

Becky Wilder's Starwatchers

Part Three: A Galaxy Of Pain

A SERIES BY BECKY WILDER

It's been way too long since you departed Earth for Outer Space. Churning insides, gunshot wounds and a twisted mind were not what you expected at all.

The persisting pain from your gunshot wounds echoes through your entire body like a symphony of agony. You've healed significantly, but your motor functions feel wobbly.

Staring at the ceiling of your quarters, you can't think of anything good that's happened to you, not before or after you joined this program.

Your previous life gave you mental pain, and your current life gives you physical pain.

You've been listening to whatever tapes you brought with you for the past 2 hours. Your ears are being violated. A faint ringing tickles them.

Strangely, you consider this to be "peaceful".

The peace doesn't last for long though, as one of your colleagues knocks on your door. You *really* don't feel like getting up.

"Come in."

Your rough-accented bumblebee colleague opens the door, with a small dash of concern on her face.

"Heya, 'Cap. How're you feelin'?"

"Fine."

"You sure? You don't look too fine."

You get up and gaze over at your mirror. What do you see?

The burnt out husk of what used to be a happy man, now riddled with an upturned jaw, 3 bullet holes in his body, and swollen, bloodshot eyes.

"You're right..."

"Sorry if I 'urt your feelings, 'Cap. I'm just... concerned, 's'all."

scoff "You? Concerned about *me*?"

She steps closer to you, looking tense at your response.

“Well, yeah! I’m a part of your crew too, of course I’m concerned about you.

She puts her hand on your shoulder.

We’re a team.”

Your ability to detect sarcasm has vanished with most of your mindset.

“I know... It just seems... weird, that you specifically would be concerned about me given our past relations.”

She seems unaffected by that.

“You think a little beatin’ will stop ‘me? Please! Ireland is worse than anythin’ you could do.”

“Really?”

“Yeah! I’ve been knocked around more there than anywhere else in me entire ‘life!”

She’s probably telling the truth. Ireland and other English territories are cruel.

“Well, I’ll leave ‘ya to ‘eal. Don’t go getting ‘yerself murdered, ‘Cap.”

She spins around and flies to the door, before walking out.

You look at your reflection again. The mere sight of it angers you, but why? Maybe it’s the constant abuse you put yourself through, or the responsibility of having to take care of a bunch of mongrels whilst getting shot at. Whatever the case may be, you’re pissed at yourself, or someone else.

Shaking your head, you recollect yourself, and lay back down. You should sleep.

However, the very moment you close your eyes...

“Good morning, Captain. The current date and time on Earth is: July 4th, 2052, 7:00 A.M. The weather in Merritt Island, Florida is: rainy. Have a pleasant day, and remember: Keep on keeping on.”

Great. You weren’t tired anyway.

You crawl back out of bed, and step over to your locker. You open it to find your spacesuit, and your undersuit, both stamped with your name.

On another row, your handcannon, and its holster, and your porcelain-ceramic armor. The waistplate is damn-near completely

shattered, and the chestplate has bullet craters in the stomach and chest areas. On another row, your Captain uniform and hat.

You grab a flannel, a black undershirt, and a pair of jeans, and put them on. You pull a pair of trainers out from beneath your bed, and slide them onto your feet. You walk over to the mirror, and examine yourself closely. The only bad-looking thing about you is that God-awful face of yours, but you can't do anything about it except wait.

You step out of your quarters, and approach the canteen, where the rest of your crew is hanging out drinking coffee and talking about whatever it is younger people discuss.

“Good morning, Captain.”

The Chief Master Sergeant greets you as you walk to the coffee machine.

“Morning, Hartmann.”

You grab a mug, and slide it into the machine, as it begins dispensing coffee.

Specialist Kaufman steps up to you.

“Hey, man, like, yo, howdy, all that.”

You turn your head slowly to look at them, disinterested in whatever they have to say.

“Yes?”

They extend the water-puppy to you.

“Like, man, I did some research and all that on this water-dog, man, and found out it wasn't born from any parent or nothing, you know what I mean? It materialized from the water on Phoenixia, man, weird, yo.”

“Interesting. Maybe we'll run into more of them in the future.”

They nod relentlessly at you, before rushing back over to their seat.

You grab your mug without looking at it, and take a sip, before stepping over to look at the galaxy outside. No recognizable stars or planets catch your eye, as you're several lightyears away from the Solar System.

Somewhere, out there, in that mess of stars, is all of the world, patiently waiting for your safe return.

The Chief Master Sergeant steps beside you to peer out into the cosmos with you.

