「Chapter One—Hellish Reunion」
 Play Track: “Call Me”, by Blondie

“You know, it could have been a lot worse.”

“You could have been seriously hurt—what kind of a reckless attitude is that to have, Nikki?”

“The kind of attitude that you tend to have about a lot of things, now that you mention it.”

The rebuttal had come as Gamora examined the atom-sharp edge of her sword, after Nikki had squirreled away into Knowhere’s vast tunneling system to get the drop on some illegal spice traders, and before Rocket threw his head back in laughter at his captain’s expense.

“Hey, she’s got you pegged Quill.”

“This is a parenting moment, Rocket—do you think that you could back me up here?”

“What for? You have me crawl around in holes all the time.” The mammalian misanthrope hopped down to the pads of his feet, “It’s kinda nice knowing that I’m not the only one gettin’ regularly abused around here.”

“I am Groot.”

“Yeah, but it ain’t like I can regrow a limb if something heavy falls on one of my arms while I’m down there.”

“I am Groot.”

“Every part of me is adorable.”

The beleaguered captain of the Milano made a conscious effort to not get sucked into another one of his crew’s unhelpful comments. The important part here was making sure that Nikki was—

“Nikki?”

The petulant periwinkle preteen had finagled her way out of the hot seat once again. Literally. With her smaller stature and slight physique, she could be kind of hard to keep track of even on a ship of six-to-seven people. Considering that one of those crewmates was a seven-foot-tall tree and the other was someone who at times felt just as wide with muscle, it wasn’t all that hard to believe that one skinny little Kree could go above notice. Sure, she may have only stood about a foot taller than Rocket, but Rocket made it a point that there was no ignoring him. Constantly.

“Ugh.”

Peter sat down in the central atrium of the Milano, feeling overwhelmed once again at the prospect of fatherhood. Like with most interactions he’d had with Nikki, and even some of the Milano’s crew, he had walked away with a new appreciation of how difficult it must have been for his mother to raise him back when he was still a moody teenager…

“You are doing the best that you can, Peter Quill.” Came the intrusion of one tattooed member of their motley crew as he hunkered down next to his captain, “I of all people understand that it can be difficult to raise a child.”

“Thanks, Drax.” Peter sighed, “I guess you really are the only person on the ship who could underst—”

“Considering that you have spent most of your life going from planet to planet living your life free of responsibilities, I can only imagine that trading in the life of glorified piracy and smuggling conflicts with your newfound desire to be an adoptive father to the child.”

“Uh… thanks Drax.”

“The trials of parenthood are similar in most cultures, I believe. Should your child ever act up, I have several parenting techniques that—"

“Y’hear that, Quill?” Rocket barked from his workbench, “Drax wants to kick the Nikmeister into a pit.”

“…I wasn’t going to suggest the pit immediately.” Drax shuffled awkwardly, “But, should these disciplinary actions continue—”

“Quill—incoming transmission from Lady Hellbender.” Gamora popped her head in from the cockpit, “You wanna take this?”

Of course there was an incoming transmission. There was always an incoming transmission when it came to improving anything in his life.

“Yeah, sure.” The captain of the Milano sighed, putting his hands on his knees and pushing off of the seat, “I’m gonna take this. If Nikki comes back, try and hold her for me, alright?”

“Pfft. I ain’t no narc.” Rocket muttered into his machinery as sparks flew and the smell of solder filled the immediate area.

“I am Groot?”

“What? I like her. She’s got spunk.”

“I am Groot.”

“What, you think that she doesn’t take after her old Uncle Rocket?”

“Groot, *you* hold her if she comes back, alright?”

“I am Groot.”

「Seknarf 9」
Play Track: “Since You Been Gone”, by Rainbow

The Guardians of the Galaxy had, by this point in their careers, amassed several friendly faces that had helped get their names out there. Most of them were friendly, anyway. Now. But with such an entourage of intergalactic who’s who to pad their contact list, was it any wonder that they had some difficulty keeping in touch with some of the various beings that had helped them during the whole Church of Truth debacle?

Especially when there wasn’t much to talk about other than how it had been forgiven that they’d tried to pass off one of their own as an uber-threatening Hell Beast?

