess that's wrong here.”

“Yes, Peter, that's very wrong here.” Mr. Pettrin took a deep breath. “The way you lived earlier is regrettable, but you can't live that way now. Your parents worked very hard to bring you here, and you need to respect the sacrifices they made by respecting the law.”

Yondu snorted. Mr. Pettrin shot him a look, and Yondu turned the snort into a series of coughs. Mr. Pettrin took another deep, slow breath.

“So tell me Peter,” he asked, “what do you think would be an appropriate punishment?”

“Well, obviously I can't ever do this again, so expel me if I do.” Peter swung his legs slightly. “Maybe I put together all the things I took apart?”

“You're not a mechanic, Peter.”

“Yeah he is,” Yondu grunted.

“You're not our mechanic, Peter.” Mr. Pettrin closed his eyes. “I think you need a more severe, personal punishment.”

“If you hit my goddamn boy,” Yondu thundered, “I'll break that fuckin' desk over your skull.”

“What? No.” Mr. Pettrin looked affronted. “I'm not going to hit your child, Mr. Quill.”

“Damn right you're not.” Yondu crossed his arms. “I'll come over this desk faster 'n you can say, 'Ooops.'”

“When I say personal punishment,” Mr. Pettrin plowed on, “I mean a suspension, Peter.”

“How is not coming to school a punishment,” Yondu asked.

“He won't see his friends,” Mr. Pettrin explained.
“What, they ain't got legs?” Yondu chuckled. “Shit, what kinda institution is this? Your idea of punishment is kickin' him out temporary-like? What, so when he comes back and he's a week behind the other lil' spitpisses, he feels bad? You're puttin' him behind the other kids and that's somehow a good goddamn solution? Ain't that just gonna make it all worse?”

“It's policy,” Mr. Pettrin said.

“Then lemme let you in on a lil' secret. Your policy is shit,” Yondu said, “and you're a shithead for followin' it.”

Mr. Pettrin colored significantly. Peter curled up in his chair with his hands over his ears.

“I'm so expelled,” he breathed.

“Detention.” Mr. Pettrin's voice was clipped. “Detention. Four weeks. If I could give you more, Peter, I would.”

“Now see, that's a punishment. Lock him up in here, yeah, where he's gotta deal with his own bullshit.” Yondu nodded approvingly. “Give Mery a break from bustin' her ass raisin' him all the damn time.”

Mr. Pettrin's lower left eyelid was twitching. He cleared his throat, patted his stapler, and managed a tight smile.

“Think that's everything. Have a good day,” he said.

“See? Told you this would be easy. Come on, boy.” Yondu got to his feet and opened the door. “We'll wait outside for Kraglin's signal so's we can get you home.”

“Kraglin's here? Yeah, okay.” Peter hopped out of his chair and followed Yondu. “Bet mom was happy to see him.”

Peter waved at Mr. Pettrin as they left; Mr. Pettrin's eyelid was still twitching. Peter closed the door behind him and exhaled.

“That,” he moaned, “was a catastrophe.”

“You kiddin'? I thought that went great.” Yondu cracked a grin as they headed down the hall. “Detention ain't so bad. More time to finish that shit homework you keep getting. Your momma can work more without worryin' about where you are. Less pay for the babysitter, yeah? Hell, your momma's gonna be pleased as a pig in shit.”

“No she's not.” Peter put his head in his hands. “Because now she's got to know about the detention.”

“Lie,” Yondu suggested.

“Mr. Pettrin will insist on being there for detention, and I don't think he's going to let this slide as easily as we think.” Peter leaned against the wall and groaned. “She's gonna be so mad. We shouldn't have done this.”

“It's already done. No use worryin' about it now.” Yondu shrugged. “You want a pop, boy?”

“Yeah,” Peter said.

A vending machine hummed in the corner. Peter expected Yondu to flick open his interface, but
instead, Yondu hit a series of numbers on the dialpad; \textit{43213214321}. The cost display suddenly changed to $0.00$. Peter's eyes widened.

“You can hack these things,” he breathed.

“Boy, I can hack anything.” Yondu punched a button; a clear bottle filled with a bright pink fizzy drink fell to the bottom of the machine. “What do you want?”

“Can I get a Twist?”

“Green or blue?”

“Green.”

Yondu obligingly hit the button, grabbed the lime green can, and tossed it at Peter. The boy caught it with an expression of wonder.

“This is the most amazing thing I've ever seen,” he said.

“Gets better.” Yondu held out a hand. “Gimme your backpack, kid.”

Peter handed Yondu his backpack without question.

“So, boy.” Yondu unzipped the backpack. “What happens when somebody tries to buy somethin' and it don't go through the system?”

“They hit the refund button,” Peter said, “and they get an exchange chip. You enter the code on the chip, you get your money back.”

“Right.” Yondu shoved Peter's backpack over the return tube. “And how many of those things are in here?”

“I don't know,” Peter said.

“We're about to find out.” Yondu stood up and tapped the code from before; the cost returned to its normal exorbitant price. “Hold the bag still.”

Peter dropped to his knees and wrapped his hands around the return tube, firmly holding the bag to it. Yondu tapped in \textit{432112311}, then slammed down the return lever. Small round exchange chips came shooting out of the machine like bullets. Peter started to laugh; Yondu broke out into a wide grin.

“Keep it down,” he warned, “somebody's gonna hear.”

By the time the machine ran dry, Peter's face hurt from grinning.

“Come on, come on, zip it up.” Yondu chuckled. “Damn boy, you're supposed to be good at this kinda shit.”

Like lightning, Peter zipped up the bag and threw it over his shoulders; the exchange chips chinked together as he did.

“Let's get out of here before the Nova Corps comes down on our asses.” Yondu opened the door, ears still peaked for approaching footsteps. “Bring the sodas.”

Peter went jostling out of the school with a soda in each hand, a bright grin splashed across his face.
Yondu came next, tugging at his harness absentmindedly as he searched the scene for potential dangers.

Kraglin stood in front of the door to Meredith's apartment with his hands in his pockets. This was the only situation in a million years where he wouldn't want to see Ms. Q, but orders were orders. He swallowed down the sense of impending doom and knocked on the door. It opened immediately.

“Peter,” Meredith enthused.

“Sorry, Ms. Q.” Kraglin hung his head. “Just me.”

“Oh, Kraglin! It's great to see you, honey! I'm sorry, I thought you'd be Peter. His school transport is late,” Meredith explained.

“It ain't late.” Kraglin took a deep breath. “He just wasn't on it.”

Meredith paled.

“Did Yondu take him,” she asked.

“Reverse of that, Ms. Q.” Kraglin stepped into the house. “Peter borrowed the cap'n to get him out of a fix.”

“A fix? Peter is in trouble?” Meredith closed the front door. “What did he do? If Yondu is with Peter, what are you doing here?”

“I'm distractin' you,” Kragin said coldly, “because the cap'n got it into his goddamn head that it's his damn responsibility to get Peter out of his fix.”

“What fix,” Meredith stressed.

Kraglin pulled a long copper wire from his pocket and began wrapping it around his finger.

“Pete got caught doin' somethin' illegal at school,” he said, “and the cap'n wants to smooth it over without your involvement.”

“You're shittin' me,” she said.

Kraglin shook his head slowly, still fiddling with the copper wire.

“And you're here to prevent me from getting involved,” Meredith assumed.

Kraglin nodded. Meredith's eyes flicked to the door.

“You can do that if you want, Ms. Q.” Kraglin slipped the copper coil off of his finger. “I ain't gonna tackle you. Cap'n's orders were to prevent you from interferin', no matter the cost, but we can say you'd already left for the school when I got here.”

“You'd lie to Yondu?” Meredith blinked. “Really?”

“The cap'n and I don't exactly see eye-to-eye on this situation. I think he ought to let Peter get the book thrown at him,” Kraglin said.

“What did Peter do?”
“Took apart school property and built a gun,” Kraglin explained, “then tried to sell it on the street.”

Meredith's face turned scarlet.

“Forget the school,” she snarled, “I'm going to ground that kid until he's twenty-one.”

“You oughta do more than that,” Kraglin muttered.

Kraglin pinched the copper coil, testing the pliability. Meredith’s eyes flicked from the coil to Kraglin's tight expression.

“Kraglin,” she said slowly, “are you alright?”

“Fine, Ms. Q.” He kept testing the coil. “Just a bit irritated at the situation. Don't take it personal; ain't your fault.”

“You're mad at Peter,” Meredith realized.

Kraglin's mouth twisted.

“Pretty pissed-off at the cap'n, too,” he managed.

“Kraglin, honey, I think you ought to tell me the whole story here.” Meredith sat on the couch and rubbed her arms. “I've never seen you angry with Yondu before.”

Kraglin exhaled. He jammed the copper coil into his pocket and started pacing across Meredith's living room. Just like Yondu, Meredith thought.

“Look, Ms. Q. This is a pretty big deal. Pete's breakin' more than just school rules; there are laws against personally manufactured firearms. That's why the cap'n went; somebody who knows these things has got to set Pete straight. You're his momma, and I don't doubt that you'll light his ass on fire, but it's a different kind of discipline. Now, Pete's been lyin' to you.” Kraglin gestured at Meredith with a pointed finger as he paced; a very Yondu gesture, Meredith noticed. “That's pretty damn significant. He's been lyin', keepin' money, playin' you for a fool. I'm thinkin' that ain't alright. I'm thinkin' you ought to roast his ass until he can't sit for a week.”

“I ought to smack him upside the head so hard his brain spins,” Meredith said.

“Ex-fuckin'-zactly, Ms. Q.” Kraglin glowered at nothing. “Made us come all this way just because he screwed up.”

“And Yondu,” Meredith said, “is getting him off scot-free.”

“Cap'n spoils him.” Kraglin grabbed the coil back out of his pocket and began violently twisting the wire. “Whatever the fuck that kid wants, he gets. I tell the cap'n 'don't put Pete on the job' and all Pete has to do is smile nice and I've got to watch the kid the whole damn time. Of course the kid botched the whole damn plan, but because he miraculously grabbed the fuckin' score, all of a sudden it's sunshine and ship fuel.”

“Job?” Meredith's voice sharpened. “What job?”

Kraglin paused. He slid the copper wire back in his pocket and held his hands up as if in surrender.

“To be perfectly fuckin' clear before I say another goddamn word,” he said, “I told the cap'n do not put Peter on this job.”
“What,” Meredith snapped, “job?”

“You know we had Peter on for a week. After you left, everythin’ was alright until a day or two before we were supposed to hand him back. Yondu got a call from Charlie-27; an urgent job, a heist, and Yondu's clan was the closest to the target. Cap'n won't turn down a job from any of his old crew. He's still provin' himself to them, I guess. Point is,” Kraglin said, “Yondu took the job. Peter heard about it and wanted to come along. I advised against it, but Peter wanted to go, so Yondu rolled over and let him.”

“Yondu let Peter talk him into going on a job,” Meredith rephrased.

“Yeah, Ms. Q.”

“Son-of-a-bitch.” Meredith put her head in her hands. “Tell me Yondu at least took precautions.”

“Oh yeah,” Kraglin said scathingly, “Yondu took fuckin' loads of precautions. Didn't give the kid a gun, didn't make the kid read mission specs; just tagged him to me and made him my problem.”

“He didn't even stay with Peter?”

“Course not; he made the kid my responsibility.”

“And?”

“And the moment Pete got trapped in an air vent, the entire situation was somehow my fault. I told the cap'n I didn't want Pete on that job,” Kraglin snapped, “and still he blames me.”

“He should blame himself?” Meredith's eyes flashed. “It wasn't your idea to bring Peter! Peter was not your responsibility.”

“Ex-fuckin'-xactly!” Kraglin gestured with his hands. “I tell you what, Ms. Q, I was pissed as hell!”

“You should be. I can't believe him.” Meredith crossed her arms as she leaned back, glaring at the wall. “He brings my son on a heist and can't even be bothered to watch him. Just sticks him with you like it was your responsibility.”

“I'd watched that kid for the whole week,” Kraglin stressed, “I was sick and tired of him!”

“So Peter got trapped and you had to let him out,” Meredith asked.

“No, Peter got trapped and then somehow crawled into the living area of a goddamn poacher. He nicked the ring, which was the whole damn point of the job, and goes crawlin' back to the animal cages. Then,” Kraglin exclaimed, “he frees a goddamn bostaur herd and goes gallopin' about like it's a goddamn rodeo!”

“What's a bostaur,” Meredith asked.

“Cow-lion-thing,” Kraglin said, “don't ask.”

“But it's dangerous?”

“Oh hell, Ms. Q, it's got horns longer than your body.”

“And Yondu let Peter ride one.”

“Cap'n didn't have much of a choice. Peter just went off and did whatever he wanted,” Kraglin said.
Meredith's eyes were glassy steel.

“Kraglin, I'm going to go find both of them,” she said, “and roast them both over a low fire.”

“I wish you wouldn't, Ms. Q.” Kraglin sunk beside her, sprawling over the couch. “Honestly, I just want this nightmare to be over. If you go bustin' in there like a force of nature, all I'm gonna hear for the next month-and-a-half is how I can't follow basic orders.”

The dead tone in his voice made Meredith reconsider. Bluish circles underlined Kraglin's eyes, and his limbs hung listlessly over the couch.

“He told you to stop me. He gave you an order to stop me,” she said.

“Yeah.” He spared her a sad look. “I told him it was a shit order, but he thought you'd listen to me.”

Meredith turned that over in her head.

“For your sake,” she said finally, “I'll wait.”

“Thank you, Ms. Q.” Kraglin sighed. “Holy shit, I was worried you were gonna bulldoze me over.”

“It ain't your fault, honey.” Meredith huffed. “What a dumbass idea.”

“That's what I said,” Kraglin said.

Meredith's nails scratched at the fabric of her sofa.

“I'm going to shoot him,” she snarled.

“You ain't got a gun, Ms. Q.”

“I'm going to bite him in the neck.”

“Ms. Q, any time you put your mouth on his body is just gonna make his day.” Kraglin sighed. “Look, let's just do what we can before they get back, alright? Anythin' need fixin' 'round here?”

“The bathroom sink is leaking a little,” Meredith admitted, “and the landlady hasn't fixed it yet.”

“Now that I can do.” Kraglin stood up and pulled his omnitool from his belt. “Lead me to it, Ms. Q.”

Meredith led him down the hall to the small bathroom. It was practically a closet with a shower, but Kraglin didn't mind. He plopped down in front of the cabinet sink, opened the door, and set to work.

“Can I help any,” Meredith asked.

“Sure can. I'll need a bucket and a towel.” Kraglin tugged a pair of gloves from his back pocket and yanked them on. “This looks like a seal issue; I'll repair the sealant and we'll be right as rain, Ms. Q.”

Meredith fetched Kraglin a clean white bucket and a ragged towel. Kraglin took the towel and chuckled.

“Ain't this from the Eclector,” he asked.

“Yeah.” Meredith sat on the toilet seat cover. “I still have everything I left with.”

“If the cap'n was here, he'd start in on some spiel about you comin' back.” Kraglin craned his neck under the cabinet, examining the pipe. “But he ain't, so I'll just say 'good for you, Ms. Q.'”
“Thanks, honey.” Meredith smiled. “It's been a little easier here; I'm getting better tips now that I
know what I'm doing, and the boss has been generous with the hours lately.”

“That's good to hear, Ms. Q.”

“Peter's been growing like a weed though,” she said, “so I've been taking him clothes shopping.”

“Yeah? Kids clothes can get a little costly.” Kraglin frowned. “You sure you doin' alright?”

“Yeah, I'm sure. I can manage my own units,” Meredith said.

“I know you can, Ms. Q, but that hardly makes it easy.”

“Easy ain't my style.”

“Ain't that the truth.” Kraglin chuckled and began wrenching open the pipes. “Alright, let's get this
started.”

Meredith watched as Kraglin opened the pipes. He unscrewed both of the pipe ends, then brushed
the ends with some kind of cream.

“Cleaning compound,” he explained.

Kraglin brushed it off, scrubbing away the previous sealant.

“So how have you been,” Meredith asked.

“ Heckin' dandy, Ms. Q.”

“Even with you and Yondu arguing?”

“Fine.” Kraglin slid some sealant on the pipe. “Less than heckin' dandy.”

“You seem stressed,” Meredith observed.

“A bit, I guess. It ain't been easy, bein' first mate. Lots of responsibility, not much reward. Cap'n ain't
the type to let you know if you're doin' a good job, but he's the first man to rip into you when you
done fucked somethin' up.” Kraglin began reattaching the pipe with his omnitool. “Makes working
for him a damn nightmare, to be honest.”

The pipe snapped under Kraglin's aggression.

“Son of a cock-sucking whore.” Kraglin cursed.

Meredith's eyebrows raised.

“Sorry, Ms. Q. I cuss when I'm frustrated.” Kraglin threw down the tool. “This piss-slick thing ain't
got grip for shit, I tell you what.”

“Looks like I'll have to buy another sink drain,” Meredith sighed.

“Bullshit.” Kraglin stood up and slid his gloves off. “I broke it; I'll get you a new one.”

“Are you sure?”

“Damn sure.” Kraglin pulled a battered rectangular card chip from his pocket. “Cap'n sent his card
along with me, in case I needed to drop some units to keep you away from the school.”
“He gave you his credit card?”

“Credit card?” Kraglin snorted. “You think cap'n has credit? Nah, Ms. Q, this is a direct line to an account.”

“And of course he gave it to you to keep me from interfering.” Meredith stood up and crossed her arms. “Big blue asshole.”

“Wish there were a way to get him to wake up and smell the exhaust,” Kraglin said, “but cap'n gets awful stubborn about some things.”

“I wish there was a way for me to punch him in the jaw without you getting in trouble,” Meredith grumbled.

Kraglin turned the chip over in his hands slowly.

“The cap'n's exact words were, 'keep Mery away from that school at any cost.'” Kraglin spoke slowly, tentatively approaching what he felt was an amazing conclusion. “At any cost.”

Both their eyes snapped to the chip in Kraglin's hand, and simultaneously, they grinned.

“I'm gonna get in so much goddamn trouble,” Kraglin laughed.

“Yeah, well, Yondu can suck a dick.” Plastic shopping back handles dug into Meredith's hands. “Is this everything you need to fix the sink?”

“Fix the sink, spruce up your shower, deck out your kitchen, and turn your climate conditioner into a luxury air processor.” Kraglin looked down in the bags he was carrying. “Plus enough supplies to keep Pete in school until he's eight-hundred-and-sixty-two.”

“Perfect.” Meredith grinned wickedly. “Thank you, Yondu.”

“He's gonna be so pissed at me,” Kraglin said.

“Blame me. It was my idea.”

“But I let you use the card.”

“His exact orders were to keep me away at any cost,” Meredith quoted, “and my cost just skyrocketed.”

Kraglin laughed, turning blue.

“We should buy you a ship,” he suggested.

“Or a male stripper,” Meredith added.

The laugh shot out of Kraglin so hard that he nearly dropped the bags.

“Ms. Q, honest-to-fuck, don't say shit like that.” Kraglin shook his head, bright blue. “You're gonna make me laugh up a lung.”
“Who cares? We've got so much dough on that card, we could probably buy you a new one.” Meredith glanced in the windows of the next store. “Do you think Peter needs new school clothes?”

“No,” Kraglin said.

“New school clothes it is.” Meredith pulled open the glass door. “Heck, pick out something for yourself.”

“Oh, I sure as hell can't do that, Ms. Q.” Kraglin frowned as they entered. “Cap'n would roast my ass for that.”

“If you don't pick up at least one thing for yourself,” Meredith threatened, “I'll drop these bags and head straight to the school.”

“Fine.” The corner of Kraglin's mouth turned up. “Orders are orders.”

“That's right,” Meredith said.

The store was filled with racks of clothes; Kraglin mulled about in the men's section while Meredith raided the kids' clothes. Normally the thought of taking advantage of Yondu's units would be appalling to her, but not today. Today, she thought savagely, she was taking advantage of that asshole for all he was worth. She piled clothes on top of the cashier's counter.

“You can bag it and have it sent, if you'd like.” Meredith jammed Yondu's card into the machine. “Just bill the card.”

“Yes ma'am.” The cashier, a tall dark-haired young man, began scanning items. “Are you interested in our sunglasses today? They're buy one, get one fifty percent off.”

Meredith surveyed the sunglasses rack.

“Kraglin,” she shouted, “would you wear glitter sunglasses?”

She could hear him laughing from across the store. Meredith picked up two pairs of giant sunglasses; black, rimmed with thick silver glitter frames, and tossed them onto the clothes.

“Good up-sale,” she said to the cashier.

“Thank you, ma'am.” The cashier grinned. “Would you like express delivery?”

“Abso-fucking-lutely,” Meredith replied.

The dark-haired cashier smirked and entered it in. Kraglin came wandering up with a pair of socks in his hand.

“Guess this'll do,” he said.

“Kraglin Obfonteri, you put those down.” Meredith shot him a sharp look. “Go get yourself something you want.”

“I do want these,” Kraglin protested. “I need new flight socks, Ms. Q.”

“Fine, then grab something more. Get yourself some jeans or a shirt.” Meredith suggested.

“The jeans are two for fifty,” the cashier suggested, “and we've got some really awesome belts. The buckles are like, super huge.”
“Giant belt buckles,” Meredith urged.

Kraglin grinned and returned to the men’s section. He came back with two pairs of jeans slung over his shoulder and a thick brown belt in his hands.

“Need a new one for my flight pants,” he explained.

“Good. Grab a tie,” Meredith ordered.

“A tie?” Kraglin scowled. “Ms. Q, I don't wear ties.”

“Every goddamn young man ought to have a fuckin' tie,” Meredith snarled.

Like lightning, Kraglin grabbed a charcoal black tie. He handed the clothes to Meredith as if setting them on a primed bomb.

“Good.” Meredith took the jeans, belt, and socks and handed them to the cashier. “We'll have these bagged and taken with us, please.”

“Of course, ma'am.” The cashier scanned everything. “One-hundred twenty-six units is your total.”

Kraglin swallowed, but Meredith shoved the card into the machine.

“That's perfect,” she said.

“Would you like your receipt,” the cashier asked.

“Yes,” Kraglin said.

“No,” Meredith said.

“Ms. Q, what if they don't fit? I gotta be able to return 'em,” Kraglin protested.

“You just want the receipt so you can return them if Yondu gets pissed at you.” Meredith snatched up the receipt and tore it in half. “If they don't fit, take them to the tailor's.”

Kraglin groaned as Meredith ripped the receipt to pieces.

“Cap'n is gonna be so pissed at me,” he said.

“He doesn't pay you nearly as much as he should,” Meredith said, “not for everything you do. He's been a real asshole to both of us, and we're hitting back this time. He deserves this.”

Kraglin swallowed, but took the bag of clothes. They stepped out of the store and back onto the street.

“It's easy to buy shit for you, Ms. Q, but doin' it for me feels like stealing,” Kraglin said.

“Honey, sweetheart, you're a Ravager.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “Your code is 'steal from everybody'.”

“Fair enough,” Kraglin allowed, “but we don't take from each other.”

“He does not appreciate you, Kraglin, and that alone is enough to piss you off. Then he goes behind my back and poses as the father of my son. Right now, Kraglin, I want to hurt him. But I can't,” she said, “because if I show up and ruin this meeting, he'll take it out on you. I am waiting solely because
this is not your fault. This ain't your fault. This is between me, Peter, and Yondu, and you don't deserve to be dragged along for this ride. If I can get you anything out of this, even if it's just socks, pants, and a belt, I'm going to do it. It's the least I can do, honey.”

Kraglin blinked a few times, but his voice remained steady.

“Thank you, Ms. Q.”

“Anytime, sweetheart. Now let's get moving. We've only got an hour and ten minutes before that meeting is supposed to end,” Meredith said, “and I ain't gonna be satisfied until we've broken a thousand units.”

Meredith had never hired an automated taxi transport before. It drove them around town, stopping in the drive-thru of a local restaurant for smoothies and gliding down all the most scenic roads in town. It hovered to a stop in front of the school building and Meredith tipped the machine generously. Kraglin stepped out of the taxi and opened the door for her; with his crooked tie and giant sunglasses, he looked like a disheveled bodyguard. Meredith's feet came first, wrapped in glossy crimson heels that clacked on the sidewalk, followed by the navy blue dress Kraglin had talked her into purchasing. The transport pulled away. Yondu and Peter were sitting on the stairs of the school, drinking sodas. Meredith and Kraglin surveyed the scene through identical giant sunglasses.

“Well,” Meredith said dully, “there they are.”

“Yeah.” Kraglin stabbed his smoothie with his metal straw. “Sure you're ready for this, Ms. Q?”

“Leave it to me, honey.” Meredith strode towards the stairs. “I'm feelin' like an atomic bomb at the moment.”

“That's right, Ms. Q.” Kraglin chuckled. “Time to let 'em have it.”

Meredith stopped and gave Kraglin a serious look.

“Remember,” she said, “none of this is your fault.”

Kraglin nodded. Yondu looked up as they approached. His expression changed from acute confusion to seething rage in a heartbeat. He got to his feet and rounded on Kraglin, chest out and teeth bared.

“Where the hell have you two been,” Yondu snarled.

Kraglin sucked on the straw; it drew against the empty glass, making a loud noise.

“Shoppin','” he said calmly.

“What the fuck are you wearing,” Yondu exclaimed.

“These?” Kraglin tapped his sunglasses. “Ms. Q got 'em for me.”

“A goddamn tie?”

“Ms. Q insisted.”
“And how the fuck did she pay for all this,” Yondu demanded to know.

“I didn't; you did. Kraglin told me you told him to distract me for a day.” Meredith's eyes were hard, but her grin was harder. “At any cost.”

Yondu purpled.

“Kraglin?” Meredith looked over her glittering sunglasses. “What's the total up to now, honey?”

“One-thousand-nine-hundred-seventy-four units, Ms. Q.” Kraglin almost smiled. “I tried to talk her into buyin' a ship while you were still footin' the bill, cap'n, but she resisted awful fierce.”

Yondu's hand seized the front of Kraglin's shirt, lifting him a foot off the ground.

“You spent my goddamn money,” he snarled.

“She spent your goddamn money.” Kraglin flicked off his sunglasses and slowly folded them. “I followed your orders to the letter, cap'n.”

“I said I'd come in and bust the whole scene up if he didn't take me shopping.” Meredith bit her lips together, trying not to laugh. “He just did what you told him to do.”

Growling, Yondu put Kraglin back on his feet.

“So it's Mery's fault,” he accused.

“Sure is, honey.” Meredith lifted her shoulders innocently. “Usually I'm not fond of taking advantage of a man's generosity, but when that man is a blue-skinned son-of-a-bitch who goes behind my back and takes roles in my son's life that I did not ask him to, and then tries to impose on his first mate by makin' him deal with the fallout of my ceaseless burnin' rage – yeah, at that point I kinda reconsider.”

Her Missouri accent increased with her anger. Yondu cycled through several shades of purple.

“Snap at Kraglin one more goddamn time,” Meredith swore, “and I'll buy myself a fuckin' mansion.”

“Give me the chip,” Yondu said through gritted teeth.

Kraglin dug the chip out of his pocket and pressed it in Yondu's hand.

“Followed the orders to a letter, cap'n,” he said.

“Too fuckin' right you did.” Yondu rounded on Meredith. “The hell is goin' on here, Mery?”

“No. You do not get to be mad at me for this.” Meredith shoved a finger in his face. “After what you did, you should be thankful I'm not calling the cops on you.”

“It was the boy's idea,” Yondu protested.

“Oh good job, Yondu,” Meredith said sarcastically, “blame the nine-year-old.”

“He ain't wrong, Ms. Q.” Kraglin shrugged. “This was Peter's idea.”

“And Yondu's an adult and should have known better.” Meredith handed her sunglasses to Kraglin. “I'm pissed at both of them.”
Peter had remained relatively forgotten; he'd curled behind Yondu, using the Ravager like a shield. Yondu stepped aside, exposing Peter to his mother's steel gaze.

“So, Peter.” Meredith put her hands on her hips. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Um, it was... bring your Ravager to school day?” Peter grinned awkwardly. “Yeah, that's it.”

“Peter Quill,” Meredith stormed.

Peter shrunk in. His green eyes were wide; tears were gathering in them.

“What did you do,” Meredith said cuttingly.

“I got caught disassembling school property and turning it into guns,” Peter said, “and trying to sell it on the street and I stunned the janitor.”

Meredith's entire body seemed to swell with rage. Yondu and Kraglin took a step back.

“Peter,” she screamed.

“I wanted to make money! You work so hard and we don't make money and I thought I could get us money by selling things,” Peter explained.

“You are a child. You do not work. You go to school and you get an education so when you are an adult,” Meredith snapped, “you can work. As long as you're under my roof, young man, I don't want you even thinking about doing things like this. When you're under Yondu's roof, I understand it, but these things do not happen planetside. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, mom.”

“Why the hell is Yondu here,” Meredith demanded to know.

“The principal wanted to have a parent-teacher conference, but I knew you'd flip out. I needed an adult to show up and pretend to be my dad,” Peter yammered, “so I asked Yondu.”

“You asked Yondu,” Meredith growled.

“He was the only one I could think of,” Peter admitted.

“And the principal bought that?”

“Yep.” Yondu popped the top off a pink pop. “Went right along with the whole charade, the dumbass.”

Yondu gulped down some soda. Meredith's expression was nothing short of offended.

“He thought I would marry you,” she exclaimed.

“Hell, Mery.” Yondu wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “You're talkin' like you wouldn't do it.”

“I wouldn't!” Meredith's eyes were wide in horror. “Marry you? Hell no.”

Yondu and Meredith scoffed at the same time, then shared identical affronted expressions.

“Now wait just a goddamn second.” Yondu got to his feet. “If either of us ain't gonna marry nobody, it'd be me. I ain't the marryin' type.”
“No shit,” Meredith said, “but the likelihood of me marrying you specifically is much, much lower than you getting married to anyone.”

“Why’s that?”

“Money.” Meredith rubbed her fingers together. “You're more likely to marry somebody for a score than I am to marry you.”

“But you're poor as shit,” Yondu countered, “and I ain't. You'd be more apt to marry me for the money.”

“Why would I do that when you give it up for free,” Meredith quipped.

“Point is,” Yondu snarled, “you're more apt to get hitched to me for money than I am to get hitched to anybody else.”

“I'm sure you like to think about that. Just wait until she's poor,” Meredith said scathingly, “and then she'll come weeping back and we'll get hitched and I can just sleep around while she cooks and cleans and screws me whenever I feel like it.”

“I told you before,” Yondu thundered, “you ain't like that.”

“Mmhmm.” Meredith's eyes lidded. “Sure I ain't.”

“You ain't!”

“Right, because if we got hitched, you'd give up one-night-stands.”

“Maybe I would!”

“Bullshit,” Meredith sang mockingly.

“Can we direct this conversation out of the realm of screwin',” Kraglin suggested, “at least as long as Pete's around?”

Yondu and Meredith both colored.

“You two,” Meredith said, gesturing to Yondu and Peter, “in the school. I'm going to have words with that principal.”

Peter and Yondu followed Meredith into the school while Kraglin stood watch outside. Meredith stalked through the halls and burst into the principal's office.

“Mr. Pettrin,” she snapped.

“Ms. Quill, thank the stars.” Mr. Pettrin lowered his comm link. “I was about to call the cops. Your husband is a maniac.”

“I need to clarify some things with you.” Meredith's face was scarlet; her curls fluffed around her hair like a frizzy golden halo. “That big blue asshole is not my husband. That is not Peter's father, and you are an idiot for thinking so.”

Mr. Pettrin let out a sigh of relief.

“Thank the stars. I knew you were a nice young lady, but that guy is insane,” Mr. Pettrin said, gesturing towards the door.
“Yes! He's completely nuts! How could you let him – how could think that he was Peter's father,” Meredith asked.

“He had adoption papers,” Mr. Pettrin explained, “and the boy seemed completely responsive to him.”

“That's because he's the asshole who took us off Terra!”

Mr. Pettrin paled as if the color was being sucked out of him with a syringe.

“Yes. Yes, you look that shocked.” Meredith's hands were fists. “You let a kidnapper pose as my son's father.”

“What were you,” Mr. Pettrin sputtered.

“Getting detained by the rest of the kidnapper's crew, you brainless dumbfuck!” Meredith's voice peaked in volume. “The heck is wrong with you?”

Mr. Pettrin babbled senselessly, gesturing as he slowly turned scarlet. Meredith cursed and stomped out of the room. Yondu and Peter were still sitting in the hallway. Meredith slammed the door; they both looked up at her with identical wary expressions.

“Mom,” Peter said.

“Mery,” Yondu said

“You two are in so much trouble.” Meredith snapped her fingers and pointed to the door. “Out. Now.”

Peter got to his feet and shuffled to the door. Yondu growled and bared his teeth, but made for the exit. Meredith carded her fingers through her hair with a sigh.

“Raising Ravagers,” she cursed.

Yondu sat alone in Meredith's living room. He could hear Meredith in the other room, laying into the boy. Peter was crying, but Meredith's stern tone never softened. The boy was getting his ass handed to him, and Yondu had a feeling he was next. Yondu grunted as he stood up, then paced to the bathroom. Kraglin was under the sink, repairing some pipes.

“Could you had me the sealant, cap'n,” Kraglin asked.

Yondu picked up the metal sealant can and dropped it on Kraglin's abdomen.

“Shit!” Kraglin jerked up; his forehead smacked into the cabinet. “Fuck!”

“You gave her my goddamn card,” Yondu snarled.

“You told me to keep her away at any cost.” Kraglin rubbed his head. “I followed your orders.”

“Bullshit. You played my words to give her a way to get back at me.” Yondu crossed his arms. “I need you to have my back, Kraglin. Need you on my side.”
“I am on your side, cap'n. It's you who ain't on your side,” Kraglin protested.

“The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, cap'n, that lately you've been spoilin' Pete.”

“Bullshit.”

“Cap'n, you can't tell that kid no!” Kraglin got to his feet. A small trickle of blue blood was dripping from the cut on his forehead. “Everything he does wrong is somebody else's fault. My fault, your fault, whatever. Ms. Q could have handled this herself.”

“Bullshit,” Yondu repeated.

“Really?” Kraglin gestured towards the hall; Meredith's voice could still be heard cutting into Peter. “Sounds like she's handlin' him fine to me.”

Yondu scowled and leaned in the doorway. Kraglin took a clean rag from his back pocket and daubed up the blood on his forehead. Yondu dug in his jacket, handed Kraglin a stick-on bandage, and grunted something akin to an apology. Kraglin stuck the bandage over his forehead and set to work repairing the pipe. Yondu handed him tools and sealant as the need arose. They worked in silence, overshadowed by Meredith's lecture in the other room. Her voice ended abruptly; Meredith's bedroom door opened, and Peter shuffled directly to his bedroom. The boy's face was red and his eyes were waterlogged.

“Yondu.” Meredith appeared in the door to her bedroom. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“You want me in your bedroom,” he questioned.

There was no humor in her eyes. Gritting his teeth, Yondu stepped into her bedroom.

“I can't believe you did this,” she began.

“Mery, I ain't a goddamn kid. Don't lecture me,” he said.

“I'm pissed at you. How could you go behind my back again,” Meredith accused, “and pretend to be Peter's father?”

“That's what you're pissed about? Look, Mery, I knew you'd be pissed at the boy. Figured you'd be pissed at me for not tellin' you about what he did,” Yondu said, “but I didn't think you'd be pissed about me pretendin' to be his pop.”

“Yondu, you can't just assume these relationships in people's lives,” Meredith stressed.

“How the hell would I know if it's important or not? My parents sold me, for fuck's sake. I don't know how to pretend to be a pop,” Yondu complained, “and I sure as hell don't know how to pretend to be a husband!”

“Step one: tell your wife if your kid has been doing illegal things. Step two,” Meredith snapped, “don't take your kid on heists and let him ride giant rodeo beasts.”

Yondu gritted his teeth.

“So Kraglin told you,” he said.

“He didn't mean to, but yes.” Meredith crossed her arms. “Yondu, you have to tell me these things.”
“The boy wanted on the job,” Yondu said, “what was I supposed to do?”

“Say no,” Meredith answered.

“But he wanted on the job!”

“No, you wanted him on the job. You had no problem telling him to piss off when we were on the Eclector. It’s when you want him to do something that you don’t say no,” Meredith said.

Yondu grumbled, rolling his shoulders.

“Yondu,” Meredith said, “you've got to get this right. If you're going to take care of my kid when I'm not around, I need you to attempt to parent.”

“I don't know how,” Yondu snarled.

“Then call me and ask me! I've been parenting for almost a decade, Yondu; I'm not perfect at it, and maybe no one is, but I can at least tell you not to do anything stupid,” Meredith insisted.

“I ain't stupid.”

“You let my son go on a heist. That was stupid. Look, I trusted you not to put him in danger unnecessarily. I trust you not to hurt Peter. I need to be able to trust you to protect him from everything,” Meredith persuaded, “including himself.”

Yondu growled in his throat, but said nothing.

“And I know it doesn't help that he's rambunctious.” Meredith ran her fingers through her curls. “He's got a lot of energy, he's frustrated with life right now, and it's just hard for him to adjust. What with everything we've been through – I should have seen this coming.”

“S'my fault,” Yondu grunted, “I taught him this shit.”

“I know, but he decided to use it. I can sit around and be mad at you all I want,” Meredith said, “but all of this was Peter's doing, and I made damn sure he knew that.”

“Good,” Yondu said.

“He called you into the school. Ugh.” Meredith put a hand to her forehead. “And the principal believed him.”

“That principal believed every word.” Yondu fiddled aimlessly with a zipper pull on his jacket. “Called me Mr. Quill.”

Meredith laughed.

“I bet you were insulted,” she said.

“Damn right I was. I sure as hell wouldn't take your last name,” Yondu growled.

“If someone called me Mrs. Udonta,” Meredith said, “I think I'd shoot them in the face.”

Yondu chuckled.

“What,” he teased, “you ain't up to the task? Cleanin', cookin', foldin' laundry – oh fuckin' wait, you did that already.”
“There's a big difference between mothering and being a wife,” Meredith countered.

“No having sex with you,” Meredith clarified.

“Yeah?”

“What's wrong with me,” he demanded to know.

“You're Yondu.” Meredith's gray eyes were lidded. “I'm not letting you screw me.”

“Because I'm from space,” Yondu asked, “or because I'm me?”

“Because you're you.”

“Damn.” Yondu put a hand over his chest. “That hurts, Mery.”

“Good,” she said, “because I'm still pissed at you for not telling me everything. I'm mad at you for disregarding Kraglin, too.”

“You spent my goddamn money,” he grumbled.

“If I could have hurt you in any other way, I would have done it.” She shot him a sharp look. “You need to appreciate Kraglin more.”

“I pay him,” Yondu grunted, “that's enough.”

“You're threatenin' me, Mery?” Yondu pretended to look affronted. “We're alone in your damn bedroom and you're threatenin' me.”

Meredith rolled her eyes and yanked open the door.

“Get out,” she said.

Yondu strolled through, chuckling.
“Hey.” He knocked his knuckles on the bathroom doorframe. “Time to go.”

Kraglin hastily stowed away all his tools, cleaning up the bathroom as quickly as he could. He threw his tools into his shopping bag and met Meredith in the hall.

“Thanks for today, Ms. Q,” he said.

“No problem, honey.” Meredith patted his shoulder affectionately. “Anytime, as long as Yondu's paying.”

Yondu growled. He rapped his knuckles on Peter's door.

“We're leavin',” he grunted.

The door opened. Peter was still sniffling back tears.

“You ain't a baby. Stop cryin',” Yondu said.

Peter raised his chin as bravely as he could; the corner of Yondu's mouth turned up.

“You did fine, kid.” Yondu messed up Peter's hair. “Next time, have the buyer ready before you make the sale, alright?”

“Oh kay,” Peter said in a watery voice.

Yondu closed the door. Meredith and Kraglin were chatting by the front door.

“Let's move,” Yondu told Kraglin.

Kraglin opened the front door, gave Meredith a cheery wave, and stepped through. Yondu and Meredith were left staring at each other. Yondu grumbled what could possibly be taken for an apology; Meredith raised her eyebrows.

“I'm sorry,” she said, “I didn't catch that.”

“I said I'm fuckin' sorry,” he snarled.

Meredith reached up and fixed the lapel of his jacket.

“The next time I see you on Dakkam,” she said, “it'd had better not be as troublesome as this. Or the time before that, actually.”

“No promises,” Yondu said.

Meredith smirked.

“Get goin’,” she said.

Yondu stepped out of her apartment. He and Kraglin paced through the streets of Dakkam and back onto the Eclector. If any of the crew thought their unexplained stop was odd, they said nothing. Yondu simply shoved off his jacket, crawled into bed, and exhaled. What a goddamn day, he thought.

Yondu's interface lit up. He looked down to see Meredith had sent a brief message.

*Fly safe,* it said.
Dinner Guests/Behind Closed Doors

Chapter Summary

Meredith meets two unexpected customers -- Ravager customers -- at work. Meanwhile, Ellyn wants to help Peter and Meredith move on with their life while telling them as little as possible about hers.

(I'm not dead! *runs by, slaps a barely-edited chapter down, and sprints out* Stay safe and make good life choices!)

