

Spoiler Warning: This scene is about 1/3 the way through the book. So if you haven't read it and do not want any plot points revealed do not read this scene. For those who have read it, will recognize the first part of this scene, which was rewritten from Abby's point of view for the novel.

Helen knew she should be more sympathetic to her younger brother's constant grumbling about being short-handed. Mark only complained about Pat leaving the ship, because he was heartbroken that Pat left him. Still she was getting sick of hearing him gripe about Harden's coldness and her own lack of planning. There were plenty of solutions. Besides right now, crates of supplies had to be loaded and were not going to be loaded by anyone else.

"Excuse me?"

Helen turned to see a thick-waisted, dark-haired girl maybe seventeen or eighteen with dark circles under her eyes. Her skirt and sweater were of high quality, but completely inappropriate for the chilly morning. Her feet looked soaked and she didn't even so much as carry a satchel.

"I heard you were looking for another hand?" the girl asked.

Brian returned her question with a question. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Eli." The girl said with too much quickness in her voice. Not the most proficient liar.

Helen rose her hand to stop the girl from lying again. "So you want to go to Lathos. What would you do there?"

“I can work. I learn dialects pretty easily.” The girl said in perfect Kiposi English. Still, it was obvious she had no idea where or what Lathos was. “I was on Earth a year ago—not really a year. A year to me.”

Helen was not surprised to discover the girl was just one of the innocent babies from Earth who had come to Kipos believing that a better life awaited her. Fury at the girl’s obvious predicament slithered up Helen’s spinal cord. Knowing the answer, she didn’t bother making her next statement to the girl a question. “So you’re indentured,” she said in a flat voice.

The girl nodded. “I was given to a man to make a child. He took my daughter away from me at birth. He no longer has use for me.”

Helen glanced at Brian. His golden eyes flashed. He did not want this problem.

Mark said softly, “We can’t just let her go. She’ll be killed.”

Helen said to the girl, “Job’s labor-intensive. In four days, we leave for a relative time ten-day stint. We need someone to gather mateodeas.”

“What are they?”

“Insects with a fifteen centimeter wingspan. Afraid of bugs?”

The girl shook her head. “My name is Abigail Boyd Lei. On Earth, I was an assistant librarian. I’m not afraid of hard work.”

Brian said, “Harden’s going to be pissed.”

Glancing over at her husband’s face, Helen was aware Brian was also seriously pissed, but he would not argue with her until they were alone.

Abigail clinched her hands behind her back. She was fighting to keep it together. If denied employment, the girl might wander around until she was picked up by customs, charged, and be executed if she was lucky.

With the knowledge, Helen risking her family as well as her career, she introduced herself, “I’m Helen Tolis Alekos – executive officer. My husband, Brian – ship’s mechanic. My brother, Mark – medical doctor and biologist. Get inside before someone sees you.

“Mark, go make sure she’s healthy.”

As soon as Abigail and Mark went through the airlock, Brian grabbed Helen by the elbow and pulled her close to him. “Are you insane?” he whispered.

She hated when they quarreled, but said, “Apparently so.”

“This is really stupid. Really stupid. We could all go to jail!”

She replied softly, “If we let Abigail go and she is caught, she won’t go to jail.”

After six years of marriage, Helen knew the best choice now was to say nothing else. Just wait. And she watched her husband’s expression move from anger, to annoyance, to acceptance in a minute.

Cupping her face, he whispered, “You’re too good, but you are endangering the ship with this girl.”

She nodded. “I know, but I can’t let her go—she’s just a kid.”

Brian sighed and wrapped his arms around her. “I’m going to finish up here and then I’ll be in the engine room. Go talk to Harden. If you are set on doing something this idiotic, let’s at least make sure we don’t get caught.”

“Thank you.”

Helen wasn't quite sure what she was going to say to Harden as she entered the airlock. She did not have to worry about it long, because he was coming down to meet her. Guessing by the look on his face, he had obviously seen at least part of it through the camera. She began climbing the steps towards him.

“Who the fuck is that?”

“Abigail Boyd Lei,” Helen said softly.

Harden asked, “Is she even old enough for A level?”

“She seems mature enough...” Helen replied though she knew she could not win in a battle of words.

Harden's eyes widened, but his voice was still calm. He knew. “Get her off our fucking ship before we are all arrested!”

Helen said, “She—she wants to go to Lathos.”

Harden did not immediately reply and Helen felt tears burning behind her eyes. She could not allow him to see her upset. Her brother hated any sort of anxiety, but especially tears. He didn't know how to deal with them. *He will come to see it my way. He always does.* Just as quickly as the burn behind her eyes came, it subsided and Helen said, “She's just a kid!”

Harden shook his head. “For fuck's sake!”

“I am keeping her.”

“No, you're not. Get her off the ship!”

“No.”

“I'm the fucking captain, and I'm ordering you to get that Earthling off the ship.”

An order? She knew how to win the argument now. She raised an eyebrow at him. “Fine, you’re the captain thus you can always override your XO’s personnel decisions. So, Captain Alekos, you tell her to get off the ship!”

His eyes were full of simmering rage and his jaw was set. He sidestepped around her and headed down the stairs towards the infirmary.