“Beautiful, isn't it?”

“Sure is.”

He takes concern in your tone and composure.

“You seem stressed out, Morrisson.”

“I just got three big-ass holes put in me, and I *seem* stressed?”

He tilts his head slightly, and smiles slightly.

“It was wrong for me to assume you wouldn’t be. A gunshot wound on its own takes a rough toll on a person, let alone three. I’m sorry you had to go through that, Captain.”

You shake your head slowly, before gazing back out into the stars. You feel compelled to ask him a rhetorical question.

What if he dislikes it? Or worse.... Dislikes me?!

“Are you afraid to die, Hartmann?”

His ears perk up, as he snaps to look at you, before looking in other directions for a bit, and finally down.

“I never gave it the thought.”

“What about when Constance shot you? Weren’t you afraid then?”

He sighs, and turns to you fully.

“I was afraid, yes, but not for myself.

You can see in the corner of your eye that your colleagues, overhearing the conversation, are looking at the two of you.

I was afraid that *you* were going to die. My wound paled in comparison to yours.

You can’t muster up a response, so you drop your head to stare at the floor.

The moment you started speaking nonsense... something about a tango... I thought you were on your way out. Nobody speaks like *that* unless they’re about to die. But, returning to your initial question...

He leans towards you.

No. I’m more concerned for the well-being of my colleagues, than my own. Why do you ask? Are *you* afraid?”

You look back at him.

“No. I’m not afraid to die, because I want to die.

He seems unaffected by your response, but your colleagues seem taken aback.

My life is like a nightmare on replay.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, Captain. I’ve been in your shoes before. You should try to get your mind off of it, and focus on the mission.

He begins to walk away, giving a witty remark as he does:

And drink your coffee. Cold coffee is depressing.”

You take a sip from your mug, as Phillips rolls up to you.

“You... you didn’t mean that, did you...?”

The kid has concern and fear in his eyes. It would be cruel to say yes, but it would be rude to lie.

“Ask me again later.”

“Ok...”

You walk away, to the flight deck.

Approaching your seat, you see something odd in the distance. It appears to be a star made of water...?

You examine it closer under a telescope, confirming your uncertainty. It’s a star, made completely of water. Its oxygen is slightly unbreathable, but the atmosphere is pressurized. You turn around and trek back to your quarters, opening your locker again. You grab your suit, helmet, handcannon and holster.

As per tradition, you put a Captain’s cloak over your suit.

You wrap the holster around your body, tucking it away behind your cloak, before sliding your gun into it.

Returning to the flight deck, you question whether or not you should call your crew into action.

Hesitating, your actions are interrupted by Hartmann.

“Going somewhere, Captain?”

You turn to look at him.

“Maybe.”

“Well, I’m afraid you *have* to take us with you, sir. This is a group operation, and plus... there’s no telling what could inhabit the planets and stars out here. If you were to be injured or killed, we wouldn’t know.”

“Fine.”

You hit the callout button.

Your crew appears, confused.

Kaufman immediately disappears to their quarters to find something.

"I'm telling you right now, Captain. This is a bad idea."

"How? Nobody would be calling it a bad idea if you came up with it."

"Don't turn this on me."

"You know what? There's no point in fighting. You're coming with me."

Kaufman appears, throwing the team's helmets at them, with Hartmann's hitting him straight in the face.

"If you do that again, I will punch your lights out, jackass."

"Man, like, sorry, man."

"Are we going to this planet or not, guys?"

"It's a star, and yes. G.U.S., get us there."

"Affirmative, Captain. Traveling to star: Aquaria."

Hooper is laughing to himself.

"Hey, Kaufman. You should totally do that again."

"Like, man, like, heck no, man."

"Oh, come on! It'll be funny!"

"Do it again, and I'll punch the lights out of both of you."

Hooper and Kaufman seem intimidated.

"Help me out here, Abby."

"Nope."

She turns away from him to put her helmet on and prepare her oxygen tank.

You turn around to look at the star with Hartmann.

From behind you...

"Like, man, he didn't mean that."

"I really wouldn't do that, dude."

"Don't you dare do it, Kaufman!"

Kaufman grunts as Hooper gasps.

You turn around instinctively to catch Kaufman's handgun, which they tossed at you for no coherent reason.

You lock eyes with them, as the rest of your crew backs away.

"Like, man... It was a joke, all that, you know what I mean?"

"Oh, I know clearly what you mean."

“Oh, well, go-”

You chuck the gun right back at them, as it hits them smack dab in the face, causing them to fall back.