“Guardians!” came a voice that Peter could never really quite brace himself for, “It has been far too long!”

And of course, the sight of a gigantic blue woman with bright red hair wasn’t enough to shake someone as versed in the strange happenings around the Galaxy as one Peter Jason Quill. He had seen beings that had taken *much* stranger shape than the enigmatic Lady Hellbender before.

But the fact that her soft blue face was much rounder, crowned with a thick second chin as her eyes squinted slightly with the width and girth of her cheeks, that was enough to make Peter freeze up in a mixture of confusion and terror.

“Lady Hellbender!” the captain of the Milano put on his best Star Lord smile and tried to make it look like he was less than shocked at the sudden changes that had enveloped his one-time mark and one-time ally against the Church of Truth, “You’ve been… living well!”

“As well as someone of my stature and standards can.” The statuesque redhead belly-laughed, “But yes, I have been celebrating our great battle for some time.”

“It… looks good on you!”

Gamora gave her captain a fish hooked green eyebrow, to which he could only smile sheepishly in response.

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"Lady Hellbender has always been rather statuesque. To call her the size of the house is a great overestimation. At best she is the size of a small hut, or perhaps lean-to. Regardless of any weight gain that she might have endured, it is unlikely that she suddenly grew several stories in height.”

“Would you knock it off with the weight gain comment?” Peter would have thrown his hands around Drax’s mouth if that hadn’t been a proven way to trigger his fight-or-flight response, “What if she hears you?”

“The woman owns a pack of the most dangerous creatures in the galaxy.” Gamora rolled her eyes, “You don’t get to do that without having at least *some* self-awareness. I’m sure that she already knows.”

“The murderess raises a valid point, Peter Quill.” Drax crossed his arms, “To insult Lady Hellbender’s intelligence and self-awareness is almost assuredly a far worse crime than pointing out any change in bodily mass.”

“I’m starting to wish that I brought Rocket and Groot on this one.”

*“Oh no y’don’t.”* a gruff voice rasped across comms, *“I’ve been thinkin’ up fat jokes since you told me what happened.”*

Seknarf Nine wasn’t the most accommodating of planets. Even without the various hell beasts and monsters that called it home, the treacherous natural architecture of spires and stone made it that much more—

*“Hey hey, how much longer ‘til you get to Lady Bedbender’s throne room?”*

“Ughhh…”

*“Come on. Bedbender? Because she’s so heavy?”*

“Yes, very clever Rocket.”

“The rodent clearly feels no compunctions about mocking a great warrior. Despite any change in bulk, I’m sure that Lady Hellbender is still just as strong and capable as she was in her prime.”

“You know, with the whole Katathian warrior schtick, I would have thought that you’d have been more disappointed when we told you that Lady Hellbender let herself get soft while we were away.”

“On the contrary—there is no greater honor in Katathian tradition than resting on one’s laurels.” Drax answered gruffly as he hocked over an overturned column, “The greatest warriors are those who have prevailed in all of their battles, offering them a chance at peace that will last for the rest of their days.”

“Wonder what *that’s* like.” Gamora tapped at the rocky red walls of Seknarf 9 with her sword, “I’ve personally never expected to live long enough to retire…”

“Not me, baby. I’m gonna hit it big and retire in style.”

*“I am Groot.”*

*“Whenever we get a big enough score, that’s when! Who asked you?!”*

The trek to Lady Hellbender’s throne room was a long and treacherous one, even with permission to take the most direct route. The monotonous and hellish scenery, as well as the occasional scuffle with one of her hell beasts, made it seem that much longer.

Rocket’s occasional quips certainly didn’t help either.

But eventually, they made it to the central chamber of Seknarf 9—putting them face to face with none other than Lady Hellbender herself.

And let it be said here if nowhere else that, despite being *so far away from her* she still somehow looked more massive than she did over the intergalactic video call that she had first hailed the Milano with.

A heavy sack of stomach sagged between and over her knees as she sort of compressed herself to fit into her throne. Red leather armor stretched and squealed over the light blue blobs that made up the Monster Queen’s massiveness. The soft rolls of periwinkle pudge that rolled and folded over one another, running like a river as her heavy stomach descended down between and over her knees.

