

A CHAOS STATION STORY >>

REUNION

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Chapter One

Hemera Station, 2260

Felix could have waited at the hostel. Done the cool thing and cornered a table in the bar downstairs, lined up some empty shot glasses and pretended to be simultaneously drinking, flirting and solving complex equations on his wallet. Or he could have left a key to his room at the desk with a note. Waited sprawled across the bed in a state of partial undress, feigning sleep. Nah, he'd have gone nuts alone in the dark or taken himself in hand, and neither would have been the picture he wanted to present when a certain someone opened the door.

Instead, he researched (hacked) the passenger manifests from several incoming transports, assigned a gate to the last one, jumping it to the head of the queue, and crossed the docking hub of Hemera Station at a leisurely stroll. No arriving harried and sweaty for him, and no hanging out in space for Zander Anatolius while the incompetent boobs piloting his shuttle stared at the pretty lights and tried to remember their training.

But the wait, short as it promised to be, might kill him.

It'd been four years since he'd last seen Zed—since he'd stood on a rooftop and declared his heart. Heat stung Felix's cheeks at the memory. He'd embarrassed himself and probably Zed...but he'd also won a single night with the man he loved. A handful of hours filled with the wordless promises he'd promised not to make. Kisses filled with the taste of Zed; his skin, his mouth, his sweat. The essence of him.

He'd also promised to forget. He never had.

Scrubbing his hands against the worn patches of smart fiber along the front of his pants, Felix paced up and down the dock lounge. He arrived at a row of molded plastic seats, each stuck to a long, metal beam. The garish pink curve of each seat looked something like an exotic flower, the whole construction some sort of alien vine. His bum caressed one of the seats for ten seconds before Felix leapt up to pace the length of the vine again. Then he strolled to the window in defiance of the old adage regarding watched things never doing whatever the fuck they were supposed to do.

To his left, Felix could just see the faint outline of the corona surrounding the distant gate. The glint of light to his right was reflected sunlight. The darkness of space blanketed everything else, but it wasn't a frightening sort of darkness. Not small or oppressive. Myriad lights circled the station, bright against the thousand thousand pinprick stars strung behind.

Heart drumming a frantic but familiar rhythm, he scanned the lights, looking for Zed's transport. "Where are you?"

It'd taken six months for him to answer Zed's frequent ripmails with something more than: *I'm fine. Very busy.* Then he'd shared the fact he'd made a friend in specialist training, a *close* friend, and let Zed draw his own conclusions. Felix hadn't wanted to say he'd moved on, but he had. Or he'd tried to, even though he tasted ash every time he thought about the fact Zed also had a *close* friend. A girlfriend. It wasn't until each of them had walked away from those relationships that their own friendship had started to come back together, via ripmail and the occasional jazer—on Zed's credit, of course. Long, rambling conversations that sometimes approached nights at the Academy when they'd lain side by side in a bunk, or up on the roof, and talked about nothing. When they'd simply spent time together.

They'd rebuilt the stack of bricks forming their friendship and these five days together on Hemera Station were to be the cement. So maybe he should stop fretting and head back to the hostel. Line up those shot glasses.

A tremor pushed through the floor beneath Felix's boots. Looking up, he saw the familiar Allied Earth Forces logo as Zed's transport nudged the docking hub and the clamps engaged. Felix scrubbed his hands over his thighs again and took a deep breath. No amount of oxygen could calm the butterflies performing zero-g maneuvers in his stomach. Or dry the sweat at the back of his neck, down the column of his spine, at the back of his knees and, for the love of all those useless gods, on his palms.

This was it! Zed was here. Felix felt his mouth curving into a big, stupid grin. He wrestled his features back into a soldierly countenance right away, but knew that the minute Zed stepped through the 'lock, he'd be grinning like a boy again. He strolled over to the hatch and tried not to twitch in place.

If Zed ever acquired a position in which he trained recruits or new officers, he was going to be sure to tell them two things. One, be smart about your choice of lovers. Everyone screwed around, that was just a given, but only stupid men and women got caught. And two, concussions really, really sucked.

His fingers found the scar at the back of his head, a gesture he found himself making more and more frequently, and one he was trying to not turn into a habit. He redirected his fingers to his shorn hair—he'd shaved it rather than sport a bald patch among the rest. After a couple of months, it wasn't quite a buzz cut anymore, but still a lot shorter than he used to wear it at the Academy.

Would Flick like it?

Zed's fingers found his scar again and he grumbled, then thrust his hand down to his side to tap on the seat's armrest. Whether or not Flick liked his hair should be a moot point. They were friends. Best friends, despite not seeing each other for years. They'd kept in touch, with ripmails that had ebbed and flowed in frequency. More flowing in recent years as they put space between them and...that night.

That topic was there, always there, but never verbalized. What could they say? They were both adults with promising careers; they couldn't just derail that the night they graduated from the Academy. They'd done the only thing they could do: walk away and move on.