“Do it again, and you won’t be so lucky to survive.”

They grab their nose, and shake their head, before putting their helmet on.

“Impressive.”

You look dumbfounded.

“You’re not gonna get on my ass for doing that?”

“No, because frankly, I would have done the same.”

“Good to know.”

“We have arrived at star: Aquaria. Have a safe journey.”

sigh “Let’s go.”

He puts his helmet on, as do you.

You and your crew walk over to the airlock, before you stop Kaufman.

“No. Not you.”

“Like, what? Why?”

You turn them around, take off their helmet, and zip-tie their hands.

“You assaulted your Chief Master Sergeant and tried to assault your Captain.

You lead them deep into the ship, into the brig, before putting them into a cell.

Get used to it here, because you’re not leaving until we need you.”

You close the cell, and run back to the flight deck.

“L.”

“What?”

“It’s slang for “loser”.”

No response.

You hit the airlock, with the doors opening relatively easily due to the same pressure levels being in both the ship and the outside world.

The stairs deploy as you slowly step down, finding the star to have gravity parallel to that of Earth.

You stop at the final stair, uncertain of how deep the water is. You slowly sit down, and put your legs in. You come to find that the water is shallow.

“Oh.”

You step down, with your crew following, as the stairs retract.

“Life support systems activated. Have a safe trip, Starwatcher 12.”

Silence.

The only thing you hear is the faint wave crashes, the rippling of the water against your crew’s bodies, and you and your crew’s breathing. Stepping forward, you look around to find... nothing. The only things in sight are the water, the sky, and your crew.

“Doesn’t seem like there’s much out here.”

“Look at the water! It’s glowing!”

Looking down, it is indeed glowing. It also seems to be sparkly.

“Honeyman, help Phillips and me get some samples of this.”

“Sure thing, ‘Cap.”

The three of you pull out some containers, and begin collecting samples of the water.

“It feels... weirder than normal water.”

“Yeah, you’re right... It feels like Jell-O...”

“Whatever you do, don’t eat it.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

To take off his helmet would result in his instantaneous death.

Phillips raises a jar of the gelatinous water up.

“Strange...”

“Looks like it has the same properties as water, but the mass of gelatin.”

“Maybe if Kaufman was ‘ere, we would know what it is...”

You look at her, unamused.

“Kaufman stays in that cell until I say they leave.”

“Don’t listen to what Honeyman has to say, Captain. You were justified.”

“I just don’t know what compelled them to-”

Your conversation is interrupted by the sound of an alarm.

Phillips looks startled, and the rest of your crew looks bewildered.

From the sides of all of your helmets, claws extend, balled up, before spinning around, and un-balling, pointing and flapping eastward whilst beeping, emitting a blue flare.

“What’s that?!”

“We’re not alone out here...”

“What do you mean ‘we’re not alone’?!”

“He means we’re not alone, dumbass!”

You shush your crew, as the sound of water rippling in the distance grows louder.

As the sound becomes louder and closer, your radars begin beeping and flapping faster. The blue flare slowly turns to yellow.

Your crew’s breathing is now increasing in speed.

“Captain...?”

You shush Felix, as your radars all lock up. The beeping has stopped, and become one steady beep, the flapping has stopped, and they’re now emitting a red flare.

As you turn, you come to find... some sort of creature emerging from the water. It’s four times the size of you and your crew combined.

There’s another creature, and another one... there’s now three creatures standing tall in front of you.

Bewildered, you and your crew all slowly step back, trying to remain as quiet as possible, before you press against the side of your ship.

One of the creatures approaches you and your crew as you step back, before slowly leaning towards you.

Your crew looks at you, their terrified faces breaking through their helmets.

With your radar going off the charts, you slide your hand out of your glove and sleeve, and put it over your mouth and nose inside your helmet, to mask your breathing, with your crew doing the same as smaller creatures appear in front of them.

Shifting your eyes to your crew, the only one of them maintaining a composure is Dennis. The rest are breaking down from fear.

The creatures disengage, and step away, before dematerializing into the water.

Your radars all power down, and return to their dormant state.

Removing your hand from your nose and mouth, you take a deep breath, with your crew following suit.

Sliding your hand back through your sleeve and into your glove, you can hear the Lieutenant trying to comfort Phillips, who has broken down into tears.

You climb back to your feet, and take some more breaths.

“Shit, man...”

“Shit, indeed.”

You step out to grab the samples that were dropped during the scuffle, alongside Hooper.

Phillips, having recomposed himself, steps over to help you.

