

*Spoiler Alert: This scene shows Harden and Brian getting attached to Abby too early. Ultimately when this scene was cut, I wrote the "beach scene" in order to have the same idea later in the book.*

Abby woke up with a start. It was pitch black. She reached out and felt the soft padded wall of her closet. "Light!"

The illumination rose in the room. Same blue walls, pictures, and quilt. Realizing she was alone in her billet, a sick lonely pain surged through her. Her hands ached. So did her elbows and knees. Deep-seated isolation in her chest threatened tears. She realized she was hungry again. Glancing at the clock, it was still the middle of the night. Hours till breakfast. She tossed and turned in her bunk for a little while. She glanced up at the clock again. Five minutes had gone by. Still hungry. Sliding on her slippers, she climbed out of her billet. She could see the glow of the control panels through the hatchway to the bridge. Even though the *Revelation* was on autopilot in a stable geosynchronous orbit, Brian slept on the folding seats. As Mark said, unless they were in stasis, there was always someone on the bridge just in case of emergencies.

Abby walked into the dry pantry. If her eyes would just stop closing, if her hands would just stop aching, she might be able to prepare herself something, but instead she scavenged for what was easy: a handful of cereal a few pieces of dried pasta. Then she saw a jar of cashews. Maybe cashews would make her feel better.

"Abby," Harden whispered obviously irritated.

*Crap!* He had already had scolded her once for rummaging. “Pull out some flour, sugar, and oil then sit down at the table,” he said.

Even though he could not see her, she nodded, gathered what he told her and then came out to the galley. He was pulling out milk and eggs from the cold pantry. Setting the ingredients on the counter, she looked up at him, awaiting another order or a reprimand.

“I believe I told you to sit down before you fall down.”

She did so. Stomach acid was rolling, but she was starving. Her eyelids were so heavy, threatening to close. They were closed. She could smell butter and the scent of something like bread—only sweeter.

She opened her eyes again. Harden stood in front of the stove. Her eyes closed. Her eyelids were rough and dry. She heard his footsteps and she opened her eyes again. Harden placed a stack of pancakes in front of her. Something was off about him, but she couldn't figure out what.

“For me?” she looked up at him in surprise.

“Obviously,” he replied.

She wished she could have said something smarter. “Thanks.”

She didn't wait for Harden to put the honey on the table to dig in, but she stopped for a brief moment to pour on the honey and then scarfed them down.

Magically a glass of milk appeared. She glanced up. It wasn't magic, Harden had set it down. She heard the padded steps of Rockford. Then she felt the brush of his fur on her arm, then the hardness of his forehead as he rubbed his scent glands upon her. “Meow?”

Her right hand was busy with the fork; she petted him with her left. He purred.

Since Harden's back was to her, she dipped her pinky into the milk and let Rockford lick it off her finger. Then she smelled meat frying. It was leftover sausages from this morning's—or was it yesterday's—breakfast.

Now Brian was up. "Hey, that smells good."

Harden handed her the sausage. Gently picking up the cat and set him on the deck, Harden asked Brian, "You want coffee?"

Brian replied, "Sure. How're you feeling, Abby?"

"Okay. I guess. I hurt."

"We know, hon. It will get better."

Harden made up a plate for Brian and brought it to the bridge. In the interim, Rockford bounded up to the back of the bench. Taking up a perch, he stared towards Abby, but she didn't dare give him more milk from the table. When he returned, Harden glanced at him, but seemed too tired to fight the cat's greater will. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat across the table from her watching her eat.

"Why are you up?" she asked.

"Apparently to make you and Brian pancakes," he replied.

"I woke you? Sorry." She realized what was off. Harden was not in pajamas. He was wearing the same coveralls and t-shirt that he had been wearing earlier. Maybe he just threw them on before coming up to the galley. Maybe he thought his crew should never see a captain in his pajamas. That seemed like a dumb rule and contradictory to everything she knew about him.

“I heard you crying and worried you’d wake Helen. You want more?”

“I can?”

“Yes, but don’t make yourself sick. You might not believe me, but it hasn’t been so long that I forgot how it feels to go through basic flight. Just be glad, you don’t have to fight Helen for stick time...” he paused, “Of course what really sucked was after every training flight, Dad wouldn’t stop praising her and disparaging me. Mom never said anything, but I got used to the fact my little sister is a much better pilot real quick.”

Abby smiled and said, “But your grades were always better...and you finished school faster.”

“I knew it was a mistake to give you access to all the crew reports.” His tone indicated his actual feelings on the matter were the opposite of what he said. “So you still hungry?”

Deciding she was full, she shook her head. “I feel better.”

“Fine, I’m going to clean up, but when I finish, I better see you in your rack.” The gruffness was back in his voice. “You can’t spend all day in flight instruction only to wander aimlessly throughout the night. I don’t want to sedate you, but I will if I need to.”

Abby hid a shiver. “I’ll sleep.” She finished her milk, picked up her plate and set them in the sink. Thanking Harden again and saying good night to Brian, she crept back her billet, went into the head, and brushed her teeth. Then laid down on her rack. Hugging her pillow and snuggling under her quilt, she closed her eyes in the lit room.

Deep in restless slumber, she was not aware that approximately ten minutes later, her hatchway opened. Without entering, Harden looked down at the girl. Even in sleep, her brow was pinched.

Harden felt Rockford push past him. *Damn cat.*

Rockford jumped through the hatchway and bounded up on her bed. Pressing his forehead on hers, he began purring into the girl's ear. Her brow relaxed, though her breath was still ragged. Rockford glanced up with a look that might be considered a supercilious smirk, but Harden knew he was just anthropomorphizing the cat.

Harden dimmed her light, turned around and climbed in the neighboring billet. He reclined into his own rack and reopened his tablet. He let himself admit that except for a few weird habits and the occasional problems with slipping into Earth vernacular, Abby really could be anyone's kid. Then focused on his pet project: the opening of a stable Einstein-Rosen Bridge.

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