Meredith was getting used to Ravagers randomly appearing in her life. Whether it was random messages from Kraglin or Yondu's “unplanned” visits, Meredith figured she had a handle on the whole, “unexpected guest” issue.

Then they had to go and bother her at work.

The evening shift was drawing to a close. It was a weekday evening, so the restaurant had been slow. Two gentlemen in dark-colored suits sat at a far corner table with menus propped up in front of them. Meredith grabbed her datapad, put on a winning customer-service smile, and approached the table.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” she said amiably, “what can I get you to drink this evening?”

The menus dropped, revealing Stakar and Martinex. Meredith nearly dropped her datapad.

“What on Earth,” she began.

“It's Martinex's fault, really.” Stakar rested his menu against the table. “He's got a high-end job coming up soon, and he failed to mention that his suit doesn't fit anymore.”

“Too tight across the upper arms.” Martinex winked. “I've been working out.”

“So, we found ourselves in need of new bespoke apparel,” Stakar explained, “and Dakkam happens to be the home of some of the best tailors in this quadrant.”

“And you're here,” Meredith asked.

“I'm hungry,” Stakar said simply.

“And I wanted an excuse to wear this bad boy.” Martinex ran his thumb under one of his charcoal gray lapels. “Sharp as a knife, yeah?”

“You look great, Martinex,” Meredith chuckled, “but you don't need an excuse to dress fancy.”

“True. Still,” Martinex chuckled as he gestured to the restaurant surroundings, “it's nice to match the surroundings.”

“Thank you.” Meredith smiled slightly. “Mrs. Kabuchken works hard on our interiors. So, what can I get you two to drink?”
“Champagne,” they chorused.

Meredith's mouth fell open.

“They have champagne in space? How is that possible? Champagne is a region in France,” Meredith said incredulously, “it's part of Terra!”

“Translator, Meredith.” Stakar tapped his head. “What we're saying translates to you as 'champagne', but what I am saying is actually champagne.”

“Captain,” Martinex said, “you're just repeating the word 'champagne' to her.”

“Yes, well, clearly we ought to teach you multiple languages, Ms. Quill.” Stakar handed Meredith the menu. “I'd like the prime cut harus with the bischnaut sauce, leeks on the side.”

“Can do.” Meredith took the menu. “And you, Martinex?”

“Just the champagne. Pluvians ingest primarily liquid foods,” Martinex explained, “and I'd hate to make a cook liquify his own dish.”

“We have a crème soup that's very savory,” Meredith suggested.

“Sure; I'll have the soup.”

“Great,” Meredith chuckled, “I'll be right back.”

When Meredith returned to the table, she saw her manager, Vajiid, pacing away from it. The copper-skinned Xandarian was oddly pale.

“Quill. Give me that.” He took the cart of food from her. “Sit down over there and whatever you do, don't provoke them.”

“Mr. Vajiid? What's wrong,” she asked.

“They want you to keep them company. They have guns.” Vajiid's hazel eyes darted to the table. “They say they know you?”

“They're not dangerous as long as you don't call the authorities. They're special operations,” Meredith lied, “from the Nova Corps. Best not to draw attention to them.”

“How do they know you?”

“I met them through the Denarian handling my case.”

“...Alright.”

Vajiid wheeled the cart to the table, performed an elaborate bow, and made a beeline for the exit. Meredith went to seat herself; Martinex sprung up and pulled out her chair for her.

“Thank you,” Meredith said, “but was scaring my boss really necessary?”

“Scaring him? All I did was flash some cash at him,” Martinex said.

“He saw your weapon.”

“Oh.”
“Martinex,” Stakar sighed, “how many times do I have to tell you to conceal your gear properly?”

“Sorry, captain. The suit's great for concealment, but it just feels lumpy around my middle.” Martinex patted the side of his waist as he sat down. “I hope I didn't get you in trouble, Meredith.”

“No, no.” Meredith smiled. “I told him you were Nova Corps special operations.”

“Nice one,” Martinex said.

“You're lucky he bought it,” Meredith said.

Stakar and Martinex ate. Meredith was surprised by their manners; Stakar cut his food into small bites, taking his time to consume it, and Martinex handled his soup spoon with all the manner and grace of a regent prince.

“Why can't all Ravagers have manners like you two,” Meredith sighed.

Stakar swallowed, then chuckled.

“If I had it my way, they would,” he said, “but Martinex here is the only one who seems to bother with being presentable.”

“I like being classy.” Martinex spun his spoon in his fingers. “Makes me feel less like a pirate.”

“What's wrong with being a pirate? There can be gentlemanly pirates,” Stakar protested.

“Yes, but not in my profession.”

“Your profession,” Meredith questioned.

“Most people don't know this, Meredith, but in addition to being incredibly sexy,” Martinex said, “I'm also a doctor.”

Meredith's eyes widened.

“Well, almost a doctor.” Martinex stirred his soup. “I was three credits short of my degree when the Kree hit Pluto.”

“Three credits short?” Meredith laughed. “You couldn't finish one class?”

“Hey, those three credits saved my life. The moon of Charon has a Kree data storage facility,” Martinex explained, “where they kept all the data from altering our genes. My last class was on Pluvian physiology. I'd gotten drunk and missed the class trip to Charon, so I had to go another weekend, by myself. I wasn't on Pluto when the Kree came; that's the only reason I survived.”

“Weren't there other Pluvians on Charon,” Meredith questioned.

“Well, Charon was kind of on lockdown. We knew the Kree were coming, so we pulled everybody back to Pluto and got ready for a fight. No one was supposed to leave the planet's surface, but I really, really wasn't going to take that class again.” Martinex twisted his spoon in his fingertips, letting the crème soup roll off the tip. “So, I stole a war fighter and went to Charon.”

“You stole a war fighter?”

“It was my best chance. Any civilian ship would have been electro-maglocked to a fighter and forced to land.” Martinex chuckled. “My parents were so pissed.”
“Your parents?”

Martinex’s fingers paused.

“I’m going to step out for a cigarette.” Stakar stood and made tracks for the door. “Call me when the
bill comes, won’t you?”

Meredith watched him leave.

“Was it something I said,” she asked.

“Stakar doesn’t like talking about all that. He blames himself for not stopping the Kree,” Martinex
said, “and I think it bothers him when I talk about... He doesn’t like to discuss civilian life. Here, let
me show you something.”

Martinex set down the spoon and fiddled with his interface for a moment. An image popped up over
his wrist, depicting two glittering Pluvians. The man was wearing a holographic visor, and the
woman had a wide, glittering smile.

“Ianex and Helenea.” Martinex stared hard at the image. “My parents.”

“You have your mother's smile,” Meredith observed.

“And my father's profession. Dad was a geneticist,” Martinex explained, “a gene doctor. He repaired
a lot of loose ends in the Pluvian genomes. Saved a lot of people.”

“And your mother?”

“History professor.”

“You come from an intelligent family,” Meredith observed.

“Very. I had a lot riding on me,” Martinex laughed, “no matter what I chose to be.”

“They pressured you?”

“No, not at all.” Martinex smiled at the images of his parents. “All they wanted in my life was for me
to have a family. I wanted to make them happy, but all they wanted was grandkids.”

Meredith laughed.

“Think about it. My mother's background was in the past of the Pluvian race; my father's profession
was its future. They knew our species' survival was dependent on procreation, but they still wanted
me to be happy more than anything. A family fulfilled both parts. The way they used to fawn over
the girls I knew...” Martinex rolled his eyes. “It was kind of sad, honestly. Made people
uncomfortable. I'd have girlfriends, you know, but nobody was ever serious enough to bring home to
my parents.”

“Why not,” Meredith asked.

“I'm selective,” Martinex summarized.

“You could always pair up with Aleta's first mate,” Meredith teased, “and finish that pairing off.”

“Katessa? Good Ravager,” Martinex chuckled, “but no.”
“Why not?”

“Two reasons. Firstly, she's not my type. I like someone with a little going on up here,” Martinex explained, tapping his brain, “something more than just getting money and killing people.”

“And reason two,” Meredith questioned.

“I'm not Katessa's type, either. She's into individuals of a more feminine persuasion,” Martinex said.

Meredith blinked, uncomprehending.

“Let me put it this way. If she were here right now, with the two of us? She'd hit on you before she hit on me.” Martinex sipped his champagne. “Good Ravager, but about as far away from 'compatible' as you can get.”

“I should fix you up,” Meredith decided.

Martinex spat his champagne all over the table. Laughter shot out of him, shaking his whole body. He grabbed a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his mouth, still laughing. Meredith jumped up and began cleaning up the table.

“You? No offense, Meredith, but you and Yondu can barely find your hearts with both hands.” Martinex's chest shook as he chuckled. “No, Meredith. I'm looking for a very specific kind of woman. I've had a lot of false leads, but I know what I'm after.”

“Firstly, I'd like to remind you that Stakar's rumors are just rumors.” Meredith dabbed at the wet tablecloth as she glared at Martinex. “Secondly, nobody really knows what they're after, Martinex.”

“Oh, I do.” Martinex pulled a black book out of his jacket pocket and flashed the cover at her; across the front in glossy black letters was *Trade of Light*. “Boom.”

“You're looking for a librarian,” Meredith teased.

“I'm looking – ” Martinex flipped open the cover and thrust the signature in her face. “ – for her.”

“Stria Lonely,” Meredith read aloud.

“This is the only signed copy of her work in existence. Here's my plan.” Martinex snapped the book shut and tucked it back in his jacket. “Krugarr has a spell that can locate an object's owner. We use it to find people all the time on jobs.”

“Won't that just find the person the book belongs to,” Meredith guessed.

Martinex opened his mouth, then closed it.

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Martinex opened his mouth, then closed it.

“Okay,” he said, “so first I need the signature removed via nanolaser. Mainframe and I can do that, yeah.”

“But the signature belongs on the book,” Meredith said, “and the book belongs to someone who isn't Stria Lonely.”

Martinex put a hand over his face.

“Meredith,” he said, “you're kind of killing my dreams here.”

“Sorry, I don't mean to – have you tried stalking the publisher's office,” Meredith suggested.
“She submits everything via long-distance connection. Mainframe figured out that the signal was coming from Dakkam,” Martinex said, “but the location is scrambled.”

“I'll keep an eye out for anyone writing gratuitous love scenes around me,” she promised.

“Thanks.” Martinex grinned. “That's more than most people are willing to do to entertain me.”

“Entertain you?”

“Yeah. Stakar, Aleta, Charlie-27 – they think I'm kind of obsessed.”

“Are you?”

“No,” Martinex said quickly.

Meredith blinked.

“Yes,” Martinex intoned.

His despondent expression made Meredith laugh. As if to justify himself, Martinex drew the book back out of his jacket and thrust it at her.

“Do you know what this is about,” he asked.

“Probably sex,” she replied.

“No. It has sex in it,” Martinex allowed, “but it's not really about sex. *Trade of Light* is about the Sumidani sun wars.”

“There were wars over the sun,” Meredith asked.

“Sumidani is a system out in the Black Eye galaxy. There's a ring of space dust around the nucleus of the galaxy,” Martinex explained, “which absorbs most of the light of the central solar star. The Sumidani system is dark. It has a small yellow dwarf for a sun, but due to planetary conditions, it only reaches two planets, Taigus and Slaadus, and shines on each for only six hours of every day. Taigus was an abandoned Xandarian agricultural project way before the Nova Corps existed. Slaadus was a place for criminal Shi'ar, kicked out of their home planet. Each planet put up with only having six hours of sunlight to grow food in. The Sumidani natives fought each other for control of the planets, hoping to double their food production.”

“They fought over the sunlight,” Meredith repeated.

“Yes, exactly. They nearly slaughtered each other over six hours of light. In the end, the two planets wiped each other's population down to the point where six hours' worth of sunlight was more than enough. When the Nova Corps were created,” Martinex said, “they flew out to Taigus and provided them with solar energy lamps and other advanced technology.”

“That's wonderful,” Meredith said.

“It would be, if the Slaadus Shi'ar hadn't immediately tried to kill the Xandarians and take the lamps. It turned into a war all over again. Technically it never stopped; to this day, Slaadus pirates steal shipments of food and supplies.” Martinex held up *Trade of Light*. “This book is set in this time. A Xandarian Nova Corps maintenance worker named Aidus Finzh gets kidnapped by Slaadus Shi'ar. He barters his knowledge of solar energy lamps to save his own life, and realizes that the Shi'ar are starving. He negotiates with his own people to try and trade for the lamps, but the Shi'ar have
nothing to trade with. They are resorting to selling themselves as sex objects for food, and the Xandarians are buying."

“And that's the first sex scene,” Meredith guessed.

“Wrong.” Martinex cracked a grin. “That's how Aidus Finzch gains the respect of the Shi’ar pirate captain; he fights a Nova Corps officer in hand-to-hand combat and wins.”

Meredith let out a low whistle.

“Yeah, it's dope. The Shi'ar pirate captain has a daughter named Pelizar,” Martinex explains, “and she's trying to solve the sun problem without the Corps by use of giant mirrors and agricultural satellites.”

“Does it work?”

“No, it fails horribly and she ends up abandoning the project when her father yells at her for wasting resources. But,” Martinex countered, “it does get her and Aidus together, and together they travel to Taigus and confront the Denarian in charge of resources. Turns out it's the same guy that was harassing the Shi'ar; he's been taking advantage of his power, denying the Shi’ar resources to keep them desperate and weak. As long as there's a war, he has a job and he has power.”

“Is this – is any of this true,” Meredith asked.

“Technically, no. Technically, this is a work of fiction. Aidus and his pirate princess Pelizar aren't real. But Taigus and Slaadus are very real, and the Denarian in charge of Taigus? He got put up on sexual harassment charges two weeks after Trade of Light hit the market.” The smirk around Martinex's mouth bordered on triumphant. “Thirty-four women, both Xandarian and Shi’ar, came forwards with tapes of him sexually harassing them. Not just charges; cold hard evidence. No one knows how they managed to do it, but they did.”

“That smirk on your face tells me you have theories,” Meredith chuckled.

“There's a background character in this.” Martinex held up Trade of Light. “A Nova Corps communications officer who goes by the name of Bilbio Makyntosh.”

“Now that's a name if I've ever heard one.” Meredith grinned and leaned forwards in her chair. “Bilbio Makyntosh?”

“'Bilbio' is actually the name of a kind of stealth camera, usually worn on an article of clothing. There is a Nova Corps law called the Makyntosh Article which claims that once an individual is caught doing something illegal on a tape,” Martinex said, “the entire tape is now evidence and the individual’s right to privacy is immediately waived.”

“You can tape anyone without permission as long as they're doing something illegal.” Meredith nodded. “Makes sense.”

“So this Bilbio Makyntosh outfits Pelizar with a tiny camera so that when the Denarian threatens her, it's all on tape.” Martinex grinned as he tucked the book back in his jacket. “I think Stria Lonely got in touch with those girls on Slaadus. I think she told them what to do. I think this book was an instruction manual on how to take down an asshole in power. I think she did her research on the war, isolated the source of the resource problem, and thought of her own solution.”

“And wrote it into an erotica novel,” Meredith questioned.
"*Trade of Light* is a cheap smut book. No one would look twice if some cute little Shi'ar was toting it around. But this isn't just a smut book," Martinex insisted, "it's political change in a black paper package. I think it is *genius* ."

"Wow." Meredith did her best not to laugh. "You're really fond of this woman."

"She hid instructions on how to stop sexual harassment in a book about sex!" Martinex gestured wildly with his arms. "Who *does* that? It's genius! It's dope! It's like a matte-black ninja-blade, slipping past evil and leading the downtrodden to victory against corruption!"

"I didn't know Ravagers could be so into justice," Meredith chuckled.

Martinex's crystals shone slightly purple.

"I – I thought it was cool. Ravagers are anti-authoritarian, and using seventeen sex scenes to bury instructions on how to take down a corrupt Denarian is about as anti-authoritarian as it gets." Martinex pressed his hands together; steam rose from them. "Every book she's written has changed things. I mean, taking down one Denarian isn't a big deal, but – y'know."

"It was a big deal to those thirty-four women." Meredith's large gray eyes were serious. "It meant the world to them."

"Exactly," Martinex said, "it *mattered* . She didn't just take down a bad guy; she gave the victims a road to take that asshole down themselves. She *empowered* them. She *fixed* things. She's saving the universe by writing *smut* ."

"I bet Aleta likes her," Meredith said.

"Actually, Aleta can't stand anything I read. She turns her nose up at sex scenes," Martinex chuckled, "and her version of taking down a sex offender is flying to the planet and killing them publicly."

"She murders them," Meredith asked.

"There are one-hundred Ravager clans, and ninety-nine of them are capable of doing some very wrong things. In order to keep ninety-nine clans full of sick, twisted, murderous space-faring scumbags from doing them, we have to lay down some very simple rules with very performable punishments." Martinex turned his champagne in his hands, examining the way the light refracted onto his hand. "That was one of the first things I learned when I teamed up with Stakar; if you make the first offense memorable, the second will never happen."

"You're first mate. Do they make you punish infractions," she asked.

"No, thank the stars." Martinex sighed. "The Ogords always handled that personally. The only times I've ever had to hurt someone have been on jobs, or in self-defense."

"That's good," Meredith managed, "that's really good."

"Yeah, I prefer fixing people to wounding them. But you see what I mean," Martinex stressed, "I need to find this woman. She's got the most brilliant mind I've ever seen in the gutter."

Meredith grinned and tapped the tablecloth with her fingers.

"I'll keep an eye out," she promised.
“She's brilliant and crafty, but wherever she is,” Martinex promised, “I'll find her. I'm a Ravager - we don't give up.”

Ellyn was bouncing plastic balls into cups full of soda.

“Are you sure this is a life skill,” Peter asked.

“Trust me, kid.” Ellyn bounced the ball into the soda. “If you get to university, soda ball will be the best income earner you've ever had.”

Peter bounced a ball; it missed the furthest cup.

“Watch your angles,” Ellyn warned.

“I know.”

Peter missed.

“Shit,” he said.

“Don't let your mother hear you,” Ellyn warned.

“She won't care.”

“Yes, she will.” Ellyn crossed her arms. “She's chill, but not that chill.”

“Chill? Mom?” Peter gave Ellyn a look. “You're joking right?”

“Your mother is so much more permissive than mine was. If I cursed in front of my mother,” Ellyn said, “I'd be copying words out of the dictionary for weeks.”

“Your mom made you copy a dictionary,” Peter asked in a hushed tone.

“The whole thing. Front to back, cover-to-cover.” Ellyn could hear the hardness in her own voice. “Phonetic transcriptions and every definition.”

“That's torture,” Peter said.

“It made me a good reader.”

“That doesn't make it okay.”

Peter bounced a ball. Ellyn's fingers twitched; the ball glided into the middle cup.

“No,” she agreed, “but when I was a kid, I had to keep my mind active.”

“Why,” Peter asked.

Because if I don't utilize my excess mental energy, Ellyn thought, I lose control of my psionics and shatter things I shouldn't.

“I was hyperactive,” she said instead.
“So you just studied all the time?”

“Yes, which made university very easy.”

“You went to college,” Peter asked.

“Where do you think I learned how to play this,” Ellyn laughed.

“What did you study?”

“I majored in political science,” Ellyn said, “with a minor in creative writing.”

“And what do you do with that?”

“I write political papers.” Ellyn picked up the second-to-last ball. “And other things.”

“Other things?”

“Novels.”

“Like fiction?”

Like politically-charged erotica, Ellyn thought, but I'm not telling you that.

“Yes.” Ellyn prepped her shot. “Fiction.”

“Can I read it,” Peter questioned.

“No!” Ellyn tossed the ball; it splashed into the furthest cup. “Definitely not, Peter.”

“Why not,” he complained.

“It's not meant for kids, kid.” Ellyn handed Peter the last ball. “Alright, make it count.”

Peter squinted at the pyramid of plastic cups. He tossed the ball up and down in the air, then threw it. Ellyn's fingers twitched. The ball arced majestically, then plopped in the furthest cup.

“Yeah,” Peter cheered.

“Nice one,” Ellyn lied, “but let's clean this up before your mother gets home.”

Ellyn pulled the plastic balls out of the cups while Peter poured the water down the sink. So maybe using psionics to help Peter win was cheating, Ellyn reasoned, but the kid needed to learn to have legal fun. If Peter did end up running off to be a thug with the Ravagers, at least he'd be good at alcohol ball. Ellyn sighed and pocketed the plastic balls. She'd never had younger siblings, or cousins, or anyone small and dependent, so Peter was a new experience. Ellyn worried about him, and about his mother, too. Meredith was a juggernaut, Peter was so vibrant, and Ellyn wanted to help them get home. They were good people, she thought; they deserved a happy ending.

“Hey Ellyn,” Peter asked.

“What, Peter?”

“What was your dad like?”

“I never met him.” Ellyn’s response to the question was almost automated now. “My mom never talked about him. I think he died before I was born.”
“Oh.” Peter tilted a cup down the sink. “Lucky.”

“Lucky?” Ellyn whipped around, wide-eyed. “How is that lucky?”

“It could be worse. Your dad could be a killer planet,” Peter said, “who tried to murder your mom.”

“Your dad was a planet?”

“Yeah, and a total dick.”

Ellyn's mind reeled. Peter caught her expression and sighed.

“Dad was a Celestial planet who pretended to be a human so he could make more kids and more Celestials to take over the galaxy. He paid Yondu to kidnap me and mom,” Peter intoned, “and together we blew up the planet.”

“Your mother had you blowing up a planet?”

“No,” Peter said, “I had to stay on the ship. Total bull – I wanted to blow something up.”

How does your mother handle you, Ellyn wondered.

The door handle turned. Peter ran to the door while Ellyn rapidly stacked the plastic cups back up. She had just shoved them into the cabinet when Meredith stepped over the threshold.

“Peter,” Meredith said, “you will never believe who I saw at work today.”

“Elvis,” Peter said.

Meredith laughed. Ellyn had no idea who Elvis was, but made a mental note to ask Peter about him later. She made it a personal point to memorize the names of all of Meredith's Ravager contacts, so that if Meredith or Peter was ever kidnapped again, Ellyn would be able to list all the most likely culprits for the Nova Corps.

“Remember Admiral Ogord,” Meredith asked, “and his first mate, Martinex?”

“The diamond guy,” Peter explained.

Ellyn's mind filed away the information. *The Admiral of the Ravager's surname is Ogord. His first mate's surname is Martinex. The first mate is somehow associated with diamonds. Possibilities: illegal diamond trade, a diamond symbol, a diamond-like appearance, some background story – has Peter ever stolen diamonds for them?*

“Yes, honey,” Meredith chuckled, “they came in and ate today.”

“Why were they on Dakkam?”

“Buying suits, apparently.” Meredith rolled her eyes. “Ravagers and their clothing – space divas, all of them.”

Peter laughed. Ellyn smiled, but her mind was still processing. *Suits – high-end Ravagers, perhaps white-collar crime?*

“Did you guys have a good evening,” Meredith asked.

“Ellyn taught me some things she learned at college,” Peter said.
“Did you get your homework done,” Meredith aske.

Peter and Ellyn both glanced towards the open datapad, where Ellyn had finished Peter's book report earlier that evening.

“It's done,” Peter said.

“Did you like the book,” Meredith asked.

“Apparently no,” Peter said.

“It's an overly-pedantic piece of subjective opinion based on the author's personal experience,” Ellyn complained, “and then extrapolated into an overarching moral statement that ignores the objective data of the problem.”

Meredith stared at her.

“You sound just like – nevermind.” Meredith chuckled. “The last thing I need is you running off to be a Ravager, too.”

“Me?” Ellyn sniffed. “Hardly.”

“Ellyn would seriously be the worst Ravager ever. All she does is write politics and do nerd things,” Peter complained.

“I'll take that as a positive comment,” Ellyn said, “as being considered suitable for a Ravager career is more of a condemnation than a compliment.”

“They're not so bad.” Meredith sat down and slipped off her silver shoes. “Just a little unorthodox.”

Stockholm syndrome, Ellyn decided.

“At any rate, I should probably let you get out of here.” Meredith stood and hugged Ellyn. “Thanks for watching him, honey.”

Ellyn considered herself an inexperienced hugger, but Meredith hugged like a pro. It was to be expected, Ellyn reasoned. Meredith was emotionally strong and physically expressive, while Ellyn was reticent and physically restrained. For the tall hybrid, hugging Meredith felt like hugging a big, warm stress ball.

“Thanks for letting me come over,” Ellyn said.

“Anytime.” Meredith leaned back with a beaming smile. “Want to stay for dinner?”

“I can't tonight,” Ellyn confessed, “I have a giant file to upload. My publisher needs it right away.”

“Aw,” Peter said.

“Maybe next time,” Meredith said.

Ellyn picked up her bag and crossed to the door. Her hand was wrapped around the doorknob when Meredith spoke.

“That reminds me. You're connected to the publishing system on Dakkam, right?” Meredith tilted her head. “Have you ever heard of Stria Lonely?”
A sickening crunch hit Ellyn's ears just as the panic shot through her blood. She didn't need to see the blue-violet light in her palm or hear Meredith's gasp to know what she'd done; she could feel the doorknob crush under her. She took a step back; the door was mostly unharmed, but the doorknob was a mashed metal mess.

“I apologize,” Ellyn said automatically.

“The heck was that,” Meredith exclaimed.

“Ellyn's got magic brain powers.” Peter didn't even look up. “Sometimes she blows stuff up with her mind.”

“That is literally the worst way to explain it, Peter.” Ellyn closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Give me a minute; I can fix this.”

Ellyn forced herself to ignore Meredith’s shocked expression. Instead, she raised her hand and focused on the impact she'd made. Slowly, with a few flicks of the fingers, she took out each dent from the knob, restoring it to its round shape. She opened her eyes and exhaled; no harm done.

“I apologize,” she repeated.

“You – honey, are you sick? Is this a medical thing?” Meredith put a hand on her forehead. “Please tell me you're not dying of brain cancer.”

“No, Meredith, it's not an illness. Just genetic psionics,” Ellyn explained, “nothing to worry about. I'm usually in complete control. I should go home now.”

“Oh. Okay, honey. Be safe,” Meredith called after her.

Ellyn already had the door shut. She paced to her apartment, unlocked the door, closed it behind her, locked it, and then sunk to the floor.

“You complete idiot,” she cursed.

She stayed on the ground for a moment or two, boiling in her own self-loathing, then stood and brushed off her khakis. It was a minor mistake; Meredith would have found out about the psionics eventually, and she'd avoided the topic of Stria Lonely altogether. Ellyn went to her desk and began the upload of Price for Peace. It had been nearly a year in the making, but Ellyn was proud of it. She had never gathered so many details about ancient Quo Modarian treaties before, and she had definitely never attempted to write Quo Modarian sexual relations before. Hopefully this would remind the galaxy of the sacrifices the Quo Modarians made to establish peace in the galaxy, and perhaps the Nova Corps would seek their assistance in ending the war with the Kree. Feeling optimistic, Ellyn leaned back in her chair and stared at the poster she kept on her ceiling. From anywhere else in the room, it looked like a holographic starscape, but if she sat in her chair and leaned back, the stars aligned to read, Save the Universe – Write Smut.

There were a lot of ways to bring peace to the galaxy, Ellyn reflected, and this one was hers.
Chapter Summary

All Peter wants is a birthday gift for his mother. All Kraglin wants is a parking spot. All Yondu wants is a retrofit. All Meredith wants is a drink.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Honest-to-fuck, Yondu didn't know what the hell he'd do without Kraglin. Having the kid around was like having a spare of himself; Yondu could send him to do anything. While Yondu took the Eclector, Kraglin could take the Suzarra to pick up a bounty on Contraxia. Twice the credits, half the effort; Yondu was damn glad to have a first mate.

The only thing Kraglin couldn't handle was Peter Quill. Meredith had forbidden Peter to access the comm screen alone since the “Parent-Teacher Conference Incident”, but Yondu still got quick, secretive messages from the boy at odd hours of the night, asking questions about how to make a combustion manifold or how fuel injectors worked. Yondu knew Mery wouldn't be happy, but he'd started to feed the boy a few schematics of the Eclector. It was educational, he reasoned.

Unfortunately, that only seemed to encourage Peter. As Yondu sat in his captain's chair, finishing up a message to Charlie-27, Meredith's name blinked onto his screen. He answered instantly; Peter's face appeared on the screen.

“Boy,” Yondu began, “what did your momma say about touchin' the comm screen?”

“Shh, keep it down.” Peter shot furtive looks off-screen. “Mom's asleep.”

“What's goin' on, boy?”

“I need your help. I've got eighty-two units,” Peter said, “and I need to get mom an extra-special birthday gift. She's been stressed to the end of her rope lately, and I want to get her something amazing. Ellyn took me shopping but I couldn't find anything. I need you to get something from Algon for me, and I'll pay you back.”

“What does she want,” Yondu asked.

“Something Terran, probably. And pretty,” Peter insisted, “something nice. She never gets anything nice for herself.”

“Ain't a big selection if you only got eighty-two units.”

“Make it work,” Peter said.

Yondu pretended to check his fuel levels and schedule. Peter squirmed with impatience; it was all Yondu could do not to chuckle. Algon's was an easy stop – the Saurid was a prime obtainer of the rare and unusual, and he'd always buy from Yondu. It meant having to put up with his goddamn so-
called “customer service”, but the cost for fuel was damn cheap.

“Done,” he said, “just transfer me the units.”

Peter tapped his interface; Yondu watched the boy drain his account.

“Spend all of it, okay?” Peter fixed Yondu with an unusually stern gaze. “No keeping it.”

“I don't want your damn kiddie money anyway.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Now get your dumb ass to bed before your momma wakes up.”

The screen snapped off. Yondu scratched his chin. It'd been weeks – no, months – since he'd seen Mery. Even with Kraglin picking up the slack, the Eclector'd been a madhouse. The Ogords always had some job to do, something to steal, someone to punch into a pulp. Hell, Yondu couldn't remember the last time he'd let his crew off for shore leave. With a swift hand movement over the map, Yondu set course for Contraxia. Then, he rose from his chair and left the bridge. There had to be something here he could sell to Algon, he mused; something that would justify the trip without the crew knowing about Peter's request. He took the stairs down to the lower cargo hold, purposefully avoiding the route to Meredith's old room. He ended up in the belly hold of the ship, pacing along metal floors lit by red light. Most of the cargo was nonperishable food, clean water, ship repair parts, and other absolute necessities. Yondu wandered around his cargo hold in vain, trying to scheme up something expendable.

“Captain?”

Yondu's arrow glinted in the dim red lights of the cargo hold. Oblo stepped from the darkness, hands up.

“Just me,” he said.

Yondu flicked his coat back over his arrow. ‘Fixin' somethin’?’

“Yeah.” Oblo jerked a thumb behind him. “Some of these air vents need replacing, captain, and our fuel couplings need to be changed out soon.”

“How's our engine metrics?”

“Oh, that?” Oblo chuckled. “I think our core could run on fumes for fifty parsecs, captain. That old girl won't quit.”

Yondu nodded, scratching his chin.

“What are you doing down here, captain? If you don't mind me asking,” Oblo added.

“Shore leave is coming up,” Yondu heard himself say, “and I'm thinkin' 'bout parkin' the Eclector at Algon's for a retrofit.”

“Damn good idea, captain.”

It was a damn good idea, and Yondu couldn't believe he hadn't had it sooner. The Eclector hadn't had a real Ravager retrofit, and now that Yondu was back in the family, it was the perfect time to give the old girl a facelift. Yondu turned around and climbed the stairs to the upper levels. While he was climbing, he accessed his comm link.

“Kraglin,” he barked.
“Here, cap'n. Gettin' ready to go pick up that bounty for you.”

“Shut it down.” Yondu exited the stairwell. “We're takin' the Eclector to Contraxia.”

The second of silence that stretched on the other end of the link spoke volumes to Yondu.

“You could handle the job fine; ain't about that. Crew ain't had shore leave in months. Figure it's about time.” Yondu paced out of the bridge and down the halls. “We drop off the crew for shore leave. Then you pick up Charlie's bounty, and I steer the ship to Algon's.”

“Crazy Algon's?” Kraglin's voice was almost a laugh. “Hell, cap'n, what's he got that we need?”

“Retrofit.”

“And we ain't getting a retrofit at the Hub because...?”

Shit. Yondu didn't have an answer for that. He grit his teeth together for a moment, but there wasn't a lie that would fool Kraglin. Fool everybody else on the ship, maybe, but there wasn't much that was going to throw Kraglin off. Kid was smart; that was why he was first mate.

“Fuckin' goddamn Terran shit,” Yondu spat.

“Ms. Q?”

“The boy.”

“Ah. What's he want?”

“Shit for his momma.”

“So it is Ms. Q.”

“No,” Yondu corrected, “it's the goddamn boy. Mery ain't got nothin' to do with it.”

“Right, sure. You got it, cap'n.”

Yondu could have sworn Kraglin was being sarcastic, but he didn't have time to find out; Kraglin cut the link. Kraglin was a hell of a first mate, Yondu grumbled, but he came with some smart-ass tendencies.

Dumping the crew off at Contraxia was the easy part. It was as simple as dropping the ramp, dispersing some units, and reminding them that at any moment an Ogord might be strolling past and decide they'd make better Ravagers as part of the one-hundredth. Kraglin steered the Suzarra off with no difficulty, not that Yondu had expected any. No, parking at Algon's was the hard part. Yondu stood at the base of the ramp with a locked jaw and steeled shoulders, preparing himself for the onslaught of Saurian bullshit that was Algon. He paced down the ramp and saw the Saurid approach with a long stride. Yondu prepared to strike his way out of a hug, but Algon made no attempt to touch him. Instead, Algon looked around, even going so far as to pick up Yondu and look beneath him. He had to be fucking kidding, Yondu thought.

“The Quills ain't here, dumbass.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Put me down.”

Yondu's boots hit the ground. Algon's frills fell.
“When will you bring them again,” he whined.

“I told you before, dammit.” Yondu adjusted his jacket. “They’re on Dakkam. They ain’t on the Eclector anymore.”

“Ugh.” Algon sagged like a puppet with cut strings. “Everything is terrible. My whole day is ruined.”

“Pull yourself together.” Yondu strode past, headed for the door to Algon's ship. “I'm shoppin' today, idjit.”

“Shopping?” The word pricked Algon's interest; his frills rose as he followed Yondu. “Shopping for what, may I ask?”

“A damn lot. We're puttin' the Eclector through a retrofit.” Yondu couldn't meet Algon's curious eyes. “Engine repair. Hull upgrades. And don't skimp me on no goddamn thruster capacitors again or I'll eat your fuckin' brains.”

“I did not skimp you.” Algon sniffed. “You purchased what you paid for. It is not my fault you misjudged their capacity.”

Yondu growled. Algon paused with one claw on the door, then sent a longing look back to the Eclector.

“When will you bring the good Terrans again,” he asked.

“How the fuck would I know?” Yondu bared his teeth. “She's on Dakkam with the boy.”

“You don't talk,” Algon assumed.

“We talk.” Yondu couldn't keep the defensive tone out of his voice. “You gonna open that damn door or what?”

“You don't talk.” Algon sighed. “That's it. I'll never see those delightful Terrans ever again.”

“Listen, shitscales – they ain't dead, they're just on Dakkam. You live on a goddamn ship! If you're so twisted-over about it,” Yondu said, “go and visit them yourself!”

“They would want to see me?” Algon's frills rose with hope. “Really?”

“No shit, idiot. Probably Mery's favorite goddamn place to shop.”

Algon's frills quivered with emotion.

“That is the best thing,” he warbled.

“And the boy palmed me eighty-two units to pick up somethin' for Mery here,” Yondu continued, “so I'm assumin' that means he likes your overpriced garbage truck too.”

“He gave you money?” Algon completely ignored the second part of Yondu's sentence. “For what occasion?”

“Mery's birth anniversary's in three days.” Yondu tried to shove past Algon. “Big deal, apparently.”

Algon stopped Yondu with a claw. The Saurid inflated, his frills stuck out, and his eyes widened with irrational, sudden joy. Yondu tried to back away; this wasn't good. He had no idea what it was,
but Yondu knew that expression had to be some kind of sign that something horrible was about to happen.

“We must have a sale,” Algon breathed.

“No. Algon, no.” Yondu put up a hand as if physically stopping the idea. “It's just a damn birth anniversary, that's no reason to – ”

“Hahahahaha!” Algon began bouncing, his eyes manic as his laughter. “A sale, Yondu! Yes, yes, we must have a sale!”

“Algon,” Yondu said, “I said I got eighty-two units.”

“That does not matter whatsoever!” Algon creaked open the door to his ship, slipped through, and began to close it. “Don't come in! Too much to do, many thanks for arriving, come back in three days.”

“Don't even think about it, idjit.” Yondu seized the door and began pulling it open. “I came here to shop, and that's exactly what I intend t'do.”

“You hate shopping. You don't like shopping here. Go away.” Algon's claws squealed against the steel as he wrenched the door closed. “Come back in three days. Bring the Quills.”

“Dammit, Algon, this ain't a fuckin' joke!” Yondu put his boots on the door and pressed his back on the doorway, forcing the door back open. “Let me in!”

“No,” Algon said.

The door groaned as Yondu forced it open.

“Let me in,” he gasped.

“No.” Algon shoved Yondu in the chest, dislodging him from the doorway, then closed the door. “Come back in three days, please!”

“Algon!”

The door slammed shut. Cursing, Yondu turned back towards the Eclector. For a brief, manic moment, he considered a frontal assault. Dismantle the door, charge Algon's emporiums, and force that chartreuse excuse for a lizard to retrofit the damn ship. It was a satisfyingly vengeful thought, but Yondu knew it wasn't feasible. Most of the crew had been released onto Contraxia; Yondu didn't know what they were doing and he didn't care. Yondu paced up the ramp and wrenched the lever, letting the ramp ascend behind him. Perfect, he snarled to himself, just fuckin' perfect. The one time he needed Algon to let him in, and he got the shaft.

His brewing anger was so deep that he almost missed the cord snaking across the floor. For a brief moment, Yondu wanted to detonate over it – something, anything to get mad at – but the cord led to an open maintenance panel, where a crew member was fiddling with exposed circuitry. Yondu exhaled. Everyone was doing their jobs; getting pissed at them over a loose cord was a shitty way to be captain. It was unusual, Yondu decided, that so many had chosen to stay aboard. Gef, Lunis, Holdon, Drazkar, a handful of pilots, and the entire maintenance crew had refused to take shore leave. The maintenance crew was here for the retrofit, of course, and Yondu would have bet his life that the pilots were taking time to baby their own ships. The rest of the misfits had stayed on “work ethic principles”. Yondu had no fucking idea when they'd decided to learn what a work ethic was, but he didn't give much of a damn about that either. Ravagers were predictable. Whatever their
reasoning was, Yondu knew it was likely vile, selfish, and completely beyond comprehension.

The misfits were sprawled out in the kitchen talking about furniture.

“I'm telling you, she has a couch.” Holdon set his ponderous feet onto the table. “Let's get her a new chaise lounge or something.”

“What the hell is a settee,” Gef asked.

“Dumb chair,” Lunis answered.

“Let's get her a big dinner table,” Drazkar suggested.

“You four are absolute monsters.” Oblo took the coffee pot and poured himself a mug of cold, black coffee. “Ravagers, through-and-through. Tough, relentless sons-of-bitches, aren't you? Sitting around discussing interior design like a bunch of women with their first apartments.”

“You don't understand,” Drazkar said, “it's Quill.”

“She can cook and raise a kid. I'll give her that.” Oblo set the empty coffee pot in the sink. “Doesn't mean she's some kind of space angel.”

“Quill killed a planet,” Lunis pointed out.

“Alongside the captain,” Oblo reminded.

“Look, lad. Whether you believe it or not,” Gef said, “the woman's a damn good cook and she's one flame patch away from being a Ravager.”

“Now that I don't believe.” Oblo leaned against the kitchen counter. “She's tough, I get it, but there's no killer instinct. No savagery. Dumb recklessness, yes, but there's no war in her soul.”

“Wars are fought on a lot of fronts.” Holdon took his feet off the table. “Sometimes, the home front.” Oblo sipped his coffee.

“She needs a big table,” Drazkar insisted.

“What, so she feels pressured to invite everyone over and feed your furry ass?” Gef scowled. “She needs a couch. My wife loved couches. Couldn't get enough of the damn things.”

“What about her chair? The backless one. Cargo hold. Her old room. We could wrap it,” Lunis said.

Gef and Drazkar drowned him out with protests.

“No way does she want a broken down chair, Lunis.” Holdon stood up and rolled his shoulders. “Look, our best option is to browse around Algon's and just take the best item we see.”

“That sounds expensive.” Gef shifted in his seat. “Look, lads, I'm all for chipping in for the lass' little birthday surprise, but my pocketpurse is picky.”

“Split the cost five ways.” Lunis shrugged. “Can't be too much.”
“Four ways,” Oblo corrected. “Count me out.”

Drazkar and Holdon made noises of protest, but Oblo left the room with coffee in hand. The portal shut behind him.

“Aw, screw him.” Drazkar batted a paw at the door. “We can do it ourselves.”

“Do any of you know anything about interior design,” Holdon asked.

Drazkar, Gef, and Lunis all shook their heads.

“This'll be fun,” Gef said glumly.