He was thinking too much again, and a vague hint of a headache brewed at his temples. Nothing significant, just a reminder of why he was stationed at Central and had been for the past couple of months. The lingering effects of a concussion meant he wasn't on Outrock Colony, on the edge of human space, for the last few months of his posting, and that meant taking leave and connecting with family—or friends—was an actual possibility. So he couldn't be too upset. Though next time, he'd try to arrange the downtime without the annoyance of an injury that was taking way too long to heal.

Finally the ship docked and Zed let the press of bodies eager to escape carry him along. As he approached the gate, he had a brief flash of panic that he wouldn't recognize Flick. Then he spotted familiar blond curls and a wide, welcoming smile and all of the worries melted away.

Zed grinned, his mouth stretching so wide it hurt. God, Flick looked good. Older (duh) and...damn, there was that bunch and lurch in his gut, the one he'd once ignored whenever he looked at his best friend. No more. Flick was hot, really hot, and Zed let himself appreciate that fact as he walked toward him.

He threw out his arms and engulfed Flick in a hug, squeezing hard. He opened his mouth to say something, but his tongue got tangled with everything he wanted to say. *I missed you, you look fantastic, I'm so happy to see you, I missed you, hugging you feels so good, how could I have walked away?*

Swallowing, he tried again. "Hi, you," he said, his voice rough.

"Hey," Flick said back, his voice muffled against Zed's chest. He sounded so casual, so nonchalant, as though this wasn't the first time they'd seen each other in forever. Had Zed miscalculated what this meeting would mean? Was this really just two old friends reuniting for a few days of fun to recapture their childhood, or—

Then he felt them. The trembles.

They quivered through Flick's body, small, slight, but there. He suddenly wanted to hold Flick tighter, closer, and make sure that he knew that no matter the distance between them, Zed would always be there for him.

Instead, when Flick tugged, Zed let him draw back.

"Should I be looking out for an angry farm wife?" Flick quipped.

Retreat. Regroup. Zed recognized that urge. Reluctantly, Zed pulled back from Flick, just enough so they weren't touching anymore, and adjusted the bag on his shoulder. "Not unless you decided you liked women, got married, and started a farm, all without telling me." Zed grinned, then turned his head to the side to display the still-angry scar. "Check it out."

"Damn, Zed. She could have cracked your skull."

"Yep." He looked back at Flick, his mouth twisting into a self-deprecating smile. "My first in-service scar, and it's from a bloody shovel. Christ."

He shook his head, then, still smiling, gestured for Flick to walk with him.

Felix scrubbed the back of his neck. "So, um, where did you book? I'm at the hostel."

"Oh. I, uh...didn't." He held Flick's gaze for a moment, then looked away. "I knew you were going to be here before me and I...well, I thought...I'd, uh, play it by ear." He looked at Flick again. His cheeks felt hot enough that they were probably glowing red. Dammit. He waved a hand and shook his head. "Regardless, you're not staying at a hostel on an Anatolius station when you're vacationing with an Anatolius. I'm sure they'll find a couple of rooms for us at the Olympus. Or, uh..." *Fuck, Zander, just say it.* "One room."

They didn't have to do anything. They could just talk all night. Fuck, he could even get a room with two beds. But none of that made it past Zed's dry throat and uncooperative tongue.

Flick stared at him and Zed thought for a moment that he'd fucked up. Again. Then, "One room would be good." A blush swept across Flick's cheeks, followed by a chuckle—which he quickly stifled. "Man, we are...ridiculous. I feel like I'm fourteen."

And just like that, they were kids again, best friends, without the elephant in the room looming over their shoulders. Not everything had to be decided now. Zed slung his arm across Flick's shoulders and directed him toward the Olympus. "Want me to see if they've got something with two twin beds so we can pretend we're back in the dorms?"

Flick's blush deepened, but he said nothing, just shook his head, and Zed let it go. Not everything had to be decided now, he reminded himself. But soon, they'd have to figure shit out.

Chapter Two

Felix could count on one hand the number of times he'd stayed in an actual hotel. In fact he only needed one finger. Normally, he saved credits by continuing to bunk aboard whatever ship he was assigned to while enjoying shore leave. Occasionally, he sprang for a hostel—when he thought he might need some privacy and a bunk not predisposed toward falling off of its hinges. Not that all his encounters over the past couple of years had taken place in a bed. In fact, he could probably count...

He needed to stop counting, and stop thinking about sex—which was really hard when faced with the largest bed in the galaxy. It was the size of an Olympic swimming pool and covered in a soft, puffy looking quilt and pillows thick enough to plug a hull breach. About six hundred of them.