Suddenly Mark’s voice was over the COM. “Helen or Diane, come in here please?”

Harden’s footfalls became faster and Helen had to run down the stairs to keep up with him.

When they entered, Abigail had pressed herself against the wall in the corner. Mark said, “I need to examine her completely. I have a feeling she hasn’t seen real medical care for awhile.”

Abigail whimpered, “But there was a doctor...”

Helen chanced another glimpse at Harden. The rage was gone from his eyes and his shoulders had sunk as if someone was literally pushing him into the deck. It had been drilled into them since the day they were born: the black was too harsh of a place to not help. No matter what her future employment status, this kid needed medical attention.

Harden opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, Helen jumped in: “For you or the baby? Do as Mark tells you.” She made sure her tone was soft and kind, but it was an order. She hoped the girl would understand she must obey without argument.

Tears leaked from her eyes, but Abigail took a step closer to Mark. Her fingers trembled as she opened the first button on her sweater.

Harden said, “She better not be a fucking junkie with a sob story,” and left.

Abigail pulled off her clothing and tried to cover her body with her hair and hands. Trying not to seem shocked at the signs of visible abuse on this child, she patted the examination table and asked, “Alright, hon. How old are you?”

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Knowing she could not allow Harden time to think about it, after the medical examination, Helen rushed up to the engine room. As she anticipated, Harden was snapping at Brian and Diane about her obstinacy. “Mark took Abby to Port 3. Please look at this before you say anything.”

She thrust a tablet into his hands, but he didn’t take it. He didn’t even look at it. “I don’t want to see that,” he said.

Diane said softly, “Is it as you thought? She was ... bonded?”

“The girl delivered a child most likely a few weeks ago and she has been...” Helen couldn’t explain the extent of Abby’s injuries without breaking down. And she could not break down in front of Harden yet. “Mark gave her nanomites to heal a fistula. Research suggests Homo sapiens can bear a high fever for twenty-four to forty-eight hours, so figured her best chance is to induce her immune system to burn up the drug they gave her to keep her compliant. She’s...”

Now Diane’s face showed pain. “Poor baby. How could anyone do this?”

Though Harden’s face was still set in a grim frown, he was softening. “Fucking Kipos immigration and reproduction laws. It doesn’t matter what we are doing what’s right. We are going to get fucked in this.”

This was good; she had almost beaten him. “The girl doesn’t have anybody. Her brother and sister are somewhere on Kipos. She has no idea what happened to them.”

Diane was looking at Mark’s medical dictation. “Older or younger?”

“Both younger.”

Harden snapped his head up and met her eyes. “Wait, so you’re fucking telling me not just that kid, but three?”

Helen said softly, “We don’t know where they are. Neither does she. The sister’s eleven and the brother’s fifteen—so they are probably all right.”

Harden shook his head. “This is so fucked up. There are people who know this girl. If we are caught with her...”

“It’s only a relative ten days...and after two years planetside most will think she’s dead,” Helen said.

Harden pulled at his fingers unconsciously popping his knuckles. “If this kid fucks up on Lathos or does anything savage, I will send her ass straight back here. I expect her supervised.”

“I’m guessing Abby’s in Port 3 so I can keep an eye on her,” Diane said.

Helen nodded. “I figured it’s best for her to be with another woman—though if you prefer I’ll move her in Starboard 1. Keep her close to Brian and me.”

Diane shook her head. “It’s not a problem.”

Helen glanced at Brian with the hope he would be on her side. “You heard her speak...do you think there is any reason she can’t do the job?”

Brian shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess from what I saw, this kid seemed like any other kid...Aw, fuck, you are rarely wrong about a person’s character...”

he trailed off for a moment and then said, “She’s a very polite girl.” Helen always could count on her husband to find the good in everyone, even someone he only spoke to for a few minutes.

Getting through his fingers, Harden began rubbing his chin as he glanced at the tablet. “I’ll probably need Dad’s help to get the paperwork in order. Got to make it look above-board.” The anger left his brow. “It’s an interesting puzzle,” he said.

Diane passed him the tablet, which he now accepted. He asked, “What happened to the infant?”

“Abby left her with her bond holders.”

Harden nodded. “Good. If we are very lucky, maybe they really won’t come after the girl.” Then he wandered around the engine room muttering to himself about the best way to protect a kid from assholes who use the law to kill unborn babies and rape teenagers. Then he wondered loud enough for Helen to hear, “Why the fuck I ever let you and Mark talk me out of fucking smoking if you were going to fucking bring fucking kids aboard. I hate training fucking kids.”

This was a good sign. Generally the more obscenities, Harden used in a sentence, the more his mind was deliberating the problem, rather than considering how to speak intelligently. Once he disappeared in the large ribs of the gravity engine, Helen took a deep shuddering breath and leaned against the hull.

“Don’t get so worked up, Hel,” Diane said. “Harden’ll make it work. You’re doing the right thing.”

Helen nodded, but found it hard to remain calm when she knew she had just endangered everyone she cared about for a girl that she didn't even know.

Written by Elizabeth Guizzetti, 2011