“But what kind of couch,” Drazkar asked.

“Big,” Lunis said.

“Small,” Holdon said.

“Cheap,” Gef added, “that's the most important thing.”

“We go in, we find the biggest small couches we can find,” Drazkar suggested, “and then we buy the cheapest one.”

“Biggest small couch?” Lunis’ eyes narrowed. “What?”

“We find the small couches. Out of the small couches, we find the biggest of the small couches. Then,” Drazkar enthused, “we buy the cheapest big small couch.”

Lunis looked to Holdon, who looked to Gef, who stroked his plump chin.

“It could work,” he mused.

Drazkar slammed his fist onto the table and laughed.

“I'm a genius,” he crowed.

“That's pushing it a little far, Draz. There's still no way for us to get it purchased before Quill shows up,” Holdon said.

“We ask Algon,” Lunis replied.

“Are you daft? If Algon's not letting the captain in, he's not letting us in. We're not exactly frequent customers,” Gef pointed out.

“I've never even been inside.” Drazkar scratched behind his neck. “The captain hates it so much that I didn't even want to go.”


“None of that sounded like an answer. How,” Holdon repeated, “are we going to get that couch?”

Gef sighed as he sat back on the bench. He took the goggles from his head and began cleaning them
on his admittedly greasy shirt.

“Our best bet,” he said, “is to negotiate.”

And so it was agreed. They cobbled together a little over two-hundred units and slipped off the Eclector together. They approached the door with apprehension; none of them had ever entered Algon's emporium. None of them had even seen Algon, but he had a reputation. Battle-slave, cutthroat merchant, and on top of that, even Yondu thought he was crazy. They stared at the door as if it were a portal to another dimension.

“Alright,” Gef said finally, “I'll go first.”

He rapped his portly fist on the door and waited. After a moment, Algon's head popped out of the door. The Saurid was taller than Holdon, and his shirt was stretched tight by muscle. His frills immediately flattened in irritation; Gef swallowed.

“You are not Yondu, nor are you the Quills. Go away,” he said.

Gef didn't have time to sputter out so much as a syllable before the door slammed shut. Lunis put his narrow hand on Gef's shoulder and smiled.

“I've got this,” he said.

Lunis rapped on the door. Algon opened it again.

“I have a knife.” Lunis drew an enormous, seven-inch blade from his belt. “Give me your cheapest big small couch.”

Algon's amber-orange eyes slid from the Kallusian to the blade and back again. Algon's deft claws plucked the knife from Lunis, bent it at a ninety-degree angle, and gave it back.

“That is a very poor knife. Go away,” Algon said.

When Algon went to close the door, Holdon grabbed it. The two struggled for a moment, but Holdon managed to pull it open again.

“We have money,” he panted, “and we need to make a purchase.”

“Units?” Algon's frills peaked. “Purchase?”

“We need to buy a couch,” Drazkar explained.

Algon's frills flattened in suspicion.

“This is one of Yondu's tricks. You're going to smuggle out ship parts,” he accused.

“No. No tricks.” Holdon held up his hands as if in defeat. “If you want, we'll stay right here and you can bring the couches out to us.”

Algon shifted from claw to claw, deliberating.

“What kind of couch,” he asked.

“Go look at all your small couches. Then, look at the biggest of the small couches. We need couches on the lower end of the price range,” Gef said.
Algon made a noise of affirmation and closed the door. The Ravagers waited. About twenty minutes later, the door opened. A three-seat couch pushed its way into their vision; it was of a modest size, made of thick-textured fabric and some dark, bubble-patterned wood. The most prominent characteristic of the couch was the large geometric pattern, made of various shapes in orange, blue, violet, and hazel green.

“This,” Algon said as he pushed it through, “is the cheapest of the biggest of the small couches in our inventory. One-hundred-and-ten units.”

The Ravagers' eyes glazed over the thick fabric, the odd wood, and the obnoxious pattern.

“Cheap,” Gef said.

“Pretty wood,” Lunis noted.

“I like the colors,” Drazkar shouted.

“We'll take it,” Holdon said.

Kraglin had known about Meredith's birthday for weeks. Peter had been not-so-subtly implying that he wanted Kraglin to pick up a birthday present for Ms. Q; Kraglin had flatly refused. It was Peter's responsibility to pick a present out for his momma, not Kraglin's, and now it looked like Pete was shoving the burden on the cap'n. That was just how things seemed to happen these days; Kraglin had been rolling with the punches for so long that things like this didn't even faze him anymore. Dump the crew with no supervision? Aye, cap'n. Park the Eclector in Yondu's least favorite merchant shop for a week-long retrofit? Aye, cap'n. Pick up the bounty on a crooked trader all by himself? Aye, cap'n. At this point, Kraglin reflected, he figured he'd seen it all.

So, when Yondu hit up his comm link for the third time that day, he was completely unfazed.

“Change of plans,” Yondu grunted, “I need you to pick up somebody else.”

“Can do, cap'n.”

“Make tracks for Dakkam,” Yondu said, “and don't tell anybody where you're goin'.”

“Dakkam?” Kraglin feigned ignorance. “Somethin' wrong with Ms. Q?”

“Algon's throwin' a goddamn sale,” Yondu cursed, “and he won't trade with us until we've got Mery and the boy.”

“Got it. Grab Pete and Ms. Q, come back to the Eclector, rake in some units, and take 'em home. Sounds good, cap'n.”

“Good. Get on it.”

“Aye, cap'n. I already dropped your bounty off with Charlie-27,” Kraglin explained, “so it'll be a straight shot to Dakkam and back, if we're lucky.”

“There ain't no luck with Terrans.”

“Understood, cap'n. Won't let the Corps see even a dust trail,” Kraglin promised.
“Good.” There was a faint tinge of relief in Yondu's voice. “Fly safe.”

The comm connection cut off. Kraglin smiled to himself as he switched the controls about, changing his course to Dakkam. Being appreciated was new, and still rare, but it was a damn nice thing to have happen. Ms. Q was a good influence, Kraglin decided, a damn good influence.

Kraglin kept his promise to Yondu; he engaged stealth systems as soon as he hit the star system and cruised past the Nova Corps like the breath of a ghost. Once in communication range with Dakkam, he sent Ms. Q a message.

“Kraglin?” Meredith answered immediately. “What's wrong?”

“Hey, Ms. Q,” Kraglin gave her a small smile. “Hope you got the day off.”

“I don't.”

“You do now.”

“Oh, God.” Meredith pressed a hand over her forehead. “What did Yondu do now?”

“Nothin’, Ms. Q. He needs your help,” Kraglin said.

Meredith's spine snapped straight and her eyes widened.

“Is he okay? How can I help? Are you alright?” Questions started shooting at Kraglin like blaster fire. “Do I need to get Ellyn to babysit? How long will I be away?”

“We'll need Pete too, actually. It's Algon,” Kraglin explained, “he's bein' a scaly little asshole. He got tired of the cap'n showing up without you two, so he won't trade with us until he sees you. Problem is, the Eclector's due for retrofits. We can't fix the ship without parts, and Algon's got the parts.”

“Couldn't you go to the Hub,” Meredith asked.

“Could,” Kraglin agreed, “but Algon's place is close to Contraxia, and that's where we dumped the crew for shore leave.”

“He left them unattended?” Meredith covered her face with her hands. “The planet is doomed.”

Kraglin laughed.

“Well, Ms. Q, the sooner I take you to Algon the sooner we pick up the crew and save a planet, alright? I'm making my descent now. Meet me at the docks. Don't bring too much,” Kraglin suggested, “just a weekend bag.”

“I'll have to call work,” Meredith said.

“Just tell them it's about those two scary men in suits what interrupted their evening.”

“You know about that?”

“Know about it?” Kraglin snorted. “Charlie-27 thought it was funny as hell.”
“Charlie? How does he know about it?”

“Martinex.”

“Martinex,” Meredith repeated with venom.

“Generally speakin’, Ms. Q, Martinex don't keep much to himself. Worry about him later, Ms. Q. One problem at a time.” Kraglin flipped off the primary thrusters and coasted down on his secondaries. “Estimated time of arrival is thirty-four minutes.”

“Understood,” Meredith sighed.

The connection dropped. Kraglin steered Suzarra down past the clouds and broke through into the city. He disengaged the stealth and seamlessly slipped into the air traffic. The docks were open; he transferred the funds to open a docking bay and parked the Suzarra with ease. He dropped the ramp and waited until the Quills could be seen pacing through the crowd. Peter was dragging along his backpack; Meredith had a brick-red rucksack over one shoulder. She strutted right up, dropped the bag, and hugged Kraglin.

“It's good to see you, honey,” she said.

Kraglin had almost forgotten how nice Ms. Q smelled. He hugged her back, then took her luggage.

“Sorry about the unexpected pick-up,” he said, “but it's a bit of an emergency.”

“It's fine, just let me – oh, no, here she goes.” Meredith answered her comms. “Ellyn?”

“You've been kidnapped again,” a female voice screeched.

“Chill, Ellyn.” Peter laughed. “It's voluntary. We're going shopping off-world.”

“Shopping without me,” Ellyn said in a small voice.

“It's not what you think, honey.” Meredith chuckled. “Remember the Saurid I was telling you about? Algon? He won't trade without me there.”

“That place sounded amazing.” Ellyn sighed over the comm link. “Take pictures?”

“Next time, we'll bring you,” Meredith said.

Peter and Kraglin began miming fingers across their throats and violently shook their heads.

“Really?” Ellyn's voice tinged hopeful.

“I promise,” Meredith said.

Peter and Kraglin made simultaneous expressions of woe. Meredith glared at them.

“Well, just be safe, okay? If I don't hear from you tonight, I'm going to call the Corps or fly up there myself or do something else that's drastic,” Ellyn said.

“Understood. I'll give you a call, okay? Thanks. Bye!” Meredith cut the comm link connection, then frowned at the boys. “Don't be rude when I'm on the phone.”

“You invited Ellyn next time? Mom, she's going to lose her mind if you put her on a Ravager ship,” Peter complained.
“Ms. Q, could you try makin' friends that don't call the Corps on us every ten seconds? Because that'd be great,” Kraglin said.

“Hush, both of you.” Meredith gestured to the luggage. “Are we going or are we going?”

“We're going,” Kraglin sighed.

Kraglin lugged the bags up the ramp of the Suzarra and stowed them in cargo. Peter leapt into the copilot's seat; Meredith settled comfortably behind. Kraglin slipped into the pilot's seat, steered away from the docks, and exited the atmosphere. Meredith stared at Dakkam until she could see its circumference, then took a deep breath.

Space, again.

Meredith didn't remember the hull of Algon's ship being so colorful. Enormous beams of light in yellow, pink, and green shone from it; swirling patterns of light decorated the windows. Peter leaned forwards in his seat.

“That looks amazing,” he breathed.

“Docking's gonna be shit,” Kraglin cursed.

“Wow; look at all those ships!” Meredith marveled at the trade ships soaring past. “What's going on?”

“Algon's holdin' a damn sale,” Kraglin said.

“Does that happen often.”

“Every goddamn time he gets a reason,” Kraglin muttered.

“Wow!” Peter nearly stood in his seat. “I bet there are ships here from all over the universe.”

“Damn near close,” Kraglin admitted.

Peter and Meredith stared in wonder. Kraglin's prediction was correct; all available docking spaces were filled. Fortunately, the Eclector was still parked; Kraglin maneuvered the Suzarra into the docking bay. While Kraglin manhandled the luggage, Meredith lectured Peter again on the importance of staying by her and keeping away from any Ravagers he didn't recognize. Peter wasn't listening; he was tugging towards Algon's ship with single-minded determination.

“Come on, mom,” he whined, “I want to see.”

“Peter – we've got to – oh fine,” Meredith sighed, “let's just go.”

Peter cheered and kept tugging. Meredith practically had to sprint in order to keep up. The door to Algon's ship was wide-open; merchants and customers of all species were flowing in and out. Inside was a marvel; large, jewel-colored lights had been strung in the upper rafters, and iridescent bubbles flowed over the waters. The usually cold, damp air was heated by the bodies of thousands of people. A scent that reminded Meredith faintly of cactus blossom was ever-present. There were so many colors, so much laughter, so much light – Meredith turned around in circles attempting to absorb it all. She bumped into someone.
“Oh, I’m so – Algon!” Meredith lit up at the sight of the Saurid. “The ship looks amazing – what is this?”

“A sale,” Algon breathed.

Meredith backed up, trying to take in all the splendor at once, and her back smacked into someone. She knew the warmth of his chest before she even turned around.

“Yondu,” she said.

The captain had his hands jammed in the pockets of his coat; his face carried his characteristic scowl.

“Mery,” he acknowledged.

“Mom, this is awesome!” Peter let go of Meredith's hand and started running towards everything even mildly interesting. “Mom, come look!”

“I'll be right there, Peter; don't run off!” Meredith's eyes flickered between Yondu and Peter.

“Yondu, Kraglin said Algon wouldn't trade with – Peter, no, I said don't run – something about us having to be here – Peter, put that down!”

Peter barely had time to set the glass bauble back before his mother seized the back of his shirt and yanked him to her side.

“We're just a little confused,” Meredith managed.

“Ask the lizard,” Yondu grunted.

“I heard it was your birth anniversary.” Algon's orange eyes widened innocently. “I did not want you to miss the fun.”

“Algon, that's sweet, but you really didn't need to – Peter, don't pull – this is beautiful, really, but I can't keep taking time off work like this.” Meredith brushed her curls out of her face. “It's not exactly professional and I need the money.”

“Money?” Algon snorted. “There is always money, but there is not always a sale. Come; I will show you the sights!”

Meredith was steered off, her protests ignored. Algon guided her and Peter throughout the ship, showing off the extravagant displays, live music, and exotic products. Meredith barely blinked and she still couldn't seem to keep her eyes open enough to see everything. Peter seemed to have no trouble; the boy ran from one sight to another like a bumblebee in a field of poppies. Yondu trailed behind like a ball-and-chain, smiling at nothing and speaking only when ordering ship parts. Meredith tried to keep an ear open for what was going on, but it was impossible to keep track of Yondu and Peter at the same time. She resigned herself to running after Peter until the tour had concluded. Her curls were a mess, her feet hurt, she'd seen absolute wonders that had her reeling, and still Peter wanted to see more.

“No,” Yondu said.

It was the first word Yondu had said in two hours, and it was the first word Peter listened to. The boy closed his mouth and stood obediently next to his mother. Meredith stared with wide eyes.

“You couldn't have said that an hour and a half ago,” she snapped.
“I ain't his parent; he's supposed to listen to you, ain't he? Besides,” Yondu grunted, “just finished with the parts. Don't need to be here anymore.”

“Isn't there something you're forgetting,” Peter asked.

“No.”

“Something worth exactly eight-two units?”

“No,” Yondu said, “and shut up.”

“Hey, I told you to do it!” Peter's face turned red. “You better either buy something or give those units back!”

“Told him to do what?” Meredith looked back and forth between them. “What are you talking about? I swear, if this is another thing like the 'parent-teacher-conference' incident I'm going to ground you both for a week.”

Algon laughed from his gut; Peter turned red. Yondu looked offended. Meredith crossed her arms and glared at the two of them.

“Okay, you two, out with it,” she said.

“The boy's too lazy to do his own damn shoppin' and he paid me to pick up some Terran shit from Algon's,” Yondu said.

“For your birthday,” Peter added.

“And when I heard,” Algon said, “I wanted to do an honorary sale. Discounts on everything! Free food! Free non-alcoholic drinks!”

Meredith's eyes expanded like silver plates.

“Oh my God it's my birthday,” she breathed.

“What,” Peter said.

“You did not know?” Algon chuckled. “How odd.”

“She knew, she just forgot.” Yondu crossed his arms; Meredith could have sworn he was trying not to laugh. “All this shit for her and she can't even bother to remember what day it is.”

“I didn’t – I'm so sorry, I just – I’ve been so busy!” She ran both hands through her curls. “Oh my God, I forgot my own birthday.”

“That is okay.” Algon patted her shoulder with his enormous claw. “We remembered for you and purchased you a proper present.”

“Present?” Meredith froze. “Present? What present?”

“This.” Yondu gestured towards a damaged cardboard box. “Bought eight-two units worth of Terran junk; take a look.”

Meredith approached the box as if it was a live bomb. Inside were vinyl records, cassette tapes, and a wire-bare set of headphones. Meredith pressed a hand over her mouth; tears burned the corners of her eyes. She whipped around and made noises that could possibly have been construed as gratitude.
Algon and Peter beamed; Yondu bared his teeth and shifted from foot-to-foot. Meredith didn’t care; she hugged all of them. Hugging Algon felt like hugging a scaled tree, Peter hung onto her waist like a child-belt, and Yondu froze as quickly as if she'd held a gun to his head.

“Thank you so much,” she cried.

“You are welcome.” Algon patted her head. “Please let go. I am technically still at work.”

“Right, right, sorry.” Meredith backed up and wiped the tears from her eyes. “I'm just – thank you so much.”

Yondu was violet; Peter kept hugging her.

“I love you, mom,” he said.

“I love you too, baby,” Meredith knelt down to hug him properly. “You've done so much for me and I'm so proud.”

Peter squeezed her tighter. Over her son's shoulder, Meredith looked up at Yondu.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Don't say that,” he grunted.

Meredith smiled.

The birthday surprises, as Meredith soon discovered, were not over. As soon as she paced up the ramp again, she was greeted with the sight of Lunis, Drazkar, Holdon, Gef, and a couch so ugly that Meredith could believe the Eclector had made it themselves. It was dingy, ill-formed, asymmetrical, and if that wasn't enough, Meredith was sure she couldn't vacuum under those stubby legs. The thick, rough fabric was made of huge geometric shapes in orange, blue, violet, and hazel green. The dark wood had a grotesque, circular pattern, as if the wood had been nothing but knots. The only positive characteristic of the couch was that it looked flammable.

“What in God's name is that,” Meredith asked.

“This?” Lunis leaned against the back of the couch. “Nothing. Don't need it.”

“Good couch though, ain't it lass?” Gef crossed over to the couch. “Nice size.”

“Pretty comfortable too, even for someone as big as me,” Holdon added.

“Antique,” Drazkar purred.

“Right, antique. Not something we're likely to take care of. You could take it, Quill,” Holdon suggested.

“Great idea! You probably need a couch, don't you lass?” Gef patted the couch cushions. “Take a seat!”
“Um,” Meredith managed.

“Free couch,” Lunis encouraged, “just for you.”

“We picked it out ourselves,” Drazkar said proudly.

Drazkar was immediately set upon by Lunis and Holdon, who beat him into silence. Meredith’s eyes raked over the gaudy blocks of orange, blue, violet, and hazel.

“You don’t like it,” Gef realized.

“What?” Lunis stopped kicking Drazkar.

“No, no, I like it!” Meredith’s eyes flew wide. “I really do, I just – it’s big, and my apartment is kind of small, and I already have a couch.”

“That’s okay. We’ll get rid of your old one,” Holdon promised.

“Oh. Yay.” Meredith grinned as well as she could. “But, you know, if you guys picked this out yourselves I’d hate to take it from you.”

“We want you to have it,” Holdon said.

“We picked it out for you,” Drazkar whined.

Lunis kicked Drazkar again. Meredith’s eyes slid from the gaudy couch to the barely-concealed hope in their expressions.

“I love it,” she lied.

The roars of triumph echoed through the cargo bay. Holdon and Drazkar lifted the couch into the Suzarra, beaming with pride. Meredith forced a grin as Gef told her the exciting tale of how long they’d argued over what to get her. Lunis told her Oblo hadn’t wanted to get her anything at all – Meredith desperately wished they’d listened to him. They dispersed off down different hallways; Meredith put her head in her hands and groaned. Everything was a problem.

First, she’d have to explain everything to her boss when she returned. Secondly, she’d promised to bring Ellyn to space next time, and honestly, Meredith cursed, why the hell had Meredith even done that? She’d come all the way here to see this extravagant cultural trade center, only to spend half of her time keeping Peter from breaking it. Yondu had gotten her a lovely selection of music for her birthday, but she’d also forgotten her own birthday. Meredith stalked through the ship and boiled in her own stress. She needed to be alone for a little while, she decided, and that would help her sort all of this out. At the very least, it wouldn’t add more problems.

Meredith barged into the kitchen and dropped onto the mess hall bench like a sack of potatoes. She crossed her arms, laid her forehead on them, and exhaled.

“What a day,” she breathed.

“Fuckin’ madhouse, ain’t it?”

Meredith’s head jerked up. Sitting in the corner, half-smothered in shadows, was Yondu. Meredith’s shoulders and spirits sunk.

“Not you,” she moaned.
Yondu chuckled. From behind his back he pulled a bottle of whiskey.

“Shit, Mery. With that attitude,” he said, “you must not want a drink.”

Meredith groaned what could have been mistaken for a plea. Yondu got to his feet, dug some ice out, tossed it in a stout glass, and poured Meredith a generous amount of whiskey.

“Best birthday present all day,” she said.

“Don't get your hopes up.” Yondu raised the bottle to his lips and took a gulp. “You ain't getting a damn thing from me.”

“The music?”

“From the boy, not me. You ain't getting shit from me.”

“Good.” Meredith swirled her glass; the ice spiraled around, clinking against the sides. “The best thing I could possibly have received would have been nothing. The last thing I need right now is a reminder of how long it's been since I left.”

“It ain't even been a year,” Yondu said, “and you're missin' this bullshit already?”

“I meant Earth.”

Yondu's fingers tightened around the bottle.

“It ain't been too long. I'm sure your pop's still alright,” he said finally.

“He'd better be,” she said.

Meredith tilted the glass back, pouring the entire glass down her throat. Yondu watched her throat move as she swallowed; it caught a bit, and she slammed a fist on her chest.

“Swallowed an ice cube,” she coughed.

Yondu knocked her on the back lightly; she gave a thumbs-up, and he stopped. Meredith lifted her glass; he filled it up again.

“You tryin' to get smashed,” he asked.

Meredith stared at the glass.

“No,” she said, “not with Peter in the state he's in.”

“Runnin' around like a goddamn fool, you mean.” Yondu corked the bottle and set it on the table. “He been like that a lot lately?”

“Yes, about anything to do with the rest of the universe.” Meredith ran her fingers through her curls and sighed. “I just don't get it. On the Eclector, he was fine!”

Yondu raised an eyebrow.

“He was mostly fine,” Meredith corrected, “but lately he's just been – I don't know. I discipline, I encourage, I teach, I'm patient, and for the most part he's fine. Whenever we get around space, or exploration, or even the idea of going somewhere he hasn't seen before, he makes a beeline for it and just won't give it up. Maybe it's me. Maybe I'm just not disciplining him enough, or giving him
enough space to explore, or maybe I'm just garbage at parenting. I just don't know, Yondu.”

Yondu pulled out his arrow and fiddled with it, spinning in his fingers and tapping it against his leg. He sat down across from Meredith and gave her a long, hard look.

“When was the last time you took a day off,” he asked.

“Today,” she said.

“I meant from takin' care of the boy.”

“The day before he was born,” Meredith joked.

“Mery.” Yondu's expression was unusually serious. “You're burnin' out, Star-Queen.”

Meredith's expression fractured in surprise.

“Burning out? What do you mean,” she asked.

“I mean tired. Burned-out, exhausted, dead-on-the-inside, all that shit.” Yondu turned his arrow over in his fingers. “You look it. You sound it.”

“I'm not dead-on-the-inside,” Meredith defended. “I'm just busy all the time.”

“Mery.” Yondu almost smiled. “You're a damn shit liar, Mery.”

“I'm just busy,” she protested.

“You're stressed as shit,” he snapped, “and too damn stubborn to admit it.”

“I am not.”

“You forgot your own damn birth date, Mery.”

“Oh, shut up.” Meredith drained more of her whiskey. “I'm fine, Yondu.”

“Bullshit.”

“What?”

“I said bullshit.” Yondu took the cork out of the bottle again. “Lyin' bullshit.”

Meredith finished her whiskey; Yondu poured her another glass and took a swig out of the bottle.

“Slow down,” he cursed, “that's two glasses in less than ten minutes.”

“I'll drink what I want,” she snapped.

As if to prove it, she took another sip. Yondu scowled and took a swig.

“I ain't to blame if you get drunk,” he said.

“I'm not going to get drunk,” she said.

“Are too.”

“Am not.”
“Are too.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

“I don’t have the energy for this,” Meredith groaned.

She put her head on her folded arm and closed her eyes. Yondu stared at the table and kept drinking. There were thoughts funneling towards him like active missiles; he stubbornly refused to allow them. He processed his fears and worries, crushing them like bird's eggs tossed into a steel machine of war. The problem was that as soon as he destroyed them, they'd come popping back into his head again.

He was pretty damn sure it had everything to do with Mery.

When she was gone, it was easy; tell himself everything's fine and that he shouldn't give a shit if it wasn't. When she was here, Yondu was forced with the blunt and uncomfortable realization that everything was not fine and that whether he liked it or not, some dumbass part of him stubbornly insisted on giving a shit. Her weight hadn't improved; Yondu was sure she was starving. She hadn't taken a day off; the woman had to be stressed to her last nerve. He knew she hadn't had sex in over eight years; Yondu wasn't sure what that was doing to her, but he'd bet units it wasn't good.

He took another swig out of the bottle and growled at himself. Knock it off, asshole – you know where those thoughts go. A soft snuffling sound distracted him. Meredith was breathing softly and deeply.

“Mery?” Yondu tapped her elbow. “You asleep, Mery?”

No response; out cold, Yondu decided. He stood, wiggled her whiskey glass out of her other hand, and drained it.

“Alright, lil' momma, let's get your ass up.” Yondu paced around the table and pulled her into his arms. “Light as a goddamn helium tank. Need to eat more, Mery – get them curves back.”

Meredith curled into the warmth of his body; Yondu swallowed. He smacked the door panel with his shoulder and paced to the cargo bay. With most of the crew on Contraxia, Yondu wasn't worried about being seen. To the remainder of the crew, seeing Mery drunk would be more of a novelty than a blemish on Yondu's reputation. Yondu stepped down the stairs slowly and deliberately, trying not to jostle her. He tried to open the door to Meredith's room by bumping it with his shoulder; it wouldn't budge. Yondu hit it a little harder; it didn't move, but Meredith did. Cursing under his breath, Yondu took a few steps back. When Meredith quieted, Yondu shifted her up in his arms. One swift front-kick from Yondu activated the door panel; the portal opened.

Yondu laid Meredith in bed and rolled her on her side. His hand paused as he brushed the softness of her curls. Against his better instinct, he slid them off her face. The bruised circles under her eyes were fading, and her eyelashes were dark against her skin. Damn it all, but she'd gotten pretty damn pretty. Yondu rubbed her lower lip with his thumb.

“Sleep tight, idjit,” he mumbled.

Yondu turned off the lights; the only light now was the soft glow of the door panel. The light from the cargo bay flooded through the open door, covering Meredith in a rectangular block of soft white. The shadows seemed to deepen; the hum of the engine was deafening. Yondu was hyperfocused, crushing thoughts as they threatened to endanger him, obliterating his impulses almost as soon as they cropped up in his mind. There were too many of them, and the worst part was that Yondu had
no idea why. There was no logical reason to have so much stupid concern, so much dumbass worry, for one goddamn woman who probably thought he was the universe's dumbest piece of shit. Yondu's hand was cold; there was sweat between his palm and the door panel.

Fuck it; he was the universe's dumbest piece of shit.

He took three long steps into the room, curled his hand behind Meredith's jaw, and kissed her. There was a sweetness to her lips that bled with the residual whiskey; Yondu ran the tip of his tongue along her bottom lip to taste it. Softly, he turned her head to the side again. Her breathing remained soft and steady; completely asleep, Yondu thought. He turned around, closed the door, and paced back to his cabin. He didn't look back; he wouldn't even allow himself the thought.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this was originally posted during the weekend, but I quickly realized that none of you get updates when I edit. I didn't want you to think that I forgot, so I republished.

Thank you in advance for your patience!
The Atazi

Chapter Summary

An entire Ravager clan has gone dark, and the Ogords must find out why.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I'm just saying,” Charlie-27 began, “I don't see the bloody point in any of it.”

*Why do we all have to go?* Krugarr was draped over the seat like a long glob of scarlet toothpaste. *I have other things to do.*

“We all have other things to do, Krugarr.” Aleta flicked an overhead switch; the navigation overlay appeared on the screen. “I need a heading.”

“Typhor Nebula.” Mainframe tapped a map; star systems appeared on it. “It's likely that Pa Zir went to ground somewhere here.”


“It's the only nebula within sixty parsecs that has planets habitable for his species.” Mainframe rolled his optics. “You know – lucky guess.”

“Don't be a smartass,” Stakar warned.

“It's better than being a dumbass,” Mainframe said, “right, Martinex?”

“Uh-huh.” Martinex's eyes were trained on the datapad. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Martinex,” Mainframe sighed, “are you even listening to me?”

“What?” Martinex’s head popped up. “We're talking about the Berhert job, right?”

“No, you idiot.” Aleta scowled. “That was ten minutes ago.”

“What are you reading,” Charlie asked.

Martinex slid the datapad under his leg.

“What kind of nothing,” he said.

Charlie and Krugarr exchanged a look. Aleta's mouth soured.

“What kind of nothing,” she asked.

“It's a book.” Martinex slid the datapad out from under his leg and showed it to her. “See? An older one. I've read it twice. It's by my favorite author.”

“Tontorius Pavel,” Mainframe recited, “the arachnid to-go breakfast.”


“Yeah, Stria Lonely.” Martinex’s voice rose in hope. “Did any of you ever read the copies I lent to you?”


*I read everything except that part,* Krugarr said.

“I got frustrated.” Stakar shrugged. “It takes people much too long to just get it over with and fuck in all these novels.”

“I tossed it in the garbage disposal as soon as I knew you had another copy,” Aleta said flatly.

Martinex sagged in his chair.

“And you wonder why I go to other people to talk about my interests,” he muttered.

“If by 'other people', you mean the webnet,” Stakar clarified.

“It counts, captain.”

“Can we get back to the damn mission,” Aleta snapped.

“Yes, let's. Why are we looking for Pa Zir again? He's a captain,” Charlie said, “just call the bastard.”

“The last thing we heard from Pa Zir was a broadcast, a distress comm from his ship Atazi, about Kree attacking. Now I can't get a read on his ship anywhere.” Mainframe pulled up an overlay of the star system. “See? So either he's gone to ground and running away from us, or the Kree have destroyed him.”

“Fine, I get it.” Charlie-27 leaned back in his chair. “I'm all for killing Kree, but what's so big that you need all of us?”

“If this isn't the Kree, then it's treason.” Stakar slid a cigarette from his belt and held it out to Martinex. “If it is the Kree, then it's fun.”

“Fun's one word for it.” Martinex pinched the tip of the cigarette with his right hand, igniting it. “I'm not sure which one I'm hoping for; that the Kree attacked and Pa Zir didn't betray us, or that Pa Zir is still alive but did something stupid.”

“Pa Zir is a shifty bastard, but he's not two-faced.” Aleta clicked her nails on the arm of her chair. “We're going to find blood, Martinex; there's no way around that.”

Martinex exhaled. He tossed his datapad onto the control console and stood.

“I'll get the medic bag,” he mumbled.

Martinex paced through the chairs and disappeared down the ladder. Mainframe looked to Krugarr, who looked to Stakar, who sighed.

“He'll be fine,” Stakar said.
You know how he feels about the Kree, Krugarr stressed.

“If Stakar says he'll be fine, he'll be fine. Martinex is a Ravager, not some bleeding-heart medic. He can do his job,” Aleta said curtly, “so focus on doing yours.”

Krugarr's tail twisted in concern; Charlie-27 closed his eyes and exhaled. After a few minutes, Martinex stepped back up the ladder with a stained white duffel bag over his shoulder.

“I brought everything we have.” His voice was deadened. “Hope there's enough alive for me to use it.”

*It's going to be fine,* Krugarr assured.

“Did you look at the future or are you just saying that to make me feel better,” Martinex asked.

Krugarr didn't respond.

“That's what I thought.” Martinex leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. “How long until we get there?”

“The Atazi's last known location is just on the other side of this asteroid,” Stakar said.

“Great.” Martinex shifted. “Not a lot of waiting.”

Stakar steered around the asteroid. As the rugged surface passed the front window, the silence seemed to sharpen. The Atazi had been savagely ripped in half. Air exhaust tubes, load-bearing beams, and destroyed weaponry hung like spilt intestines between the two chunks of hull. The ship floated as lifeless as a corpse, barely lit by the glow of a distant blue sun.

“By the stars,” Aleta breathed.


“None, captain.” Mainframe's metallic voice shivered with emotion. “Not a one.”

Charlie-27 put his hand on Martinex’s shoulder.

“Looks like we won't be needing the bag,” he said quietly.

When Martinex dropped the strap it was smoking.

“There's no way of knowing what parts of the Atazi are still stable, so don't disengage your maglocks *ever.* Keep hold of your safety cord and don't get stupid on me.” Mainframe shoved a scanner into everyone's hands. “Stakar and I will be back here; if somebody gets lost, get to an exit and we'll find you.”

“Understood.” Aleta snapped down the visor on her helmet. “Tell us if you see anything shift; I don't want to get crushed to death in there.”

“It's times like this when I'm glad I can't freeze to death.” Martinex adjusted his mask. “Are you going to be okay, Charlie?”
“These things get tighter every time you make them, MF.” Charlie-27 pulled at his space suit with a grimace.

“I'm sorry,” Mainframe said scathingly, “I can't sew in plus sizes.”

*Hush, both of you.* Krugarr slithered to the exit port with no apparatus at all. *Less sassing, more analyzing. We have an entire clan to find.*

“Find? Krugs, they're dead,” Martinex said.

*No, they are not.* Krugarr opened the airlock; his tail lifted into the air like a ribbon as the artificial gravity depleted. *I've done my own analysis on that ship. There are no life signs. There are no organic signs at all.*

“What does that mean,” Aleta asked.

With his willowy scarlet arms, Krugarr pushed off into space. His tail trailed behind him as he flew towards the corpse of the Atazi, disappearing into the hull.

*It means someone stole our people.*

The rest of the team launched themselves after him. They slowly descended towards the ship; when they were close enough, their boots magnetized to the floor. Aleta and Charlie-27 flicked on their headlamps and looked about.

“He's right.” Martinex paced after Krugarr. “I can't see a single body.”


“The 72**nd** was heavily armed,” Aleta admitted, “and Pa Zir was smart. He'd never let this happen if he could prevent it.”

*You three focus on scanning the ship. I want to go straight to the bridge and see if Pa Zir recorded anything before the attack.* Krugarr passed his hand over an air vent; the grate detached and he slithered in. *I will contact you at a later time.*

“We need to see if this was a battle or just a total ass-kicking.” Martinex looked down the hall; the ceiling was collapsed. “Does anybody know the way to the hangar bay?”

“Mainframe?” Aleta touched her helmet. “Hangar bay directions.”

“Take a left,” Mainframe suggested.

Martinex gestured towards the collapsed ceiling with a flat expression. Charlie-27 chuckled. He rolled his shoulders, grabbed the shattered metal, and lifted. The screech of the metal was nearly silent in space. Aleta and Martinex crawled under; Charlie-27 waited until they'd passed, then tossed the rubble over his other shoulder.

“Forgot how nice it is having you around, big guy.” Martinex grinned. “Think you can pull this ship back together?”

“Don't tempt me. Which way, MF?” Charlie looked at the stairs. “We've got up and we've got down.”
“Usually the answer is down, but the entire floor has fallen through,” Mainframe said, “so you'll have to go up and I'll find you a way down somewhere else.”

“Mainframe, dude. We've got magnetized boots,” Martinex reasoned, “let's just walk on the ceiling.”

“That's be a great idea if the ceiling wasn't made of live electrical currents, Marty.”

“Oh. Damn.”

“We're going up.” Aleta grabbed the railing and ascended.

At the top of the stairs was a long, straight hallway with branches every ten yards.

“Side hall; probably runs right under the battery for the right cannon.” Charlie-27 touched the wall with a gloved hand. “There's no blaster fire here.”

“No sign of a struggle at all in this section. Architecturally compromised,” Aleta allowed, “but not a battle site.”

They continued on. The hallways that branched off were mostly collapsed; a few ended in gaping holes through which the infinite void could be seen.

“If the electrical currents downstairs are still live,” Martinex said, “that means one of the generators is still working. A backup?”

“Looks like it. The core of the ship is cold, but there's an emergency generator attempting to keep main systems online. Life support is wrecked and there's clearly no artificial gravity, but at least it's kept the lights on.” Mainframe sighed on the other end of the line. “It's a shame. She was a hell of a ship.”

“With a hell of a crew,” Aleta agreed.

They continued down the hallway.


“They wouldn't go without a fight,” Martinex said.

“They may not have had much of a choice. Come on,” Aleta said, “the bridge is just ahead.”

Krugarr was waiting for them. He had wired the comm system back together, but it remained dark.

“Mainframe?” Aleta scanned the system. “Where's the fault?”

“Circuit 2-3A is burnt out. Try rerouting it through circuit 3-8K,” he answered.

Krugarr popped out a wire and slid it into a different port; the lights of the comm system fluttered open like awakened eyes. The videos were mostly corrupt; barely-distinguishable figures rushed about through static. Martinex took over; with a few swift swipes and some adjustment, most of the static dispersed. Ravager figures, identified by the dull serpent-green of Pa Zir's clan, were falling to the ground and grasping at their throats and noses. A faint orange tinge tainted the image. Martinex's eyes narrowed.

“Gas? No, the ship's ventilation would have purged it. Orange color – maybe a chemical agent that bonds automatically with organic matter? Maybe an organic spore that exists in space itself.”
Martinex wondered.

“Someone killed our people.” Aleta’s fist tightened around the grip of her blaster. “I'm going to chew someone's throat out for this.”

*Ship sensors confirm enemy craft fit the profile of Kree.* Krugarr scanned through the logs. *Three against one. They flanked the Atazi and crippled her engines. Then, they fired something into the ship. A torpedo of sorts; I cannot identify the silhouette.*

“Probably full of whatever it is that choked our people,” Charlie-27 said.

_The Kree boarded._ Krugarr lifted his eyes to the video screen; Kree in spacesuits were grabbing the limp Ravagers. _They took the crew off-board._

“Kidnapped? So they could still be alive,” Martinex said.

“We'll find them.” Aleta watched the Kree with a frigid, predatory look. “We'll kill every Kree in the galaxy if we have to.”

“Wait, wait.” Charlie-27 narrowed his eyes. “Pull up that camera there. Enlarge it, Marty.”

Martinex obliged. The screen showed a Kree in a dark hood flanked by two marked officers.

“Pause. There, right there.” Charlie-27 moved closer to the screen. “That's Ronan, that is.”

“Impossible. Ronan is a high-ranking member of the Kree Empire; they know better than to outright attack a Ravager clan,” Aleta said.


“We need to get this back to Stakar.” Martinex plugged in a drive and began draining the data. “MF? We're uploading.”

“Standing by to receive data,” Mainframe confirmed.


Onscreen, paralyzed Ravagers were being dragged off the ship. Ronan surveyed the labor. As Pa Zir passed, he gave the stiff pirate a kick in the ribs. Pa Zir didn't flinch.

“Muscular rigidity,” Martinex observed.

“He stole my goddamn Ravagers,” Aleta snarled.

“Data received.” The screens went black as Mainframe drew the data from the wreck of the Atazi. “Stakar wants you all back on the ship. Now.”

It was practically a funeral. Aleta stared out at the corpse of the Atazi. Charlie-27 and Krugarr leaned against opposite sides of the wall, both of their heads cast down. The only sound in the room was Mainframe’s metal fingers tapping at the keys as he and Martinex attempted to identify the paralyzing agent. Stakar smoked a cigarette, staring out into the void.

“So the Kree are splintering off.” Stakar's voice was scarcely above a murmur. “They're united in
cause, but not in method.”

He stabbed his cigarette into the metal arm of his chair; a spark smoldered, then perished.

“And they don't give a damn about what it takes to achieve their goals. The Kree are bad, but this?” Mainframe watched the video with an expression of horror. “This is ungodly. If they're willing to risk this, they must be bolder than I'd predicted.”

_They're going to start attacking en masse. Entire clans are going to fall, Krugarr said, and they'll enslave the populace._

“It's going to be like the old times all over again,” Charlie-27 said.

The reality of the situation settled over them like a heavy smog, pressing in on their chests. Martinex gave Aleta a sullen look over his shoulder; she didn't take her eyes off the Atazi.

“They'll kill us all to get to the Xandarians. We're at war,” Stakar said, “whether we wanted to be or not.”


“The question is,” Aleta asked slowly, “who's going to be the one to tell Yondu?”

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Chapter End Notes

*runs through, tosses a short chapter at your face and sprints by*

Just because they're not frequent (or particularly long...) doesn't mean I haven't forgotten about updates! I miss writing this so much and I miss being able to post frequently! Be safe! <3
Kree Hunting

Chapter Summary

All Ravager clans have been given clearance to engage Kree ships, but few know the extent to which the Kree forces will go to succeed against the Xandarians. While Yondu gleefully hunts down his old enemies, Martinex is given the unenviable job of revealing the enslavement of the Atazi.