“That sucked...”

“It’s *only* gonna get worse, man.”

He didn’t like that one.

As you collect the samples, the ambient rippling stops.

“Guys...?”

As you step back towards the ship, your radars all flare up again.

Before you can process it, you feel hands grab your legs, dragging you to the ground, and pulling you relentlessly against the tide.

In the distance, you can hear your crew yelling, as they’re being dragged too.

You begin to hyperventilate as water engulfs your vision.

Where these creatures are taking you is unknown, but it can’t be anywhere good.

The hands stop dragging you, as your crew is forcefully caught up to you.

Looking around, your ship flies in the skies above, following you through your joyride.

A hand grabs your helmet, before another one, and another, yet another, and one more grab it too.

Pulling you and your crew to your feet, the hands wrestle with you all, before eventually ripping your helmets off.

Your ears immediately pop violently, and ring horribly. You can’t breathe. Oh, God.

The hands grab all of you, and begin dragging you under the water.
Your consciousness slowly fades away as you get dragged deeper and deeper into the sea.

Darkness.

You're alone, yet again.

Nothingness, still.

Yep, there's still nothing,

No, wait. There's something.

Very faint talking.... but still darkness.

Before long, a large splash of water hits your face, waking you up.

With a yell, you awaken, finding yourself upside down, hanging from your feet.

In front of you, a race of what appears to be water-dogs, and to your left and right, fortunately, your crew! They're alive! But unfortunately, they're all... shirtless, as are you.

With no time for examining the bodies of your colleagues, what you assume to be an emperor calls out something.

“Brothers, and sisters! Today, we gather to determine the fate of these delinquents who tread on our domain!”

A group starts cheering.

Looking around, this appears to be some sort of colony, a courtroom specifically. You're being tried for a crime of some sort. What crime that may be? Trespassing, most likely.

“In the name of King Aquai'i, I ask you, travelers, what is your business here?!”

“Well... nothing, until you dragged us under.”

“Elaborate, human.”

“We're just space travelers... We didn't come here seeking violence, we came here seeking peace, actually...”

“So you do not seek to tear us from inside out?”

“Man, why the Hell would we do that? I mean, sure, you hanged us from our feet and stripped us of our shirts, and threatened to kill us, but we're good people!”

“It’s true, sire. These adventurers appear to come from Planet Earth, from something called the ‘Starwatcher program’, seeking to unify peace with the galaxy.”

“Then **why** are they still hanging there? Get them down!”

“You’d better be telling the truth, or you’re dead.”

You hear the thuds of your crewmates hitting the ground, before you fall. The ground impacts and stings your body, leaving you bruised.

Slowly climbing to your feet, the strange foreign race takes notice of your wounds.

“You! Human! What happened to you?”

“Shot.”

“Shot? By whom?!”

“A man named Paul Constance.”

The foreigners all look at each other shocked.

“You battled Paul Constance?! And survived?!”

“Not only survived, but lived to watch him die. Phillips over there killed him.”

You gesture to Phillips, who looks a mixture of embarrassed and scared.

“How can we be sure you’re telling the truth...?”

Hartmann pulls out his PDA, and projects an image of Constance’s corpse onto the ground.

“It’s true. He was killed in a firefight a few weeks ago.”

The water-dogs look bewildered.

“They bear the mark of Gods!”

“They are the chosen ones!”

“Praise!”

“Incredible... So... it’s true...”

You nod.

Thank you...”

“For... what?”

“You’ve freed us from the torment, sirs and ladies! For years on end, we’ve dealt with that monster’s roughhousing... so many lives lost, so many supplies stolen... and for what? Street credit?!”

“Look, what matters now is that he’s dead. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

“Good! Good riddance! I see only the flames of Hell for him!”

The other water-dogs cheer.

“So... Can we go...?”

“Well, yes, but... It would be impervious to leave without announcing your victory to our people! We’ve suffered for too long to go without resolution...”

“Resolution it is. Take us to your people, then.”

“Of course. Right this way.”

Before you can start walking, your female crew members all seem... distressed about something.

“Uhh... hello?!”

“Yes, madam?”

The Lieutenant throws her hands in the air, and off of her chest in a gesture of anger.

You show no reaction.

Hartmann averts his eyes.

“Oh, dear GOD!”

Hooper covers his face.

Phillips closes his eyes in embarrassment.

Honeyman shifts her eyes back and forth between the Lieutenant and the crowd, with the Lieutenant hitting her in the side of the head.

“Oh! Right, I forgot...”