“Guardians of the Galaxy!” what at first glance had been mistaken for her signature club was, in fact, a very large leg of roasted monster. Something that wouldn’t be confirmed until she raise it high to take a bite out of it, “You have responded to my summons quickly—I thought that surely I would have time for another course before your arrival.”

Peter fought against his better instinct to suggest that perhaps their early arrival had done her a favor.

The great weight that inflated her outwards in all directions, apparently, did little to keep the vast woman hindered. With hands large enough to palm the faces of anyone onboard the Milano with ease, Lady Hellbender pushed herself off of the great macabre throne that housed her corpulent carriage, allowing the great blue belly to slosh and sag gently with her great lumbering gait. Not stopping from the occasional munch on her giant entrée of cooked bestial leg, her face dripped with the juices of her most recent culinary conquest.

“Wow.” Gamora raised her eyebrows, “That’s… quite a change since the last time that we saw her.”

“Gamora, stay cool.”

“As always it would be in our best interest to avoid insulting the Queen of Monsters; especially over such trivial matters.”

“Trivial matters? The woman’s a house!”

“What was that house comment? I will not be spoken to by such a twig of a woman in such a way!”

Despite the fact that almost everything that came out of Lady Hellbender’s mouth could be taken as venomous just going by tone, she didn’t seem particularly bothered by Gamora’s off-the-cuff remark about her size. The slow, heavy wobble in her waddle as she brought herself to a standing position looked almost soft and delicate—two words that nobody in their right minds would have used to describe someone like the Queen of Monsters, whether in her prime or out of it.

“Oh, uh… nothing! Nothing at all!”

“Aha! I jest—come Guardians, it is very good to see you!”

The waist-thick biceps that squished and folded with the faint movements of her arm clearly belied the strength that was still present beneath all of the excess heft that bulged from underneath her shoulderpads.

「Chapter Two—Knowhere But Up」
 Play Track: “Rock, Rock (Till You Drop)”, by Def Leppard

“Your ship is incredibly small, Peter Quill.”

“Somehow I don’t think it’s the ship that’s the problem.”

“I am Groot.”

“Well don’t *repeat it!”*

“I somehow doubt that the size of our vessel is the issue when housing a woman of your… carriage, Lady Hellbender.”

“Oho, the Katathian Warrior wishes to get into another skirmish, does he?”

“N… No ma’am.”

“That’s what I thought.”

For the first time in quite a while, Peter Quill and his adoptive daughter found themselves on very much the same page. Their head in respective hands as they battled with the inherit chattiness that seemed to come with being a member of the crew. It could already get a little overwhelming, but add into the fact that there were several feet of big blue ass helping to make everyone feel *extra* compressed in the cockpit, and the compression might as well have been unbearable.

Also, Lady Hellbender had the distinct aroma of cooked, smoky meats. Which could be enjoyable in certain contexts, but not when it was directly behind you for an extended period of time… or around you, as the swollen side-rolls and ample landscape of blue blubber that bulged behind the captain’s chair would attest.

There was hardly enough room for Nikki in this hodgepodge crew, between the mainstay Guardians *and* the occasional Sixth Party Member that was a certain gold-skinned messiah figure. How had anyone thought that bringing aboard this absolute behemoth of a woman was going to make an already cramped ship any less tight?

“So, Knowhere will have the answers that I seek?”

“And a whole lotta answers to questions you ain’t never even *thought* of asking.”

“I am Groot.”

“It can be kind of overwhelming at first. But if this beast that you’re looking for is *anywhere,* thenthe best place to start looking is Knowhere.”

“What the murderess speaks is true, Lady Hellbender. May I… offer you my seat so as to ensure your smooth landing?”

“A gentleman *and* a warrior… don’t worry. I’ll be sure to parse out which cuts of you are gentleman and which parts are from noble, Katathian, *dirty—”*

“Guys, ixnay on the irty day alk tay. Inor may onyay oard bay.”

“Is your translator on the fritz again? I’m not crazy, right, Quill’s talkin’ nonsense.”

“I am Groot.”

“See? Total nonsense.”

“J-Just… keep it in your pants, alright?”