(I wrote this at 2 in the morning and I have not edited it, but I have a brief moment to publish it, so publish it I shall! Thank you so much for your patience; you guys are the best! <3 )

“Shit shit shit fuck shit!”

Kraglin scrambled through the halls of the Eclector with his arms full of tech. A tri-forked power diverter slipped from his grasp; he caught it between his knees. Slowly, carefully, he wrapped his pinkie finger around one of the forks and lifted it.

“Kraglin!” Yondu's snarl in his ear nearly made him drop everything. “Where in the fire-flecked depths of hell are you?”

“Aye, cap'n! Coming, cap'n!” Kraglin hoisted his load higher and kept sprinting. “Nearly at the bridge!”

As Kraglin approached the bridge, the portal opened. Yondu was standing at the helm surveying the screens he'd opened. On them, Kraglin could see the results of thousands of long-range scans, each one searching for the same thing – the Kree. Kraglin dumped the tech on Gef's desk.

“Give me twenty minutes and a few trial-and-error runs,” Kraglin said, “and I can rig up a power boost for the scanner.”

“Need it done,” was all Yondu said in reply.

It was fortunate for all involved that Kraglin never shirked from hard work; he began his labors immediately. Gef had propped his headset up, listening to the communications from other Ravager ships about Kree in the area. The news about the Atazi had hit like a sledgehammer to the crotch. Every Ravager was out for blood, and none so more than Yondu Udonta.

In a way, Yondu was almost glad. There were few things in life he really relished more than killing Kree, and doing it alongside his family made the revenge all the more sweet. He slid a screen away, letting it disperse into light.

“Gef,” he said, “how's our immediates?”

“The quadrant's clear of activity, captain.” Gef shook his head. “They have no idea we're hunting them.”

“Not yet they don't.” Yondu eyed the screens; a grin was jumping on his face. “Come on, you motherless bastards, show your asses. Moment one of you shows up I'm gonna suck your eyeballs
right out of your skulls.”

Gef and Kraglin exchanged a look.

“Ain't it funny,” Kraglin ventured, “how we ain't got no clue how they took the Atazi?”

“Yeah. All the crew,” Gef chimed in, “taken with some kind of paralyzing gas?”

Yondu didn't acknowledge them; he was staring at a small blip on the scanner.

“Gef,” he barked.

“It's a Nova Corps transport,” Kraglin sighed, “I've checked it already.”

Yondu scowled.

“Maybe,” Gef began, “we ought to find out what that stuff is before we go crashing in on Kree ships.”

Yondu raised his eyes to the ceiling. Fuck it all if his crew weren't such goddamn children sometimes.

“Gef,” he said, “d'you think I'm stupid?”

“No, cap'n,” was the immediate and honest answer.

“You're thinkin' I'm fixin' to bust down with our flight pants round our ankles,” Yondu said, “barin' our naked asses for a solid whoopin', that right?”

“No, cap'n.”

“Don't worry about it, idjit.” Yondu bared his teeth. “I've already got a plan.”

Gef didn't look convinced, but hid his skepticism by taking a long drink of coffee. Suddenly he jolted, coughing up liquid all over his desk. Yondu barely had time to give him an incredulous glance before Gef pointed to one of the screens. An ocean of bright green dots was massing.

“Kree,” he wheezed.

Yondu's hands were on the helm before Kraglin could get to the co-pilot's seat. The Eclector surged forwards, leaping into faster-than-light speeds at a rate normally reserved for escaping the Nova Corps. The starscape seemed to leap for a moment before the Eclector arrived in a new star system.

It was slaughter. Kree ships were blasting each other apart with searing red lasers. A great dark dreadnaught had been shattered into shards of ebony; smaller fighters were weaving through for cover. A pair of ships collided with one another in a violent explosion of orange and white. Yondu leaned back in his chair.

“Stakar,” he snapped.

Gef got on the comms immediately. Yondu reached under his control console and pulled a latch. The Eclector's heat emissions dispersed. They would be invisible to most scanners, Yondu reflected, and that would buy him time. He was all for killing Kree, but watching them rip each other apart like this was somehow disturbing.

“Yondu?” Stakar's face appeared on the comm screen. “What is it?”
“Found your Kree,” Yondu said.

“Permission to engage is granted.”

“They're killin' each other.” Yondu sent the Eclector's live-recording to Stakar. “Goddamn bloodbath up there.”

Stakar put one hand over his jaw and exhaled.

“It must be Ronan. Do not engage. Pull back,” Stakar ordered.

“Pull back?” Yondu couldn’t keep the snarl out of his voice. “I’ve been huntin' these assholes for four weeks, and you want me to pull back?”

“I want you to pull back so we can regroup,” Stakar added, “and with power combined, annihilate the Kree. A temporary retreat, Yondu.”

It didn't sit right with him, and he knew Stakar could tell, but Yondu wasn't about to risk exile on some disobeyed orders. He steered the Eclector around and left the system as fast as he could. Stakar was still looking at the recorded feed.

“These Kree here,” he said, “I recognize the patterns on their wings.”

“Thought they looked familiar,” Yondu said.

“They're a group called the Balkardi. Or at least they were.” Stakar shut off the feed. “That was their entire fleet getting ripped to shreds.”

“Dead Kree,” Yondu said approvingly.

“The Balkardi are a Kree pirate union. Their interests were profits, not politics. They were the closest thing the Kree had to a Ravager clan,” Stakar said, “and now they're doomed.”

“Again, dead Kree,” Yondu shrugged. “The fuck do we care?”

“Think, Yondu. First, Ravagers, now his own people? Ronan is up to something,” Stakar swore, “and I'll be damned if I have no idea what it is.”

“You'll figure it out.”

“I hope so.”

“You will,” Yondu said, “you're too goddamn stubborn not to.”

“Yes, well.” Stakar chuckled. “That reminds me; Martinex made a breakthrough on the Atazi attack.”

“He sent me a comm earlier,” Yondu recalled, “he said we wouldn't have to worry about that gas anymore.”

“It's not a gas, it's – well, he could explain it better. Transferring you now,” Stakar said.

Stakar's face vanished from the comm screen. After a moment, Martinex's head appeared. He was wearing a pair of safety goggles that had some kind of orange dust on the edges. His shirt was buttoned improperly and his eyes were wide.
“Aha! Yes, Yondu! I've done it! I figured it out!” Martinex held up a small orange vial of what looked like dust. “Microscopic paralytic xeno-sensitive nanorobotic swarms.”

“In a language I can fuckin' understand, Marty?”

“Really tiny orange robots that inject a paralyzing poison into any organism that isn't a Kree,” Martinex said.

“And we kill them with?”

“I haven't gotten that far yet,” Martinex said, “but for now, just keep any biohazard suits you have real close, okay? I'm going to try finding a way to kill these things.”

“Now hold on.” Kraglin leaned over and squinted at the orange vial. “How the hell did Ronan get his paws on nanobytes?”

“Another good question that I don't have an answer to yet. Mainframe is working on how these things are made; my current mission is how to unmake them.” Martinex laughed. “Burning them to death works, but it's not a long-term solution. Can't make a flamethrower in space, you know; the whole oxygen thing.”

“That is a problem,” Gef acknowledged.

“At any rate, it's coming along splendidly. Four weeks of work finally paying off. What about you,” Martinex asked, “have you landed anything to shoot at yet?”

“A transport or two, nothing worth talking about. Just went face-to-face with a shooting gallery but Stakar told me to pull back,” Yondu complained.

“He's just worried.” Martinex's expression grew solemn. “Did you hear about what happened to the forty-first?”

“Lost their flagship.” Yondu nodded. “Good hearin' the captain and crew survived.”

“Aleta's getting them a new flagship as we speak, but it was a close one.” Martinex gave Yondu a focused look. “We don't want to lose anyone if we can help it.”

Yondu shifted. The implied translation – *we don't want to lose you* – was something he was going to have to get used to.

“It'll be fine,” he managed.

“Don't be an idiot,” Martinex warned.

“Can't help it.” Yondu cracked a crooked-toothed grin. “Natural talent.”

Martinex chuckled.

“I'll let you get back to it. Fly safe,” Martinex said before shutting off the screen.

Yondu only nodded. The scanner screens were back up, and a lone green dot was weaving its way across it.

“Gef,” he said.

“Kree weapons shipment,” Gef said immediately, “going to reinforce the battle. Marked with
Ronan's crew.”
Yondu reached for the proton torpedoes.

No sooner had Martinex shut off the comm screen than Charlie-27 was leaning in the door.
“What? No,” Martinex said, “Stakar was going to tell him.”
Charlie-27 shook his head slowly.
“Fuck,” Martinex breathed.
“If he finds out we knew and didn't tell him,” Charlie-27 started.
“What, so now that's my job? I'm not – hold on, let me incinerate this.” Martinex passed his right hand over his goggles, melting away the orange dust. “These things go for the eyes.”
Charlie-27 waited until Martinex had passed through the lab's biosecurity before he began again.
“If Yondu finds out that Ravagers are being enslaved and we didn't tell him, we are all in trouble. Big trouble. We just got him back; I don't want to bloody lose him again! If I tell him,” Charlie-27 reasoned, “he'll get pissed-off at Stakar and Aleta. If they tell him, he's liable to go rampaging off on some killing-spree on their behalf. But if you tell him?”
“If I tell him, he goes into a state of cold, dark rage where the only thing he cares about is killing Kree, because he can't get mad at Stakar or Aleta because I'm telling him on their orders,” Martinex answered dully.
“Yes!”
“Here's a really new concept for you, Charlie – maybe, just maybe,” Martinex said scathingly, “we should think more about what Yondu would want to hear rather than what we want his reaction to be.”
“You can't sugar-coat this, Marty.” Charlie-27 exhaled. “This is going to be a blow.”
“Then let it be a blow! He's an adult,” Martinex stressed, “with a ship and a crew and a life outside of just us. He can handle this.”
“Then tell him.”
“I shouldn't have to! Nobody should be glass-stepping around this!”
“If you think it ought to be done, then you ought to do it.”
“Yes, great, I love that logic. Marty, tell Yondu the truth because we're all scared of it.” Martinex paced down the hallway step-in-step with Charlie-27. “And when I call you out on it, it becomes 'Marty, tell Yondu the truth because you're just braver than us'. Two ways to say the same thing; nobody's got the stones but me.”
“Aleta and Stakar don't want to lose him. I don't want to lose him. You're right,” Charlie-27 said, “about everything. We're afraid to lose him. We're afraid we won't do this right. Again.”
Martinex tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

“You're the level-headed one,” Charlie-27 reminded.

For a moment, all that could be heard was Stakar's ship churning. Then, Martinex exhaled.

“Fine,” he said in a dull voice, “but you idiots owe me.”

With that, he turned down a corridor and let the portal shut behind him. As he walked, several Ravagers gave him a salute; he could barely deign to nod at them. His head was packed with emotions; anger at Stakar and Aleta for not telling Yondu the truth, contempt that no one else had the stones to do it, worry about what Yondu would do, and the worst emotion of them all; the feeling that there was no one he could tell any of it to.

Martinex slipped into his private cabin and locked the door. He put his comm link on silent and lowered the lights of the room. He sat at his terminal and opened the interwebs. Earlier, he had been reading Stria's latest book. It hadn't been released in a physical copy yet, but he was determined to finish it before the first release. Martinex would tell Yondu everything, but not until he had finished the book. He would do it, Martinex thought sourly, but he would do it on his own damn time.

Martinex found where he had left off.

_Frost was forming on something in her soul. In the darkness of the public transport, with bodies moving to every side of her, Syara had never felt more alone. She stared at the palms of her three-fingered hands and imagined someone else's entwined therein. Even her physical comforts were imagined for herself; the thought left a bitterness on her tongue._

Martinex's chest burned with a warmth he couldn't give words to. She gets it, he thought. Behind him there was a terrific alarm; Martinex nearly leapt from his chair. The portal opened and Krugarr came slithering in.

_Why was your cabin door locked, _he asked.

“Five – _fucking_ – minutes!” Martinex slammed his fist on the desk; frost arced from it. “Can I get five minutes without somebody needing something from me?”

_Your alarm was set up? Odd. _Krugarr waved his hand; the beeping stopped. _I felt your misery a few moments ago. Are you alright?"

“To put it mildly, Krugarr, abso-fucking-lutely no, I am not alright. I would be more alright,” Martinex exclaimed, “if people would leave me alone to read my smut.”

_You shouldn't be reading that kind of thing while we're strategizing. _Krugarr wagged a finger at Martinex. _Think with your head, not your tongue._

“Krugs, come on. This is my private cabin.” Martinex gestured to his terminal. “This is my private computer that holds my private smut. This is private time, and my thoughts are private thoughts.”

_Privacy is of no concern to a wizard, Martinex. That said, I was only skimming. Your in-depth imaginings were not explored._

“Thank God,” Martinex said.

_You should not hyperfixate on this, Martinex. You're imagining a person behind that pseudonym that cannot possibly exist. She, if it is a she, is a person. People are flawed. If you continue to refuse to reconcile reality with your imagination, _Krugarr predicted, you're going to find yourself very
surprised when reality reconciles itself regardless.

“I'd have to meet her for that to happen. Speaking of,” Martinex asked, “what can you do about the book Yondu and I lifted off Neoke? Can you trace that signature?”

*Of course I can, Martinex.* Krugarr closed his large jet eyes. *That's basic magic, honestly.*

“Great,” Martinex enthused, “so you can track her magically?”

Yes.

“Ha, yeah!” Martinex leapt from his chair and fist-pumped the air, his previous glumness abruptly dispersed. “Gonna meet my smut hero!”

*I'm not going to do it.*

“What,” Martinex said flatly.

It’s a violation of privacy to stalk someone using magic. *I'm not doing it.* Krugarr slithered out of his chair. If you want to find this woman, do it the old-fashioned way.

“You just – no. No!” Martinex sprung from his chair. “You just said privacy is of no concern to a wizard!”

*It isn't, but it should be of concern to you. Do this yourself; I'm not stalking someone for you.*

“How am I supposed to find one woman on a whole planet,” Martinex yelled.

Krugarr gave him a half-lidded look.

*Start with one,* he said, *and keep going.*


Krugarr rolled his enormous eyes and slithered out of the room. Martinex slumped back in his seat and spun slowly. His previous melancholy was sinking into his blood like cold syrup, deadening his spirits. When everyone wanted help, they all turned to Martinex; when he wanted help, he thought bitterly, the only person who bothered was Yondu. Yondu, whom Martinex was going to set off by telling him the truth about the Atazi. Martinex cursed and put his head in his hands; all of his previous worries pierced his skull. He stared at the words on the screen until his eyes blurred out. He couldn't believe what Krugarr said about reality versus his imagination. He couldn't afford to believe it. There were times in his life, Martinex thought, when hope was so threadbare that he had to imagine that he was hopeful. The fate of his planet, Yondu's exile – and Stria, a person he'd never met but had staked a million dreams on. As he stared at the screen, his previous warmth returned, surging through his body with new strength.

“I'll find her,” Martinex vowed.

For a weapons shipment, the freighter had a pretty low-yield defense suite. The Eclector had torn through it like wet paper, the boarding party only slightly less so. Yondu stepped over the corpses, dipping the bottom of his boots in the indigo of their blood. He nudged a dead Kree with his foot, then turned to his crew.
“Grab what you can,” he said.

His crew dispersed through the halls of the mercenary ship and began hoisting crates of ammunition high on their shoulders. Part of the success of the mission came from the crew themselves; many of them had lost family or friends to the Kree Empire. This was as much about revenge as it was about units. Kraglin stepped around Yondu, heading for the bridge so as to drain the computer of relevant intel. Yondu paced down the hall towards the observation room. He leaned against the wall and stared out at the star-speckled void. After a moment of reflection, he decided to detonate the ship when he left and leave no trace that he'd ever been here. No gutted wreck as a warning; just a shattered ship and no answers. Exactly what the Kree had done to the Atari. Grimly, Yondu smiled.

A weak groan emanated from his left. Yondu's head snapped in the direction of the sound. A Kree guard was slumped in the corner; his right leg was bent at an unnatural angle. A dent in his helmet spoke to some head trauma. Unconscious, Yondu realized, not dead, and the bastard was coming to. The Kree reached for a knife as Yondu stomped up to him; with a quick kick, Yondu sent the knife skittering across the floor. Yondu's thick right hand seized the Kree by the neck and held him against the wall like a wet towel. The Kree scrabbled for air as he cursed; indigo blood was draining from under his helmet, pouring on to Yondu's wrist. Yondu placed his free hand over the Kree's mouth, silencing his groaned curses. With one swift motion, Yondu snapped the guard's neck. He let the corpse slide to the floor, then wiped the Kree blood off on his pants. Movement at the door; Yondu tensed.

It was Kraglin.

“Ready to go, cap'n. Drained all the relevant data,” he said, “and ready to disembark on your orders.”

“Let's get the hell out of here,” Yondu said, “and find more of these bastards to kill.”

Back on the Eclector, Yondu had a message waiting. It was from Martinex and all it said was, Call me. In Yondu's experience, the less words Martinex used, the worse things were. He called back immediately.

“Marty?” Yondu could barely wait for the connection to establish. “Marty, hey! You there?”

“Yeah! Yeah, I'm here.” Martinex took a deep breath. “Glad you called.”

“Who's dead,” Yondu blurted.

“What? No! Whoa, no. Nobody's dead.” Martinex held up his hands as if pushing the very thought away from him. “We are all alive. Nobody's dead.”

Yondu's shoulders relaxed.

“But I do have bad news. Extremely bad news.” Martinex put his hands together. “And before I tell you, you need to know a few things.”

“Shoot,” Yondu said.

“Firstly, you need to know that this information doesn't change any of your orders. Secondly, you need to know that Stakar, Aleta, Mainframe, Charlie-27, and Krugarr also know. Also, they told me to tell you because they're a bunch of spineless idiots who don't think you can handle what I'm about to tell you. Fourthly,” Martinex said, “you need to remember that getting pissed isn't going to solve this problem.”
“Fuck,” Yondu breathed.

“Yeah. So, here's what's going on. The crew of the Atazi weren't killed when they were paralyzed. They were hauled off the ship,” Martinex said, “presumably into slavery. We have no idea where they are or what's being done to them. We're afraid to fire on any large Kree ships because our people might be on board. This isn't a search-and-destroy mission; this is a search-and-rescue.”

Ice water was running down Yondu's back.

“They'd be better off dead than wherever they're at,” he heard himself say.

“I know, bro.” Martinex put his head in his hands. “We... I've been trying to track this nanobyte thing down. If we can figure out where it came from, we might find the production facility. If we're lucky, it'll be on the same planet as the slave camps. If not, at least we'll find more Kree to kill.”

“And they wouldn't tell me. Stakar and Aleta,” Yondu said, “they wouldn't tell me.”

“They were afraid you'd shoot off like a proton torpedo.” Martinex's jaw was locked. “They were afraid to lose you.”

“If that's what they're so goddamn worried about,” Yondu snarled, “they coulda just – “

“I know, Yondu.” Martinex's voice was uncharacteristically sharp. “I know, okay? I've been saying that since we found out. I'm the only person who has, so please stop jumping on my neck about it.”

Yondu squinted.

“Marty,” he said, “are they givin' you shit?”

“Inadvertently,” Martinex answered bluntly.

“Stakar?”

“All of them.”

“Want me to raise hell?”

“No, that won't help.”

“Anything I can do?”

“Can you locate Stria Lonely for me?” Martinex's voice was perfectly flat. “Can you search the entire populace of Dakkam?”

Yondu's crimson eyes snapped to the tech Kraglin had been working on.

“What if I told you I could,” he mused.

“Don't be a tease, Yondu.”

“No, I'm fuckin' serious.” Yondu almost laughed. “Marty, I got Dakkam rigged. You think I'm lettin' those Quills out of my sight? Hell, I had you walk Mery around everywhere on Ilyth, remember? Those Terrans are a liability if someone gets hold of 'em.”

“So you actually have surveillance there?” Martinex lifted his head. “Could you actually scan the planet?”
“What would I be lookin' for,” Yondu asked.

“Any long-distance upload of several gigabytes of text-form, all uploaded at once.” Martinex was sitting fully-upright now. “Preferably to an outer server. She could be anywhere on the planet.”

“And it's a she?”

“Almost definitely. If it isn't,” Martinex said, “don't bother looking. I'm kind of picky.”

The fragile hopeful expression on Martinex's face almost made Yondu laugh, but something told him not to. Being Stakar's first mate was a shitty job; Yondu had seen what it did to Aleta. Martinex was tough, Yondu would give him that. He could spare his brother's book-loving eccentricities.

“I'll do what I can,” Yondu said.

“Yes! Yes! Galaxy's best blue-adopted-asshole-brother!” Martinex threw his hands in the air; frost and sparks emitted from them. “I will pay you back for this! I'll – I don't know what I'll do! I'll make Stria write some kind of Terran smutfest for you? I don't know if she does second-person point of view but I'll convince her to give it a shot?”

“I ain't got the faintest fuckin' idea what you're on about, Marty, but leave the Terran out of it. I'll scan the planet when I get the chance.” Yondu leaned back in his chair. “You tell those assholes next time they can say that shit to my face. Ain't right, usin' you like a second-rate comm officer.”

“It's fine! I don't even care at the moment! Stria Lonely! Woo,” Martinex cheered.

“Yeah, yeah. Don't do anything stupid. Talk to you later,” Yondu said.

Martinex was still celebrating when Yondu hung up. Yondu rolled his shoulders back and stared out at the starscape. Ravagers were in slavery, Martinex was in some kind of emotional bullshit, and the family was still tip-toeing around Yondu like he was a live bomb. It was enough to make any man wish for a break. As if on cue, another green blip appeared on the scanner. Yondu examined the readouts; a damaged Kree fighter wandering away from the battle. Yondu seized the weapon controls with renewed vigor and set a searing beam into the fighter's port side. Its port side engine detonated in a flash of white light.

A grin split Yondu's face; it was good to de-stress.
Breakout (Part I)

Chapter Summary

Two events of significance have been set in motion by Yondu Udonta. He has a plan to liberate the 72nd Ravager clan without any assistance from the Ogords; simultaneously, he's sent Martinex to look over the Quills while he's away. Martinex seizes the opportunity to look for Stria Lonely and Meredith seizes the opportunity to set Ellyn up. Yondu enlists some unexpected assistance to perform his rescue; his plan to save the 72nd must go perfectly.

If it doesn't, he's looking at another twenty years as a slave.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been a week since the last Kree raid, and the Eclector was still waiting for Stakar's command to attack. The Ravagers weren't good at sitting around during wartime; fights broke out frequently and were put down just as quick. Tempers were high; even Kraglin found himself tightening screws like he was trying to wrench off someone's finger. He'd heard everything Martinex had said, and the truth had spread like wildfire through the ship. Ronan had kidnapped Ravagers, and when given the opportunity to engage the enemy, Stakar had told them to pull back. The fury of the crew was unparallelled.

The only one who was not affected was Yondu.

This alone caused Kraglin deep concern. Yondu strode around with a calm expression. He crushed fights like a frozen brick; heavy, brutal, and cold. Kraglin had often caught him on the bridge, staring out into the starscape as if expecting it to blink. These were all warning signs; the calm before the storm, and Kraglin had never seen a calm last so long before.

When Kraglin finished the scan-amplifier, he saw the first winds begin. Yondu leaned out of his captain's chair and grabbed the amplifier with one hand.

"Been waitin' for you to finish," he grunted.

"Had to be perfect, cap'n, for whatever the hell it is you're gonna do." Kraglin gave Yondu a wide berth; something in his brain was ringing an alarm. "What are we looking for?"


Kraglin squinted slightly. Yondu pulled up the comm link himself, lazily scrolling through his contacts until he found Martinex.


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"Why don't you call Quill," Yondu said, "check on the Terrans."

Yondu phrased it as a request; Kraglin heard an order. Kraglin paced of the bridge like he was walking away from a rabid lion. Ms. Q was a good damn idea; maybe she'd be able to snap Yondu out of whatever deep hell-rage was brooding just beneath the surface. Kraglin called her immediately.
“Ms. Q?” Kraglin tried to keep the panic out of his voice. “Hey, Ms. Q!”

“Hey, Kraglin! How’s the Eclector,” Meredith asked.

“Drazkar got a bad burn; fur caught on fire during a raid. He's alright now,” Kraglin said, “but he's still kind of favorin' that arm. Lunis and Gef are alright. Holdon, he's never hurt. Guy's built like a steel tree.”

“How is Yondu?”

Thank the stars she'd asked, Kraglin thought.

“Still the cap'n. Kickin' ass, killin' Kree. But, uh, there's somethin' off.” Kraglin started tapping his omnitool against his leg as he walked, burning nervous energy. “He's been pretty happy lately, what with the killin' Kree thing, but there's been a development.”

“A development?”

“Some of the Kree have started kidnappin' our clans.”

“The Kree are kidnapping Ravagers?” Kraglin could hear the panic in Meredith's voice spike. “Are you all okay? What's going on?”

Kraglin tried to answer, but Meredith ran him over.

“You tell me if anything happens, okay? If I hear on the news that the 99th Ravager clan got kidnapped,” she said, “I'm not going to be able to calm down.”

“You gonna come flyin' in on a fighter,” Kraglin joked, “blow up some Kree, save the day?”

“You know I would. Peter could fly. He learned from Yondu, after all, and no one's as good at flying spaceships into hazardous conditions as Yondu.” Meredith laughed. “I can still remember him plowing through the ceiling on Ego's planet.”

“Yeah, well, he's about to do something eight times crazier than that.” Kraglin shot a glance over his shoulder, half-expecting Yondu to be right behind him. “He's gone quiet, Ms. Q. Like a tickin' time bomb before it burst.”

“What's he about to do?”

“That's just it,” Kraglin hissed, “I don't know! All he said was somethin' about helpin' Martinex hunt down that book lady. What does that have to do with Ravagers?”

“If I know Yondu, it has everything to do with it. He's smarter than he looks,” Meredith admitted.

“I'm worried, Ms. Q.”

“Do you trust him?”

The question smacked Kraglin in the face like a tossed hammer.

“Of course,” he began.

“Then don't worry about it. I'm sure whatever he's going to do will be the best thing for the Ravager clans,” said Meredith.
“Oh come on, Ms. Q, not you too. This is serious,” Kraglin stressed.

“Kraglin, it'll be okay. Whatever it is,” Meredith said, “Yondu can handle it.”

Kraglin gritted his teeth together. Usually it was Ms. Q doubting the captain and Kraglin reassuring her; he now understood how frustrating it was to be on the other side.

“Fine.” He couldn't keep the edge out of his voice; it had been a long week. “But when he does somethin' crazy and half-near gets us all killed, you remember I warned you.”

“Yes, Kraglin.” Meredith laughed. “Take care of yourself, okay? And Yondu too, if you can manage.”

“Yeah,” was all Kraglin replied.

Meredith hung up. Kraglin mimed smashing his omnitool against the wall. *Stupid fuckin' crazy-ass people,* he internally hissed, *not listening to a goddamn word I say.*

Kraglin was wrong; Yondu was listening to every word he said, particularly about the nanobyte technology. Kraglin had recognized it on sight, and no wonder; nanotech was a Xandarian specialty. Technology that small and precise had to be made in specialized factories, and there could only be so many capable of producing that level of product. If Yondu was going to create a weapon of that magnitude, he wouldn't waste time building his own; he'd capture an established provider and alter its product to fit his needs. And that, he mused, was what Ronan had done.

Despite Stakar and Kraglin's doubts, Yondu still had the mind of a Kree battle-slave, and he knew how to use it.

Firstly, he needed to cover his assets.

“Marty,” he said as the comm connected, “you there?”

“Yeah, what's up?” Martinex's voice was back to its usual pep. “Seen any action?”

“Still lurkin' back on Stakar's orders. Say,” Yondu said calmly, “you know what I said about helpin' you find that Lonely chic?”

“Yes,” Martinex said quickly.

“Had my first-mate rug up a scan-amplifier. Should be pretty easy to filter the data once the algorithm's been put how you want it. Only problem is,” Yondu said, “the damn thing can't break through atmospheric conditions. You'll need to put it on Dakkam if you want to use it.”

“Not a problem. I've got more vacation time saved up than the rest of you combined. Being Stakar's first mate doesn't exactly allow for a lot of time off,” Martinex said.

“Alright then. You swing by on your way to Dakkam,” Yondu said, “and you can pay me back by watchin' out for the Terrans while you're down there.”

“I see how it is. Somebody's worried about his lady,” Martinex snickered.

“Says the chunk of rock who's stalkin' one.”
“It's not stalking!”

“Marty,” Yondu said, “it's kinda stalkin’.”

“IT's not – look, you know what? I'm not arguing about it. I'll come pick up the amplifier and everything will be fine.” Martinex sighed. “Yeah.”

“Before you hang up, I had a question for you.” Yondu leaned back in his chair and stuck a metal toothpick between his teeth. “About them nanobytes.”

“We're working on ways to destroy them,” Martinex promised.

“Ain't that. What are they used for?”

“Used for?”

“Yeah. Besides poisonin' our people,” Yondu added.

“Lots of things. Medicine, polymer synthesis, green technology. It's actually really interesting,” Martinex said, “when you look at what's been done in the past thirty years.”

It was everything Yondu could do to keep listening. His eyes threatened to glaze over, but he sat and listened to Martinex ramble about nanomedicine in modern pharmaceuticals, microbial processes for synthesizing nanomaterials, nanocapsulation of bioactive food compounds, and other large words that made Yondu want to punch someone.

“So,” Yondu interrupted, unable to bear it a moment longer, “which of them is closest to what we got goin’ on with the Kree?”

“Oh, undoubtedly nanomedicine. These things eschew any biological signal that isn't Kree, latch onto the body, and force it to release adenosine triphosphate. That pulls the muscles rigid. I'm impressed at the precision; they can get it to stop our large muscle groups but still leave the heart and lungs alone. It would be an engineering marvel,” Martinex admitted, “if it wasn't a war crime.”

“Wonder what they'd do with it if it weren't bein' used to kill people,” Yondu asked mildly.

Martinex turned that over in his head.

“Well,” he mused, “if I were a fully-accredited doctor who hadn't missed his last class, I'd utilize it to fix nervous disorders.”

“Yeah?”

“Thousands of people from thousands of species can't produce dopamine or serotonin or a thousand other necessary chemicals and hormones. Imagine how effective it would be to have a tiny little robot constantly monitoring your chemical levels. If you dip low one day,” Martinex explained, “they'd just pop you back to normal levels.”

“Pity the Xandarians don't have somethin' long those lines,” Yondu said.

“They probably do on Xandar. It's the last bastion for Xandarian nanomedicine. Their hospitals on Akir, Yelen-3, and Ranides have been completely obliterated by the Kree. Bastards,” Martinex spat.

“You said it.” It was everything Yondu could do not to smile. “Hang in there, Marty. See you soon.”

“See you soon,” Marty replied cheerfully.
Yondu had to hang up before he started laughing. He pushed aside the comm link and connected to the interweb. Akir, Yelen-3, and Ranides; those sounded like headings to Yondu. He knew from personal experience that the Kree hated spending money on captives; they would have picked a planet with an ambient temperature so that they didn't spend time on heating and cooling. Atmosphere, however, was optional; the Kree would have built underground to escape notice, where air could be recycled without difficulty. Yondu's eyes sped over the entries on Akir; the temperature was arid, but he could see how working underground would counteract that. It was a possibility; he saved it for later. Yelen-3 was out of the question; it was an ice planet fairly in view of the galactic public; even the Nova Corps would notice Kree smuggling slaves there. Ranides was a biome anomaly; a jungle that thrived on sulphuric acid. Yondu couldn't imagine why Xandarians had chosen to put a hospital there in the first place, but the Kree would have used the jungles to great effect as cover. It was either Akir or Ranides, Yondu reflected, and that was a pretty small target compared to the thousands of Kree-owned planets Stakar would be searching. With a self-satisfied grin, Yondu picked at his teeth. Stakar cut him out when they found the Atazi, when they learned about Ronan, and when they'd found out their people had become slaves. Yondu felt no remorse leaving Stakar out of his investigation. He couldn't wait to see what Stakar did when he saved the 72nd clan single-handedly. The expression was so potent in Yondu's mind – mingled acceptance, irateness, pride – that he started to laugh.

Out in the hallway, Yondu's laughter echoed; the rest of the crew could only shudder. Whatever orders they had been waiting for were about to arrive.

Bars of sunlight slid through the clouds, glinting off Martinex's ship. Technically it was Yondu's ship, Martinex reflected, but Yondu had been kind enough to loan it. Kind wasn't really the word; Martinex was well-aware that Yondu was only humoring his 'Stria Lonely' quest. The real reasons for Yondu's uncharacteristically generous behavior were the Quills. Martinex had sworn to check in on Meredith, and he fully intended to keep his promise.

And maybe use Meredith's home as a base of operations during his planet-wide search.

Martinex paced through the streets, glad to be a Plutonian; his wool suit would have been roasting him in this heat. Meredith's home was a walk from the docks. Martinex admired Yondu's thought process there; close enough to rescue her if the need came, and far enough away that they could use launch missiles from her home and detonate enemy ships. Meredith couldn't have any idea how much thought Yondu had put into helping her get established on Dakkam, but then again, Martinex had a sneaking suspicion that Yondu didn't want her to. Martinex hopped up the stairs, adjusted his cufflinks, and knocked on the door. It swung open within seconds; Meredith's face held a look of trepidation.

"Hi," Martinex said.

"Please tell me he's okay," Meredith said.

"He's fine. I'm here on my own accord, actually. May I come in," Martinex asked.

"Yeah, absolutely."

Meredith backed up, letting Martinex in the house. It was just as small and depressing as Yondu had described it, but Martinex smiled anyway.
“I like your house,” he lied.

“It’s small, but it’s home enough for me and Peter.” Meredith beamed back. “Can I get you something to eat?”

“No, thank you. I ate on the flight.” Martinex pressed his hands together, letting the steam roll from them. “Look, Meredith, I – I need a favor.”

“What’s up?”

Now that he was here, it felt like a lot to ask. He shifted from foot to foot, trying to find the words.

“Do you remember when Stakar and I were at dinner,” he began, “and I mentioned an author?”

“Yes, Stria Lonely.”

“Yes! Yes, you remember!” Martinex pointed at her. “Okay, so this is about that. I’m looking for her and I’ve narrowed her location down to this planet.”

“This planet?” Meredith chuckled. “What are the odds?”

“Actually, it’s not that unusual.” Martinex half-grinned. “Dakkam is a great city-planet with excellent growth opportunities. It’s also extremely difficult for anyone to be tracked here because their data systems are practically archaic. There are thousands of servers on this planet dispersing information. Finding someone on this planet is like trying to hear a bee in radio static.”

“Wow,” Meredith said, “I had no idea!”

Wow indeed, Martinex thought, that you never questioned why Yondu pushed you to settle here.

“At any rate,” he continued, “I’ve got a device that should help me narrow down the search exponentially, but it’s going to take a while to calibrate, and – ”

Martinex cut his own sentence off. Meredith tilted her head slightly, waiting for him to finish. Meredith Quill, who had brought his brother out of exile. Meredith Quill, who lived in a two-bedroom apartment in the thick of the city. Meredith Quill, who had no idea how much time and energy Yondu had put into keeping her safe. Meredith Quill, who could barely afford to live, let alone to go home.

“I’ll be on the planet for a few weeks, living off the ship. If you need anything,” Martinex said, “you let me know.”

“Okay, Martinex.” Meredith chuckled. “What’s the favor?”

“The favor? Right, yes.” Martinex's mind whizzed. “I was hoping you'd help me narrow down my search while I'm here. You know, if you hear anything.”

“Actually, I think I can help.” Meredith's face brightened. “My neighbor, Ellyn, she babysits Peter some nights. She's got links in the publishing industry on Dakkam. She could be a great asset.”

“That's wonderful!”

It was a lie. There was no way Stria Lonely would go flaunting her identity in front of other writers, but the sunshine-and-daisies expression on Meredith's face was too honest for Martinex to crush. It was no wonder Yondu fell head-over-ass whenever she was around, Martinex decided; she was the absolute opposite of Yondu.
“You should come to dinner tonight,” she suggested, “and I'll introduce you.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Oh. There is one tiny thing though.” Meredith rubbed the scars on her arms. “A really small thing.”

“Ooo,” Martinex chuckled, “how ominous.”

“Ellyn hates Ravagers. I mean, hates them. She already didn't like them, and then when she heard about Peter and I, she just... I've been working on her,” Meredith explained, “trying to change her mind, but she's only had bad experiences. So, maybe keep your occupation under wraps?”


“I'm sure you'll get along. She loves books,” Meredith said.

“I like her already.”

“And she's very smart.”

“That's always a plus.”

“And she's single,” Meredith added quickly, “and very pretty.”

“And that's not relevant.” Martinex snapped his fingers and grinned. “I know who I'm looking for, Meredith, and I'm pretty sure it's not Peter's babysitter, okay?”

“Okay, okay.” Meredith tossed her hands up. “I try to help...”

“I appreciate the thought,” Martinex said.

Another lie, but an innocent one. Martinex took a seat on the couch. It was the ugliest couch he'd ever seen; a blotted assortment of hazel, violet, blue, and orange that made Martinex think of vomiting colored cocktails. Still, Meredith seemed happy here. Martinex watched her buzz around contentedly, chatting to him about her son, and smiled. He popped his interface up and adjusted the camera; he snapped a quick picture of Meredith getting something out of the cabinet. With a swipe, he sent it to Yondu. The response came within seconds.

_She alright_, it asked.

“And Peter's got his big school dance coming up,” Meredith said, “so I pressed his shirt. He looks so dapper I could _scream._”

_Yes, _Martinex texted back, _she's absolutely Meredith._

Yondu was working late again. Kraglin had long since gone to bed and Yondu had relieved the night pilot hours ago. He had four screens popped up; one for Ranides, one for Akir, one for planning an attack strategy, and a very small one for Marty's comm. The link had gone dead hours
ago, but Yondu kept it up. It was a small image; Meredith on her toes, opening cabinet doors with both hands and staring inside. Yondu had analyzed it thoroughly and was pleased with what he saw. She was gaining weight and there was plenty of food in the cabinets. There were bills on the counter; when Yondu zoomed in, he could see that they were paid. If he zoomed in on the red leather pants she was wearing, he could appreciate how she filled them out. It was strategically impossible for Yondu to visit Dakkam right now. He knew that logically, but it didn't stomp out that wheedling little feeling of envy that Martinex got to sit around with Mery while he had to research destroyed Xandarian hospitals.

It wasn't all bad; every second Yondu spent scrolling through dead Xandarian garbage was a second put towards rescuing Ravagers and killing Kree. He had gathered enough information to suspect that Ranides was going to be his target. The sulphuric jungle still gave him pause, but the hospital there had the most production space as the land was virtually worthless. Yondu picked at his teeth and stared at the image of the gold-ringed planet. There could be no mistakes; he had to be sure.

Unfortunately, he'd chucked all chances of amplifying his long-range scans at Martinex. Yondu leaned back in his chair and exhaled. The starscape glimmered at him.

Scanning for life forms wouldn't work; the jungle was teeming with them. It might work on Akir, but his scans would only penetrate so deep under the surface. If he landed without knowing how many Kree he was about to face, he ran the risk of being seriously outnumbered. Yondu preferred strike team combat for fortresses, but there was no way of telling how big the Kree station was. If it was big enough, they would simply move the slaves to another area, block off the Ravagers, and vent the air from the rooms. That's what Yondu would do, if he were a Kree. He stabbed his toothpick into his chair and kept turning the ideas over in his mind. He knew Kree slavery better than anyone else; if anyone could get this done, it had to be him.

It was as if the answer had slipped from the stars and dropped right through his forehead. A great jagged grin broke out across Yondu's face. It was simple. He leaned forwards and wiped his strategy away completely. The new plan was much more concrete. What he needed was a pincer attack; he needed to stop thinking about the kidnapped Ravagers as a goal and start thinking about them as an asset. He needed to get a team into the building, to the slaves, without raising any alarms. There was only one guaranteed way to do it. The plan was a hell of a risk, Yondu acknowledged, but if you wanted something done right, you had to do it yourself.

Deep in the pits of the Eclector, the engines churned. Yondu stood with his hands on his hips, staring at his first mate. He'd explained the plan; now all he needed was a second opinion to tell him he was right. Kraglin sat on a crate, put his hands over his mouth, and leaned his elbows on his knees.

“No,” he said.

Yondu scowled.

“Cap'n, no. Hell no, absolutely not. Not a quid's chance in hell,” Kraglin said, “under any goddamn circumstance.”

“It'll be easy,” Yondu said.

“It's insane!”
“Ravager,” Yondu reminded.

“Cap'n there is a big damn line between Ravager-crazy and cap'n-you've-got-to-be-fuckin'-kiddin'-me.” Kraglin got to his feet and started pacing. “Consider all the things that could go wrong.”

“They won't.”

“Cap'n, if you make one goddamn mistake we're without a cap'n and you're lookin' at stars-know-how-many years of slavery.” Kraglin shook his head rapidly. “No. Absolutely not. You can kick my ass off the ship before I do that.”

“Kraglin, they're lookin' at stars-know-how-many years of slavery. We're Ravagers,” Yondu said, “we protect our own.”