Felix looked at Zed instead and felt yet another blush sting its way down from his scalp and across his cheeks, where it met the one springing up from his neck. Damn his pale skin, and damn Zed for being so fucking hot. He was melting Felix's synapses. Conversation as they crossed the station to collect his hold-all from the hostel had been weird and stilted. Felix had expected it to take some time for them to reconnect. He hadn't expected the odd combination of strangeness and familiarity, though, as if someone had presented him with an imperfect copy of the Zed he'd grown up with. One more gorgeous, just as personable, well-versed in their personal history, but somehow different. Unknowable.

"There's only one bed," Felix said.

Zed's brows crooked together. Man, he looked good. Felix preferred Zed's dark brown hair longer, but the shorter cut made his steely blue eyes huge and...had his cheekbones always been so prominent? His mouth, Felix remembered. Wide, with full lips. The straight nose, those dark and mobile brows.

"It was going to be a bit of a wait for two and the beds at these hotels are always huge. Is it a problem?" Zed finally answered.

Felix's answering shrug was more reflex than planned. "It's the size of a basketball court, I think we'll be fine."

"You still like basketball?"

"Yeah. I don't get to watch it much. Mostly old replays we pick up through rip comms."

Felix glanced at the bed. They could sleep together there for a week and not bump into one another. It'd be fine. Unless Zed had planned for them to do some bumping. Was that why he'd decided not to wait for a bigger room?

Jesus. He really needed to stop staring at the bed.

Backing away, Felix swung his hold-all from his shoulder and dropped it onto the floor. Without looking at Zed, he angled toward the door on the far side, what he hoped would be the bathroom.

Zed caught his arm as he passed. "Hold up."

Felix stopped.

"I can get us a different room if the bed is a problem."

"Forget the bed."

Zed's brows dipped low. "Do you want your own room?"

"No. What I want is to take a leak."

"Oh." Zed let go.

Zed was still standing at the end of the bed when Felix finished inspecting every corner of the palatial bathroom and had washed his hands four times. Soap smelled good. Sorta like Zed. All woodsy with a hint of citrus.

“Do you want to get two rooms?” Felix asked.

“What I want is for this to not be so weird.”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s been four years.” Felix scratched the side of his head, catching the scent of sandalwood and lemon as his hand passed his face. “It didn’t occur to me until that last week at school that it’d be that long. Two years, four, whatever. Seemed unreal, you know? Like we’d probably bump into each other out there somewhere. After training if not before.”

Zed’s smile had a slightly distant quality.

Dropping his hand, Felix went to inspect the mini bar. Maybe they should fall back to Plan B. That’d been the one where he lined up shot glasses, right? Or got drunk? As he studied the line of bottles—no mini versions for VIP guests!—he realized he didn’t want to waste any of the little time he had with Zed by getting drunk. He wanted to remember these five days. They might be all he had for the next who knew however long.

Zed still hadn’t moved when Felix turned around again. Had he said something wrong? Felix pushed out a sigh. “Okay, here it is. I’m not expecting anything, all right? I’m not going to throw myself at your feet and tell you I love you and ask you to promise me the next four years. I’m over it. Took me a long time, I know, and I’m sorry for any ripmails I didn’t answer, and for the fact I’ve let a few queue up lately. We were in the—”

Registering the fact Zed now had a strange look on his face, Felix clamped his mouth shut, cutting his apology off at the knees. Fuck. He *had* said something wrong. But which part? And why was Zed so quiet?

Zed had dropped his bag on a proper stand thing in the corner of the bedroom. He walked over to it and thumbed the release. The bag softened and fell open, displaying two stacks of neatly folded clothing. “How about if we head out?” he said, lifting the top two layers away to get at something underneath. “Get something to eat, a drink. Find some music or a show.” He glanced up. “Do something that isn’t us staring at the big bed in the middle of the room, wondering if we’re going to sleep on separate sides or in the middle.”

Felix’s thoughts wandered to the middle of the bed, to what they might do there in between banked clouds of pillows and linen. Was that what Zed wanted? Did he want to sleep—or not sleep—in the middle? The fact they only had a limited amount of time could be the pass Zed needed. Five days to fuck and then...no, Zed wouldn’t forget. If not only because he knew Felix wouldn’t, despite the brave speech he’d just given.

“Felix.”

At the sound of his name, Felix returned to the conversation to find Zed standing right in front of him. This close, he caught a whiff of the familiar and strange that had so far dogged their afternoon. Zed’s aftershave and the chemical tang of reprocessed air. This close, he could appreciate, again, how large his best friend was. Broad across the shoulders and half a head taller. Zed leaned in and brushed their lips together. A kiss that didn’t feel like a kiss, but a touch that could be nothing else.

“Stop thinking so hard,” he said, his breath tickling Felix’s stunned lips. “That’s my job. Now go put on a clean shirt.” Stepping back, he cocked his head. Eyes twinkling now. “You did bring a change of clothes, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Forward march, soldier.”