The male water-dogs in the room begin to boil.

Will you cut that out?!”

He throws you and your crew’s undersuit tops, spacesuits, and helmets to you, as you put them on one by one.

“Thank you kindly.”

“Carrying on, if you’d just follow me, I can take you to my people.”

“Lead the way, Your Majesty.”

You and your crew begin following the king to the balcony of his castle.

The outside world appears to be in a dome, separating it from the ocean you were dragged in from.

As you all step up towards the edge of it, the crowd drops to silence, as they were expecting the news of your trial.

“BROTHERS, AND SISTERS! I BRING TO YOU, EARTHLINGS BEARING GREAT NEWS! Go ahead, if you will.”

You step up to a microphone, before looking back at your crew, and then back at the crowd.

Clearing your throat,

“Ladies and gentlemen... Paul Constance is dead.”

The crowd goes silent for a moment, with some of the crowd members looking at one another, before back at you.

Assuming they think you're joking, you prepare to tell them you're not joking, before they cut you off with an extremely uproarious symphony of cheers.

You look at the king.

“I seriously cannot thank you enough, sir....?”

“Gary.”

“Gary!

He extends his hand to you, as you take it. It's soft, and gelatinous, similar to the surface.

“I apologize profusely for my behavior earlier... you can never be too careful today.”

“It's not the first time I've been mistaken for a pirate.”

“Well, I'm sure it won't be the last!”

A faint rumbling sound slowly engulfs your hearing, to the dismay of the king and his servants.

Looking at your equally confused crew, you turn around and look up to find.... Great. More space pirates, with these ones looking twice as meaner.

“Oh no... Not again..”

Your helmet radars all extend and begin pointing, flapping and beeping in the direction of the pirates.

Glancing to Hartmann, you nod to each other, before looking at the king.

“Take your people and get them somewhere safe.”

“What about you, sir?!”

“Don't worry about me, worry about your people.”

You signal to your crew to follow you as you draw your handcannon, and begin loading it, running into the castle, to get down to the ground level. Running down what feels like 500 flights of stairs, this takes a toll on some of your crew.

panting “Who the Hell.... Puts 50 flights of stairs.... In a Goddamned castle?!”

“It’s a castle, it’s gonna be tall!”

“Advise caution, Starwatcher 12. Your opponents are more heavily armed than you. It would have been wise to equip your longarms and some armor before you set out.”

“Are you criticizing us, G.U.S.?”

“Yes.”

Finally reaching the ground level, the people are frenzied.

As you get out of the castle, a bullet impacts the wall next to you. You instinctively run for something, anything to get behind.

You and your crew split up, all getting behind something, as a hail of gunfire flies through the air.

“Stop shooting at us!!!”

“I don’t think they will, dude!!!”

You peek over the barrier you’re hiding behind. Two pirates are in sight.

You turn around and raise your handcannon over the barrier, steadying your aim.

Getting the wind speed, the recoil, the target’s movements’ all lined up... NOW.

You pull the trigger. Your ears ring intensely from the gunshot, and your hands snap upward, numb from the explosion.

Looking through the plume of smoke, only one of the pirates is still standing. He’s got a bullet hole in his arm, and he’s trying to pull the casing out.

Before you can reload, the back of his head explodes open, with his brain matter and a pool of blood flying out, as he falls to his back.

Someone shot him, but you don't have any time to try to figure out who. Reloading your handcannon, a shit-ton more gunfire rings through the air.

During that whole situation, Abby somehow made her way over to you.

"Captain! Are you okay?!"

"Barely! Now, focus!"

As you peek over the barrier, an explosion knocks the two of you back. Not a gunshot explosion, a full on explosion. The pirates have rocket-propelled grenades at their disposal.

"Was that a fucking.... RPG?!"

Slowly rolling over, and pushing yourself to your feet, you help her up, before dropping back down again as a rocket flies over your head, exploding against a building in the distance.

"CAPTAIN!!!"

You look over to Felix, before turning around to find a pirate standing over you, with a double-barrelled shotgun aimed right at your head.

This is it.

Death.

Sweet, sweet death.

Take me, God.

Let me see my family again...

You close your eyes, as a gunshot pierces your ears.

The thud of a body hitting the ground tickles your ears as you open your eyes, to find your visor covered in blood, and the pirate laying on the ground, dead.

Looking to your right, Abby is aiming her gun. She gives you a wink that says "saved your ass".

The gunfire around you has grown in intensity. In a panic, you grab the shotgun, and fire blindly twice over the barrier. You clearly hit someone, because you heard them screaming like a little bitch.