“By getting caught and enslaved by Kree.” Kraglin put a hand over his forehead; a Meredith habit, Yondu noticed. “Cap'n, has it occurred to you they might just kill you?”

“I'm wanted in twelve Kree provinces.” Yondu spat on the ground. “Ain't nobody turnin' their nose up at that fat bounty.”

“And if you can't get out?”

“I'll get out.”

“I doubt they're gonna let you tote the arrow in, cap'n.” Kraglin's voice dripped with sarcasm. “And it ain't exactly somethin' you can stow up the prison-wallet.”

Yondu cracked a grin. Kraglin kept pacing.

“Not to fuckin' mention,” he continued after a moment, “you'll probably be doin' it alone. If I can't go with you, who the hell's gonna throw their neck on the line?”

“The crew will go if I order 'em.” Yondu leaned against the wall of the maintenance shaft, his hands sliding into his pocket. “Look, my end's easy.”

“Easy,” Kraglin said incredulously.

“Your part is hard. While I'm gone, I could be gone for hell-knows-how-long. You'd be actin' captain,” Yondu reminded.

“Cap'n, please.” Kraglin waved that concern away with one hand. “Idiots I can handle. Knowing you're getting whipped or beaten or tortured – sorry, cap'n, I can't handle that.”

“It's the plan,” Yondu said.

“Cap'n, there's got to be another way.”

“Think it up quick, then.” Yondu rolled his shoulders back. “Every second we spend kickin' around details, Ravagers are getting whipped and beaten and tortured.”

Kraglin went pale. Yondu watched him pace; Kraglin's pale blue eyes were flicking around, as if analyzing some unseen map. Yondu waited. Finally, Kraglin sat back down on the crate.

“It's the only way to guarantee you know where our people are at,” he conceded, “but it'd be suicide to go with just the folks on this ship. You're gonna need somebody who knows what they're getting into, cap'n.”
“Right, sure,” Yondu said sarcastically, “I'll just reach into my damn pocket and pull out another crazy risk-takin' battle-slave for you.”

Kraglin's eyes snapped up to Yondu's. Slowly, comprehension dawned.

“No,” Yondu said.

“Cap'n, he knows everything you do about this shit. He has the same experience level,” Kraglin argued, “and you know he's got your back.”

“I'll roast in hell first,” Yondu spat.

“If you don't have the right men at your back, you'll end up in hell, cap'n.” The anger in Kraglin's voice was cold and unyielding. “You know that.”

“So that's your price,” Yondu snarled.

“Yes, cap'n.” The rage cooled off in Kraglin as quickly as it had come. “You take him with you or I ain't doing shit.”

From the moment he stepped on the Eclector, Algon was all business. Most of the Ravagers had never come into direct contact with him before; he loomed over them like a chartreuse mountain. His size and reputation were reason enough to respect him, but the most terrifying thing about him was his cordiality. He was all pleasantries and 'please', all thoughtfulness and generosity. Seeing him stand next to Yondu was a lesson in appearances; both of these men had the training to kill every living thing on the Eclector without remorse, but only one of them would do it in a polo shirt.

Kraglin couldn't hide his disappointment. Part of him had still hoped that Algon would talk Yondu out of his insane plan; instead, Algon had accepted it as the most rational course of action. The three of them were gathered on the bridge to discuss the details of the plan before revealing it to the rest of the crew.

“There cannot be mistakes made.” The Saurid traced a claw over the image of Ranides. “We will be risking our own lives as well as those of the captives.”

“It's gonna be hell until we reach the others,” Yondu warned.

“I am not afraid.” Algon's voice was as calm as Yondu had ever heard it. “There is nothing that they can do to me that has not been done before.”

“They could kill you,” Kraglin muttered.

Algon and Yondu snorted simultaneously.

“Twelve Kree bounties,” Yondu reminded.

“Please, Kraglin,” Algon said, “I am very good at talking my way out of problems. I have exceptional customer service skills.”

Kraglin's knuckles were white on the steering mechanism.

“Yondu, you have a plan for getting your arrow inside,” Algon assumed.
“Yep.” Yondu pulled it out of his quiver and ran his thumb along the tip. “Gonna need Kraglin to help, though.”

“Whatever you need, cap'n.”

“I need you,” Yondu said slowly, “to mail it.”

“Mail it?” Kraglin's voice shot up a half-octave. “What the hell, cap'n?”

Yondu shrugged.

“Kree mail system's a piece of shit, Kraglin. I've mailed bombs with that garbage,” Yondu said.

“I sold the bomb,” Algon added.

“Cap'n this is – you're shittin' me.” The Xandarian gripped the steering mechanism like he was trying to strangle it to death. “You want me to put that in the mail and send it to the Kree Empire?”

“Yes,” Algon and Yondu chorused.

Kraglin's jaw was twitching.

“Fuckin' fine,” he snapped.

The corner of Yondu's mouth twitched. The boy was overreacting; everything was going to go exactly to plan. Kraglin's insistence that Algon be added to the mix was an unexpected plus; Yondu hadn't thought about him as back-up, and he told Algon as much.

“I was a natural choice.” Algon chuckled. “We have the same experience level with these things, yes?”

“Only I was a kid and you were still six-foot-six and breakin' femurs.” Yondu leaned on the railing. “It ain't gonna be pretty when we get inside.”

Algon's orange eyes flicked over to Kraglin, then back to the holographic planet.

“I am surprised by your decision.” His voice was confidentially quiet. “You hate the Kree, Yondu. You are willing to risk this?”

“That's our people down there, scum-snout. I don't expect you to understand.”

“I do not understand at all. Do you really believe, if the positions were reversed,” Algon asked, “that Pa Zir would do the same for you?”

Yondu drew his thumb across his arrow in silence.

“I thought not.” Algon's voice became even softer. “Yondu, what is this about?”

“Killin' Kree.”

“You can do that without risking enslavement.”

“Rescuin’ Ravagers.”

“And that is not something you usually risk enslavement to do,” Algon huffed, “so?”

Yondu bared his teeth, but Algon's expression remained open and expectant.
“It's personal,” Yondu added.

“Personal.” Algon leaned back. “I see.”

Algon didn't ask any more questions after that. Yondu presented the plan to the crew. The reactions he received were exactly what he expected; half the crew thought he was insane and the other half thought he was a genius. All were on board. The Kree were responsible for deaths in the family, slaughtered lovers, and more than half their collective shares of scars. If there was a chance to kick the Kree in the mouth and look like heroes doing it, the crew of the Eclector were all in. Some grumbled about a lack of payment, but Kraglin reminded them that Pa Zir still had thousands of credits sitting in accounts across the galaxy and would likely compensate them for time and damages. Yondu didn't bother to confirm; he didn't give two shits about the money. What he had told Algon was the truth; this was personal.

Ellyn's mother was an affluent and sour-mouthed old woman who loved nothing better than to criticize the world and everyone in it. This, combined with a desire for grandchildren that she could berate and control, often created situations in which Ellyn would be asked to come over to dinner for the express purpose of sitting next to some poor sap her mother had roped into communicating with her. Some of them were pleasant, but mostly Ellyn felt that they were like sculptures or paintings in the room; they were there for her mother to reference, not to engage with, and when they left the room she lost nothing by their absence. Ellyn had started to expect that pattern when she was invited to dinners with other people's guests, and when Meredith mentioned that the guy she had over was single, she prepared herself for another torturous evening.

Ellyn could not have done anything to properly prepare herself for Dr. T'Naga.

He glittered. Ellyn had done a lot of research on a lot of species, and she'd never met one that glittered. Meredith pulled Ellyn into the room and stood between them, smiling.

“Dr. T'Naga.” The guest flashed a dazzling smile. “My pleasure.”

“So,” Meredith said, “this is Ellyn Ostari.”

Ellyn wasn't looking at the doctor's dazzling smile or his charming wink. One of her least favorite parts about herself was her inability to make eye contact with new people. On this occasion, Ellyn was grateful for it. Something else had caught her attention; an all-too-familiar book cover clutched in his left hand.

“You read Stria Lonely,” she asked in a flat tone.

She snapped her eyes to his face momentarily. The grin had slid off, replaced by a stone-cold, serious expression.

“I am in love with Stria Lonely.” His voice resonated like struck crystal. “If you utter so much as half a syllable against anything she's written, I'll kill you.”

Meredith inhaled sharply. Ellyn had to stop herself from laughing in his face.

“Oh jeez, you're one of those fans.” She lifted her eyes to the ceiling, still grinning. “I've read everything Stria Lonely's ever written, okay?”
“Really,” he asked.

“She's good,” Ellyn confirmed, “but she could be better. She gets better with every book, I’ve noticed.”

“Yeah, but Classified Contact is still her best book,” the doctor argued, “I don't care what anyone else says. It's the first and the best.”

“Classified Contact?” Ellyn laughed; her first book had been done on a lark. “You liked that?”

“I cried eight times in Classified Contact,” T'Naga said.

That was humbling. Any time a reader had an emotional reaction to something she’d written, it endeared them to her; she couldn't help it. Ellyn didn't consider herself particularly emotional, but that didn't mean she couldn't admire it in others.

“You like love novels,” Ellyn assumed.

“I like satiric sociopolitical masterpieces,” T'Naga corrected, “that expertly weave together tragic longing, comedic self-deprecation, and passionate physical contact.”

Ellyn almost blushed.

“Oh sweet Lord, please don't; she's just met you” Meredith sighed.

“Meredith, you've got to read them. You don't need sex; you need these novels.” The doctor brandished the book at her. “Trust me, you could totally touch yourself to this.”

“Wow, no.” Meredith pushed his wrist away. “Way to make sure I never read them, Marty.”

Ellyn laughed.

“You've at least got to read Classified Contact,” T'Naga insisted, “it's my favorite book.”

“Fine,” Meredith sighed, “what's it about?”

“It's a complex metaphor for the political revolution of the Shi'ar Dynasty,” T'Naga and Ellyn chorused.

They all paused, jointly confused. Ellyn raised her eyebrows. The doctor stared at her, dumbfounded.

“What's a Shi'ar,” Meredith asked.

“What's a Shi – right. Sorry, I forget that you're Terran. Alright, you know the Kree, right? Well, before the Kree, there were the Shi'ar. Big, bird-like aliens.” Ellyn gestured with her hands, trying to physically depict one of them. “They enslaved a lot of people, but those groups rebelled a lot. Eventually the Shi'ar went through a political revolution and freed their captive slaves. Most of them moved on with their lives; not the Kree.”

“The Kree value honor above all else. Forgiving an enemy that killed your people is the same as murder to them.” The doctor's voice hardened. “So they decided to enslave the Shi'ar, and the rest of the galaxy with them.”

“The Shi'ar were almost completely destroyed. Now, the Kree Empire has taken over the Shi'ar Dynasty and just keeps spreading. The Skrull, the Xandarians – anyone who stands up to them gets
wiped off the map. It's monstrous,” Ellyn said, “but it's not entirely unexpected.”

“Why not,” Meredith asked.

“Because it keeps happening. The Shi'ar were a servant race to the Badoon. The Kree were a servant race to the Shi'ar.” Ellyn couldn't keep the anger out of her voice. “The cycle keeps continuing because the servant races don't know how else to operate due to the oppressive regime of the masters, so they end up bearing the same mantle and causing even more destruction because for some reason the empires fall faster than the servant races can ascend. It creates this nonsensical wheel of enslavement that makes no political sense because the servant races can't possibly eliminate their technologically superior masters in that amount of time; it doesn't make sense, it's not logical, and if you look at the history it –“

“Ellyn.” Meredith put one hand on her shoulder. “Breathe.”

Ellyn's jaw snapped shut.

“My apologies.” She cursed herself inwardly; she'd done it again. “Politics is not good dinner conversation.”

Ellyn could feel the doctor's eyes boring into her; she couldn't look at him. Meredith looked between them, then clapped her hands together.

“So I put dinner in the fridge. If you can reheat it,” she said, “and Ellyn can set the table?”

“Done,” the doctor said.

Ellyn crossed over to the silverware drawer and began picking cutlery out. Stupid, she cursed herself, stupid; you do not discuss your politics in front of a reader. Anyone who defended them with the same vigor as Dr. T'Naga had to be a deep reader. Ellyn couldn't risk revealing herself.

“Where's Peter,” Ellyn asked.

“Spending the night at a friend's.” Meredith smiled slightly. “I didn't think it would be a good idea to have him around when you two started talking.”

“Because of the sex books,” Ellyn asked.

“Yep,” Meredith replied.

Ellyn kept setting the table. Meredith, I write those sex books, she mentally confessed.

The dinner table was small, even by city standards; Meredith ended up sitting across from the wall, putting Ellyn and T'Naga across from each other. It was like sitting across from a shattered mirror; she kept seeing glances of her reflection in his grin. Ellyn kept wondering if that was a biological advantage in deterring predators. It certainly deterred her from looking at him; eye contact seemed even more impossible than normal. The dinner conversation started out light; Ellyn curbed her observations.

Then, the doctor mentioned Tontorius Pavel.

“Tonty,” Ellyn sighed.

T'Naga's head snapped up.

“You read Pavel,” he asked.
“I took his class in university.” Ellyn buttered a thick slice of green bread. “He was a very kind old man. Bit of a lech, but more joking than creepy. Brave man; nothing was off the table for him.”

“You knew Tontorius Pavel.” T’Naga spoke barely above a whisper. “That is so dope. You are so lucky.”

Ellyn smiled, but it quickly faded.

“I cried when I heard about the spider,” she said.

“I was depressed. Meredith was there,” T’Naga said, “wasn't I depressed, Meredith?”

The doctor looked to Meredith, who had her mouth full. She nodded.

“Well, on the inside.” T’Naga sipped at his drink. “I didn't have much time to indulge in mourning that day because of the Table.”

The table jumped; T’Naga winced. Judging by Meredith's angry expression, she had just kicked the doctor under the table.

“I spoke at a table on cross-species blood transfusions. Did you know,” T’Naga said, “that almost fifteen percent of sapient life can exchange blood.”

“Yes, I did. Anything close enough to a base species can.” Ellyn shrugged. “Like in Traditionally Forward.”

The doctor leaned forward.

“You like TF,” he said.

“Traditionally Forward is perhaps the best novel Lonely’s written.” Ellyn kept her eyes on her food, trying to curb her tautological ramblings. “It might have gotten her death threats, but I guess that's how you know she's good.”

“Yes, exactly!” T’Naga tossed up his hands in earnest. “If no one hates you for it, your stand wasn't big enough!”

“If you stand up for what you believe in, you're going to make enemies. If you go through life pacifying both sides instead of taking a true stand, you're part of the problem. The galaxy is old,” Ellyn said, “and great things have been achieved by many means, but never in history has apathy accomplished anything worthwhile.”

“You – you're really smart,” T’Naga said, tapping a pointer finger towards Ellyn, “Meredith, you keep this one.”

Meredith and Ellyn laughed. Dinner was different after that. Ellyn found that if she looked the doctor directly in the eyes – black eyes, she described to herself, with gold bars as thin as wire – talking became easier.

The doctor had something to do after dinner – something about a scan-amplifier and needing to code some algorithms. Meredith begged him to stay, but he was insistent. T’Naga shook hands with Ellyn before he left. Ellyn had never felt a colder grip.

She stayed to help Meredith wash dishes; this proved to be a strategic mistake. No sooner had Dr.
T'Naga vacated the premise than Meredith began her raptures.

“You like books,” Meredith enthused, “and he likes books.”

“No.” Ellyn glared at Meredith over her visor. “I see where you're going with this, and I am not headed that way.”

“Oh.” Meredith hesitated. “So... is it like a 'feminine persuasion' thing, or...?”

“No, Meredith.” Ellyn rubbed her nose with her thumbs, trying not to laugh. “Thank you for being considerate and asking, but I'm definitely into males.”

“He is male,” Meredith said immediately.

“I barely know him, Meredith.” Ellyn over-enunciated all of her words in an attempt to politely convey her exasperation. “He is not a possible life mate. I will not go on a date with him. The answer is no.”

“What if it wasn't a date?” Meredith crossed her arms. “It would be a friendly meeting between friends. Just friends.”

“Hello? Is this thing on?” Ellyn playfully tapped Meredith's comm link. “Your translator must have ceased functioning. What's the Terran word for 'no'?”

“Something has to distract him from his crazed obsession with Stria Lonely,” Meredith said. Flickers of blue light obscured Ellyn's vision. She took a few deep breaths.

“I don't think hitching him up to some random woman is going to do that, Meredith.” Ellyn kept scrubbing cutlery. “Especially not hitching him up to me.”

“Why not,” Meredith complained.

Because I'm Stria Lonely, Ellyn mentally screamed.

“It doesn't make sense. If you're obsessed with something, you look for it everywhere. If he's obsessed with this woman, he's going to see her in everyone. That's not fair to whomever he's dating, right? If you want to end someone's obsession,” Ellyn said, “they have to choose to give it up themselves.”

“Well that's not happening.” Meredith's mouth soured as she leaned her hip on the counter. “He's completely besotted.”

“Maybe you should find out why he's supposedly in love with her,” Ellyn suggested, “and go from there.”

“Will you help?”

“What?” The spoon Ellyn was washing slipped from her wet fingers. “No, Meredith. I barely know him, I'm not getting involved in his personal business.”

“But you know all this Stria Lonely knowledge. If anyone can get him to effuse about it, it's got to be you.” Meredith's eyes were so pleading that Ellyn grabbed the dry cutlery and sped away from the sink. “Please, Ellyn? Please please please?

“No,” Ellyn said, “no no.”
“Please?”
“No.”
“Please?”
“No.”
“Please?”

“You are just like your son,” Ellyn huffed.

Meredith laughed. She stood up straight and slung her dry dishtowel over one shoulder.

“Guess that's it, then.” She paced towards the laundry room, chuckling. “I'll have to tell Yondu that Martinex is just a goner.”

The Admiral of the Ravager's surname is Ogord. His first mate's name is Martinex. The first mate is somehow associated with diamonds. Possibilities: a diamond-like appearance.

The dry cutlery slipped from her fingers.

Martinex is the doctor. T'Naga is a Ravager.

The clattering of cutlery on the tile floor snapped Ellyn back into the present. On instinct, Ellyn's wrists flicked. The cutlery zoomed back into her hands in a shimmering of blue light.

“Are you okay,” Meredith yelled from the other room.

“I'm fine,” Ellyn shouted automatically.

Ellyn was not fine. Her face was abnormally warm, but ice water was running down her back. She put the cutlery away in a perfunctory manner. The implications of this discovery sent her reeling. She knew people from all walks of life read her books and that she had fans in strange places, but the first mate of the Admiral of the Ravagers? He wasn't even a normal fan – he was one of those passionate, dedicated readers who stalked her posts on social media and debated her age and gender. For star's sakes, he'd admired the sociopolitical commentary. Ellyn shut the cutlery drawer. He was more than a fan; the Ravager was obsessed with her. He was Yondu's friend; that explained why he was here with Meredith. Ellyn needed to ensure that he had no other reason to be here. She plotted as she put dishes away; by the time Meredith returned, both the plan and the work were done.

“I need to go home now,” Ellyn said bluntly. “Goodnight.”

“Night, honey!” Meredith waved to her as she paced out. “You're welcome to come over anytime! Please don't hesitate!”

Ellyn shut the door, crossed the hall, yanked open her door, and carefully closed it. She leaned her back against the door, slunk to the floor, and exhaled. She would have to be extremely careful while the Ravager was here. The Ravager, in love with her – it was enough to make her shiver. Someone with that level of intelligence and capacity could easily peel away the deception that Ellyn had woven on Dakkam. If he found out who she was, she would gain the universe's most deadly and accomplished kind of stalker. Yes, Ellyn thought to herself, she would have to do everything perfectly.

Feeling marginally better, Ellyn got to her feet and crossed to her computer. She sat down, opened
several terminal screens, and started coding additional firewalls. Her fingers flew with the same rapidity and passion she had while typing her novels; more perhaps. Ellyn had come as far as she had thanks to writing fictional answers to real-world problems; now, the time had come to protect them.

The first part of Yondu's plan involved two condemned M-ships, a pair of pliers, his teeth, and a corpse.

He ordered that the two most-damaged M-ships in the hangar be made just worthy enough to fly. Kraglin was in charge of sprucing them up while simultaneously removing anything of value. While the crew worked on that, Oblo worked on Yondu.

“I'm not a dentist, captain.” Oblo took the pliers hesitantly. “Not even close.”

Yondu grabbed a shot glass of harberry juice and drained it. He leaned back in the chair and gritted his teeth.

“Just yank the fucker out,” he growled, “and screw the thing in.”

The tip of Yondu's arrow had been carefully unscrewed from the shaft. The design was no accident; the diameter of the screw was identical to the diameter of Yondu's upper implant.

“You say, 'rip my teeth out', I say, 'yes captain'.” Oblo tossed a sterile rag over Yondu's chest. “Hold still.”

Yondu's jaw yawned. Oblo gripped the gold crown with the pliers and started rotating it. The feeling of the metal screw unwinding from the implant was disturbing; it felt like Oblo was removing part of Yondu's skull. The harberry juice worked slowly; when Oblo had taken the full crown out, Yondu was half-conscious. Oblo tossed the crown on the tray; Yondu watched the tooth roll. Gold with stripes; Aleta had helped him pick it out, he remembered. Yondu's vision darkened.

When he awoke, his jaw was sore and something had been jammed between his teeth. Oblo was cleaning the pliers; dark blood was dripping from them.

“It was already a goddamn implant,” Yondu snarled, half-asleep. “How the fuck did you cut me?”

“You bit down.” Oblo carefully took the steel springs from between Yondu's molars. “I had to use these damn things to keep your jaw open.”

“Is it in?”

“It's in.”

Yondu licked the spot where his crown used to be and felt the shape of the arrow tip. It was much too large for his mouth; it pushed his cheek out slightly. That didn't matter; what mattered was that with all the other metal in his mouth, scanners wouldn't pick up the shape.

“What do you want to do with this?” Oblo held up the gold crown. “Keep it on the ship?”

“I'll take it,” Yondu grunted.

Oblo passed the crown to Yondu, who pocketed it. Oblo wrapped the pliers in the sterile cloth and took the tray with him. Yondu was left alone in his cabin, adjusting his bite to the feeling. When he
bit down, he had cut his lower lip. The cut would heal soon. Not that Yondu cared; he'd be getting plenty more scars where he was going.

He rubbed his stinging lip and looked to the bed. Sleep hadn't worked well for him last night; goddamn nightmares again. Walking back into Kree hands felt as stupid as it sounded, but Yondu understood what Algon had been talking about. There was nothing that they could do to him that they hadn't already done. Yondu was practically one giant scar now; there were no new places on him to hurt. There were new ways to hurt him, but he had prepared for that; Martinex would take care of the Terrans. If something did happen to him, Yondu reasoned, Martinex would help Mery and the boy get home. He could trust Marty with that. Vaguely, he wondered if Martinex had realized why Yondu had sent him, but he brushed the thought aside. If Martinex had any idea what Yondu was planning, the entire Eclector would be on fire.

“Cap'n?” Kraglin's voice buzzed in his ear. “M-ships are ready, cap'n.”

“On my way.”

Yondu grabbed his jacket and patted his pockets. He wouldn't be coming back here for a while; if he was going to need it, he was going to have to take it now. He rifled through the desk, double-checking for useful tech, when his fingers closed around a familiar rectangular shape. He pulled the Ravager Mix out and stared at the familiar curvy handwriting. The corners of his mouth turned up; he brushed his thumb over the letters.

Then, he imagined the Kree touching it. The tape box went back in the drawer. Nothing of Mery's was coming with him; nothing she touched deserved to be put through that kind of hell. Yondu slammed the drawer with more force than necessary; the whole thing rattled. He turned out of the room and walked down to the hangar bay. Absentmindedly, Yondu went to fiddle with his arrow; his hands closed around empty space. He reverted to running his thumb along his captain's rank; the physical touch soothed him. This could come with him; this small piece of something that mattered. It would be the only thing he didn't leave behind. Mery had been the one to lead Yondu back into the fold. Stakar had been the one to embrace him fully and restore his rank.

It was time he proved to Stakar that he'd earned it.

Chapter End Notes

Long chapter is long! Actually had to break this one up into separate parts. I will warn you; this is an emotional roller coaster. I'm pretty excited about how it's been rolling, so here's hoping you enjoy it as much as I do! <3
Yondu and Algon take a team down to the surface of Ranides with the intent of getting captured. They find a Kree fighter base that must be taken out or leaving the planet will be impossible. While Martinex codes his algorithm, he is forced into close proximity with Peter, Ellyn, and civilian life -- a life he has almost completely forgotten.

When Holdon dragged the corpse up to the bridge, Yondu didn't question where it came from. He merely turned over the Acheronian's face, checked that it wasn't a Ravager, and grunted in approval.

“Throw some gear on it and pack it onto my ship,” he said.

Holdon gripped the corpse by the ankle and dragged it on board.

“Vorker and Huhtar are flying the other ship.” Kraglin wouldn't look Yondu in the eyes. “They'll get you planetside.”

Yondu handed Kraglin an arrow. It was the same size and shape as his own, but not the original. Kraglin didn't know that; Yondu needed to make sure he didn't know that. Part of his plan involved Kraglin's own ingenuity, and the only way to plan for that was to let him believe that Yondu was stupid enough to mail his arrow to the Kree Empire.

“Mail it, huh?” Kraglin echoed Yondu's thoughts. “This is nuts, cap'n.”

“It'll be fine, idjit. Take all the precautions you can think of,” Yondu ordered.

“Yes, cap'n.” Kraglin slammed his fist on his chest twice. “Can do, cap'n.”

He still wasn't making eye contact. Yondu leaned back on his heels and exhaled. The situation wasn't lost on him; he was leaving a barely-tested first mate in charge of a crew that was half-made of people even Yondu didn't fully trust. The idiot was worried about him, and as much as Yondu wanted to tell him to just shut the fuck up and work, part of his plan revolved around Kraglin acting the way Kraglin wanted to, not the way Yondu would.

“It's gonna be fine,” he heard himself say.

“You keep sayin' that, cap'n, and I'm tryin' to believe you, but somethin' don't feel right here.” Kraglin stared at his boots. “I just gotta come out and say it; I think this is a shit plan.”

“You got a better one,” Yondu asked.

“No.”

“Then it's what we're rollin' with.”

“Yes, cap'n.”

“Hey,” said Yondu.
Kraglin lifted his pale eyes.

“It's gonna be fine,” Yondu stressed.

“And if it isn't,” Kraglin asked.

“If it ain't, then you're in charge of the Eclector,” Yondu pointed towards the pilot's seat. “You take charge and kick ass for me. Write your name in the Kree Empire with bullet holes.”

It worked; Kraglin cracked a grin.

“Marty's got the Terrans; I need you to look after the Eclector. I'll be back,” Yondu said, “but if by some fuck-forsaken catastrophe I ain't – then shoot straight and die free.”

Kraglin drew himself up and gave a sharp Ravager salute.

“Aye, cap'n,” Kraglin said.

“Let's get this shit rollin'. Bout to make a goddamn Kree body count that even Stakar won't spit at.” Yondu patted Kraglin's shoulder twice as he passed by. “Fly safe, son.”

When the door had shut behind Yondu, Kraglin lifted his sleeve to wipe his eyes.

Algon was waiting by Yondu's ship, as was Lunis. Yondu stopped short when he saw the Kallusian.

“Kraglin send you,” Yondu asked.

“What? No.” Lunis wrinkled his nose. “I'm going with you.”

“This ain't a goddamn joyride, Lunis. We're expectin' to be there a while. In chains,” Yondu said, “in prison.”

“Started out in jail. Been back a few times. Done this before.” Lunis was strapping knives on every part of his body big enough to hold one. “Figure I could help.”

“Lunis,” Yondu began.

“Can make a shiv,” Lunis offered, “out of a pack of chewing gum.”

Silence greeted his statement.

“How the hell,” Yondu began again.

“We must take him.” Algon seized Lunis by the shoulders and lifted him onto the ship. “I cannot die not knowing, Yondu.”

“I'll go,” Brahl came striding out of the hallway with a sniper rifle slung across his shoulders. “Any chance to pop some heads off is a chance I'll take.”

Yondu allowed him to pass onto the ship. Brahl had a reputation as a bloodthirsty bastard; Yondu could use that. He pressed his finger to the comm link in his ear.
“Vorker, Huhtar,” Yondu said, “you assholes ready to fly?”

“Yes, captain.” Huhtar's voice was nearly monotone. “Let's go kick some teeth in.”

“We've got Drazkar and Tazerface on board, captain.” Vorker gave a thumbs-up; Yondu could see him in the pilot's seat. “We'll get you planetside.”

“When you do, stay low and get workin'. Your part ain't easy,” Yondu said.

“Please, captain.” Huhtar laughed. “We are Ravagers. We're behind you completely.”

“Good.” Yondu strode up the ramp of his ship. “Let's go 'em, boys.”

There were several whoops of excitement; Algon's frills flicked with interest. They strapped themselves in and took off. Two highly-damaged M-ships, scarcely able to keep a straight flight vector, went careening towards Ranides.

Yondu had flown in some risky situations before and survived. This was a bit different. Firstly, he had no real idea of what he was getting himself into. Secondly, there was little to no chance of rescue if something went wrong. Thirdly, and most significantly, he was virtually unarmed. Without his arrow, Yondu felt naked. He would be fighting impossible odds in unknown conditions while practically missing a limb. He tightened his grip on the steering mechanism as they emerged from the hyperjump.

“Ranides directly below, captain.” Huhtar's voice buzzed over the comm. “Awaiting your orders.”

“Let's move.” Yondu soared towards the shadowed half of the planet. “Goin' dark.”

“Aye, captain.”

Yondu's ship had barely passed out of direct sunlight when a familiar shape showed upon the scanner.

“Kree fighter, starboard. Strap in,” Yondu ordered.

Lunis and Brahl latched their flight harnesses on. Algon clicked his down gently, then reached over and secured the corpse as well.

“Ready,” he said cheerily.

Lunis and Brahl looked at Algon like he was a madman. The Kree ship, practically nothing but a twisted excuse for a rectangle, started its attack vector. Yondu set the ship's trajectory and started careening away.

“You're going away from the planet,” Brahl asked.

“Don't talk.” Yondu flipped a switch and primed the torpedoes. “Just shut up and trust me.”

Brahl's mouth snapped shut. The torpedoes shot out into space. One went spiraling out of control; the other began tracking the Kree fighter, which hastily pulled away.

“Vorker,” Yondu said.

“On it, captain.”
Out of nowhere, the Ravager M-ship zoomed by, headed for the planet's surface. More Kree signatures appeared on the scanner.

“I count seven, captain. Can you handle them,” Vorker asked.

“Can I handle ’em,” Yondu repeated sarcastically.

“Yes, captain.” The other ship didn't change its course. “Moving to landing zone.”

While Vorker made a break for the surface, Yondu kept the Kree busy. They locked into two four-ship formations and made attempts to trap him. The other Ravagers were tossed about in the cabin as Yondu twisted away from the pincer attack. A glass bottle went careening through the air; Lunis caught it before it could smash against Brahl's head.

“Come on, you sons-of-bitches.” Yondu primed his next set of torpedoes. “Welcome to hell.”

This time, both torpedoes fired properly. One clipped the wing of a fighter. The other shot like an arrow and decimated one of the wing ships in the second formation.

“Two down,” Algon noted.

“One down. That fucker with the wing is still hangin' on.” Yondu had to plummet to avoid a hail of blaster fire. “I don't count ’em as dead until I done blown 'em up.”

Algon unstrapped his flight harness and got to his feet.

“The hell are you doin'? Get back in your chair,” Yondu yelled.

“You said they are not dead until they have been blown up, yes?” Algon strapped himself into the co-pilot's chair. “I believe I still remember how to kill things with a ship instead of my bare hands.”

“Fine.” Yondu shoved the control switch twice. “You take the guns; I'll take the steerin'.”

Algon's claws tapped away; a volley of lasers shot out. Most missed, but he clipped the damaged fighter and sent it whirling away into the void.

“It did not explode. Does that count,” Algon asked.

“Stop talking and shoot,” Brahl yelled.

“If you're so concerned about it,” Algon said peevishly, “why were you not in the co-pilot's chair.”

“Stop talkin' and shoot!” Yondu had to spiral to the left to avoid an incoming Kree ship. “Dammit Algon, now ain't the time!”

“Yes, yes, fine fine.” Algon primed the torpedoes. “Launching whatever these are.”

“Torpedoes,” Lunis offered.

“Are they? Hm.” Algon punched a button and watched the torpedoes rocket away. “I suppose they are.”

Each torpedo found its mark; two Kree ships exploded in a small burst of electricity.

“Two down,” Yondu crowed.
“Yes, and see? Those exploded.” Algon’s frills flicked in delight. “I am very good at this.”

“One formation left.” Brahl looked out the left window. “Port side, captain.”

“I see ’em.” Yondu curved the ship upwards; his stomach protested at the small lapse in artificial gravity. “Fire, asshole.”

Algon fired another round of lasers; the Kree ships were forced to break formation.

“They scattered! No fair,” Algon said.

“They’re Kree, Algon. ‘Fair’ ain’t exactly a priority,” Yondu pulled the ship out of its loop and wheeled about, checking for targets. “Damn. They really did scatter.”

“Off for reinforcements,” Brahl asked.

“No.” Lunis pointed. “Regrouping for another attack.”

The Kallusian was correct; the Kree had gathered into a diamond-shape formation and were flying directly at the ship.

“Captain,” Vorker said over the comm, “we’ve landed.”

“About goddamn time.” The ship was forced to corkscrew around the Kree torpedoes; Yondu's grip felt like death on the steering mechanism. “We'll head down.”

“Head down? I do not recall seeing a landing zone on our mission specs,” Algon mentioned.

“Crash landin’, Algon.” Yondu shoved the accelerator forwards. “Best pray to any gods you know the names of.”

“Ah.” Algon leaned back. “This should be fun then.”

The diamond-shaped formation wheeled around and started firing at the engines. Yondu swerved into the fire; the lasers shredded the left wing.

“There we go,” he yelled triumphantly, “perfect hit!”

“This is insane,” Brahl screamed.

“Ahaahahaha!” Algon gripped the seat with a wide, toothy grin. “This is how adventures start, yes?”

Lunis simply shrank into his flight harness and closed his eyes. The ship spiraled out of control, soaring towards the atmosphere of Ranides. Yondu used the flight stabilizers to guide their trajectory; it wouldn’t be perfect, but it as better than nothing. Light burned against the hull as they entered the atmosphere. Gravity and other forces threw their ship around like a dry leaf on the autumn wind; only their flight restraints kept them secure. The green canopy of Ranides grew larger and larger until with a sickening *wha-crunch!* The ship bust through the jungle ceiling and went skidding across the ground. It came to rest at the base of a great orange-tinted tree; smoke bled from its engines.

Yondu was alive. He was gripping the steering mechanism with both hands. It had been detached from the control console; sparks were flying from it. Brahl's eyes were as wide as an Acheronian's could go. Lunis was still hugging his flight harness with his eyes closed; when he registered that the ship had stopped, he opened them.

“Hey,” he said, “we lived. Cool.”
“Algon,” Yondu grunted.

“Perfectly fine.” Algon's frills slowly extended. “That was an interesting entrance Yondu. I remember you as a better pilot.”

“Crash-landing's part of the plan, remember? How's the corpse,” Yondu asked.

“The crash did a lot of moving around of this guy's innards.” Brahl eyed the corpse with distaste. “But I do say he still looks freshly dead.”

Yondu grunted in affirmation. The taste of blood seeped onto his tongue. Experimentally, he probed the side of his mouth with his tongue and found his arrowhead had cut into the side of his cheek. He shoved the flight harness off and stood.

“They'll be here any minute. On your feet,” Yondu ordered.

The crew unstrapped themselves. Yondu and Lunis handed out gas masks. Yondu strapped his over his nose and mouth, then looked to Algon. The Saurid had one gas mask stuck to his nostrils and three of them strapped over his mouth. Yondu scowled, but said nothing. The surface of the planet was hot and reeked of sulphur; even the masks couldn't filter out the smell. Algon picked the corpse up and threw it over his shoulder. Yondu's boots had barely hit the planet's surface when he heard the faraway sound of a ship engine.

“They're comin',” he said, “best get away from the wreck.”

Brahl and Algon crawled into the trees. The bushes had broad leaves veined with gold; Lunis and Yondu hid in them. The roaring of the ship grew louder. A high-pitched whine cut the air.

“Get down,” Yondu shouted.

A red laser pierced through the canopy, eviscerating the M-ship. Yondu and Lunis forced themselves flat against the ground as shrapnel went tearing through the foliage. After a few heart-pounding seconds, Yondu raised his head. Where the ship had been, there was now a smoking crater.

“We're lucky,” he muttered.

“Lucky how,” Lunis asked.

“If they'd used bombs we'd both be dead. Get up,” Yondu grunted, “let's move.”

Algon descended from the trees and set the corpse aside. Brahl crawled down much less gracefully, and when he paced over, he was limping.

“What's with you,” Yondu grunted.

“Shrapnel in my leg. It's nothing, captain,” he added.

“If it slows us down, it ain't nothing. Lunis, patch him up. Algon, get your scaly ass back up in that tree and give me a heading.” Yondu looked in the direction that the fighter had come. “We're lookin' for a great big-ass building. Three stories high, six stories deep.”

Algon dug his claws back into the bark and scaled the tree. Brahl propped his leg up and let Lunis attend to the wound. Yondu glanced at it when Brahl wasn't looking. It was lucky; the shard of metal had lodged in Brahl's boot. Only the tip had dug into his foot. Lunis pried it out and bandaged the wound with ease, then examined the shard of metal.
“Knife,” he decided.

“It's barely big enough to hold,” Brahl complained.


“About the only damn thing of use we'll get from this wreck.” Yondu put his hands on his hips and surveyed the crater grimly. “Best press on; nothin' to scrounge.”

“Yondu!” Algon leaned out of the fern-like branches. “There is a large gap in the canopy in the opposite direction that the fighter came from. It is either your building or a dock for ships.”

“I'll tell you what it is,” Yondu said, “it's a heading.”

It was not the building Yondu had wanted to find. It had the high angular structures of Kree design and was heavily guarded. Yondu spat on the ground; where his saliva touched the sulphuric surface, it discolored.

“Well ain't that fuckin' great,” he snarled.

“This is not good.” Algon frowned and dropped the corpse; he had been put in charge of lugging it about. “Those ships will prevent any rescue attempts from finding us, if things should go poorly.”

“We'll have to kill them all,” Lunis said.

“The four of us, against all them? I like murder as much as the next mercenary, Lunis, but we've only got the weapons we landed with.” Brahl shouldered his sniper rifle a little higher. “And with the captain's arrow still in transit, we're fucked.”

As Brahl was speaking, Yondu was studying the building.

“No,” he muttered, “we ain't.”

“Captain,” Lunis questioned.

“Brahl, get your ass in a tree and find a decent vantage point. Algon, when I give the signal I want you to wipe that place clean. Lunis, you go with Algon.” Yondu glanced at Lunis' large collection of knives. “Stab shit, I guess.”

“You have a plan,” Algon assumed.

“I got like, eleven percent of a plan.” Yondu shrugged. “The rest is more like a big pile of 'fuck-it'.”

“Ah. I see.” Algon's frills flicked in amusement. “What is the signal?”

“See that Kree fucker on the perimeter? In about seven or so minutes he's gonna come by here. You're gonna kill him. I'm gonna take his shit,” Yondu said, “and keep walkin'.”

Algon laughed; Brahl looked confused. Lunis was busy selecting a knife.

“When I get inside, I'll take out that motherfucker on the top there. See 'em? That's their sniper. He goes down,” Yondu said, “you start movin'. Make sure to bring the body with you.”
“I understand,” Algon said.

“I don’t.” The bony ridges that made up Brahl's eyebrows knotted together. “You're going to infiltrate them? How?”

“Brahl, you stupid son-of-a-bitch.” Yondu spread his arms wide. “I'm fuckin' blue.”

“Not all Kree are blue,” Lunis said absentmindedly.

“Yeah, well, these fuckers are. Guardsman wear those dumbass helmets. I toss one of those on, cover m'self up, and they won't know the difference.” Yondu peered out at the oncoming guard. “At least not until I'm murderin' the fuckers.”

“One problem. Kree patrol routes are supervised by an officer, usually armed with a long-range weapon.” Algon nodded towards an angular spire; a Kree stood at attention. “Him, most likely.”

“Then that's Brahl's target.” Yondu picked at his teeth and nearly cut himself on the arrowhead. “Take him out when I go for the guard. That thing's suppressed, ain't it?”

“It can be.” Brahl pulled a suppressor out of his bag and began attaching it. “Should I take out the other sniper?”

“No; there may be more. Kill that one and another one might sight in on your position. Wait until I kill him. Then, clear the windows.” Yondu jerked his head towards Algon and Lunis. “Anything spittin' bullets at them is your top priority.”

Brahl nodded.

“Question.” Lunis looked up. “What do we do if something goes wrong?”

“Keep killin' Kree. Aside from that,” Yondu said, “use your imagination.”

“Aye, captain,” Lunis replied.