Why hadn't he just waited for a room with two beds? Flick was clearly embarrassed by Zed's assumptions—and now, so was Zed. Flick couldn't have made it clearer that he wasn't interested in pursuing anything of a romantic nature.

He really should have called down and asked for them to be moved to a new room. But fleeing the scene of the crime seemed like a better proposition at the time. And it had led them here, to a laser tag arena, so that couldn't be all bad, right? They were up against a trio of teenagers—spoiled rich kids, by the looks of them, and Zed would know. He and Flick had won the first round, and now a couple of unintelligible shouts drifted from the other team's camp. Trash talk.

Flick rolled his eyes. "You know," he yelled over the barricade, "if you're gonna be smart-asses, you should at least enunciate!"

"Bite! Me!" The words were very clear and perfectly pronounced.

"You told them to enunciate." Zed chuckled. "How's the charge on your rifle?"

"More than enough to take out these two dickwads."

"Remember, they're just kids."

"Not anymore, they're not." Flick's eyes glittered with a mix of amusement and ferocity. "Now they're the enemy."

The siren sounded to start the second round. Zed shared a grin with Flick, bumped fists, and headed off to flank the so-called enemy. If they won this round, too, they'd get new opponents—theoretically, they could keep going all day on the one admission fee, if they kept racking up the victories. Not that he was worried about the cost. It was more the principle of the thing. Bragging rights. It felt like he and Flick were back at the Academy, taking on all comers and kicking—

Zed's stomach lurched as his feet left the floor. Instantly he snapped into officer mode, assessing the situation. Was the gravity loss throughout the station or—

Just as quickly as it disappeared, gravity came back on and reinforced its hold. Harshly. Zed slammed to the plasmix floor and rolled, distributing the brunt of the fall. From a pained groan off the in the direction he'd left Flick, someone else hadn't been so agile.

Forgetting all about the game, he sprinted across the battleground. A laser shot stung his shoulder—a fleeting sensation designed to inform but not harm. He lifted a finger in the universal sign for fuck you, then skidded to a stop beside Flick, who was sitting against one of the strategically placed barricades, blood streaming down his face from his nose.

"M okay, 'm okay," he muttered as Zed knelt beside him.

"Shit." Zed peeled off his shirt and folded it up to press against Flick's nose. "Can you breathe okay?" Eying the other side of the battleground, Zed shouted, "We forfeit!"

Cheers erupted. Assholes. Scowling, Zed pulled out his wallet and punched a couple of holographic buttons to officially end the match. Oh look, there was a button for medical assistance. Zed pressed it, then put his wallet away and turned back to Flick.

"Here, keep pressure on it." Zed cupped the back of Flick's head and pressed the blood-soaked cloth more firmly to his nose.

"Ow!"

Zed winced. "Sorry."

"You could've warned me that the laser tag had zero-g mode." The words came out of Flick's mouth sounding muffled and garbled, but Zed figured them out.

"I didn't know. I thought I'd picked a standard battleground."

He backed off as a couple of attendants appeared with a first aid kit. Shortly thereafter, an older man wearing a suit marched up their three former opponents. He looked about as impressed as Zed.

“Mr. Anatolius, I’m Greg Hoffelder, the director of Hemera Laser Fun. I’m sorry to meet you like this, but I wanted to share that we registered the momentary loss of gravity in your match and were able to trace it back to your opponents.” Greg leveled a glare at the teenagers.

Zed’s brows rose. “You hacked the match?”

The boy in the middle—and he was definitely a boy still, with zits and limbs too gangly for his body—crossed his arms and looked like he wanted to be anywhere else. “Yeah. But we were never gonna win against you guys and—”

“Shut up, Mario!” one of the other boys growled.

“And now we’re banned for a month. Jeez.” The third boy glared at Zed. “*Everyone* knows that the grav is fair game for hacking.”

“We didn’t. Ow, fuck.” Flick pushed at the attendant’s fingers until she moved her hands away from his face. “I think it’s stopped bleeding. What do you think, is it broken?”

Zed waited for the attendant to move away, then, gently palpitated the bloodstained flesh. “Nah, I think it’s good. How’s it feel?”

“Like shit.” Flick made an experimental sniff and flinched. “Damn it, that hurts.”

The game attendants produced an icepack—one of the ones Zed was familiar with from exercises, where you just had to break the material inside the plasmix to get the reverse thermal reaction to occur. The thing went super cold in seconds. Zed pressed it gently to Flick’s face and Flick hissed.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured.

Flick made a grunting noise that might have been acceptance of the apology or dismissal, Zed couldn’t tell.

“This whole...none of this is going as I’d planned.” Zed sighed.

Flick looked up at Zed for a few seconds, his gaze unreadable. “Maybe that’s the problem.”

“What?”

“The plan part of things.” He shrugged and winced again as the icepack moved. “Maybe we need to toss the plan. Start new.”