“WHERE THE *FUCK* IS OUR SHIP?!?!?! WE NEED TO GET THE *FUCK* OUT OF HERE!!!!!!”

“Do something, or we’re toast, Gary!!!”

One of the grenade launcher wielding maniacs is running near your cover. Now’s your chance.

Peeking over, you grab his leg, dragging him towards you. A bullet hits his back, as you smash his face against the barrier, dragging him over it.

As he tries to draw his knife on you, you put your handcannon to his face, and shoot it.

Your hands go numb from the explosion, and your ears ring even harder.

Through the plume of smoke, the man’s head has quite literally evaporated. The only thing left is tiny bits of it.

You rip the grenade launcher from his deceased hands, and grab some grenades from his waistband. You fire a grenade over the barrier at another piece of cover.

Some mangled pirate corpses fly out over it.

Breaking the barrel open, you toss the shell out, and put another one in.

Looking over at your crew, they’re in a hellzone.

“Williams, we gotta get over there.”

“Ok, let’s do it!”

You take this moment to reload your handcannon, and “your” shotgun, before you and Abby rush out of your cover, with bullets, rockets and grenades flying over you. You fire your shotgun from the hip towards a charging pirate. She drops to the ground like a ragdoll, screaming in agony.

You dive down over into cover with the rest of your crew.

“I told you this was a bad idea, Captain!”

“Well, *excuse me* for not knowing there was gonna be an all-out fucking WARZONE!!!”

“Where in the fuck did you get a grenade launcher?!”

“Nabbed it off of one of these pédés! (fags!) Now, shut the fuck up and shoot!”

You fire a grenade over the barrier. The faint explosion results in a multitude of screams from beyond.

In the distance...

“Look!”

Your ship flies overhead, as a tether rope drops down.

“Run.”

“Go!”

You and your crew begin running for the tether rope, as an even rougher hail of gunfire flies over you. Some water-dogs begin shooting at the pirates.

“Military’s here! Let’s bounce!”

“About damn time!!!”

As you run for the tether rope, the nuclear sirens begin going off. One of the pirates has a nuclear bomb, and they intend to detonate it!

Looking up, a large number of nuclear bombs fire up into the air, intent on coming back down.

A feeling of bewilderment washes over you.

“Pour l’amour de Dieu!!! (For God’s sake!!!) RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!!!”

Amidst the chaos, Jack asks a terrifying question.

“WHERE’S ABBY?!”

Looking around, she’s gone.

Looking behind you, she got hit in the leg.

You stop dead in your tracks, and turn around.

Felix turns to look at you, shocked,

“Captain?!”

“Keep running! Don’t stop!!!”

You slide over to Abby, picking her up, and supporting her, as the two of you run for the rope.

The rest of your crew climbs onto the rope, and into the ship hastily.

“The ship cannot remain here for long, Captain. Hurry up.”

“PICK UP THE PACE, CAPTAIN!!!!”

“COME ON, GARY!!!”

You stop for a moment, picking Abby up off of her legs as she winces in pain, before continuing running.

“Don’t look at it, Abby!”

“Shut the fuck up and keep running!”

The sirens are 10x louder. Those bombs are nearly to the ground. You know what must be done.

“G.U.S., LIGHTSTEP IT!!!”

“Gary?!”

“It is not a good idea to lightstep while you are still outside, Captain.”

“OH-HO, NO! YOU ARE NOT STAYING BEHIND!!!”

“WHO THE FUCK SAID I WAS STAYING BEHIND?!”

You let Abby down, and attach the rope to your back, as she grabs onto you.

“GO, G.U.S., GO!!!!”

“But, Captain-”

“NO FUCKING BUTS, G.U.S.! LIGHTSTEP IT!!!”

“Affirmative, Captain. Lightstepping to Central Space. Duration: 2.1 lightyears.”

The ship ascends as Abby wraps herself around you.

“CAPTAIN!!! COME ON!!!”

“CLOSE THE DOORS!!!”

“NOT UNTIL YOU GET IN!!!”

The sirens stop.

You look down.

The bombs explode simultaneously.

Abby screams the loudest you’ve ever heard anyone scream.

“PUTAIN DE MERDE!!! (HOLY SHIT!!!) G.U.S., GO, GO, GO, GOOOOO!!!!!!”

You let out a rather high-pitched scream, as the ship shoots up.

Some pirate ships are following, following the same lightstep tactic as you.