Brahl was in position, his scope poised on the Kree officer's head. Down below, Algon waited. His charteruse coloration was an unexpected bonus; the sulphur made the planet's foliage colors of orange, yellow, and green. The guardsman paced closer. Lunis had drawn a line in the moss-covered stone with his knife. The guardsman's foot hit the line; Brahl pulled the trigger and the Kree officer crumpled to the ground.

Algon's jaw clamped over the guardsman's neck. Like some kind of ungodly Venus flytrap, he severed the head with one chomp. He dragged the body into the bushes with his immense claws and tore off the skull. When he spat it out, Yondu grabbed the helmet.

“Nice one,” he muttered.

Algon spat Kree blood, then wiped his mouth with the guard's torso.

“Thank you,” he said.

Behind him, Lunis threw up in the bushes. When the Ravager finally stood upright, he was shaking.

“You killed him with one bite. One bite.” The whites of Lunis' violet eyes were visible. “You took his head clean off.”
“I am a reptile.” When Algon grinned, there was still blue Kree blood staining his teeth. “I am naturally gifted at this sort of thing.”

Lunis backed into the tree, eying Algon as if expecting to be next. Algon rolled his eyes. Yondu was busy pulling the Kree's uniform over his Ravager gear. He strapped on the helmet and looked to Algon.

“Good enough,” he questioned.

“Almost.” Algon rubbed Kree blood on Yondu's facial scars. “They dye themselves, after all. You ought to achieve a uniform color.”

“Get off me.” Yondu pushed him away, scowling. “I ain't passin' dress inspection, idjit.”

“I'm going to laugh if you walk up there and are forced to stand at dress attention.” Algon's frills spread wide with glee. “I would love to see that. Do you think they'll ask you to march?”

“Shut up and watch for the signal,” Yondu snapped.

With that, Yondu paced out into the clearing. He started walking the way he had learned to walk. Impersonating a Kree was second-nature to Yondu. The fuckers had raised him, bred him, perfected him into a goddamn killing machine. If anyone could pass themselves off as a Kree warrior, it was Yondu. Centaurian may have been his native language, but Kree was his mothertongue.

When he turned to finish the route, he caught sight of another Kree pacing out of the building. As the two approached each other, Yondu felt a shiver of panic. The guardsmen would know each other by name.

“Pel-Kir,” the guard called, “you have blood on your shoulder.”

Yondu's eyes flicked to his left shoulder, where Algon had wiped his mouth.

“It's fine.” The Kree language roughed his throat in uncomfortable ways. “Stupid, really.”

“What did you do,” the guard asked.

“Slipped in a puddle of acid. Landed my shoulder on something stuck out of the ground – rock, I think.” Yondu scowled. “I hate this planet.”

“Doesn't look like it likes you either – your eyes are bloodshot,” the guard noticed.

“Some of the acid.” Yondu gestured to his face. “I think it got in my eyes.”

“You should go to the infirmary, Pel-Kir.” The guard frowned. “Now.”

“I'm fine,” Yondu said.

“Go,” the guard ordered.

Yondu put on what he hoped was a suitably dejected expression and paced up to the building. The door opened as he approached, which interested him; there was no bio-scan, no security for the doors at all. The Kree thought no one would bother to find them here.

The familiar architecture of the Kree was tickling his memory. Hala was brimming at the edges of his mind, threatening to break over him in a great rush. The architecture alone was enough to bring to mind the tall, angular spires that cut the horizon. Small windows, Yondu remembered, good
structural support. Thick walls – not thick enough to hide the sounds of screaming. No sublight. Everything was underground – better that way, Dal-Char said, better that proper Kree not have to see the scum that lived on the underbelly. This is where your people belong, Yondu – under our feet. There was a boot on his neck; Yondu couldn't breathe.

“Pel-Kir,” someone shouted.

Yondu jumped, breathing heavy. A Kree woman with pale skin and white-blue eyes was giving him a concerned look; a silver commander's rank glimmered on her chest.

“Your eyes are bloodshot. There's blood on your shoulder. You just walked by me without saluting,” she said, “and you're sweating.”

Momentarily, Yondu was lost for words.

“You usually don't make mistakes, Pel-Kir, so I'll let it slide. Go back to your bunk. Rest,” she ordered.

The commander put one hand on his shoulder; Yondu wanted to chew her fingers off.

“Control your emotions,” she advised.

Ice water trickled down Yondu's back. The commander paced on, leaving Yondu paralyzed in the middle of the hallway. Control your emotions. The Kree couldn't know – it was impossible for her to know what Yondu had been thinking – but she was correct. There was no time for fear. Yondu was not a child. Dal-Char was dead. Charlie-27 had strangled him in front of Yondu. There was nothing alive that Yondu needed to be afraid of.

His boots carried him swiftly up a flight of stairs. The sniper would be at the top, Yondu knew, and the fastest route would be the stairs structured near the corners of the building. There were always stairs in at least one corner of a Kree building – the Empire had fire codes, after all, and Yondu had listened to enough complaints from Kree guards about sweeping the stairs to know that they were scarcely ever used. He thundered up them rapidly, taking two at a time, until he was standing in sunlight again. The female Kree sniper had dark blue skin, a dark crew cut, and was scrolling through a datapad.

“Pel-Kir,” the Kree acknowledged.

“What are you reading,” Yondu asked in Kree.

“This? Oh, nothing.” The Kree quickly pulled the datapad off the table. “Not worth looking at.”

“Show me.” Yondu paced forwards; he needed this death to be visible to trigger the signal. “Now.”

The Kree swallowed, then slid the datapad back on the table. Yondu flipped it around and read.

“‘Price for Peace’?” Yondu's voice plummeted. “That Lonely woman?”

“I know it's against Empire entertainment standards.” The Kree wouldn't look him in the eyes. “Don't tell the commander, Pel-Kir; I'm begging you.”

Yondu's eyes flicked from the datapad to the Kree's guilty expression.

“Marty would want me to leave you alive,” he decided, “on account of you bein' into the same kind of bullshit he is.”
“You're not – ung!” The Kree wheezed as Yondu punched her in the gut. “Who are you?”

Yondu slammed the Kree's head against the wall; the sniper dropped.

“There you go, Marty. Paid you back for watchin' the Terrans.” Yondu took the unconscious Kree's rifle. “Didn't kill your book club buddy. I'm a goddamn saint.”

Movement to his left drew his attention. Lunis and Algon were running full-speed towards the compound. Yondu squinted; the corpse was still on Algon's shoulder. Satisfied, Yondu started down the stairs. Below him, a pair of Kree came sprinting up carrying sniper rifles. Yondu fired; one dropped dead. The other only had time to look stunned before she met the same fate. Yondu spat on the corpses as he passed.

Algon and Lunis were causing hell in the hangar. Lunis leapt about like an electrocuted rabbit, plunging knives into Kree as easily as if he was sticking toothpicks in butter. Algon was an absolute monster. Each swipe of his claws was the passing touch of death. Snarling, teeth bared, covered in Kree blood – Yondu was starting to remember why he had stayed in touch all these years. Brahl was in the doorway, firing shots out of cover. Yondu ran to his side and posted himself on the other side of the doorway. They shot at anyone who landed a bead on Lunis or Algon, and for a while, it looked like they had it under control. Then, the Kree fighter charged up.

“Dammit!” Yondu dodged an incoming laser. “They're firin' up the ships.”

“On it,” Lunis called.

The Kallusian sprinted towards the fighter and leapt up on its wing. The pilot was still prepping for launch when Lunis yanked open the cockpit and stabbed him repeatedly. Lunis' absence left Algon's back uncovered, and with the Acheronian corpse he was lugging around, the Saurid couldn't turn fast enough to cover his flanks. Yondu ran out to defend him.

“Ahahaha!” Algon thrust his claws through the chest of a Kree. “It reminds you of the escape, yes?”

“Only less Kree,” Yondu shouted, “and Stakar ain't laughin' his damn ass off.”

“Wait until he hears about this.” Algon shoved a shotblaster at Yondu. “I have acquired this for you.”

Yondu cocked the shotblaster and blew the cap of a Kree's skull into mush. He grunted in approval.

“Now would have been an excellent time to use the arrow,” Algon said.

“No. If they took that thing I'd never get it back.” Yondu kicked a Kree in the chest to stumble her, then blasted her chest open. “Gotta do things the fun way, I guess.”

Algon gripped three Kree soldiers in a vice-like hug, then tore their heads off with his wide, crocodile-like maw. The corpses hit the floor. Algon grinned; Kree blood seeped from between his teeth.

“Fun,” he enthused.

A blaster blot seared the air next to Yondu's head. Roaring, Yondu turned. The Kree dropped like a puppet with slit strings.

“One down,” Brahl called.
“More coming.” Algon shook out his shoulders; a team of Kree were charging towards them. “And there will be more after that.”

“Job's to get captured, not killed. Remember that,” Yondu muttered.

Screaming metal made them all look up. Lunis had taken control of the Kree fighter and activated its thrusters. He ran off the wing of the ship and rolled when he landed. The ship careened down the hangar bay, shoving other fighters into themselves. Large chunks of hull and wing went smashing into the ceiling and shattered against the walls. Lunis got to his feet and beamed.

“Used my imagination,” he said.

“That you fuckin' did,” Yondu cackled.

“Kree,” Algon urged.

The team was nearly upon them.

“Fighters are down. Extraction team should have no problem when the time comes. Reckon its time,” Yondu said.

“Got it.” Lunis rolled his shoulders. “Pretend to be crazy.”

“With you, Lunis, it's not really pretending,” Brahl joked.

The commander that Yondu had met earlier was strutting along behind the team of Kree. When she got near enough, Yondu removed his helmet. A tremor seemed to go through the Kree; some of them even took steps back. Heat flared in Yondu's chest. That's right, he seethed, be afraid.

“Yondu Udonta,” the commander said.

Yondu spat on the ground.

“If you think your appearance here is of note, you are mistaken.” While the rest of the Kree hesitated, the commander strode forwards. “You were only a threat because you were taught by Kree. We are Kree. We are superior.”

“Suck my fat Centaurian cock,” he snarled.

“Language, Yondu.” Algon frowned. “What if there are impressionable minds in our audience?”

“Impressionable, yeah.” Lunis selected a knife. “I'm thinking a sharp impression. Through the neck. Twist the wrist a little.”

“Take them,” the commander ordered.

The Kree rushed the Ravagers. It took years of skill and training to learn to kill Kree, but even more to pretend to lose to them. Yondu managed to shove aside a pair of shock restraints, landing them on one of Algon's wrist. The Saurid understood immediately; he slammed the restraint into a Kree and locked it in the process. Snarling, Algon fell to his knees. Brahl faked it well; he fought like a mad wolf until a broad-chested Kree wrangled him to the ground. Yondu and Lunis just kept fighting; it took two Kree to pin Lunis down, and twice that for Yondu.

“As I said,” the commander gloated, “we are superior.”

Yondu spat on her boots and cursed at her in Kree. Her mouth soured.
“Commander Val-Mara?” One of the Kree nudged the Acheronian corpse with his boot. “This one's already dead.”

“Cause of death,” she questioned.

“Looks like he was killed by the crash.”

“They burn their dead. His corpse is necessary to them.”

“And to us, Commander?” The Kree shifted from foot to food. “It could feed the Saurid.”

“No. Leave it here,” the commander decided.

In one swift movement, Algon snapped his restraints. Brahl twisted like an oiled serpent and choked a Kree with his chained shackles. Algon grabbed two of the Kree restraining Yondu and tossed them like rag dolls. Lunis slid his narrow hands through the restraints and began doing his favorite thing – stabbing. Yondu grabbed the corpse. The four Ravagers bolted behind the remains of a Kree fighter. The door was behind them.

“We could make an escape,” Brahl suggested.

“That ain't the damn plan.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Gotta let those fuckers take us again.” “Because of what,” Brahl yelled, “the corpse?”

“Because of the plan.” Algon ripped a sheet of metal off the Kree fighter like he was peeling bark from a tree. “We must be captured.”

“But what about the body,” Lunis asked.

Blaster bolts peppered the Kree fighter; one of them seared Algon's shoulder. He hissed. Yondu checked the wound.

“I'm fine,” Algon said.

“You won't be in a hot minute.” Yondu pumped his shotblaster. “They're shootin' to kill now.”

“What do we do,” Lunis asked.

“Go find the others!” Yondu threw the corpse onto Lunis. “Get that thing back to me, you hear?”

“Captain,” Lunis questioned.

Another volley of blaster bolts went flying by. Brahl cried out in pain, then collapsed. Yondu was at his side in seconds, pulling him into the cover of the debris.

“That's a goddamn order,” Yondu yelled, “now move!”

Lunis didn't have time to question. He hoisted the corpse's arm over his shoulder and sprinted across the clearing. With the Kree preoccupied with Yondu and the crew, Lunis was able to quickly go staggering into the sulphuric jungle. Leaves smacked him in the face as he tore through the foliage. He stumbled once or twice, but blind panic drove him forwards until all he could hear was the wind through the leaves. Lunis finally stopped and looked around.

“Algon?” He called as loud as he dared. “Brahl? Captain?”

There was no sound save for his own panting. Lunis was lost.
When Ellyn came over to babysit, Peter and the Ravager were in the living room. A large piece of machinery, roughly the size and shape of an oil drum, was quietly whirring in the middle of the room. The Ravager, Martinex T’Naga, was sitting cross-legged at its base, coding algorithms. Peter was lounging on the couch reading a data pad. When Ellyn opened the door, Martinex looked up.

“Good morning,” he cheered.

Ellyn wanted to psionically shatter his stupid face off. How dare he, she fumed, how dare he use Meredith's living room as a base for crime. It was unconscionable.

“I'm off to work.” Meredith came striding into the room with her hair pulled back into a ponytail. “Ellyn, you watch Peter. Peter, you watch Martinex.”

“On it,” Ellyn and Peter chorused.

“Wow.” Martinex put his hand on his chest. “I came here to use a scan-amplifier and honestly I'm feeling so attacked right now.”

“Scan-amplifier?” Ellyn's eyes narrowed. “Don't you think Stria Lonely's defenses could handle something like that.”

“Oh, I'm counting on it.” Martinex's grin glinted in the light. “I'm coding with that in mind at the moment.”

“Ellyn's pretty good at coding,” Peter said.

“Great! Ellyn, you help Martinex. Peter,” Meredith said, “do not touch anything illegal, okay?”

“Yes, mom.”

“Thanks, sweetheart.” Meredith bent over the couch and kissed Peter on the forehead. “I'll be back.”

“Love you,” Peter called.

“Love you too!” Meredith waved, then shut the door.

Ellyn and Peter waited until Meredith's heels could no longer be heard on the sidewalk outside. Then, Ellyn dropped on the couch and Peter transferred his music to the comm screen. The upbeat sounds of Terran music flooded the room. Martinex leaned out from behind the scan-amplifier.

“Could you turn it down,” he asked, “just a little?”

“This is our thing,” Peter complained.

“He's right.” Ellyn leaned back and closed her eyes. “It's kind of our thing.”

“Your thing?” Martinex squinted. “What, are you two some kind of dynamic duo?”

“Correct,” Ellyn said.

“Pretty much.” Peter kicked his legs. “She's the smart one; I'm the talkative one.”
“We're pretty much an unstoppable babysitter-kiddo duo,” Ellyn finished.

“And this is what you guys do?” Martinex gestured to the music. “You just sit around and do nothing?”

“Usually Ellyn writes,” Peter said, “and sometimes we play cup pong.”

Ellyn looked over her gold-rimmed visor at Martinex.

“You went to university, right,’ she asked.

“It was a long time ago, Ellyn.” Martinex didn't look at her. “I'm not that guy anymore.”

Ellyn's mouth twisted into what was almost a smile.

“Once a frat boy, always a frat boy. You ever play cup pong,” she asked.

“Did I play?” Martinex rolled his eyes. “Ellyn, you're talking to the university champ.”

“Then how about a little wager?”

“What kind of wager are we talking,” he said carefully.

“You win and we'll shut off the music. I win,” Ellyn said, “and you tell me how this amplifier is going to find Stria Lonely.”

Martinex leaned his head to the right, appraising her.

“Okay,” he said, “but Peter is on your team, not mine.”

“You think he's bad at it?” Ellyn looked to Peter. “Can you believe this guy is doubting your skills, Peter?”

“I've got mad skills, Martinex.” Peter looked over the datapad with a serious expression. “Mad skills.”

“I'm sure you do, kid, but I repeat: university champ.” Martinex got to his feet. “I'll get the cups.”

Martinex strode to the kitchen. Ellyn gave Peter a look, then nodded towards the hallway. Peter slid off the couch and hid. Ellyn calmly got to her feet and strode after him. In the hallway, they connived.

“So how do we beat him?” Peter's grin splashed across his face. “Because I suck at this game.”

“I know, but that's not going to matter.”

“Why not?”

“Whatever you do, don't tell him about my psionics, okay?” Ellyn's eyes were hard. “That does not come out of your mouth.”

“I got it, I got it.” Peter scowled. “What's the big deal?”

“We are going to hustle him,” Ellyn said.

“Isn't that like cheating?”
“He’s a Ravager.” Ellyn gave Peter a look over her visor. “He deserves it.”

“How did you know he was a Ravager,” Peter asked.

“Various bits and pieces of information conglomerated over a long period of time, okay? Just roll with it,” Ellyn hissed.

“What are you two doing,” Martinex called.

“Strategizing,” Peter called back.

“It’s cup pong,” Martinex’s voice was flat. “Ball into cup. That’s your strategy.”

“Ours is a little more complicated than that.” Ellyn led Peter back into the kitchen. “Got the cups?”

Martinex gestured towards the triangle of cups set up on the table.

“Filled with water for rapid clean up,” he noted.

Peter reached up into the cabinet and pulled out a handful of brightly-colored plastic balls. Ellyn sat on the counter behind Martinex.

“So, Dr. T’Naga.” She tried to force a pleasant tone. “Where did you go to university?”

“Pluto,” he said.

“Pluto?”

“Yeah, I’m Pluvian.” Martinex took a green plastic ball from Peter. “Of Pluto.”

“I thought the Kree –”

“Yeah,” he said, “they did.”

“Oh.” Ellyn stared at the floor. “I hope something like that never happens again.”

Martinex gave her a look over his shoulder.

“Me too,” he said, “that’s why I do what I do.”

“As a doctor,” Ellyn questioned.

“Right, yeah, that’s what I meant.” Martinex tossed the ball; it plunked into a cup. “Doctor Martinex T’Naga.”

“Nice one,” Peter said.

“Your turn, kid.” Martinex took the excess balls from Peter. “Go ahead. Show me those mad skills.”

Peter pitched the ball like a baseball; it bounced off the wall, flew back, smacked against Martinex’s forehead, and landed into the furthest cup. Peter cheered; Martinex froze.

“Did that just happen?” He looked at Peter. “You just did that.”

“I did just do that,” Peter said.

“Oh he totally just did that.” Ellyn did her utmost not to smirk. “We warned you; mad skills.”
“Are you guys professionals at this?” Martinex turned around and put his hands on his hips. “I feel like I’ve just walked into a championship league.”

“You have.” Ellyn slipped off the counter and took the pink ball from his hand. “Prepare for a lesson in humility, Dr. T’Naga.”

Thirty minutes into the game, Peter gave up playing and resorted to keeping score. Martinex and Ellyn had poured themselves plastic cups of beer and were cycling turns like their lives depended on it. Peter was the sideline referee and Ellyn’s cheerleader.

“It's the music, really.” Ellyn popped another ball into the furthest cup. “Gets me in the zone.”

“In the zone, yeah right.” Martinex hit the same cup seconds later. “You're only winning by six.”

Ellyn's mouth twisted. She tossed; it landed in the middle cup.

“This is not fair.” Martinex crushed his empty plastic cup in his hands. “This is impossible; even I can't get it in every single time. You're cheating. You've got to be cheating.”

“Define cheating,” Ellyn said before bouncing a ball into the furthest cup.

“Cheating,” he said, “as in violating the terms of the arrangement?”

“Do I look like I'm cheating?” Ellyn blinked innocently.

“I don't know how you're doing it,” Martinex said, “but you are cheating.”

Ellyn laughed and bounced another ball directly into a cup.

“Guess I'm just talented,” she said.

“Ellyn, be real with me. Be real with me right now.” Martinex tossed the crushed cup into the garbage. “How are you doing this?”

“I'm cheating,” she said simply.

Martinex stared as Ellyn scored again.

“You know what? Fuck you.” Martinex waved his hand over the cups; the beer inside froze solid.

“Bounce into that, you cheat.”

“You should watch your language around Peter,” Ellyn warned.

“Fuck that,” Peter said.

While Martinex poured himself a fresh beer, Ellyn tossed the white ball up and down in her palm. Her mouth was pressed flat as if suppressing a smile. She threw the ball against the ceiling. It clacked against the textured ceiling, smacked into the floor, ricocheted onto the pink wall, and arced gracefully into Martinex’s beer. The amber liquid leapt out of the cup and splashed onto his shirt, leaving a thin veneer of foam. Peter burst out laughing.

“That's not even – that denied laws of physics,” Martinex screamed.

Ellyn covered her mouth as she laughed. Martinex tore his shirt off in disgust.
“You cheat,” he accused.

“Hey, no undressing in Meredith's house.” Ellyn put her hands on her hips. “This isn't a strip club, sparkles.”

“'Sparkles',” Martinex said scathingly.

Ellyn gestured to the glittering crystal panels of Martinex's chest.

“Sparkles to me,” she said.

Peter doubled over, shrieking with laughter.

“How are you doing this,” Martinex cried, “it's not physically possible!”

“Do you give up,” Ellyn asked.

“Hell no.”

“Then I guess we keep playing until you do.” Ellyn pulled her pink plastic ball out of Martinex’s beer. “Because I'm not going to stop unless you can tell me how I'm doing it, and since you can't, you're just going to keep losing.”

Martinex's mouth twitched.

“I got hustled,” he said quietly.

“You got hustled hard,” Peter said.

“So,” Ellyn said, “do you want to call it quits and cough up what you're doing with that scan-amplifier, or should I just frustrate you some more?”

Martinex wrapped his shirt around his left hand; frost spread along the fabric.

“I don't know how I feel about being hustled out of my own business,” he said.

“You agreed to the wager,” she said.

“Under false pretenses.”

“Incorrect. We warned you that Peter had mad skills. We did not mention what kind of skills I have.”

“That would have affected whether or not I agreed.”

“You should have asked more questions.”

“Are you blaming me for being deceived?”

“Are you bailing on a formal agreement?”

“Are you guys done,” Peter asked.

Martinex and Ellyn glanced at him quickly, as if they'd forgotten he was there.

“I'll concede the match.” Martinex shook out his shirt. “But I'm putting in a formal complaint with the authorities.”

“Yes; Meredith.” Martinex put his shirt in the sink and started washing it. “She is the authority in the house, is she not?”

Ellyn and Peter exchanged a look.

“We'll concede and turn the music off,” Ellyn said quickly, “if you don't mention the particular game that was played.”

“Wait, does Meredith not know?” Martinex looked over his shoulder. “What does she think you do all evening?”

“Read,” Ellyn said.

“Homework,” Peter said.

Martinex sighed and continued to rinse his shirt.

“Poor sweet innocent Meredith. Sometimes I wonder how she's stayed alive this long. So trusting,” Martinex said, “and so woefully ignorant.”

A sharp pain in the back of his knee made Martinex hiss. Peter stood behind him, preparing another kick.

“Watch it,” he snapped.

“I meant ignorant as in unaware of what you two were doing,” Martinex said, “not as stupid! Meredith is pretty damn smart, okay? Ow, kid, what did you kick me with?”

“Everything I had,” Peter said.

“Well, good one.” Martinex bent down and rubbed his sore leg. “Right in the crease. Ow.”

Peter smirked. Ellyn cleared up the rest of the game, then glanced at the clock.

“Peter,” she called, “food.”

“Pizza,” Peter suggested.

“Does Martinex want pizza,” Ellyn questioned.

“I'm a slut for pizza,” Martinex said.

“Pizza it is, then.” Ellyn adjusted her visor; an interface passed in front of her. “Any particular toppings?”

“Green peppers,” Peter said.

“Olives,” Martinex said, “but the green kind, not the black.”

“Lauka as the meat sound good? Going once, going twice?” Ellyn's eyes flicked between the boys; she then placed the order. “What name are we using?”

“What,” Martinex asked.

“We always use a stupid name,” Ellyn explained.

“Won't fit in the text box; sorry, kiddo.”

“Dolly Parton?”

“You used that one last month.”

“Bilbio Makyntosh,” Martinex offered.

“We are not using the comm officer from Trade of Light, Martinex.”

“Oh come on,” Martinex complained.

“Kevin Bacon,” Peter offered.

“The great Earth hero, huh? Okay.” Ellyn typed it in. “It should be here in about fifteen minutes.”

“So this is what you two do.” Martinex shut off the water and wrung his shirt out in the sink; a grin played around his mouth. “You play cup pong and listen to music and eat pizza.”

“What's wrong with that,” Ellyn asked.

“Nothing, nothing at all, it's just – it's so civilian.” Martinex shook out his shirt and steamed it with his right hand. “I haven't done anything like this in a long time.”

“You haven't just hung out?” Ellyn's eyebrows drew together. “What do you do in your spare time?”

“When I can get five minutes to myself? I read,” Martinex said.

“Stria Lonely?”

“Usually.”

“Do people not judge you for that,” Ellyn asked.

“If they do, I don't care.” Martinex pulled his shirt back over his head, covering his glittering chest. “She's phenomenal. Anyone who doesn't think so has no appreciation for fine sociopolitical satire.”

“Here's a question.” Ellyn adjusted her visor. “Which do you prefer; her sociopolitical commentary or the romance aspect?”

“That's like asking whether or not I prefer daytime or nighttime when we're discussing the sunset. It's beautiful because it's both,” he said.

Ellyn almost smiled.

“Hey.” Peter turned off the music. “You're not telling Mom about this, right Martinex?”

Martinex drew his hand across his mouth.

“My lips are proverbially sealed,” he said.

Peter took a seat on the couch and kept scrolling through his datapad. Martinex sat down next to his amplifier; Ellyn sat next to Peter and tapped at her leg.

“I should have brought a book,” she muttered.
“Want one?” Martinex looked up. “I have a pocket copy of *Classified Contact* in my jacket pocket.”

“A datapad,” Ellyn assumed.

“No, a literal pocket copy. I like physical books.”

“I agree. Tracing your fingers over sleek glass isn't the same as flipping a good solid page,” Ellyn said.

Martinex paused in his work to give her a curious look.

“Exactly,” he said.

“So where is it?” Ellyn got to her feet. “Jacket's in the closet, right?”

“Oh, no, let me. My pockets are filled with garbage.” Martinex flashed a grin and got to his feet. “I'd hate to make you go palming through that.”

You'd hate to have me examining the clan markings on your jacket, more like, Ellyn thought savagely. Just because he was a fan did not mean she had to like him; Ellyn kept repeating this firmly to herself. Joining a criminal gang to stop the species that killed his planet was admittedly quite anti-heroic of him, and being plausibly the last Plutonian made Ellyn sad in a way that weighed down her soul.

Martinex returned from the hallway with a small paperback book. Tons of little neon flags stuck out of it.

“I have to warn you,” he said, “I only have my annotated copy.”

“Annotated,” Ellyn breathed.

“Yeah.” Martinex tinged slightly purple. “I'm a huge nerd. Here you go.”

Ellyn took the book as if it were made of glass. While Martinex worked, she gingerly turned through the pages. Cramped in the margins was small, spidery handwriting that connected to long underlined passages. They said things like, *Characterization of this asshole is delicious*, and *MASK of concern – S.L hinting at future antagonist?* As Ellyn pored through the annotations, her eyes widened.

“This is incredible,” she breathed.

“She's dope, isn't she?”

“I meant you. These notes – they're enlightening.”

Martinex's crystal was slowly clouding purple.

“I don't have a lot of free time,” he admitted quietly, “but the free time I do have is spent consuming stories.”

Ellyn looked up from the book with a slightly critical look.

“Why,” she asked.

“These books are beautiful places. Even when I'm in the real world, part of my mind and my heart are always in my stories.” Martinex cocked his head to the side. “I suppose fantasy helps me believe the galaxy can actually be a better place. It deludes me into believing that if I just work hard enough,
I can save it.”

Ellyn looked at the spine of the book; it was heavily creased with use. Gently, she rubbed the cover with her thumb.

“Martinex,” she said softly, “I think you need to send this to Stria.”


“She'll think you're a genius, Martinex. Just look at this.” Ellyn thumbed through the mark-heavy pages. “You've analyzed themes and saw connections here that I – I bet even she didn't see.”

“She's the author,” Martinex said, “I just read.”

“That is completely incorrect.” Ellyn closed the book gently. “In order to be a truly good reader, you have to be an inventor. There is as much creativity in true reading as there is in true writing. Why do you think the best writers are also good readers?”

“I'm not a writer,” Martinex said, purpling slightly.

“Maybe not, but you're an amazing reader.”

“That's no guarantee she’d read it, or that she'd like what I think.” Martinex's mouth twitched down. “I don't want her to think I'm obsessed with her.”

“Martinex,” Ellyn said flatly.

“Okay fine, I don't want her to know I'm obsessed with her.” Martinex sighed. “She'd probably get a restraining order against me.”

“She might consider it,” Ellyn admitted.

“Then absolutely not.” Martinex tapped his finger on the scan-amplifier; snowflakes were falling from it. “I'd rather never meet her at all than know she didn't like me.”

“That's quite a statement.” Ellyn leaned back. “You admire her that much?”

“That woman cares about what happens to the galaxy. She cares about people she's never met on planets she's never been to. When she sees the universe,” Martinex said, “she wants to fix it. She believes she can. Believing that? That is sexy.”

Ellyn's cheeks were on fire.

“You think the way she – her mind,” she stammered, “how she thinks about – wanting to fix it?”

Martinex gave her a confused look.

“She wants to help people,” Ellyn forced out, “and you find that attractive?”

“Duh,” he said.

“I'm a kid.” Peter looked over his datapad; Ellyn and Martinex jumped. “Can we hold off on the 'where babies come from' conversation?”

Martinex tilted his head back and laughed. It was a resonating sound unlike anything Ellyn had heard before. *Like the bells of an ancient cathedral, her mind invented, tolling their tongues in caves long*
There was a knock at the door. Ellyn went to stand, but Martinex was faster. He reached for something in his back pocket. Ellyn could barely make out the shape of a gun. Her blood went cold.

“Hello.” Martinex opened the door with a wide grin. “How can I help you?”

“Pizza?” A Dakkamite with short blonde hair was holding a green box. “Three toppings for a Mr. Kevin Bacon?”

“That's me!” Peter waved. “I'm Kevin Bacon.”

“Oh, thank God, it's just the pizza guy.” Martinex laughed. “I'm sorry, I thought you might be the cops.”

“Why would he be the cops? Don't be ridiculous.” Ellyn paid the pizza guy with a few swipes of her interface. “Grab the food and let the guy get back to work.”

Martinex took the box and shut the door with his foot.

“So,” Ellyn said lightly, “Dr. T'Naga? What's with the gun?”

Martinex paused.

“I don't like city planets.” He locked the door and set the pizza on the table. “Can't trust anybody around here.”

“I see,” Ellyn said.

“How'd you see it,” Martinex asked.

“You reached for your back pocket: I saw the outline of it in your pants. You shouldn't wear such tight clothing if you're hiding weaponry,” Ellyn suggested.

“Were you staring at his butt,” Peter whispered.

The look Ellyn gave Peter could have frozen magma. Peter giggled and hid under his datapad.

“Come on, you.” Ellyn got to her feet. “Let's get some food in you so I can kick your butt to bed.”

“Bed? It's not even nine,” Martinex said.

“Meredith comes back at eleven; Peter needs to be asleep by then. She checks.” Ellyn opened the pizza box. “She always checks.”

“And I have school tomorrow.” Peter rolled his eyes. “It sucks.”

“I liked school,” Martinex said.

“You also said you're a huge nerd,” Peter countered.

“He's right; you did say you were a huge nerd,” Ellyn said.

“What is with you two?” Martinex took some pizza. “Do you duel-team Meredith like this?”

“All the time,” Ellyn said.
“She hates it,” Peter said.

“You two are worse than Stakar and Aleta,” Martinex muttered.

“What was that,” Ellyn asked sharply.

“I said you two should stop and just eat pizza,” Martinex said.

Dinner had Martinex and Ellyn sitting across from each other again. Thankfully, Peter was a sufficient distraction for both of them. His antics were a constant source of conversation and entertainment. Martinex and Peter helped with the dishes. When Peter went to bed, Martinex returned to the scan-amplifier.

“So,” Ellyn started, “you were going to tell me how this works?”

“I'll give you the basics; no details,” Martinex stressed.

“Fine.” Ellyn eyed the machine. “So, what does this thing do?”

“It narrows down data based on certain search parameters. I've attached a hacking module made by my dear best buddy Mainframe. See this here?” Martinex gestured to the terminal screen. “It's simultaneously testing firewalls all across Dakkam.”

“So you'll have to hack every computer address on Dakkam first.” Ellyn looked pleased. “That could take months.”

“Actually, no. Only a select number of addresses have transported large amounts of data in the form of text files. Since Stria's main off-world uploads are her books,” Martinex said, “we can narrow it down to a couple thousand addresses.”

“Okay. Okay.” Ellyn nodded. “So, weeks then.”

“No, not even close. See, this thing also picks up runtimes, extraneous data, all the little things. I've hacked a little already, and from what I can see, only a few of these terminal addresses have improved their firewalls within the last few days. So,” Martinex reasoned, “if we can assume that if Stria Lonely is smart enough to know that she's being hacked, we can also assume that she's prepared for a counterhack.”

“You're narrowing down your search based on which addresses have the strength to fight your hacking attempts,” Ellyn breathed.

“Abso-fucking-lutely. Stria Lonely is a master at hiding herself. If she catches wind of this, and I've been sloppy enough to leave definite traces, she'll already have boosted her firewalls. That makes her one of a very limited number of people.” Martinex grinned from ear to ear. “One hard hacking strike from this baby and I'll have her within a few days.”

“What,” Ellyn said.

“See? It's this simple. This thing is testing the firewalls as they're put up on multiple accounts. Imagine that firepower narrowed down to cracking just one computer address.” Martinex couldn't help but grin as he adjusted the algorithms. “In two days, I'll be face-to-face with the goddess of sexual tension.”

“You're joking, right?” Ellyn was staring at the machine like it was going to lop her arm off. “This can't actually run through all that data.”
“Oh.” Martinex raised one glittering eyebrow. “Oh, it can *run*.”

Ellyn swallowed.

“Is it flammable,” she asked weakly.

“Nope!” Martinex slapped it with his right hand; the flames curled harmlessly off. “I build everything that way. Accidents, you know.”

Ellyn closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“You are smart,” she admitted, “really smart.”

“Thank you.” Martinex wiggled his eyebrows. “In addition to being *incredibly* sexy, I also like science.”

“Just wait until you meet Stria.” Ellyn pressed the bridge of her nose with her thumbs. “I don't think either of you will be prepared for this.”

“I'll consider that a compliment,” Martinex said.

Ellyn set her fingertips on his annotated copy of Classified Contact.

“Can I borrow this for tonight,” she asked.

“If you don't return it to me tomorrow, I'll hack your bank account and post pictures of dead puppies on your social media.”


“Alright then,” Martinex chuckled, “keep it safe.”

Ellyn scooped up the book and headed to the door.

“You've got Peter,” she called.

“As long as he stays asleep.” Martinex gave her an unenthused look. “Kids and I don't really get along.”

“It's Peter.” Ellyn returned his expression. “You'll be fine.”

The door shut. Martinex kept coding algorithms for the scan-amplifier until Meredith came through the door.

“Hey Martinex,” she said.

“Hey, Meredith. Your neighbor, Ellyn? She's good with Peter. I mean, really good.” Martinex set his tools down for a moment. “How did you find a babysitter that good?”

“Good how,” Meredith asked as she took off her shoes.

“Smart,” Martinex said, “good with your kid, just a little mischievous.”

“Oh, you don't find people like Ellyn.” Meredith grinned. “People like Ellyn find you.”

“I suppose,” said Martinex.
The Ravager went back to his work. Meredith leaned her arms on the back of the couch and watched him tinker with the scan-amplifier for a few moments.

“Did you guys have fun tonight,” she asked.

“Surprisingly, yes.” Martinex’s eyebrows narrowed. “It's strange; I'd almost forgotten what it felt like.”

“To have fun?”

“No, not that. I'm a Ravager; that's all the fun I need. It's more like the little things,” Martinex explained.

Meredith was looking at him expectantly. Martinex leaned back from the machine.

“I'm nothing like Yondu or Charlie-27. I didn't grow up in a slave camp or a military stockade. I was a civilian. I ate pizza and played video games and worried about test scores. All that went away, you know, and Ravager life is all I've known since then. I don't miss it,” Martinex said quickly, “but I didn't – I don't know. I didn't realize how much of it I'd forgotten. Pizza, games, relaxing, not thinking about the next heist or some grand plan. Just living, you know?”

“It's a pretty sweet gig if you can land it,” Meredith said.

“Ha.” Martinex grinned and went to work. “I'm a Ravager, Meredith. We don't mix well with 'easy'.”

“Don't I know it. But hey, look at it this way.” Meredith stood up and paced to the hall. “If a civilian like me can be a Ravager sometimes, why can't a Ravager be a civilian every once in a while?”

Martinex's fingers paused momentarily. He kept coding until he heard Meredith disappear into her bedroom. The lights turned off; Martinex's omnitool glowed enough for him to keep working. After a few more minutes, he exhaled and shut it down. Meredith's couch would have to do for tonight. He retrieved his jacket from the closet, curled up on the couch, and stared at the scan-amplifier.

“You have to work,” he told it.

The scan-amplifier did not respond; not that he'd expected it to. Martinex rolled on his side and opened his interface. Then, like every night, he flicked through his holos until his parents were smiling up at him.

“Night, mom,” Martinex mumbled, “night, dad.”

They smiled up at him until he turned off the holo, plunging the living room back into darkness.
Chapter Summary

Yondu and Algon find themselves thrown in with enslaved civilians while Yondu's crew tries to sort out the situation. Meanwhile, Ellyn stays up all night (again) trying to stop Martinex from cracking open her secret identity. In the end, it's Meredith who discovers more than she wanted to know.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Over the years, Yondu had become kind of a connoisseur of handcuffs. There were Nova Corps restraints; nice, moderately comfortable, and pretty easy to get off if you had the right tools. Once, a curvaceous Krylorian woman with a tattoo of a bostaur's horns over her collarbone had tried to convince Yondu that handcuffs could be a sexual thing, and he'd never been so turned off in his goddamn life. Ravager handcuffs were thick, clunky, and couldn't be broken by anyone weaker than Charlie-27; when he had started out, Yondu had clapped himself in them and tried to break out of them just in case Stakar turned on him suddenly. The Kree had thicker cuffs, almost like armbands, that locked together with thick chain; they were heavy as hell and a bitch to move in, but could be used as a blunt weapon when the time came. Suspended in midair with his forearms and ankles encased in metal and a gag over his mouth, Yondu had a first-row seat to experience the Kree's innovations in handcuffs. They were a bunch of goddamn monsters, but Yondu had to admit they took their slavery damn seriously.

Algon did not seem to be enjoying himself either. The Kree didn't have a proper restraint big enough to hold him, so they had improvised. A heavy steel arc had been laid across his shoulders; Algon's arms were clamped to it. In the middle, the bar was welded to a thick collar, which was chained to the restraints around Algon's ankles. The chain was short; Algon had to stoop when he stood and was otherwise forced to lie on his back to prevent the bar from harming his spine. A large muzzle had been strapped over his head, leaving only his eyes and fins viewable. That was enough for Yondu; at least he knew he wasn't the only one glaring daggers at any Kree that walked by them.

They hadn't seen Brahl in hours. Yondu wasn't concerned; they had most likely taken him to the cells of the other slaves. Yondu and Algon were ex-battle slaves; the Kree were rolling out the big guns for them. The commander, Val-Mara, had paced in front of them, smirking all the while. Yondu had been passed through a scanner on the way in; all Yondu's weaponry had been confiscated, but they had been allowed to keep their garments.

The patrols were an easy way to keep time, but Yondu didn't rely on them. Mostly, he counted heartbeats. It had been the only way to keep time when he was a child, and it served him well now. He knew that the patrols paced every forty-five minutes, not every hour like they had done when he was a child. The guards had identification codes in their interfaces; Yondu had seen them scanning in to pass through the door. The most informative observation had been a glimpse of a passing scientist. Yondu took that to mean that he was right; Ranides was the base of production for the Kree.
nanobytes. With his current options limited to glaring and thinking, Yondu had to admit the victory was losing its luster.

This was all part of the plan. He had to keep telling himself that. Panic would accomplish nothing. Yondu was temporarily inconvenienced at most. This was part of the plan. Restraints and Kree and cells were part of the plan.

Yondu really hated this plan.

His loathing was only sharpened when Val-Mara returned. She brought with her several Kree soldiers, who set to work moving Yondu and Algon out of the room. They threw a heavy bag of thick fabric over his head. It didn't matter; he could smell them, hear the commander barking orders, the sound of the portal opening and closing. His restraints were chained together, then disengaged from the frame. Yondu hit the ground hard. A boot drove into his back; he rolled up instinctively and snarled. A sharp pain slit his back; he arced in pain and fell to the ground again.