Zed frowned. “I don’t want to pretend we don’t know each other. Or that we didn’t—”

Flick held up a hand to stop Zed. “We’re not the same guys we were at eighteen. I think expecting that we could just pick up where we left off...”

Goddamn it. Zed let go of the icepack. Flick was holding onto it with one hand anyway, and Zed couldn’t be touching him when...when... “Do you want to cancel our—”

“No!” Flick shouted, then cleared his throat. “No,” he said more calmly. “But let’s...just play it by ear. I mean, this was a good start.”

“In theory,” Zed said, his lips twisting into a grimace.

“In theory,” Flick agreed.

Zed sucked on his teeth for a moment, debating with himself. “Do you want another room?” he finally asked.

It took Flick just as long to answer. “No,” he said quietly.

“Okay.” Zed tried to ignore the flutters of triumph in his stomach. “Let’s go get room service and see if we can find a bad holo to watch.”

“Or a basketball game?” Flick suggested hopefully.

“Sure.” It didn’t matter to Zed—as long as they were together.

Jumping hurt. He had to remember that. But Titans needed this point to take the game from the Ancients. The plush carpet of the Anatolius suite was not thick enough to cushion Felix's landing, though. Pain shot from the base of his jaw, up through the bridge of his nose, where it poked directly into the back of his skull. "Jesus, Joseph and Mary."

"You okay?" Zed pulled Felix's hands from his face. "Don't touch your nose, you'll make it worse."

"Don't see how," Felix mumbled.

"Maybe let the Titans shoot the rest of their baskets themselves?"

"They need my help, man. They need this game for a chance at the quarter finals." Zed was laughing quietly. Felix pushed him backward by shoving a hand into his shoulder, but found he couldn't help laughing as well. "Hey, this is the first live game I've seen in two years. If I'm gonna help my team, now's the time."

"I'd forgotten how much you like basketball."

"And I'd forgotten how much you like to eat." Food crowded the low table in front of the sofa. One of everything from the room service menu.

Felix perched on the edge of the sofa and leaned forward to grab another strawberry by the stem. He tipped his head back and dangled it over his lips, teasing the pointed end with his tongue, absently, liking the texture, before taking a bite. Juice ran from the corner of his mouth and he swiped his tongue sideways to catch it. Having glanced in the same direction, he caught Zed staring at him—eyes heavy lidded, lips parted. Cheeks flushing, Felix looked back at his strawberry. The mischief maker within suggested he stick his tongue into the little hollow inside the fruit. Moan a little, then suck the strawberry into his mouth. Zed wouldn't be the only one turned on by the tease, though, and they hadn't actually decided if they were going to revisit old territory or not. But, really, could something like that be initiated by a conversation?

Fuck it.

Closing his eyes, he stuck his tongue into the strawberry. Zed's sharp intake of breath would have been audible back on Earth. The sound—the urgency of it, the want transmitted by that one quick inhale—shot straight to Felix's groin. The strawberry was sweet and warm. He sucked juice from the middle before wrapping his lips around the rest of the fruit and drawing it into his mouth. Cheering erupted from the large holo screen flickering in front of them. Someone had scored a point—maybe even his beloved Titans. The short, quiet panting next to him seemed louder. Definitely more significant. Felix finished chewing, swallowed, opened his eyes and turned to face Zed, who looked as though he'd come in his pants. Or was about to.

"Holy shit." Zed pulled at his pants, obviously needing to rearrange certain folds of fabric.

It was so hard not to look at his crotch.

"I don't know whether to feed you more strawberries, push you back into the couch or just yell at you for giving me a hard on."

Well, that was frank.

Chuckling, Felix reached for another strawberry.

"Wait." Zed's hand arrested his, callused fingertips grazing Felix's knuckles. "Hold up. Before you drive us both insane...maybe we could just talk a while? That's what we haven't done, you know."

Felix swallowed. "Talk about what?" Did Zed want to make a new plan, or outline some rules for whatever happened next?

“Just stuff. All we’ve done since we got here is stare at a bed, nearly get your nose broken and watch a basketball game.” He moved his hand away from Felix’s, holding it up in a placating gesture. “What I mean is... You were right. I had a plan and it didn’t include you eating strawberries.”

Grinning, Felix picked up another strawberry and twirled the stem, making the small red fruit spin.

Zed groaned. “Jesus, Flick.”

Felix popped the strawberry into his mouth without a tease and flopped back into the couch. “Okay, you want to talk? Tell me what you’ve been up to on Central. Your last couple of ripcomms were really vague.”

“Anything out of Central gets sniffed and snipped, you know that.”

Especially anything transmitted from the AEF Headquarters. Felix had supposed a post at the seat of human government would suit Zed, but now he could tell it didn’t.

“How long are you going to be stuck there?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve been...looking into other postings.”

“Yeah? Like where?”

Zed short of shrugged, sort of frowned. “I don’t want to talk about work.”