As the ship speeds up, you can feel your body stretching out, and your face being mushed by the G-force. Your arms are basically glued to Abby. In both the left and right corners of your eyes, lightstepping pirate ships.

The force from the lightstep begins to disintegrate the pirate ships, which weren't built for lightsteps of this duration.

You and Abby are still screaming horribly.

Wait, isn't this part where...

The ship begins to barrel-roll.

"OH SHIIIIIIIT!!!!"

The ship does a quadruple barrel-roll, and then a half-somersault to escape the lightstep beam.

As the ship comes to a stop, the rope shoots forward, taking you and Abby with it.

The two of you fly through the exit doors, rolling through the ship violently, before smashing into a wall.

The rest of your crew rushes over to the two of you.

"Captain?!"

You groan as you get up, with Abby lifting herself to a sitting position, as the two of you take your helmets off.

In the reflection of your visor, your face is super red, your nose and mouth are bleeding and your hair is soaking wet from sweat.

"Dude! Are you okay?!"

"Disoriented..."

You sit down, and put your hand on your head.

"Stay here, Captain. Regain your strength."

You cough up blood as you ask something of Hartmann.

"Go get Kaufman."

"Of course, Captain."

He rushes off to the brig, as you attempt to get up, before Hooper stops you.

"Stop, Captain. Rest."

"Okay..."

You lay down on your back, panting from the stress.

“Fils de pute... (Son of a bitch...)”

“Let me help you...”

Hooper, Phillips and Honeyman attempt to lift you up to help you to your quarters, but struggle immensely.

“Damn, man.... How much do you weigh, dude?!”

“You want it in pounds or kilograms?”

“Pounds.”

“234.”

“That explains a *lot*.”

Hartmann and Kaufman return from the brig.

“Oh, man, like, damn, man. Like, what happened, what’s up, all that jazz?”

“A big-ass fight happened, is what.”

“And I didn’t get to be there, what? What a shit.”

You get up on your own, and pick Williams up, taking her to the medical bay.

“How bad is it?”

You help her take off her suit, to find a series of holes in her leg, from a slug-shot shell.

“Not that bad.”

Peering into the wound, it appears that most of the holes are actually just marks from where the slugs hit her and bounced off, only two of them actually penetrated the leg.

Pulling out a pair of small tweezers, you feel a parallel of the events before.

“Alright... Don’t look at it, and focus, and you’ll be alright.”

“I hope...”

“Hey. You saved Hooper’s life, and mine with the same tactic. You’ll be fine.”

“Yeah... right...”

You slowly insert the tweezers into her leg, as she instinctively whimpers in pain, but doesn’t twitch.

She’s already better than Jack.

You slowly extract the slug from her leg, and drop it onto the table.

“Diabhal... (Devil...)”

You go back in, but this one puts up more of a fight.

As you try to pull it out, Williams screams in pain, before a pool of blood explodes out. You popped a blood vessel.

“Críost uilechumhachtach! (Christ almighty!) Focus, ‘Cap!’”

“Téigh go dtí ifreann. (Go to hell.)”

Honeyman looks offended.

“Ar a laghad ní gá dom a bheith ar dualgas dochtúir! (At least I don't have to be on doctor duty!)”

You stop what you're doing, and slowly look at her, unamused.

“Tá a fhios agat, tá tú an-annoying, mar sin le do thoil, stophtar suas, agus labhair Béarla, le do thoil. (You know, you are very annoying, so please, shut up, and speak English, please.)”

“Focus, Captain. No need to get into an argument in Irish.”

You look at Williams, who is in visible distress, before inhaling, exhaling and **RIPPING THE SLUG OUT!**

She lets out a horrific scream.

cackle “Joie! Je l'ai encore fait! (Joy! I did it again!)”

She really isn't amused.

“Черт возьми, Гэри! (Damn it, Gary!)”

“What?”

“She said: “Damn it, Gary!”

“Вы тоже говорите по-русски? (Do you speak Russian too?)”

She nods.

“Am I like... the only one here who only speaks English?”

“Nah, I tell you what, man, I speak English, and like, only English, but I can speak some other languages a bit, like, uh, konichiwa, man.”

“Alright, everyone, out. Let her heal.”

As you and your crew leave the medical bay, you can see Williams flipping you off in the corner of your eye.

Leaving the medical bay, your crew disperses to their quarters, as do you.

Entering your quarters, you take off your spacesuit, and put it and your helmet into your locker, with your holster and handcannon following suit.