The pain brought with it a most bizarre kind of nostalgia. Yondu had almost forgotten what the bite of a thrash-blade felt like. They whipped him when he fought back. The pain was sharp, but they never hit him more than ten times; more, Yondu recalled, and he wouldn't be fit to work.

Another hit snapped him back to the present. There was no work. He was not a slave. This was not something he had to just lay down and take. This was not his life anymore. He tensed when the next stroke hit. Behind him, he estimated, about four feet.

Yondu struck out with his leg and caught the Kree in the thigh. The Kree went to strike him again, but now Yondu knew where the fucker was. He rolled to the Kree, sat up, and pile-drove his shoulder into the Kree's knee. There was a horrible jumble of limbs and yells and weight before Yondu set one knee onto the Kree's chest. The others were trying to pull Yondu off. They gripped his arms and dragged him up. Yondu pressed his foot under where he hoped the Kree's jaw was and stomped. The Kree's screams began to gurgle. Good, Yondu thought, crushed a windpipe.

The commander was screaming now. They hoisted him up and hit him a few times; Yondu had had better punches from Peter, for shit's sake. Either the Kree were weaker or Yondu was stronger; either way, his spirits lifted considerably. They began dragging him off. He took footsteps in a deliberate fashion – one second strides, in time with his heartbeat, that's how you count distance when there's no measurement but yourself – and kept his ears open. He heard the churning of an elevator with satisfaction; the commander had probably cleared them to be moved to a cell until she could send him off for his bounties. The room they pushed him in felt dry and cold; he could hear echoes of his steps. A large area, dry air, the faint smell of chemicals; they were taking him to a lab. Against his will, Yondu's heartbeat picked up. He had to force himself to count seconds as he walked.

He could hear a portal open in front of him. A boot slammed into his back; he found himself on his knees. They ripped the bag off of his head. Yondu blinked a few times, adjusting himself to the light. Algon hit the ground next to him; they had taken off the arc but kept the muzzle on him. The Saurid leapt for the door, a mountain of scales and rage, but the portal snapped shut.

“They moved us.” With the muzzle on his jaw, Algon's speech was stifled. “Why do you think that is?”

“Reckon they want us for somethin' else.” Yondu looked down at his restraints. “Didn't take the cuffs off.”

“Really? They took mine off. A bad decision on their part,” Algon said.
He gripped the sides of his muzzle and pulled until the welded joints gave way. With a gasp, he flung the shards aside.

“Come here.” Algon gestured with a claw. “Let me get those off you.”

Yondu offered his wrist. Algon deftly wormed two claws through the center chain link and pulled. It didn’t give, so he moved to the next. Finally, one of the links edged open a little. Yondu put his foot on the chain and pulled with everything he had; the chain link began to open. Algon slipped the ring of the chain into the gap that had been made and pulled; the ring popped right through. Yondu flexed his hands and rolled his shoulders.

“Alright,” he said, “so we're in.”

“What is our next step,” Algon asked.

“Did you – you just broke that chain like it was nothing.” An awed voice came from the corner. “Wow.”

Yondu and Algon tensed. The room they were in was rectangular and filled with what looked to be desks bolted to the floor. Now, various people were peering over the desks in various states of shock, awe, and suspicion.

“Who the fuck are you,” Yondu spat.

“Yondu, don't be rude. We were just flung into their cell, after all.” Algon drew himself up proudly. “I am Algon, proprietor of Algon's Amphibious Market, the only amphibious-friendly market in the galaxy.”

“And,” Yondu stressed.

“And ex-battle slave, but that is not nearly as interesting.”

“And you.” A tall man with pale green skin and a shock of white hair stared at Yondu with wide black eyes. “You're Yondu Udonta.”

Yondu spat on the ground.

“You are,” the man breathed.

“Of course he is.” Algon snorted. “And who are you?”

“We're – well, they call us training-slaves.” The man raised his still-chained cuffs. “We're practice for their combat.”

Yondu's eyes dragged over the inhabitants of the cell. Most were sporting massive bruises, black eyes, or fat lips. When the man who spoke smiled, he had a chipped tooth. Yondu's blood boiled.

“You're livin' punchin' bags,” he said.

“Pretty much. I'm Juerk,” the green man said.

“Where did they get all of you,” Algon asked.

“Trading caravan,” one of them piped up.

“I was visiting my sister on Neoke.”
“Civilian cruseliner.”

“Ship engineer.”

“Sold by Eridani.”

“I was a janitor here,” Juerk answered.

“Goddamn civilians.” Yondu bared his teeth. “Any of you seen anybody by the name of Brahl?”

“Brahl? No,” Juerk said, “we don't have a Brahl.”

“He might be up there.” A young woman got to her feet. “The cage above us is filled with your type.”

“My type,” Yondu questioned.

“Pirates,” the girl answered.

Yondu squinted. The girl had deep-brown eyes, as large and long-lashed as a doe's but with rectangular pupils. Her fawn brown skin was mottled with patches of white. Two brown horns, curved like a ram's, curved out of her long, chocolate-colored hair. She was short – even shorter than Meredith, Yondu thought.

“They're keepin' kids like you here,” he questioned.

“I'm not a kid!” The girl stamped her left hoof. “I'm nineteen.”

“You're a child,” Algon said.

The girl lowered her horns and charged. Algon side-stepped; the girl rammed herself into the portal. The resulting clang made the civilians wince. She wobbled as she got back to her feet.

“They're battle-slaves, Taurlette.” Juerk raised his eyes to the ceiling. “They could kill you without even trying.”

“Choke you to death with your own chains,” Algon added.

“Chains?” Yondu snorted. “Just crush 'er neck with your foot, asshole.”

Taurlette stumbled back, eyes wide. Juerk put his hand on her shoulder and pulled her back.

“There are pirates in the room above us. The ceiling has a vent hole,” Juerk said, “and we can talk through it.”

“Take me to it,” Yondu said.

He strode forwards; the civilians parted around him. The blatant awe and fear with which they watched him made Yondu scowl; these idjits wouldn't last five seconds in a real fight. Juerk led him to the corner of the room. A small air duct, blocked off with hexagon-patterned vents, led to the room above. Someone was sitting by it; Yondu could see the dull serpent-green of Pa Zir's clan.

“Hey,” he shouted.

“Keep y'voice down,” one of them muttered, “a'fore they come back again.”
“Where's Pa Zir?”

“None of your damn business.”

“Tell him Starhawk sent me,” Yondu said.

“Starhawk?” There was a shuffle. “Who the hell is this?”

The jacket moved away; a white scowling face popped over the vent. Yondu scowled back. The pale man widened his pink eyes and began to laugh loudly.

“Udonta! Pa Zir,” he cried, “it's Yondu Udonta!”

“Yondu Udonta? The Yondu Udonta?” Voices were picking up now. “That's impossible.”

“No, it's him – I can see him through the floor.” A female voice; Contraxian, Yondu decided. “They took your clan, too?”

“Hell no.” Yondu bared his teeth. “We're here to bust your asses out.”

“Well,” the albino said, “aren't you doing swimmingly.”

“Belay that, Thrig,” a heavily accented voice said.

A thick, square face appeared over the vent. Black, bristly hair smothered his lower jaw, matched only by the thickness of his brows. His left eye was a dark brown; his right was a vacant socket. When he grinned, Yondu could count two missing teeth.

“Oh and ain't this a right surprise, dontcha know?” Pa Zir began to laugh. “The great Yondu Udonta, here to break out me and me humble crew, aye?”

“Somethin' 'long them lines, yeah.” Yondu's brow contracted. “They took your eye?”

“And me mechanical leg,” Pa Zir said, “and me left middle finger.”

“The one that turns into a laser sword?”

“Aye, that's the one.”

“What do you have?”

“My crew's all alive. The Kree've been usin' us as combat practice,” Pa Zir said, “when they're done feelin' good about themselves from knockin' around them civilian-types. Been a nightmare, dontcha know.”

“They stuck us down here with the damn civilians.”

“Us?”

“Brought Algon.”

“Aye, they did mention something about a Saurid. Probably put you down there in case he gets hungry,” Pa Zir explained, “and he goes lookin' for somethin' tasty to much on.”

“I'm not going to just eat people,” Algon protested.

“Algon,” Yondu said, “you ate the heads off four damn Kree.”
“I didn't swallow them.”

“You still bit 'em off.”

“Yes,” Algon cried, “but that is not the same as eating.”

The civilians were now giving Algon and Yondu a wide berth. Good, Yondu thought grimly; the last thing he needed was a swarm of idjits in his way.

“Pa Zir,” he called, “do you got one of my crew up there?”

“The Acheronian? Aye,” Pa Zir answered, “but he's out like a light at the mo'. Want me to shake 'im an' awaken 'im?”

“Nah, let him sleep. What'd they do?”

“Looks like they conked him quite a bonkin',” Pa Zir said, “and laid him unblinkin'.”

It took Yondu ten seconds to discern what the hell Pa Zir had just said.

“They knocked him out,” Yondu realized.

“Aye,” Pa Zir snapped, “that's what I said, dontcha know!”

“He has a most peculiar dialect,” Algon muttered.

*Backwater planet*, Yondu mouthed. Algon nodded in comprehension.

“We've got a plan to get out,” Yondu called to Pa Zir, “so you and your crew just hold tight, alright? I've got my best men on it.”

Lunis wanted a medal for this. Maybe a windfall of units, he thought as he dragged the corpse through the jungle, or a nice new knife. That was it; a big nice knife with a pretty handle.

“Not too much to ask,” he huffed, “just a pretty one. Look at me. I'm dragging a corpse. I'm a good Ravager. One knife. Too much to ask?”

The Acheronian corpse didn't answer. Lunis was starting to wish that they had killed a smaller species; this bastard was getting heavy. Lunis set the corpse down momentarily and surveyed his surroundings.

“Where am I going,” he sighed.

Using his comm link would be suicide; the Kree would come down on him like a strike of lightning. Lunis had no choice but to figure out where the other ship had landed, and that would be nearly impossible. Still, blind panic wasn't going to help him, and Lunis wasn't the kind of man to despair when there was work to be done.

“Get up high,” he decided, “find the ship. That doesn't work? Build a shelter. Wait for help.”

It was as good of a plan as he could think up; the corpse sure as hell wasn't spouting any bright ideas. Lunis took the time to cut some vines and create a harness so he could haul the corpse on his back. He began to walk uphill. The corpse lagged behind him; the Acheronian was bigger than he was. Lunis was not going to leave the corpse. If the captain said the corpse was important, then the corpse
was important. Lunis didn't live this long by questioning authority; he just did what the captain said.

The captain. Lunis frowned. Yondu was probably wrapped up in chains by now. Lunis knew what that was like; he'd been born in a jail. Tossed out, he remembered, when he was old enough not to need his mother. Tossed back in when he was old enough to go to jail. Back and forth, back and forth, until Yondu had been sent to pick up his bounty. Lunis remembered that; Deneb, in the Diphda system. He'd jumped Yondu in an alley and had the tar beaten out of him. Lunis thought Yondu had wiped the floor with him, but Yondu told Stakar the kid fought like a madman. Yondu had suggested they keep Lunis, and Lunis had followed him ever since. It was simple to be a Ravager, Lunis thought – do what Yondu says and don't break the code. Even a jailbird could manage that.

The top of the hill was littered with great chunks of rock and fallen tree trunks. Large ferns sprouted everywhere. Lunis took a few deep breaths; the air reeked less up here. He hauled the corpse up on a rock and surveyed the surrounding treetops. He peered; a large silver rectangle was far off to his right. Glass windows, he realized – the compound. The other ship couldn't be far from that, but Lunis wasn't stupid enough to go stomping around Kree territory shouting for his friends.

There was a slight divot in the treetops not far from the compound. Lunis studied the landscape for a few more minutes, then decided that heading was as good as any other. He skidded down the rock; the corpse bounced behind him, messing with his balance. Lunis readjusted the harness and headed in the direction of the divot. It was either Kree or Ravagers – either way, Lunis would at least have a better idea of where the hell he was. If the captain was counting on Lunis to get a dead Acheronian corpse into a secret Kree facility, then that was exactly what he would do.

A low thrumming reached his ears. Instinctively, Lunis threw himself in the ferns. Two Kree fighters soared overhead. Lunis cursed – there were more docks than the one he, Yondu, Brahl, and Algon had destroyed. That meant that there'd be no air rescue unless a signal could get up to the Eclector, and again, using comms was suicide. Lunis stood up and brushed the sulphuric dirt off his chest. He stretched for a moment, then shrugged to himself. The captain would find a solution; Lunis' only problem was dragging this dead body around.

As he headed down the hill in the direction of the divot, Lunis allowed his mind to wander. The captain had been adamant that the corpse be returned to him, but Lunis had no idea why. Not that it was his problem, but Lunis was naturally curious. Maybe it only looked like a corpse but was actually a bioweapon. Maybe it had bones made of giant files to cut through bars. Maybe, Lunis mused, it was actually complete nonsense and the captain had lost his mind. Again, Lunis shrugged – none of his business. His job was to do whatever Yondu said; reasoning was irrelevant.

The hill bottomed out back into jungle. Lunis kept tromping forwards, looking around for signs of Ravagers. The sulphur was strong enough that he doubted he'd be able to smell the ship exhaust. Vaguely, Lunis wished Drazkar were here – that fur-face could smell a rat in a dumpster fire. Lunis stopped in his tracks. Drazkar was on the other ship.

Lunis let the corpse fall unceremoniously to the ground. He took off his Ravager jacket and inhaled in satisfaction. An hour or two of walking and running under heavy duress had him sweating through the lining of the fabric. He tugged his loose tank-top down – it had been white at some point, he remembered, when Quill was still doing the laundry – and pulled the harness back on. He used his left hand to keep the harness on properly while he waved his jacket wildly with the right. Lunis stomped bravely on, pushing all thoughts of failure or concern from his head.

The captain would find the solution; Lunis just needed to be found.
Yondu was sitting in the corner, where he could see all the civilians. Algon was sitting in a small ring of them; after he'd made it clear he had no intention of hurting anyone, his warm disposition had been welcomed immediately. Algon had been enthraling the civilians with tales of Yondu's fights against the Kree. He downplayed his own roles in them, Yondu noticed, and talking Yondu up; trying to give the civilians hope, most likely.

It was a bad decision. Yondu prodded his thumb with his captain's rank. He wasn't here to save these civilians; he was here for Pa Zir and his clan. Whether or not the civilians died was irrelevant. He couldn't save everyone. A voice snapped Yondu out of his reverie. The green-skinned idjit was leaning over a desk, looking down at him.

“Did you really do all those things Algon said you did,” Juerk asked.

“Depends.” Yondu gave Algon a look. “Asshole exaggerates. What'd he tell you?”

“That you escaped the Kree when you were twenty, but that before that you were one of their most prized soldiers. That you could kill a field of men in minutes,” Quervin said, “and that you never took prisoners.”

“Yeah.”

“So you're an expert at this kind of thing, right? You're going to get us out of here,” Juerk said.

That drew attention. A few of the nearby civilians lifted their heads optimistically and leaned into the conversation. Yondu scowled; exactly what he didn't want – a bunch of starry-eyed civilians thinking he was some kind of hero.

“I'm gonna get me out of here. Him, too, if I can manage it.” Yondu nodded towards Algon. “Pa Zir's clan.”

“And us?”

“Let me learn you a goddamn thing.” Yondu began picking his teeth with the pin of his captain's rank. “Whether or not you live or die don't mean two fucks to me.”

“You don't care,” Juerk realized.

“Can't afford to. My mission's Pa Zir. If the rest of you make it, that's all fine, but you ain't a priority.” Yondu shrugged. “Just the way it is.”

“You'd just let us die,” Taurlette protested.

“Yep.” Yondu laid back and closed his eyes. “Better dead than where you're at, horns.”

“Yondu.” Algon's voice was sharp. “A word, please.”

“Fuck off. That's two words.”

Algon didn't smile. Yondu got to his feet, scowling, and followed Algon into a corner of the room.

“You're not helping,” Algon crossed his arms. “These people need hope, Yondu. They need someone to look up to.”

“Good.” Yondu sat on the floor. “You're taller'n me anyway.”

“Yondu, have you no empathy? These are slaves,” Algon snapped, “same as you were, once.”
Yondu affixed Algon with a characteristic scowl.

“I was a battle-slave, asshole. I had strategic value in combat. These idjits,” he said, “can't fight to save their own lives. If I go tryin' to save every slave in this compound, there ain't no way we'll get out. Most of ’em are gonna die, Algon. Ain't no way around that.”

“You won't even try?”

“I ain't about to endanger the whole damn mission for a bunch of soft fuckers who got dealt a bad hand. I can't afford to lose an entire Ravager clan, alright?”

“So because they do not have combat experience,” Algon summed up, “they are expendable.”

“It ain't pretty, but there it is.”

The lights shut off. The other slave's began to curl up to sleep Yondu punched his jacket into a more comfortable shape. Next to him, Algon leaned forwards, his elbows on his knees.

“What would Meredith Quill say,” he said.

Yondu paused mid-punch.

“The fuck did you say?”

“Meredith Quill does not have combat experience. Meredith Quill is a civilian. You cannot tell me they don't have value based on those criteria. You don't want to save them because they don't matter to you. These people have families, Yondu. Someone out there loves them very, very much,” Algon said, “and losing them will hurt as much as if you lost your Terrans.”

Yondu wouldn't meet his eyes.

“Fuck off,” he muttered.

“I encourage you to remember that when you escape, because I am absolutely sure that you will escape, you will be explaining your actions to more than the Ogords. I invite you to consider this now.” Algon laid down and closed his eyes. “What will Meredith Quill think?”

For a moment, all that could be heard was the soft breathing of the sleeping civilians. Algon let the tension roll out of his shoulders and began to take deep, calming breaths. He was drifting off to sleep when a fist slammed into his stomach. He jolted up, claws ready to tear, but found himself face-to-face with a very purple Yondu.

“Fuckin' fine,” the Centaurian hissed, “but if they fuck everythin' up it's on your goddamn head, you hear me?”

Wincing, Algon nodded. He rubbed his sore stomach while Yondu threw himself back down and turned his back to Yondu. Algon watched Yondu until the rise and fall of his chest had evened out, then laid back down. The image brought back barely-retained memories – the boy's expression, frustrated even in his sleep, his ribs slightly showing through blue skin, breathing deeply in the arms of dearest Kidahet, her fins tucked softly back, amber-gold eyes soft in the dim hold – that warmed Algon's chest. He turned on his side and grinned widely.

Always, he chuckled to himself, always such an angry child.
Vorker had saved the ship. Half the landing gear had been torn off and the hull was peeling away like old paint, but it was intact. The crew had emerged unscathed, and were now exploring the crash site with their masks on. The planet, with its tropical greens and sour yellows, was now their ground zero.

“This place reeks,” Drazkar growled.

“Sulphur.” Vorker took a sample of the dirt and analyzed it. “I wonder why the Xandarians put a hospital here.”

“The captain said they made nanotechnology here. A biome like this is chemically volatile. They may have used it to test the chemical resilience of the tech,” Huhtar explained.

“Did anybody see this?” Taserface gestured to the wing. “Thruster's damaged.”

“Hell.” Vorker spat. “Well, the damn thing needs repairs anyway if we're taking it off planet.”

“Do we have the supplies to do that,” Huhtar asked.

“Of course. The whole reason the captain ran interference for us was so that we could land without being detected. We're the way home,” Vorker said.

“And the cavalry, if necessary. Come on,” Huhtar said. “best get moving.”

Vorker began making repairs on the ship, assisted by Taserface. Huhtar began preparing the materials they would need to assist Yondu. Drazkar's job was less glorious; he dragged around large branches, festooned with leaves, to hide the ship and its crew from Kree surveillance. He was grabbing the last few branches he'd need when something bothered his nose. Drazkar sniffed deeply.

“There's something out there,” he said.

“How can you smell anything?” Taserface scowled at the yellow dirt. “Everything reeks of sulphur.”

“What is it,” Huhtar asked flatly.

Drazkar pulled down the branches and inhaled deeply. His indigo blue nose twitched.

“Lunis,” he said.

Huhtar looked up from his work bench.

“Lunis? He's with the captain,” he said, “he shouldn't be anywhere near us.”

“Maybe he ran,” Taserface said.

“It's Lunis. Whether from stupidity, bravery, or some combination of the two, he'd never run from a fight.” Vorker slid out from under the ship. “Thruster's repaired, in case anyone cared.”

“I'm telling you, I smell Lunis.” Drazkar barged through the foliage. “I'm gonna go get him.”

“Drazkar, don't!” Huhtar ran after him. “You're going to get caught and killed!”

“I'm telling you,” Drazkar roared, “I smell Lunis!”
“Drazkar?” Lunis’ voice emanated from the jungle. “Draz, is that you?”

“Lunis?” Drazkar turned in circles. “Where are you?”

“Here! I'm here.” Lunis came into view; he was dragging an Acheronian corpse over his shoulders and held his jacket with one hand. “Help me with this.”

Drazkar took the corpse and hung it over his shoulders.

“Where's the captain,” Huhtar asked.

“Captured by now. That was the plan. Found a Kree fighter base and took it out. The captain, Algon, Brahl,” Lunis said, “they were all captured.”

“How did you escape?”

“I didn't. Captain tossed that at me.” Lunis nodded towards the corpse. “Told me to bring it back to him after I found the others.”

“Looks like the others found you. Come on,” Huhtar said, “we'll get you back to camp.”

Lunis’ news started a stir at the campsite. Drazkar had laid the Acheronian face-up on Huhtar’s bench. The Ravagers stood around it in various states of confusion.

“There had to be a reason,” Drazkar kept saying.

“If there is,” Taserface said, “I'm sure as hell not seeing it.”

“Lunis, did the captain give you any clues?” Vorker examined the corpse. “Anything at all?”

They all looked to Lunis. He was playing with a knife, twirling it rapidly in his fingertips as he searched his memory.

“Captain said to bring it back to him. That was it” Lunis shrugged. “Must be important.”

“Important? It's a corpse,” Taserface said.

“If the captain said to bring it, it's important.” Vorker's voice was even and controlled. “Our main objective is to breach the facility; we can worry about the corpse later.”

“Breach the facility, right.” Taserface gestured to the crashed ship. “We haven't even fixed the damn ship and you want to attack?”

“The captain said bring him the corpse,” Drazkar said, “so we bring him the corpse.”

“We don't even know why we're bringing it!”

“You need to know why to follow orders, Taserface?”

“It'd be a damn fine change of pace,” Taserface snapped.

“Orders aren't enough,” Drazkar questioned.

“Only an idiot does what he's told without knowing why. If he can't tell me why we're lugging this thing,” Taserface said with a nod towards Lunis, “then don't count on me to lug it.”

They all looked to Lunis again. He kept moving the knife faster and faster, struggling to interpret
something more from what Yondu had told him.

““It was all fast. Very fast.” The knife was practically a blur now. “Captain said bring him the
corpse.”

“Unless Lunis misheard him.” Huhtar looked grave. “You were under fire at the time.”

“Not to mention he's kind of twitchy,” Taserface mumbled.

“If Lunis says that's what happened,” Drazkar said, “that's what happened.”

“Lunis,” Vorker asked, “do you have any idea why Yondu asked you to do this?”

“I don't know!” Lunis drove his knife straight through the corpse's chest. “I don't know what he was
thinking!”

“It doesn't matter what he was thinking. We were told to breach the building,” Vorker said, “so that's
what we do.”

“We'd be on our way to being dead Ravagers.” Huhtar frowned. “I don't like leaving him there any
more than you do, but our priority should be to make sure we can get him off-planet.”

“Yondu can take care of himself.” Drazkar patted Lunis on the back. “He'll be alright.”

Lunis wasn't listening; he was digging into the corpse's chest with his knife.

“That's already dead, Lunis. You can't make it any more dead,” Huhtar said.

Lunis kept digging, tearing out sinew and mort flesh until what he had discovered was glinting in the
dappled sunlight.

“Not a corpse.” Lunis started to laugh. “A treasure chest.”

The other Ravagers jostled about him, trying to get a good look.

“You're fucking kidding me,” Taserface said.

“Saurids eat meat.” Huhtar chuckled. “The captain must have thought they'd keep the corpse to feed
him.”

“How did he even get it in there? Nevermind.” Vorker's mechanical eye darted away. “I don't want
to know.”

“Once he has that,” Drazkar crowed, “we can kiss this jungle goodbye.”

Lunis wedged his knife into the chest cavity and carefully extracted the shaft and fletching of
Yondu's arrow.

Thanks to Martinex T’Naga, Ellyn hadn't slept again. The first half of her night she had been
completely engrossed in his copy of her book. After meticulously copying down his analysis and
cross-referencing them with her editor's comments, she had come to a terrifying conclusion; the damn Ravager was better than her editor. That some space pirate could have a better understanding of her work than her editor did would have been frustrating on its own, but his wit and the veracity of his criticisms set Ellyn against herself. She wanted to hate him, and indeed she believed she did, but she had to admire the way he thought. There was no skirting around the truth; the Ravager was smart.

That was the second half of her problem. Martinex T'Naga's infernal scan-amplifier was haunting Ellyn's every waking moment like some kind of mechanical wraith. Her options were limited. Destroying the machine would be pointless, if not counter-productive. Undoubtedly the Ravager would be able to build a new one, and if Ellyn was caught it would cast undue attention on her. In a caffeine-fueled binge, Ellyn had coded as many kinds of firewalls as she could think of. She stared at the screen without seeing it. It was all pointless; the more security she loaded onto her terminal, the more suspicious it looked.

When the dawn finally seeped through her window, Ellyn had come to a decision. The sleep-deprivation had an unexpected bonus; her brain was too dead to worry any further. There was nothing Ellyn could do to stop the machine. If she wanted to protect her identity, she would have to stop T'Naga, and the only person who could do that was Stria Lonely.

Direct communication was absolutely out of the question; it would only encourage him to hack further. What Ellyn needed to do was communicate her own wishes in a manner that would be similar to Stria Lonely while under the guise of being herself. Yes, she thought dizzily, it was perfectly uncomplicated. Pretend to be herself while secretly being her not-self – a flawless plan.

First, she had to get the book back. Yes, the book. When Ellyn went to grab it, it psionically smacked her upside the head and fell on the bed.


Ellyn got to her feet; her joints creaked. She couldn't remember the last time she'd stood up. Stiffly, she tottered over to the bed, grabbed the book, and looked at the pillow.

“Sleep later,” she ordered herself, “book now.”

When Ellyn opened the front door, an odd coldness around her legs made her look down. Her bare legs gleamed back at her.

“Pants,” she exclaimed.

Ellyn shut the door, crossed back into the bedroom, and pulled on some clothing. She looked in the mirror, confirmed that she looked fairly normal, and went to the door. She gripped the doorknob, then stopped.

“Why am I leaving,” she asked.

The doorknob did not answer. She squinted at it, racking her brain. A sharp pain upside the back of her head made her slam into the door. The book fell at her feet.

“Book,” she cried.

She snatched the book, wrenched the door open, and knocked on Meredith's door. There was no answer. Ellyn banged again. Again, no answer. Frustrated, Ellyn flicked open her interface to call Meredith.

4:01 AM.
“Frick,” she cursed.

If she fell asleep, she would sleep until noon. Martinex would come looking for his book. There was no other viable solution, Ellyn decided. She sat down on Meredith's welcome mat and stared at the door, waiting for it to open.

Martinex was starting to understand why Yondu liked Terrans so much. Their food was delicious. Next to Meredith and Peter, however, Martinex felt like an amateur; the Terrans had carved through a stack of five pancakes each and were showing no signs of slowing down. Breakfast itself was normal for Martinex, but the situation was less so. Weekends weren't a thing on a Ravager ship. Sitting at the dingy little dining table, with warm dawnlight dancing on the wall, Martinex had an odd feeling of displacement.

“More syrup?” Meredith offered.

“Go ahead.” Martinex pushed his plate towards her. “Pluvians are usually liquid-loving folks, but these pancake things are practically air.”

“Thank you!”

“Are there other foods like this on Terra?” Martinex admired how the syrup dribbled from his forktip. “Primarily sugar-based almost-liquids?”

“Tons,” Meredith.

“Finally, a planet with cuisine I can get behind. Did you know,” Martinex said, “that we could be very very very very very distantly related, Meredith?”

“Oh really?” Meredith raised her eyebrows. “Your great-great-great-grandma from Missouri?”

“No, but my great-great-great-gr – hold on, let me count.” Martinex closed his eyes for a moment. “It was a thousand years ago, sorry.”

“So like, ten greats,” Peter said through a mouthful of pancake.

“Yes!” Martinex snapped his fingers. “My ten-times-great-grandfather was Terran.”

“Really?”

“He and a tribe of warriors were abducted from their home country and put through extensive cloning and gene alteration. The Kree wanted miners for Pluto, so they needed a species that would be immune to cold and heat, but still something they could kill if they wanted to. So,” Martinex said, “they altered the only other sapient species that populated that galaxy. You're a base species, so you have plenty of genes to screw with.”

“I remember Yondu saying something about this.” Meredith frowned. “The Kree took Terrans?”

“Tons of them. This was back before you guys had – well, anything really.”

“And nobody stopped them?”

“Who was there to do it?” Martinex spread his arms wide. “Neither the Ravagers or the Nova Corps existed yet.”
“So before the Nova Corps and the Ravagers,” Meredith exclaimed, “who ran the galaxy?”

“The Kree.”

“And before them?”

“The Shi’ar.”

“And then?”

“The Badoon.”

Meredith’s expression was nothing less than offended.

“So you're telling me that nobody stopped these monsters,” she cried.

“Sure. The Starjammers, the Ogords, Vance – Saal's father,” Martinex explained, “and before that, there were others.”

That seemed to calm Meredith down slightly, but her brow was still furrowed as she stabbed at her pancakes.

“What is it,” Peter asked.

“I just keep thinking how awful small Terra is,” she said, “and how awful big the universe is, and yet somehow Terra's got the shit end of the stick. Kidnapping, abducting, Ego, the blockade.”

“Rumor has it you landed yourself an Infinity Stone, too.” Martinex shrugged. “But that's the way things are, Meredith. Some truths are universal; there's always good guys and bad guys.”

“And space pirates,” Peter said.

Martinex flashed a huge grin.

“Jury's still out on the whole good-vs-bad part there,” he joked.

“No it isn’t,” Peter said.

“He's right. You're good. Idiots and assholes,” Meredith allowed, “but good.”

“Watch that mindset.” Martinex ground his teeth together. “Not every Ravager is Yondu.”

“But you've got a code,” Meredith said.

“The code prevents atrocities. It doesn't prevent jackassery.”

“It prevents evil.”

“It punishes evil. The code wouldn't need to be there if Ravagers didn't break it.” Martinex kept his eyes on his plate. “Everything the code warns against has been done before and will be done again. Rules don't prevent; they enforce. That’s what the Ogords are there for. They're reins on hellfire.”

After a few tense seconds of silence, Martinex looked up. Peter's eyes were wide. Meredith had set her fork down.

“Look, that's – I didn't mean – the code works,” Martinex corrected quickly, “and most Ravagers follow it, but it's – you can't expect the kind of people we hire to follow all the rules. That's why we
exile or kill anybody who doesn't follow them. Harsh punishments prevent infractions, not the code.”

The Terrans said nothing.

“Sorry, I'm used to discussing this kind of thing with the Ogords, not you.” Martinex swallowed. “I'll just stop talking now, yeah.”

There was a bang at the door; Martinex exhaled in relief. Meredith crossed through the living room and opened the door. Ellyn was sitting on the welcome mat with a dazed expression.

“Oh good,” she said dreamily, “you answered.”

“Ellyn, honey, why are you on the welcome mat?”

“Welcome mat,” Ellyn repeated.

“Yes, honey.” Meredith's voice grew soft and concerned. “Why are you sitting on it?”

“So I could knock on the door.”

“You could do that standing up.”

Ellyn shook her head, then mimed banging her head on the door.

“Easier,” she said.

Meredith's eyebrows raised.

“Okay, yeah, no.” She reached down and pulled Ellyn to her feet. “Get in here. You're drunk.”

“Not drunk!” Offended, Ellyn shoved away Meredith's hands. “Not drunk! Tired! Didn't sleep!”

“You didn't sleep?”

“Didn't need to.” Ellyn wandered into the apartment with glazed eyes. “Too much to do. Welcome mat.”

“Ellyn,” Meredith stressed.


“Here. Take it.”

Martinex took the book and shoved it into his pocket without looking at it. He was too busy peering into Ellyn's eyes, examining how her pupils reacted to light.

“Is she going to be okay,” Peter asked.

“Fine,” Ellyn said.

“No, she's not.” Martinex's voice became stern. “She's sleep-deprived. I'm guessing at least two days without a decent rest.”

“Dammit, honey.” Meredith pushed Ellyn over to the couch. “Sleep, Ellyn.”

“Don't need it,” Ellyn protested, “too much to do.”

Ellyn sprawled onto the couch with a scowl. She squinted hard at Martinex.

“You’re not even a doctor,” she spat.

Martinex leaned back in surprise.

“Of course he is, Ellyn.” Frustrated, Meredith fluffed a pillow and jammed it under Ellyn’s head. “Now go to sleep or so help me, young lady!”

“So help you what?” Ellyn tossed the pillow back at Meredith’s head. “No sleep!”

“Ellyn, don’t make me – oof!” The pillow smacked into Meredith’s face; when it dropped, she was red. “Ellyn Ostari!”

“Welcome mat,” Ellyn yelled back.

Peter started to laugh. Martinex had to hide a smile under his hand, trying to look deeply concerned. Meredith picked up the pillow and squeezed it with force enough to choke someone. Sensing a storm brewing, Martinex patted Meredith’s shoulder affectionately.

“Let me try something,” he said.

“Is she going to be okay?” Meredith stuck the pillow under Ellyn’s head again, ignoring the weak slaps that Ellyn pattered against her arm. “She doesn’t usually act like this.”

“Ever,” Peter added.

“It’s alright – Aleta does the same thing when she’s drunk.” Martinex looked around. “Can I get a blanket?”

“A blanket? Yeah, sure.” Meredith went to the closet and pulled down a soft white afghan while Ellyn began wandering towards the door. “Bought it at a thrift store. It’s not big.”

“Doesn’t need to be.” Martinex took the afghan and shook it out. “See? Plenty big enough.”

With a swooping motion, Martinex tossed the blanket around Ellyn and yanked her back. Ellyn fought to get the blanket off her face. Martinex took the two ends of the blanket, pressed it to the couch, and sat on them. Ellyn flumped on the couch, irate. She tried to stand up; the blanket had her pinned.

“Reckon you just lasso’d yourself a Dakkamite,” Meredith joked.

Ellyn bared her teeth and stuck her tongue out at him.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” Martinex raised his eyebrows. “Didn’t think you were into me like that.”

“I am mocking you,” she clarified.

“Plutonian sex organs are in our throats. Sticking your tongue out is like asking to get laid.”

Ellyn’s eyes widened.

“Gotta – gotta write that down.” She went to sit up, but the blanket forced her back down. “Important research. Inquiring minds want to know.”
“What is she talking about,” Martinex asked.

“I've no idea.” Meredith went to the kitchen and started cleaning up breakfast. “Sorry – she gets like this. Sometimes she doesn't sleep.”

“She acts like she's drunk,” Peter said.

“Not drunk! Tired,” Ellyn snapped.

“Then sleep,” Martinex said.

“Don't need sleep.”

“Ellyn, I'm a doctor.” Martinex pressed his cold left hand to her forehead and gently laid her back onto the couch. “And I'm telling you in my medical capacity as a doctor that you not only require sleep, but that if you don't go to sleep right now, I'm going to do something drastic.”

“Like what,” she said scathingly.

Martinex pulled out his copy of *Classified Contact* in his right hand.

“I'll burn this,” he said.

Ellyn's face went blank.

“You're bluffing,” she said.

Smoke started to trail from Martinex's outstretched thumb.

“I'm asleep! I'm asleep!” Ellyn plowed her face into the couch, eyes closed. “I am asleep.”

Martinex smirked. He set down his book and counted seconds on his interface. After about ninety seconds, he stood up. Ellyn remained face-down, visor askew.

“Works like a charm.” Martinex rolled his shoulders. “Get their eyes closed for over a minute and the auto-response kicks in.”

“You said Aleta acts like that,” Meredith said.

“When she's worried, she doesn't sleep. When she doesn't sleep, she gets like that. Short sentences, weird behavior.” Martinex shrugged. “It's actually a common response.”

“How does Stakar put up with her,” Meredith wondered.

“I'm pretty sure he gets her in bed and fucks her unconscious.”

“Martinex!”

“Right, sorry.” Martinex winced. “Not in front of Peter.”

Behind Meredith's back, Peter rolled his eyes. Meredith began to wash the dishes; she worried while she worked. Usually when Ellyn acted out like this, it was because she was stressed. This kind of delusional behavior indicated that not only was Ellyn was stressed beyond belief, but that Meredith had missed it. Meredith cursed to herself as she worked. Ellyn did so much for her; watching Peter, keeping an eye on the house when Meredith was in space, bearing with all the craziness that the Quills brought into her life. To the best of Meredith's knowledge, Ellyn had no family nearby. The
only person to take care of Ellyn was Meredith, and Meredith was happy to do it.

Martinex had picked up his book and was thumbing through it carefully.

“What are you looking for,” Peter asked.


“Why?”

“Never trust someone who dog-ears pages, Peter.”

“I dog-ear pages.”

“Meredith,” Martinex said, “your son is a reprehensible criminal.”

Meredith chuckled, but Martinex only frowned.

“Could you do me a favor?” Meredith dried her hands. “I need to make sure Ellyn’s okay. She’s usually not like this. I think something’s wrong and she’s not telling me what it is. Could you take Peter out for the day?”

Peter lit up; Martinex swallowed.

“Okay, so full disclosure? I'm horrible with kids,” he began.

“Peter's no handful!”

“Yeah,” Peter lied, “I'm no handful.”

“Between your kid and the half-delusional passed-out weird neighbor girl, I'll take the neighbor girl.”

“She barely knows you.”

“I barely know her. That's something we have in common.”

“Martinex, you're a...” Meredith gave Ellyn a furtive glance before hissing, “You're a Ravager.”

“She has no idea,” he whispered back.

“Martinex, I'd feel more comfortable if you took Peter and I watched Ellyn.”

“I'd feel more comfortable if you took Peter and I watched Ellyn.”

“I'd feel more comfortable if you took Peter,” Peter said, “and you two watched Ellyn.”

“Nice try, Star-Lord.” Meredith pressed a kiss to Peter's head. “You're not old enough to go adventuring on your own. Even Yondu said so.”

Peter scowled. The expression was so close to Yondu's that Martinex grinned.

“I'll cut you a deal, Meredith. I've got to grab a few things from my ship to finish these algorithms for the scan-amplifier. I'll take Peter with me out and about,” Martinex offered, “and then I'll get back and we'll switch. You take Peter out and do whatever it is that Terrans do, and I'll finish my scans while bookworm there sleeps off her two-day-stress-fest.”

Martinex watched Meredith turn the offer over in her mind.
“Okay,” she finally said, “but if she wakes up and starts to be a handful again, comm me.”

“I like how you both think Ellyn asleep is more trouble than I am awake.” Peter looked between them with a grin. “Have you met me?”

“You're going to stick with Martinex and stay out of trouble.” Meredith gave him a look. “Ellyn's exhausted; you have no excuse for your behavior, okay?”

Peter relented. Martinex went to retrieve his jacket and thought better of it — strolling around in his clan markings wouldn't help the Quills lay low. He settled for a concealed weapon and a Ravager badge stuffed in his back pocket. He glanced in the mirror as he pulled down his dark grey shirt.

“Do I even look like a civilian,” he asked.

“Hm.” Meredith frowned. “Almost. The navy flight pants look a little suspicious.”

“They're all I have.”

“You don't have just... pants?”

“Just pants?”

“Jeans, slacks – some people walk around in sweatpants. You know,” Meredith said, “clothes to relax in?”

Martinex raised his shoulders with a half-grin.

“Guess I don't,” he said.

“Peter?” Meredith stroked her son's hair. “Make sure Martinex buys some real clothes while he’s out, okay?”

“Got it, mom.” Peter ran in wearing his old Ravager jacket. “Ready to go?”

“You're wearing that,” Martinex asked.

“I'm almost nine years old.” Peter gave him a flat expression. “Who's going to care what I wear?”

“Fair point.”

“You two be safe, okay?” Meredith walked them to the door. “I'll keep an eye on Ellyn.”

“Tell me if she explodes anything with her brain,” Peter said.

Martinex laughed; Meredith didn't. The boys stepped out. Meredith closed the door, exhaled, and went to watch Ellyn. Her visor was still crooked; Meredith carefully slid it off her face. When she did, her finger brushed the temple.

The visor activated; screens popped up in interface form. Cursing, Meredith tried to turn it off. Instead, the screens expanded. Meredith's eyes flicked across the screens, trying to find the close button. Her eyes rested momentarily on a few phrases. Send copy to publisher. Double-increase defenses on SL account. Draft Nova Corps letter – if pirates take Qs the Corps will need info. Protect M&P. Meredith's eyes riveted to a phrase typed in red font: T’NAGA IS A RAVAGER – QUILLS IN DANGER?