“I have no such garment that could contain me—and if I did, why should I want to sheathe such beautiful, powerful legs? They’re as thick as the teeth of Fin Fang Foom and twice as sturdy!”

“…I agree. And, to add, quite plush.”

“You know, I’m only just now starting to realize that it’s *weird* seeing Drax hor—”

“*Don’t*. Say that word.” Quill took both of his hands off of the steering wheel, “Not in front of Nik—”

Lo and behold, the (second) smallest of their crew members, and undoubtedly the most powerful, found a way to squirrel herself away once more. Peter could only give another begrudgingly parental sigh, feeling his latest failure loom over him once again.

“Whatever.”

“…so it’s still weird seeing Drax be horny, right?”

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After docking in the port, it was customary for Peter to sort of do a round among his crewmembers. Catch up, see how they might be feeling, and to make some small talk before departing on what could potentially be a very dangerous mission.

Because let’s be honest, nothing was ever simple with the Guardians of the Galaxy.

Or, for that matter, with being a father.

“Does the young one still shy from my gaze?” Lady Hellbender asked, looking up from her bonding moment with Cami the Space Llama, “I’ve had that effect on children for a while now.”

“What, Nikki? Nah, she’s just… going through some things.” Peter put his hands in his coat pocket and looked away from his big blue temporary party member, “Do the Kree go through puberty?”

“Ha! You might as well be as brave of a warrior as the Katathian.” Lady Hellbender’s sausage fingers flattened against the fuzzy blue muzzle of their unofficial team pet, “Isn’t that right, little one? The Terran is in far over his head.”

The behemoth of blue woman scratched behind the ears of the mysterious cable-eating creature that had already caused the Guardians no small amount of trouble. The way that Lady Hellbender’s eyes widened and dewed at the mere sight of Cami, you would have thought that she was looking at the cutest thing in the world. With her hammy arms wrapped tight around the creature’s long neck, she actually brought it close for an embrace—her stomach overpowering the poor thing’s front two legs.

“She, uh… seems to have taken a shine to you!”

“I am friend to all beasts, monsters, and creatures shunned by society.” Lady Hellbender released the smelly thing to scamper away back to what had become Nikki’s quarters, “You have done well in raising her. Though I wouldn’t allow her to snack on so much circuitry—it’s bad for her teeth.”

“Uh, yeah, *speaking* of snacking, I was kind of hoping that you could maybe tell me just what’s up with… you know…”

“I’m quite unsure of what you’re talking about.”

“You know, the uh… the *last* time that we saw you, when we were taking out the Church of Truth and you were riding Fin Fang Foom, and uh…”

The blank look behind those beady gray eyes told Quill all that he needed to know. His point wasn’t getting across.

“You’ve put on a *lot* of weight in *not* a lot of time, Lady H.” Peter finally managed to suffer through the point, “And I’m just curious… you know, is everything *okay* or is this like *normal* for your people or—”

“Aha! Peter Quill! You have been hiding Lady Hellbender from the rest of us!”

An… overly… excited Katathian entered the docking bay with the rest of the Guardians in tow, cutting the conversation short and leaving Peter without an answer in regards to Lady Hellbender’s sudden expansion—or her blasé attitude towards what was by all means an incredible shift in size.

“Ready to ship out, Peter?”

“Don’t look at me—are *you* ready to ship out, Lady H?”

“Undoubtedly.” The big woman’s chest puffed out with pride, “If the answers that I seek are on Knowhere, then Knowhere had best prepare itself for my arrival.

「Knowhere」
Play Track: “Where Eagles Dare”, by Iron Maiden

Despite being located in the far reaches of the galaxy, or perhaps because of it, Knowhere was a veritable smorgasbord of shipping, contraband, and illicit pleasures that were much more closely policed by the Nova Corps in known space. Spice running, smuggling, Venus dealing, or any other number of illegal activities were fair game this far out in the galaxy’s edge.

A more wretched hive of scum and villainy, you would have been hard pressed to find.

However, this made it a natural breeding ground for the sort of information that the Guardians of the Galaxy needed in order to operate. Hot tips and little leaks of information that could just as easily turn out to be their next big score as it would turn out to be a major bust.