Looking into the mirror, you could do without that awful beard of yours... You grab your electric razor from your pack, and put your earbuds in, putting a tape labeled "Business As Usual" into your Walkman, and pressing play. A saxophone driven song plays, as you skip it. A song you don't like plays, as you skip it, before finally landing on one of your favorite songs: the centuries old "Down Under". You turn on the razor, look at your beard one last time, and begin to shave it off. Years of disco, tango and funk, down the drain... for good reason.

*Traveling in a fried-out Kombi
On a hippie trail, head full of zombie*

You can feel your face getting lighter.

*I met a strange lady, she made me nervous
She took me in and gave me breakfast*

You can see your crooked, upturned jaw clearer as your beard fades away, and falls to the floor.

And she said...

You feel... happier?

*"Do you come from a land down under?
Where women glow and men plunder?
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder?
You better run, you better take cover!"*

You're clean shaven now... but now that you look at yourself closer... you could lose the mullet-fade hybrid. You pull a pair of scissors and a set of electric hair-clippers out of your pack, and plug the clippers into the power bank.

*Buying bread from a man in Brussels
He was six-foot-four and full of muscle*

You begin to snip the long parts of your hair off with the scissors, before taking the clippers to it.

*I said, "Do you speak-a my language?"
He just smiled and gave me a Vegemite sandwich*

G.U.S. deploys a robot to help you see the back of your head. You can see clearly... you fucked up. You can't be seen with *that* on your head. You've got to take it all off....

And he said...

Here we go...

*"I come from a land down under!
Where beer does flow and men chunder!
Can't you hear, can't you hear the thunder?
You better run, you better take cover, yeah!"*

Your entire head becomes lighter as your hair all falls off. You hand the clippers to the G.U.S. robot, so that it can get the back of your head. The robot shows you a full turnaround of your head, showing you that you're now a completely clean shaven man, no longer a husk of a disco-tango-funk man.

The bloodshot eyes and the broken jaw remain, but the blood and beer stained hair doesn't. You turn off your Walkman, and take your earbuds out.

Running your hand against your shaven head, you get up, shake the excess hair off of your body, and then sweep it all up, disposing of it in a disintegrator.

You step out of your quarters, with a rather cold gust hitting you.

You walk to the canteen, where your crew supposedly is.
Sure enough, there they are. Williams, too. She got discharged from medical to eat with the crew.

Stepping in, Hartmann shows impression with you.
Williams seems... starstruck?
Hooper seems proud of you... for whatever reason.
Phillips is confused.
Kaufman is indifferent.
Honeyman is too focused on her food.

You walk over to the countertop, and serve yourself “food”:
Baked beans, bread, some sort of soup, mashed potatoes and green beans.

Looks like those tax dollars didn't go towards getting something less bland to eat.

Taking your “food” to a table, you sit down.
Your crew immediately feels the need to mention the elephant in the room, and it's not the “food”.

“I see you took care of yourself, Captain.”

“Yeah, I was sick of it.”

Phillips seems concerned for Williams, who is staring at you.

“Hey, uh... Abby? You okay?”

“What?”

She snaps to look at Phillips.

Yeah, why?”

“You're kindaaaa.... Staring.”

“Yeah, Williams.” **sarcastically** “If you don't like it, just say something.”

“No... it's the opposite. You look more.... What's the word.... Charming?”

“You know you're the first person to call me that since I was 16 years old?”

She looks dumbfounded.

“Yeah, right.”

“No, I’m being serious. 16 years old, bushy hair, braces to the max, there I was, dorkiest kid in school. And there was only one girl in the entire school who was nice to me: Betty Carter. She called me charming when I asked her out to prom.”

“Betty... isn’t that your... wife?”

“Betty Carter. My **ex**-wife.”

“Right.”

“Man, your ass is lucky to even get to go to prom! I was so much of a loser the school didn’t even let me go in the gymnasium during prom night!”

“I ‘think that ‘might be for more ‘reasons than ‘one, ‘Ooper.”

“Can it, bozo.”

“Nah, I’ve got a better one! “Can it, sackhead!”

“What the fuck is a ‘sackhead’?”

“Like, man, I think it means, like, nutsack, man.”

“Oh, no.”

You finish eating, and get up. You place your tray back on the counter, and walk back down the hall to your quarters.

Stepping into your quarters, you take off your undersuit, turn off the lights, and lay down in your bed, exhausted and hurting from the events of earlier.

“Good night, Captain. The current time on Earth is: 11:22 P.M. Have a good sleep.”

You close your eyes, and drift off into dream-land.

It feels... weird, to sleep in space in a bed that isn’t a hospital bed...

To be continued.