Meredith's blood chilled. The more she looked, the worse things became. Ellyn had made a
comprehensive list of every detail about the Ravagers that she could find. Names, dates of arrival, relations – she'd even copied down the comm address from the one time Meredith had called her from the Eclector. Sketches of the clan markings from Peter's Ravager jacket had been attached, as well as newer sketches of markings Meredith recognized from Martinex's ship. Ellyn hadn't just paid attention; she was studying the Ravagers. A copy of the book Martinex had mentioned was open in the form of a document in which she was editing in his remarks. Just when Meredith was sure her breath had permanently frozen in her lungs, her eyes locked onto the last screen. It was a pitch for a new book, due to be sent to Ellyn's publisher once completed. The letter was signed Stria Lonely.

“Fuck,” Meredith breathed.

Chapter End Notes

Long chapter is long! Still working on pacing this - my apologies if it reads as "jumpy". I'm used to shorter chapters... but I liked this one too much to split it up. (For those of you missing Kraglin, I promise he'll be back soon! Gotta work through all this fancy planet-side stuff before I can jump back to the Eclector...)
Chapter Summary

While Yondu fights at the behest of the Kree, Kraglin and the planet-side crew set plans into motion. Meanwhile, Meredith has to balance having the two most uncooperative people since Ego and Yondu in her house while simultaneously raising Peter.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

From what Yondu could see in the training arena, the standards for Kree warriors had seriously dropped. The arena was a dome-shaped room with a sandy floor and two doors. One led to where the Kree waited. The other led to a small room where restraints could be mechanically released. Chained in a line with the other Ravagers – a Xandarian with pierced eyebrows to his left, Algon to his right – Yondu waited for that room. Then, he thought, they’d toss him in until either the Kree gave up or he was laid low. For once, Yondu liked his odds; most of the soldiers had the stereotypical Kree arrogance, but lacked the normal level of efficiency. Yondu could spot several mistakes that Dal-Char would have shot them dead for. Their commander, Val-Mara, seemed content as long as the Kree were winning. Considering they were bludgeoning civilians, Yondu didn't see how they could lose.

One boot to the head was all it took to daze the captives; after that, it was like watching a bad bar fight. Some of them had spunk; the green one, Juerk, leapt about like a snake, trying to avoid being hit. Taurlette had the opposite problem; she charged right in and was immediately thrown to the ground. Only one of them had the stones to impress Yondu, and that was the big Shi’ar.

It was no wonder the man had learned to fight; the Kree were obsessed with pulverizing him. He was broad-shouldered, yellow-skinned, and had a forehead that Yondu could park the Eclector on. Algon had muttered his name; Quervin, a farmhand caught in a Kree raid. What made him impressive was that while the other captives fought, Quervin killed. The other captives were always on the defensive. Yondu watched the Shi’ar strangle a Kree with no small satisfaction – that man was there to kill.

“That’s right,” he muttered, “you make that bastard pay.”

The crack of a thrash-blade over his shoulder made Yondu snarl. The chain was pulled forwards roughly; one of Pa Zir's clanmen entered the ring. Yondu watched with interest and was not disappointed. Pa Zir's men were ruthless, cunning, savage – Ravagers through-and-through. It took seven Kree before the pirate was laid low. The chain pulled forwards; the line kept moving. Val-Mara would dictate which Kree would fight whom; Yondu had the distinct feeling that she was using these fights as some kind of sick grading ceremony. If that was so, the Kree were about to fail – Algon was next.

It was everything Yondu could do not to laugh as Algon walked into the center of the ring, drew a line in the ground, and put his left foot on it.

“Only sportsmanlike,” the Saurid shouted.
Val-Mara curled her lip.

“Khitar,” she yelled.

Khitar was big, Yondu noticed, pale-skinned and gold-eyed – a brute more than a soldier. Khitar paced around Algon in a wide, predatory circle. Algon's frills flicked towards the sound, but he stayed still. In a flurry of limbs, Khitar rushed him. With his right claw, Algon impaled the warrior. He lifted the body and let it limply fall of the end. The Kree gagged for air; punctured lung, Yondu realized. Algon put his right foot over the Khitar neck and put his weight on it. The screams echoed. Algon's pleasant expression never changed.

“Holy shit,” the pierced Xandarian said.

There were no lashes; the Kree were struck with horror. Val-Mara had gone pale. Algon daintily wiped his claws on the dead warrior and smiled a little wider. Val-Mara called in another warrior who was beheaded with a single bite before she had a chance to strike. Algon spat the skull; as it rolled, indigo blood stained the dirt.

“Still waiting!” Algon's frills were flared in rage and excitement. “I'm only one old Saurid, after all.”

The commander pursed her lips and signaled. The door opened for Algon to rejoin the line. As Algon strode back in and reapplied his own restraints, Yondu studied Val-Mara's expression. The hard line of her mouth and the stiffness in her posture told Yondu everything he needed to know; she'd miscalculated. They were used to losing a Kree every once in a while, Yondu reasoned, but watching Algon had been a brutal reminder. Yondu knew enough about being a leader to know that watching crew-members get brutally slaughtered never gave a boost to morale. The more Kree he killed, the worse the others would fight. Yondu almost smiled as the door in front of him opened. The Kree shoved him in; the chain unlinked. Yondu turned around, snarling, but the door snapped shut. His restraints didn't shake off. They had learned from Algon, he thought. Yondu paced out into the arena. As he strode by, he punt-kicked the decapitated Kree head around like a toy. He rolled his shoulders, waiting for someone to kill.


Zhona was a woman – that was their first mistake. Yondu had enough experience fighting Kree women to know they were as mean as snakes. Dirty hitters, he thought, and always stronger than they looked. Zhona was tall, even for a Kree, with stringy black hair like Aleta's. Her lips curled up in a smirk.

Yondu spat on the ground and put his left foot on the line Algon had put in the sand.

“Only sportin,” he said.

Screaming like a nightmare, Zhona came barreling towards him in a series of spinning kicks. Yondu didn't look at her limbs – he kept his eyes locked onto her torso. When it lined up how he wanted it, he launched himself at her. She began kicking, biting, scratching, punching; Yondu got her on the ground. He put his knee under her throat and started to press. Zhona slammed her fist into his jaw, trying to break it; he kept his teeth gritted. Slowly, as Zhona's air supply drained, so did the force behind her blows. He watched the fight and the life leave her eyes, then stood.

“Next,” he said flatly.

Yondu lost count of how many Kree died in that arena. After eleven, it stopped making sense to count. What did it matter if there were five or fifty – Yondu was going to kill them all. When the
door finally opened, not a square yard of the small arena was free of Kree blood. Speckled with indigo, Yondu walked back into the room. His restraints automatically chained to the line when the door opened. Algon was waiting for him, grinning.

“The pile drive where you broke his neck? That was new,” Algon said conversationally.

“Picked it up from Charlie-27.”

“And the way you broke the one's arm by using your leg?”

“Kraglin, believe it or not. Think he picked it up from a stripper or somethin’. Yondu kept shuffling along. “Why'd they let you off after just two?”

“Apparently they think I'm crazy.”

“You are crazy, Algon.”

“Crazy for good deals, Yondu. Crazy for good deals.”

“I had fifty,” Yondu complained.

“It was thirty-six, Yondu.” Algon rolled his eyes. “And you had fun.”

“Yeah,” Yondu said, savoring the barely-concealed expressions of fear on the guards' faces, “that was fun.”

The Kree weren't the only ones who thought Yondu and Algon were insane. When they walked back into the cage, the civilians stared.

“The fuck are you lookin' at,” Yondu spat.

“You two are monsters,” one of them said.

“Excuse you?” Algon's frills flared out in offense. “What did you just call me?”

“You bit off somebody's head!”

“I didn't eat it!”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It means that if you call him a monster again I'm gonna tear your throat out.” Yondu bared his teeth. “They ain't put a muzzle on me yet, and I'll eat anythin' that holds still long enough.”

“He did once threaten to eat a Terran child,” Algon allowed.

The expressions of horror only intensified. Yondu didn't have time for that; he paced over to Quervin directly.

“Where the hell'd you learn to fight,” he asked.

“My great-grandfather was in the Kree Insurgency.” Quervin's night-blue eyes stared at the floor. “My grandfather stressed self-defense.”

“You're good.”
“Not good enough.” Quervin turned his arm over; it was dappled with rose-red bruises. “They hate Shi’ar.”

“Ain't a species in the galaxy that ain't got a bad rep for somethin’.” Yondu scrutinized the young man. “You in the market for a new career?”

“If you're going to ask me to be a Ravager, don't bother. Your friend upstairs tried that too.” Quervin glanced at the ceiling vent. “I'll tell him what I told you; all I want is to be left alone.”

Yondu nodded slowly, then let the Shi’ar be. He sat down on the floor next to Algon.

“You took 'no' for an answer,” Algon noticed.

“Bein' a Ravager ain't about press-gangin' people into it, Algon.” Yondu scratched his knee. “How do you figure this is gonna go?”

“I'm guessing at least three-fourths of these civilians will be dead within a month. Approximately fifteen Ravagers,” Algon guessed, “and perhaps even one of us.”

“You first.”

“You're all heart, Yondu.”

Yondu fiddled with his captain's rank.

“They're weaker,” he said.

“What?”

“The Kree. They're weak.”

“They're not used to fighting someone of your caliber, Yondu.”

“Not just that. They're scared.” Yondu leaned his elbow on one knee. “It ain't supposed to be easy to wipe the floor with them.”

“Perhaps we've stumbled onto a post which Kree are sent to when they perform unsatisfactorily,” Algon guessed.

Yondu turned that over in his mind. The ease of infiltration, some Kree reading on the job, a commander who couldn't keep her troops from expressing fear – Yondu started to nod.

“These assholes are scared shitless of us. These ain't warriors,” he said, “they're the Empire's rejects.”

Algon made a noise of affirmation. For a moment, the only motion between them was Yondu's fingertips on his captain's rank.

“Things are going to get worse,” Algon said.

“We'll make it, you big scaled piece of shit. We've gotten out of bigger fixes than this before.”

“I am not talking about this,” Algon said, gesturing at the cages, “I am talking about the war. It is going to get worse.”

Yondu chewed on that for a moment.
“Yeah,” he said.

“We're going to lose planets again.”

“Stakar won't let it happen.”

“He won't have a choice in the matter.”

“You don't know him like I do.”

“He was alive when they attacked our planets, Yondu.” Algon picked at a tear on his pant leg. “He was alive when the Kree rose to power.”

Yondu didn't have an answer to that. He pulled his captain's rank off his chest and began running his thumb along the sharpened edges. Within moments, he could feel Algon's eyes on him.

“Bad memories,” he asked.

Yondu's mouth soured.

“I thought as much.” Algon leaned his elbows on his knees. “I have been having them as well.”

“Yeah,” Yondu heard himself say, “been getting a couple.”

“Dal-Char?”

“Who the fuck else?”

“I keep seeing Kidahet.” Algon gestured to his eyes. “In the corner of my vision. I saw her today, standing next to you in line. Again, as we were passing in the hall. Always the same expression; frills flicked, claws pressed together tightly. Worried about us, you know.”

Yondu snorted.

“Why did we come back,” Algon asked.

“To get Pa Zir's clan out.”

“That's not why, Yondu.”

Yondu's head snapped towards him.

“Oh, come now.” Algon rolled his orange eyes. “You really expected me to believe that you were doing this out of some sense of duty? Some kind of moral obligation? Yondu, please.”

“Why else would I be here?”

“You are here,” Algon said, “because you have something to prove to yourself. You are here to show the Ogords, and yourself, that you are not a child anymore. You've grown since they knew you, Yondu. They've been treating you as fragile. If you are anything, you are not fragile. Dal-Char did not break you. This place will not break you. Nothing breaks you. I once told Stakar Ogord that one day you would make the stars rattle. He told me that you would shatter them all.”

At some point during Algon's speech, Yondu had dropped his pin. He didn't remember doing so, but as Algon finished, Yondu became abruptly aware that he was sitting there with empty hands, listening instead of moving. He snatched the pin up again, ignoring the heat in his face.
“However, when you are creating your master plan, please remember that I am an old man; my limits are not yours.” Algon laid on his side and closed his eyes. “The universe will reach its breaking point before you do, Yondu Udonta.”

Yondu's only response was a grunt. While Algon slept, Yondu ran his thumb over his captain's rank, staring into midair. The master plan was already in motion; all that could be done was to remain patient until Yondu's crew began the attack.

“It's simple enough.” Vorker's eye spun, taking in the map. “We wait until the package is in the building and then we pump the pipes with sulphur.”

“Which should cause a thermal reaction and detonate the pipes,” Huhtar said, “dousing the Kree in boiling hot liquid.”

“Will that kill them,” Lunis asked.

“Maybe, but that isn't the point. The main line runs right over this hangar bay door here.” Huhtar tapped it on the map. “The mechanism for the mag lock is right under it. When the ruptured line takes out the lock, we move in. Taking advantage of the confusion, we make our way to the center of the facility. Scans say that the captain and Pa Zir's clan are being kept in the laboratories; this is excellent. They have their own fire control system and should not explode.”

“Should not.” Lunis almost laughed. “No guarantee?”

“Never a guarantee. Still, it should be simple. We move to the labs, we get the captain, and we haul our dirty asses out of the building.” Huhtar looked to Vorker. “Can we get off-planet?”

“She'll fly like a bird, but not fast enough to out-maneuver a Kree fighter.” Vorker's eye snapped to Lunis. “Don't suppose you feel like taking out every hangar bay on the planet?”

“Don't have enough knives. Sounds fun though,” Lunis replied.

“How do we get off-planet without being blown up,” Taserface asked.

“The captain's got a solution.” Huhtar stood. “We'll know it when we get to him.”

Taserface scowled. Drazkar cocked his head at the map.

“What do you think the Eclector's up to,” he asked.

“That's the damnedest part.” Vorker scratched his head. “The captain said he wasn't leaving this building standing, but even blowing the pipes won't take the structure down.”

“The Eclector has the firepower for a direct orbital strike, but there's no way the captain would risk flying her in solo to take on the Kree. Without back up, it's a hell of a risk.” Huhtar stroked his chin. “Perhaps they're hiring mercenaries, or getting back up from another clan.”

“I doubt it,” Drazkar said, “but pretty thought.”

“It will be fine.” Lunis traced the lines on the map. “We blow things up, we get the captain, we fly away, bombs kill the building.”
“Except that we have to funnel sulphur directly into the pipes which risks our immediate capture,” Huhtar admitted.

“And don't even know if Yondu's still alive,” Taserface said.

“I told you,” Vorker said, “there's no way we're getting off this rock with those Kree fighters still in dock.”

“We don't have bombs,” Drazkar said.

“So the plan isn't simple.” Lunis scowled. “It will still be fine.”

“Is that optimism or idiocy,” Huhtar asked.

“Both,” Lunis replied.

A mix of optimism and idiocy had been rather common around the Eclector since Yondu left. The Eclector had been operating under Kraglin's command since the moment Yondu's comm link fizzled out. Gef was impressed; at least the damn thing was operating. If the crew had any doubts that they'd ever see Yondu again, they'd kept it to themselves. The captain had pulled off insane stunts before and the Eclector knew it. Rather than brood on the future, the crew kept working as if Yondu himself stood behind them. Of course Gef had every ounce of faith in Kraglin, but faith didn't amount to a pile of trash when it came to leadership. Fortunately, Kraglin was doing well. If anything, he was doing too well; Gef hadn't been able to catch a nap at his desk in days.

For one, Kraglin was always working. He slept only when the night pilot was flying; other than that, he was flying about the Eclector, fixing everything he had ever wanted to fix that Yondu had told him not to waste his time on. He was most active on the bridge. He zoomed around from the pilot's chair to the map to the comm station like an irate bumblebee, constantly frowning at the state of things. The only moment he was still was when he picked up his discarded tools and keep working on the package.

The package was an empty cylindrical vessel meant to carry Yondu's arrow through the Kree package system. It was also far more. Gef had observed Kraglin piecing together biometric scanner arrays, color-case hardened paneling, and barbs embedded into military-grade electrocution wires. It had long ago stopped being a vessel; it was now its own private army. Honestly, Gef was scared to death of the damn thing. He gave it a wide berth on the bridge and refused to even look at it too long – what if it operated with a retinal scan? If Gef bit the dust, he wasn't going out at the hands of killer gift wrap.

When it was finally finished, that was exactly what it resembled; gift wrap. Light brown, with a nicely-tied ribbon and a large sticker on the side that read, *Have A Nice Day!* in the Kree language. Gef looked to Kraglin.

“The sticker,” he began.

“Isn't Kree regulation. If you try to tear it off,” Kraglin said flatly, “it releases a packet of hyper-concentrated neurotoxin.”

Gef swallowed.

“Where did you,” he began.
“Made it myself.”

“How?”

“Very carefully.” Kraglin picked up the box. “Alright, Gef – here you go.”

Gef’s piggy blue eyes snapped to the box, then immediately away.

“I ain’t touchin’ your box o’ death, lad. I know what’s in it,” he said firmly, “and I’d like t’keep my limbs attached if you don’t mind.”

“You’re the comm officer. You handle every message and package that comes in. Digital,” Kraglin said, “or physical.”

“You want me to mail that,” Gef wailed.

“I’m orderin’ you to mail it. Here.” Kraglin tossed the box. “Catch.”

“Son-of-a-cockless squid-sucker, you brainless bastard!” Gef barely caught the box. “You motherless quid-cocked lunatic, you could o’ killed us all!”

“No.” Kraglin winked. “Just you.”

Gef glowered. Kraglin rolled his eyes.

“Look, Gef. You want to know a secret?” Kraglin pointed to the box. “That thing is rigged with the same nanobyte technology that they used to capture the clan. Put in a requisition order for cap’n Mainframe from cap’n Yondu’s terminal. Told him I needed it for study. That box won’t kill a damn Orloni, but it’ll fuck the shit out of some Kree.”

“So – so it’s safe?”

“For you? Yeah.”

“Completely safe?”

“That’s what I said, Gef.”

“What about the sticker,” Gef asked.

“The sticker was a joke. Put it on there to be funny.”

“You said it was neurotoxin!”

“I lied.”

Gef swelled up, but obediently started labeling the package for transit.

“You’re a right asshole when you’re in command,” he muttered.

Kraglin grinned as he walked to the captain’s chair.
When Ellyn woke up, Meredith was sitting on the floor next to her with Ellyn's visor in hand. Ellyn stretched and yawned.

“Did I – oh stardust, that was a good nap – did I return the book,” she managed.

“Yeah,” Meredith said, “you gave back your book.”


Meredith flipped the visor up and down in her fingers.

“Ellyn,” she said slowly, “I think you and I need to talk.”

Ellyn sobered instantly. She sat up and affixed Meredith with a wary expression.

“What about,” she asked.

“When were you going to tell me that you're Stria Lonely?”

All of Martinex's tools smacked against the ceiling in a flash of blue light. Ellyn tensed up as quickly as if she had been tased.

“I'm not mad!” Meredith's voiced hiked up. “I'm not mad, Ellyn, it's okay!”

“How did you know how did you know how did you know,” Ellyn babbled.

“The visor.” Meredith held it out to Ellyn. “So, when were you going to tell me?”

The tools clattered to the ground. With long, trembling fingers, Ellyn took the visor.

“Honestly,” she said, “the plan was not to.”

“I figured. Kind of weird, though.”

“How so?”

“If you'd told me,” Meredith said, “I wouldn't have let Martinex build his super-scanner in my living room.”

Ellyn folded her ankles over each other and crossed her arms, curling in like a pretzel.

“He's smart,” she admitted, “for a Ravager.”

“You've been studying him.” Meredith bit her lips together. “All the Ravagers. You've been studying them.”

“Of course. What, you think I was just going to let notorious criminals come and go across my doorstep without keeping record? They kidnapped you – what was I going to do if they took you again? Look some officer in the eye and tell them I knew and didn't do anything about it?” Ellyn scowled. “No, absolutely not. Don't give me that look, Meredith – I'm not sorry about it.”
“Honey, I know you have a bad impression of them, but you've got to give them a chance. I've seen Ravagers do some terrible things, but they aren't evil. Ravagers aren't your enemy,” Meredith persuaded.

“Meredith, they aren't like you. You care about everybody, not just your family. Peter told me,” Ellyn said, “that Ravagers take care of their own.”

“What's wrong with that?”

“They only take care of their own. Ravagers only care about the people that affect them. The Corps try to save everyone, every race, every person. Yes, they screw up. Yes, some of their planets are considered non-priorities – I'm not saying they're perfect! But when the Corps shuts down something evil, they don't just walk away.” Ellyn slammed her fist into her palm. “They help people rebuild. Ravagers don't.”

“The Corps has walked away from people who needed them before, Ellyn.”

“And so have the Ravagers! Look, I don't pick sides. All I care about is doing everything in my power to fix the universe. Ravagers only care about fixing their problems. If they had it their way, the rest of the universe would either be Ravagers or entertainment.”

“That's not true,” Meredith snapped.

“Then prove it.” The scorn in Ellyn's voice was nearly palatable. “Because I've never heard of a Ravager doing the right thing when it didn't benefit them.”

“Maorda-9.”

“I read about that. They went in to steal plasma, not to save civilians. Your Ravagers chose to save civilians, which is nice,” Ellyn allowed, “but they didn't go down there out of the goodness of their hearts. It was first and foremost a heist.”

“And that nullifies the good part?”

“No, it doesn't nullify anything, it's just – if you're going to compare the Corps to the Ravagers, you have to do it fruit-to-fruit. The Corps prioritize their people; Ravagers don't. Ravagers take care of their own; they don't care about anything else in the galaxy. So, what's worse?” Ellyn leaned back into the couch with a sour expression. “Letting your own people die for a chance at destroying evil, or saving your own people and letting the rest of the universe burn?”

Meredith bit her lips together so tightly that they turned white.

“Ellyn,” she said, “I can't let you sell them out.”

“And I can't let you tell anyone about my pseudonym.” Ellyn's mouth twisted. “Am I sensing a truce here?”

“I won't tell anyone that you're Stria Lonely.”

“And you'll stop the diamond-boy from hacking my terminal?”

“I don't know how to stop him!” Meredith gestured at the machine. “I don't know anything about space technology, Ellyn! The most I could do is hit it with an autotransport.”

“Could you,” Ellyn asked with interest.
“I don't own a car, honey.”

“Look, just – whatever you can do to get between him and his goal.” Ellyn held up her hands in pacification. “I won't stop collecting data, but I swear I won't release it to anyone.”

Meredith's mouth soured further.

“Why,” she asked, “do you feel the need to study everything?”

“Because only idiots sit by without taking steps to understand.” Ellyn adjusted her visor. “Look, they're a dynamic player in galactic politics. My job is to fix things. I need to know as much as possible. It's not like I can hurt them, and I won't tell anyone.”

“They'll kill you if you speak a word to anyone.” Meredith sighed. “I don't like saying it, but they will.”

“Well duh,” Ellyn almost laughed. “Meredith, I've had death threats before. I'm like – I'm used to them by now.”

“You what?”

“Oh yeah. Traditionally *Forward* actually earned me death threats, did you know that? Apparently the official governments really didn't like it so they put me on some death-list?” Ellyn shrugged. “I don't know. I had lawyers for a while about it, and they took me off, but I still get hate-mail about it to my old address. After all that, I moved here to Dakkam.”

“To hide yourself in the server static.” Meredith's face felt cold. “Ellyn, honey – your smut books earn death threats?”

“Well, yeah. They're full to the brim with highly-contested sociopolitical viewpoints.”

Meredith covered her face with her hands and started to laugh.

“I just – wow. Of all the people I run into,” Meredith joked, “my neighbor's got to be a wanted criminal too.”

“Not a criminal!” Ellyn's voice snapped loud. “Anti-authoritarian! Completely different.”

“Okay, okay. It's just that I think I'm becoming a magnet for people like you.” Meredith shook her head, grinning. “People who just have troubles.”

“I'd like to think I'm a marginally better friend to have than a bunch of space-scum, Meredith.”

“They'll never give up on you.” Meredith didn't blink. “No matter what or who you do. No matter what you've done. They'll always be waiting for you to come back into the fold. They don't give up on anyone.”

“They're not like you. They're not good people.”

“No,” Meredith allowed, “but maybe some of them want to be.”

Ellyn squinted.

“Define,” she said.

“Well, let's take a look at just the ones I've met. There's Yondu, who was raised in a slave camp.
Honestly, considering what he's been through? I'm proud of him for approximating even a semi-normal person. You'd like Kraglin – despite being raised by Ravagers he's maintained a moral compass.” Meredith laced her fingers together and stared at them as she spoke. “In the time I've known them, they've become so much better than they used to be. They're not perfect, but I do believe they're good.”

“That's because it's you, Meredith.” Ellyn pressed her thumbs to the bridge of her nose. “You believe in everyone.”

“Imagine what the rest of them could do if someone believed in them, too. Imagine what would happen,” Meredith said, “if someone told them they were the good guys. They'd be so uncomfortable with it. They're so used to seeing themselves as these stone-cold monsters that it seems only natural. Imagine what would happen if they believed they could be more.”

“Meredith, you had a profound effect on them because you were in close proximity with them for an extended period of time.”

“So?”

“So,” Ellyn stressed, “it's not the same. You can't use them as the measurement of 'goodness' in all Ravagers.”

“Who would you use,” Meredith demanded to know.

“Oh gee wilikers, I don't know!” Ellyn gestured to the machine with wide eyes. “The only Ravager I've met is the stalking quack!”

Meredith eyed the scanner,

“Yes,” she sighed, “there's also Martinex.”

“The stalking quack,” Ellyn continued, “who is somehow slicing through years of data static.”

“You almost sound impressed, Ellyn.”

“I almost am.”

Meredith exhaled. The carpet stared back up at her for a few moments. Why was it, she wondered, that nothing in her life was ever simple? Even her neighbors were involved in some intergalactic fight.

“Is this what it's like to live out here,” she uttered.

“What?”

She'd said it aloud – Meredith's head jerked up.

“I meant – this, all of this. Having to cut deals with you to protect Ravagers and cut deals with Ravagers to protect you, and people fighting all the time and everybody's on a side and – is it always like this?” Meredith pressed a hand to her forehead. “Is nothing simple in space?”

“Are things simple on Terra,” Ellyn asked.

“No, but they're rarely this complicated.” Meredith glanced at the door. “So, about the Ravagers.”

“I'll keep my mouth shut if you keep your mouth shut.” Ellyn held out a hand. “Plain and simple.”
“Plain and simple,” Meredith echoed.

They shook hands. Ellyn's fingers were shaking; Meredith couldn't help but smile.

“It's going to be okay, Ellyn,” Meredith stood up and pulled Ellyn from the couch, directly into a hug. “It's going to be okay.”

“Yeah. I'm an undercover galactic smut-writer with political bounties on my head and your houseguest is a glittering bounty-hunter with a doctorate.” Ellyn hugged Meredith back, dropping her forehead onto the Terran's shoulder. “Things are going swimmingly.”

“I am absolutely sure that everything will be alright,” Meredith lied.

Martinex and Peter sat on a city bench watching autotransports stream by. Peter's Walkman was pumping out tunes that smothered the noise of the traffic. The melodies twisted, weaving themselves together with much more grace than the convoluted lines of traffic above. Martinex's head bobbed with the beat.

“This is dope,” he said.

“Gotta get in touch with your Terran heritage,” Peter said.

“I doubt they had beats this sick a couple thousand years ago, but I dig it. If Terra's got music this fresh,” Martinex said, “I may have to visit when that blockade goes down.”

“We've been gone over a year,” Peter reasoned, “so it's probably a whole year better.”

“Dope.” Martinex glanced down at his interface. “Alright, kid. I think it's time to head back. Remember what I told you?”

Peter lifted the bag of parts next to him.

“You bought them all because they were on sale,” he lied, “and we absolutely did not shoplift them out of the store.”

“Right on.” Martinex flashed a grin. “Your mom's probably calmed down your no-good cheating neighbor by now.”

“Ellyn's just weird.” Peter's tone painted it as a true compliment. “She's really smart, but I think she doesn't like people.”

“Who wouldn't like people? People are awesome.” Martinex led Peter down the street. “People are life's greatest study.”

“I study enough for school, okay?”

“Think bigger, kid. Look at all those transports.” Martinex nodded towards the brightly-colored shuttles that went zooming overhead. “Each one holds at least one person, right? There are thousands of transports on thousands of planets. There are trillions of people in the galaxy – there's no way to study them all, right?”

“Right,” Peter said slowly, “so what do you do?”
“You study patterns of behavior. A starving person will kill someone who has food so that they can eat. Two men in love with the same woman will put each other down. A woman scorned will attack her ex-lover in whatever means she has at her disposal. People,” Martinex explained, “prescribe to patterns. Learn the patterns and you won't need to learn trillions of people.”

“What do you use your patterns for?”

“To get what I want,” Martinex said with a grin.

“How?”

“Well, let me think.” Martinex put his hands behind his head. “Let's say that for all intents and purposes, I need Aleta to do something she doesn't want to do. Let's say I need her to tell your mom thanks for not selling us out.”

“Why would you need that?” Peter hoisted the bag of tools higher on his shoulder. “That doesn't help you.”

“Think bigger, Peter. If your mother feels appreciated, she'll feel comfortable reaching out to Yondu. More communication with him eases his concerns about you being planet-side, which makes him a more focused ally. Helping him is helping myself. Plus,” Martinex said, “he's my brother. When he's unhappy, I'm unhappy.”

“Can't it just be that he's your brother?”

“What?”

“Can't you just help him because you love him?” Peter frowned. “Why's it always 'fights and money'?”

“Pirate,” Martinex reminded.

Peter blew a raspberry at him.

“That's a stupid answer,” he said.

“Fine, fine. I did it because it was good for Yondu and it's polite to say thank you, okay?” Martinex shrugged. “Look, the point is that you can't get Aleta to do something she doesn't want to do by pushing her. You have to make her believe it's in her best interest to do what you want.”

“How'd you do that?”

“I told her that if she didn't thank your mother, Stakar was likely to do it. That's unlikely, of course – Stakar had already handed her my ship, and she'd passed it on to that Obfonteri kid. The point is,” Martinex continued, “I made her believe that Stakar was going to take her toy ships and hand them to your mother. I also made her believe Stakar would have ulterior motives behind that.”

“You lied to your mom?”

“I painted a vivid picture of a possible future. The future doesn't exist yet, so it wasn't a lie. It was an unlikely prediction,” Martinex said, “that I loaned credibility to.”

Peter's brow was knit in confusion.

“So you told her something might happen,” he said slowly, “in a way that made her think it was definitely going to happen?”
“You nailed it.”

Peter gave Martinex a shrewd look.

“You're smart,” he said.

“As smart as I am handsome, and I am incredibly handsome.” Martinex took a right turn – the docks glittered ahead in the sunlight. “Almost time to punt-kick you back to your mother.”

“I wasn't that bad.” Peter rolled his eyes. “I actually tried to be good, okay?”

“And I appreciate the effort as I am completely shit with children.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Kids hate me.” Martinex shrugged. “I never met a kid that actually liked me.”

“It's because you don't tell the truth.”

Martinex's steps faltered.

“What,” he said.

“You smile like this.” Peter grinned so wide that he bared his teeth. “It's not a smile – it's like a threat. You hold yourself too tall and straight – nobody walks like that normally. You put ups and downs in your voice that shouldn't be there. It's like you're acting at being yourself.”

For a crystalline structure, Martinex's face looked awful fractured. Peter studied it as Martinex quickly tried to repair his expression.

“Fake, huh? I guess you figured it out – I'm actually a biosilicate, not diamonds.” The Pluvian winked. “These kids today, pointing out all a man's most personal secrets.”

“You're deflecting with humor.” Peter stomped up the stairs to the apartments. “Mom does that all the time.”

Martinex climbed the stairs stiffly. In the hall, there were voices. Peter stopped and held up his hand.

“Mom's arguing,” he said quietly.

“With who,” Martinex asked, “my brother?”

“I think it's Ellyn?” Peter peered through the kitchen window. “Yeah, it's Ellyn.”

“Oh, this should be juicy.” Martinex dug into his pocket and extracted what looked like a black screwdriver with buttons. “I'll be back.”

“What is that,” Peter asked.

“Something you're not allowed to have.” Martinex stuck the narrow end of the screwdriver under the door and pulled – the handle extended like a cord. “I'll tell you if they're talking smack about you, kid.”

“You're eavesdropping?”

“I'm curious.” Martinex pressed a button; a small silver dish popped out of the side, which he held to
“Your neighbor's jumpy. Been jumpy, actually, since I’ve arrived. Probably has a boyfriend in the Corps or something.”

“Ellyn couldn't stick a boyfriend if she covered herself in industrial glue,” Peter muttered.

“Hey, shut it! Committing a felony here?” Martinex scowled. “Kids.”

Peter rolled his eyes. Martinex tuned the disk slowly, angling the tiny microphone towards the living room.

“The fact is,” Meredith was saying, “that you can't base his entire personality over one really weird thing.”

“Stalking Stria Lonely is more than weird, Meredith. It's obsessive.”

“He really likes the books! You said they were full to the brim with anti-authoritarian sociopolitical whatever, right? If he cares so much about that,” Meredith exclaimed, “he can't be evil.”

“Oh no, he's not evil.” Ellyn's voice never altered from its calm, smooth tone. “But he's just a pirate. He's a thug in a fancy uniform. He's not a doctor – he's a criminal with medical training. If anything, his moral compass makes it worse. Unlike his fellows, he doesn't have the excuse of ignorance. He chooses to act selfishly. He has all the skills of a proper doctor and he wastes it patching up goons to go out and pillage again. When was the last time he helped heal someone who wasn't a Ravager? What, does he donate time to shelters? Help heal some of the people who get obliterated by Kree? No, I bet he doesn't. He patches up his own wounds, grabs a bottle of liquor, and tries to drown out his autonomy along with the fact that he goes against everything that the medical profession aspires to be.”

Martinex couldn't feel his body. He stared at the concrete floor, clutching the device with numb fingers. He's a criminal with medical training. He has all the skills of a proper doctor and he wastes it. He goes against everything that the medical profession aspires to be. A thug in a fancy uniform. He's a thug in a fancy uniform. He's a criminal with medical training.

“Ellyn, that's harsh.”

“Tell me it's not true, then.”

“It's true,” Martinex muttered.

“What are they saying,” Peter hissed.

“Nothing. They're arguing over the machine being in the living room. Ellyn thinks it's not safe.”

Martinex's drew the cord back in from under the door. “Dumb argument, actually.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, absolutely.” Martinex shoved the screwdriver-like tip back into the device and shoved it in his pocket. “Go on in.”

Peter knocked on the door – Meredith and Ellyn's voices stopped immediately. The door opened; Meredith's face was scarlet.

“Hey!” Her eyes flicked from Peter to the bag. “Oh good, you got your stuff!”

“Yeah, it went great!” Martinex matched her false cheer perfectly. “No trouble at all.”

“No trouble at all,” Peter echoed.
Ellyn looked to Martinex; he could feel the stretch in his grin.

“Glad to see you're feeling better,” he noted.

“Thanks for the medical advice,” she said, “and I apologize for my behavior.”

“Nah, it's cool – I've seen way weirder.”

“I'm sure you have,” she replied.

Martinex couldn't physically feel temperature, but the frost on Ellyn's voice seemed to curl through the air. They stood there for a few unbearable moments – Martinex's grin was about to snap – until Meredith clapped her hands together.

“So,” she chirped, “time for Peter and me to head to town, right?”

“What,” Ellyn said.

“That was the arrangement. I was to take Peter out until you were alright and then Meredith and Peter were going to head out to town. Do – I don't know, whatever it is Terrans do.” Martinex laughed. “It was weird – he's not nearly as much of a handful as Yondu makes him out to be.”

“That's because I wasn't trying,” Peter said under his breath.

“Yeah, don't get comfortable – you've seen only a fraction of his true chaotic power,” Ellyn muttered.

Martinex took the bag of parts and sat down in front of his scan-amplifier. He went straight to work, wiring in parts and rebooting systems to make sure they functioned. Peter walked off to the bathroom – Meredith gave Ellyn a hard look and jerked her head towards her bedroom door. Ellyn stiffened; Meredith grabbed her and dragged her in.

“Ow! Hey, hey hey hey ow!” Ellyn winced. “Body modifications, remember? You are very strong and that is very painful.”

“Ellyn,” Meredith began.

“Meredith we just had a thirty-minute argument about this,” Ellyn complained, “can it just be over now? I don't like Ravagers. I don't like criminals. I like laws and order and justice and peace and Ravagers are literally the opposite of that.”

“Just give him a chance,” Meredith begged.

“Why,” Ellyn spat.

Meredith picked up her hand and squeezed it tightly.

“When he talks about what you've done, he lights up. He believes in what you write. He believes in you – all I'm asking is that you return the favor. I can't convince you that all Ravagers are good,” Meredith said softly, “because they're not all good. I'm asking you to believe that they can be good. If you can't believe in all of them, that's fine. It's okay if the only chance you give is to him.”

Cobalt met silver, and Ellyn's shoulders dropped dramatically.

“You and your stupid mom words,” she muttered, “making me do things.”
Meredith patted Ellyn's hand gently, then let it go.

“Trust me,” she said.

“I trust you,” Ellyn said, “but the glitter-pirate is a toss-up, okay?”

“Ellyn,” Meredith stressed.

“I'll think about it, okay? Just give me some time.”

Meredith nodded. Ellyn leaned against the bedroom wall and slid off her visor. Leaving Ellyn to her thoughts, Meredith quietly closed the bedroom door and turned around.

Martinex loomed.

“Shit! Oh God, Martinex, don't do that!” Meredith put a hand over her heart. “I've died before, okay? You want to scare me to death?”

“Do I have to kill her,” he uttered.

“What?”

“Ellyn.”

“What about her?”

“Do I have to kill her?”

“What? Martinex – ugh, hold on.” Meredith dragged Martinex into the living room. “Why would you have to kill her?”

“Meredith, don't insult my intelligence.” Martinex stared her down. “Your neighbor knows too much.”

“Oh God, please don't kill her. Look, I've – we agreed on a deal, okay? She gave me her word she wouldn't tell anyone,” Meredith babbled, “and I've got some pretty deep blackmail on her so we're good. Also, she's my friend and I trust her.”

“Blackmail, hm?” Martinex's glare snapped to the beddoor. “I fucking knew she was hiding something.”

“Yeah?” Meredith's eyes snapped between his face and the door. “Maybe don't try really hard to find it out, okay?”

“What's she hiding, Meredith?”

“She's – her – um.” Meredith closed her eyes tightly. “I can't actually tell you that.”

“Meredith,” he thundered.

“She knows who Stria Lonely is,” Meredith blurted.

Martinex's face fractured; in a split second he went from looking like Stakar to looking like Peter in an ice cream shop.

“Oh my God she knows? Do you think she'd tell me? Can I bribe her? If we were friends, would she
tell me?” Martinex’s voice fluttered. “No wonder she hates me, oh my God this is amazing! Do you think she's told Stria Lonely I'm here?”

“I am one-hundred percent sure that Stria Lonely knows you're here.”

Martinex's eyes were like dinner plates.

“Holy shit,” he breathed, “she knows I exist.”

“I think she probably even knows your name actually.”

“Meredith stop, please – my heart can't take this.” Martinex swallowed. “This is the greatest moment of my life so far.”

“Yeah, okay.” Meredith gently sat Martinex down on the couch. “So don't kill Ellyn, okay? Stria would really not like that.”

“Yeah,” Martinex agreed vaguely, “oh yeah.”

“And maybe don't grill Ellyn about it or she'll never tell you.”

“Yeah...”

“Yeah, good.” Meredith kept her voice as soothing as possible as Peter came into the room. “Gonna leave now, okay?”

Martinex nodded dumbly. Meredith shepherded Peter to the door, sparing Martinex a few concerned looks. When he started to work on the amplifier again, she felt it was the right time to leave. Outside, Peter started to laugh.

“Don't Peter, it's not funny.” Meredith rubbed her face. “God, when he finds out she's Stria Lonely...”

“She's Stria Lonely,” Peter asked with interest.

Meredith's face burned.

“No! Peter! Forget I told you that, just – tell nobody, okay?” Meredith gripped her son's hand tightly. “Don't tell anybody. I never told you that. Don't even let Ellyn know that you know.”

“You're telling me to keep secrets,” Peter giggled.

“Yes, honey. God, am I glad Yondu taught you that much.” Meredith almost grinned. “Your momma's terrible at keeping secrets.”

Peter's mind flashed to the bag of shoplifted parts, the hacking lessons he'd been taking from Kraglin, and the numerous homework assignments Ellyn had done for him.

“No,” he lied, “I'm terrible at it too.”

Chapter End Notes
Hey folks! Here's an update on the Star-Queen series. If you ever have any questions (questions that aren't "When will you be posting next?" because I don't even know that anymore) you can always hit me up at thisauthorisscreaming on tumblr, okay? I occasionally post Star-Queen update info (and a bunch of other fandom jargon). Alternatively, hit Subscribe and receive an email every time I sneeze words onto this thing.

Kudos make my day, and I always look forward to reading your comments!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!