Felix chuckled. “We’re soldiers. Our work is our life. It’s all we have to talk about.”

“You get any time to tinker aboard the *McCandless*?”

“Not really...” Felix thought over the numbing routine that was life aboard a battle cruiser. “I did devise a new locking mechanism for the aft evaporator storage.”

“Because...”

“Not many private places aboard a battlecruiser.”

“Oh.” Zed’s expression darkened. He rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. “Need privacy a lot?”

“Not often.” He had a casual something going with one of the guys on his crew. Very casual. So casual, it was more like coincidence. “How ’bout you?”

Zed’s hand migrated to the back of his head. His new scar. “My head is still ringing.” He gave a wry smile.

“So...with all the important work you’re doing at Central...” Paper pushing. He’d be scanning holo reports and making reports of what he’d read for other benched soldiers to scan. “Have you kept up with your music?” That had always been Zed’s main hobby. Weird instrumental compositions made using a couple of different wallet programs. Felix didn’t understand Zed’s music, but he liked it—mostly because it represented a part of his friend few people ever saw. What he was like beneath the handsome exterior wrapped in a layer of perfect soldier. It was Zed the dreamer, the gentle idealist. The man who would one day be a hero to more than just Felix Ingesson.

Zed had his hand on his pocket. “Well, I did do this thing...” Cheeks flushing, he moved his hand away. “It’s not really—”

“I want to hear it.”

Zed fiddled with the fabric of his pocket. “It’s not finished yet.”

“I don’t care. Besides, who else are you going to play it for?”

Felix held his breath as he waited for Zed to answer, suddenly and keenly aware that if there was someone else—outside of Zed’s brothers—who got to hear his music, then Felix would no longer be...privileged? Special? The best friend.

Just as he thought to suggest Zed needn't answer, Zed pulled his wallet out and folded it open. He glanced up at Felix. "Besides you, Brennan and Maddox?" His smile was wistful. "No one. You know that."

Felix let out a breath. Unsure how capture the precious feeling imparted by Zed's statement, he ate another strawberry while Zed fiddled with a holo display.

The music caught him by surprise, as it always did. Haunting melodies strung together with beautiful phrases. If Felix were to try and make music, his compositions would be mathematical. Methodical. Zed's music wasn't chaotic, but veered as close as it could to the edge of sense, combining rhythms that shouldn't work together but did. The melody...traveled, rarely visiting the same place twice, but beneath, there was a constant. Felix couldn't figure out just what it was, couldn't pin it down, but there was a note, or a beat that tied it all together.

When the piece ended, Zed eyed him cautiously. "What did you think?"

Felix didn't know what to say until his memory suddenly snapped the pieces of what he'd just heard together. "It's...it's a story, isn't it?"

Zed immediately brightened. "Yeah."

"That's what all your music is, right?"

Rather than look offended by the fact Felix had only just got it, some ten years after he'd heard Zed's first mournful tune, he simply nodded. "Mostly. Sometimes it's just me playing with sound, but I always have a sort of picture in mind."

"Tell me about the picture for this one."

He'd thought Zed might hesitate and he seemed to, for the space of a breath. Then he launched into a tale—him among the stars, searching—and Felix fell into listening. He was interested in the story, but really, Zed could be describing the food laid out across the coffee table. Just to hear him talk, passionately and animatedly. This was what had been missing so far. Zed being Zed. Felix laid his head back on the couch and closed his eyes, prepared to listen until Zed ran out of words.

Chapter Three

He was back on the rooftop with Flick, watching the fireworks and holos spell out their names overhead, along with those of the rest of the graduating class. Zed knew it was a dream—a lucid dream, maybe, because he could smell Flick’s wonderful scent, the one he hadn’t known he’d miss until he didn’t catch a whiff of it every day. The tang that reminded Zed of a space station, and circuits, the perfect embodiment of Flick.

They were curled up on the roof—which was much more comfortable than it had been in real life, thank you dreamland—Flick’s back to his chest, Zed’s arms wrapped around him and holding him close. The unseen fireworks overhead cast Flick’s blonde hair in various shades of red and orange and blue and purple that Zed was almost too close to see.

“Gonna miss you,” he whispered.

It was a memory, but not—on some level, Zed knew this wasn’t quite how that last night had happened, but it didn’t matter. One of his hands skimmed downward, slipping under the waistband of Flick’s underwear. His groan as he found Flick’s rock-hard erection rivalled Flick’s.

They hadn’t been together enough times for Zed to know what Flick liked, so he improvised. Whatever made Flick squirm and groan and grunt was a good thing—especially when he started rocking back against Zed. God, yes. Zed met each thrust with a press forward of his hips, rutting his cock into the perfect groove of Flick’s covered ass. He tucked his face into the crook of Flick’s neck and shoulder and breathed in his tangy scent, now overlaid with musk and lust. His thumb swept over the tip of Flick’s cock, spreading the warm bead of liquid there all over the head, which only made Flick’s movements more frenzied, more desperate.