Unfortunately, the only major bust that anyone could really think about was the wobbling blue tits of the several hundreds of pounds of woman that hauled herself around, dragging behind the Guardians at literally every step despite her wide gait and impressive stature.

“Slow… *down*… you skinny little…”

“Still find her impressive, Drax?”

“Most assuredly.”

He wasn’t the only one. The walking, sloshing, wobbling pile of cobalt corpulence clad in black keratin and red leather was quite a sight, even on a place where having less than four limbs could be considered a disability. Seven feet tall and almost just as wide by either side, Lady Hellbender’s brassy huffing and puffing as she heaved and ho’d herself one pillary leg at a time behind her contracted party was enough to attract curious stares. But when they were confronted with the sight of a true blue glutton that stood head and shoulders over most of the others in her party, vaguely matching the description of one reclusive Queen of the Monsters, it was hard for them not to.

On a team with a walking, talking (in his own way) Mega Flora from Planet X (to say nothing of the murderous woodland creature) it was saying something that Lady Hellbender still managed to stand out.

“Are you… \*puff\*… are you certain that your contact will be able to point us in the direction… \*ugh\*… of that which I seek?”

“She’s the best bet that we’ve got.” Gamora shrugged, “Worse comes to worst, she points us in the right direction, we hop back aboard the *Milano* and jump to wherever she sends us.”

“Mantis is, uh… less than clear. Sometimes.”

“*Most* of the time.”

“I am Groot.”

“Yeah, and how many times since then has she ‘pointed us in the right direction’? I still think she’s faking it.”

The fact of the matter is that, despite the goodwill built up from helping the Guardians deal with the Church of Universal Truth and helping to keep Drax under control, Mantis’s usefulness was… spotty at best. Something that no Guardian—bar Gamora—could argue with. Having *the* Celestial Madonna at their disposal, clairvoyancy and all, had sounded too good to be true.

“Even still, she should be able to point us to where we need to be concerning—”

“I have… \*wouf\*… had enough of this…” Lady Hellbender straightened her back and wiped the sweat away from her brow with one thick forearm, “There must be a place where I can build my wind back up. I’m starving.”

“You were eatin’ all the krutackin’ way here, you—”

“Lady Hellbender. Allow me to escort you to one of Knowhere’s finest eateries and cantinas.” Drax cleared his throat as he spoke directly to the Monster Queen, “They should suit you well.”

“A lovely idea, Drax the Destroyer.” Lady Hellbender’s scarred face smiled, dimpling her soft-ball sized cheeks at the thought of yet more to suck down during her extended trip away from Seknarf 9, “I haven’t been in a good bar fight in *cycles…*”

“No. No barfighting.” Peter raised a paternal finger at his temporary team mate, “Just… keep a low profile, alright?”

“No offense, but I don’t think that keepin’ a low profile is somethin’ that a seven-foot tall, six-foot wide Monster Queen can do, Quill.”

“I am Groot.”

“There isn’t much point in all of us sticking so close together. It is *Mantis* we’re looking for.” Gamora shrugged, “Peter, you Rocket and Groot go find Mantis. I’ll play chaperone.”

“I do not require chaperoning, Murderess.”

“Then I’ll tag along for drinks.”

“I like this one.” Lady Hellbender placed a pudgy palm on Gamora’s shoulder in a hearty, boob-quaking pat, “Come—the three of us shall eat, drink, and be merry while we await the arrival of the Celestial Madonna!”

“Guys, come on—”

But, as it so often proved to be with his crew, there was no use in trying to dissuade Gamora or Drax from doing what they had clearly set their minds to. As the multicolored motley crew of the galaxy’s most deadly denizens walked slowly towards Cebulski’s, Peter could only groan at the thought of having to wrangle the three of them after a few drinks.

“You really could stand to run a tighter ship, Quill.”

“I am Groot.”

“Yeah, we might need to turn the hose on the big green guy before this mission’s over.”

“I am Groot.”

“Hey, I ain’t judgin’. But, uh… I mean, you know it could be worse. At least she’s a lot easier to catch.”

“I am Gro—”

“*Shut up, both of you!*”