God, so good. So fucking good. Zed licked the bare skin of Flick’s shoulder, not even wondering at Flick’s lack of clothing—dreams were dreams.

“Zed, don’t stop. Don’t.”

“Can’t,” Zed agreed, his voice shaking.

Wait...

He blinked and the rooftop faded away, leaving a bed. A hotel room. Synthesized morning light filtering through the polarized windows. Flick shaking in his arms. Zed’s balls drawn up and ready—

“Fuck,” Flick groaned, the curse long, drawn-out, as he stilled for a second, then thrust again. Warmth rushed over Zed’s hand, the smell of come and lust intensifying, and even though Zed knew he wasn’t dreaming, knew he’d accidentally crossed a line, he couldn’t hold back. With a gasp and a cry, he pressed harder into Flick’s backside and froze as his orgasm overpowered him.

The bliss fled way too quickly, leaving Zed with a hand covered in cooling jizz and boxers full of the same—and a suspicion that whatever progress he and Flick had made yesterday had been rubbed out along with his morning wood.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “Fuck, I’m really sorry.”

Flick let out a noise that might have been a sigh or a gentle laugh—it was hard to tell with him facing away from Zed. “Good dream?”

Awkward. “You were in it, so, um...yeah.” He pulled away, trying to move so he didn’t smear his messy hand anywhere. “So much for staying on my side of the bed. Shit,” he muttered, pushing to his feet. “Look, I’ll...I’ll get you another room, okay?”

“Stop with the room shit. We dealt with that yesterday.” Flick rolled over to glare at him.

“Yeah. Before...” Zed wagged his come-covered fingers.

“It was a sleepy hand job. One step above a wet dream.” Flick held Zed’s gaze, his own hazel eyes unreadable. “Do you hear me complaining?”

No, but that didn’t help the shame currently cascading through Zed. He shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “I’m gonna...” He waved at the bathroom.

Flick opened his mouth as if he was going to say something—then closed it, giving a little headshake. “Yeah, okay. Go.”

Released from standing there like an idiot, Zed bee-lined for the shower, eager to put this new disaster behind him.

Felix listened to Zed moving around the bathroom. The thick walls of the suite muted the sounds of his progress, but determined attention won through. Felix would rather listen to Zed washing his hands than contemplate what had just happened.

Zed stopped moving after he finished at the sink.

The memory of Zed’s body rocking into him slid into the quiet pause. The hard point of Zed cock pushing at the crease of his ass, the rough-smooth texture of Zed’s hand over his dick. The pressure of his thumb, the maddening twist every time he pulled up. It’d been the best hand job Felix had ever received—probably because he’d been able to smell Zed’s sleep-warm skin, and the fingers wrapped around his shaft had been both familiar and strange.

The best part had been how natural it felt. Right. Inevitable? Felix had been aware of Zed most of the night, his quite breaths, the little shifts as he rolled from time to time. He’d woken a little when Zed moved up behind him and cuddled. What else to do but snuggle backward, let the heat of Zed’s chest move through his back and into his chest. Into his heart.

In the bathroom, Zed still hadn’t moved—unless he’d figured out how to shower like a ninja.

Two choices floated about on the taste of morning breath. Felix could let Zed shower alone, which would lead to Felix also probably showering alone. Awkward showers would be followed by an uncomfortable breakfast and a day filled with avoiding the fact their hips had moved perfectly in time. After a number of years and a handful of other lovers, they’d fallen into a matched rhythm with nary a hitch. Felix generally didn’t bottom, but had Zed had lube handy, he’d have lost his underwear so fast the fiber might combusted with the friction.

Was Zed a top? He had the whole gruff alpha thing going.

Focus, Felix.

He pushed back the covers and scrambled to the edge of the stupidly wide bed, second choice decided upon before he’d fully examined it. Fuck awkward, and fuck plans. If Zed didn’t want this, this was his chance to say so. Felix didn’t know how they’d make it work, or if they even could. Hell, they might only have these five days—the four remaining. If that was it, then that was it. Seize the day and all that.

His heart jerked around in his chest as he approached the bathroom. A sharp pain across his left palm cautioned him to uncurl his fingers. He stopped in front of the door and looked at his hand. A row of red crescents marked the skin. Maybe he should default back to option one.

His marked up hand had already palmed the door panel, though, and it slid back without remorse to reveal Zed doing exactly what Felix had pictured. He stood by the sink, hands braced against the sides, and looked in the mirror. His boxers were in a heap on the floor and...

All the moisture evaporated from Felix’s mouth. Specialist training and two years out in the field had stripped the last softness from Zed’s frame. He was still generously proportioned—wide shoulders, powerful arms and legs, firm, ripe buttocks. Shoulders bulging with

musculature, rounded pecs and a hard, flat abdomen. There was nothing extra, though. His hips were trim, his legs long and lean. His ass. Felix couldn't lift his gaze from Zed's ass. He knew if he looked a little sideways, he'd catch a glimpse of Zed's cock, but his ass...

"Do you need the head?"

Felix had a feeling Zed had spoken more than once. He'd heard words, but hadn't made sense of them. He looked up. "Huh?"

"Do you need..." Zed gestured the toilet.

"No." Actually, yes, but the vague pressure in his bladder wasn't the reason he'd come into the bathroom. He'd wanted to—what had he been going to do?

Zed made an impatient noise, calling Felix to focus.

"I want to talk," Felix said.

"Can't it wait until I've had a shower?"

"No." Felix moved into the bathroom, into the heady sphere of Zed's naked influence. Holy mother of everything. "God, it's hard to focus on anything with you naked."

"Want to get to the point?"

The sharpness of Zed's tone cut exactly to that, the point. Felix tore his gaze away from naked flesh and looked into Zed's steel blue eyes. "This morning—what happened in bed. Do you regret it?"

"Why?"

Why? Was that some interrogation technique? Get Felix to answer all the questions so Zed didn't have to? Fine.

"Because I don't." Felix held up a hand, forestalling any response from Zed. "It felt damn good and I want to do it again, other way 'round. I want to spend all day in bed with you. I know it can't go anywhere, that these few days are all we're likely to get, but..." He swallowed. "I'm good with that." He wasn't, but he could stretch a lie over a few days and mourn the bastard afterward. "We fit, Zed. It works between us. We could, I dunno, make it about the physical if you like. I know you want me. Why not let yourself have me? Just for today, or the days we have left."

There it was, the proverbial carrot held out for Zed to grab. Flick wasn't even trying to keep it out of his grasp, not anymore—and that pissed Zed off.

"Goddamn it, Flick, you think this is just physical?" He pushed away from the sink and, movements sharp and jerky with temper, turned on the water in the shower. It gave him something to do, something to look at. Something to act as a buffer between him and the guy he'd just...*fuck*...molested while half asleep. Gritting his teeth, he stepped under the water, not caring that it wasn't the right temperature yet.

Flick grumbled, words Zed couldn't decipher over the rush of water—then the shower door opened and Flick stepped inside. "No, it's not just physical, asshole. Never has been."

Zed swiped water away from his eyes. "Then why would you even say that?"

Flick turned on the other showerhead—wouldn't be an Anatolius suite without that luxury—then crossed his arms and glared at Zed. "Why do you think?"

They shared a hard stare, one that reminded Zed of when they were kids and neither wanted to back down from an argument. But they weren't kids anymore. Zed rubbed the scar on the back of his head and let out a breath.

"'Cause we're both scared." He held Flick's gaze, noticing that it softened a bit with that admission out in the air between them. "Can I tell you what I had planned? Coming here?"

God, this was frightening. More frightening than seeing his lover's wife lift up that shovel with murder in her eyes.

Flick sluiced water away from his face, and Zed reflected that this was not how he'd pictured having this conversation—naked and wet would be a better choice for more fun activities. But, whatever, he'd take it. "Yeah, okay," Flick said, his voice just audible over the soft rumble of the shower.

Time to jump. Zed had no idea if he had a parachute on or not.

"I love you." He held up a hand to stop Flick from saying anything. "Just let me talk for a minute, okay?" He drew in a shaky breath. "I figured it out that night."

"Graduation night? And you didn't—"

"I didn't. Leaving you was hard enough. The timing wasn't right—you know it wasn't right."

Flick turned his face away from Zed, his jaw tight. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Zed continued on.

"So, my plan was to see you, now, see if there was a spark beyond friendship and—" Another trembling breath. "If there was, I wanted to talk to you about putting in for a joint posting somewhere."

Flick's gaze snapped back to Zed's. "Joint posting? You mean stationed together?"

"Yeah. It's probably not really an option right yet, and I don't want to rush us into anything. So...maybe not a true joint posting, but we could try to angle for ones that are closer than you on the *McCandless* and me at the edge of human space. Or at Central. There's got to be a happy medium somewhere, right?"

Flick tilted his head, looking at Zed like he was a particularly interesting—and broken—engine part. The silence spun out between them and Zed adjusted the water temperature, and then the intensity and pattern of the stream, just for something to do.

Flick huffed out an impatient breath. "What are you trying to say?"

Zed suddenly found the interface for the shower really interesting. "Look, I know you already said you were over what happened on graduation night. I get it, I do. But I thought...I'd just put it out there. In case... But if there isn't any chance, then I'll have to live with it, right? Because really, I'm the one who fucked it—"

"Yeah, you did."

Zed dared a glance at Flick. "I regret walking away without making you a promise. I thought—I wasn't sure. It was such a new thing and—" He shook his head, looking back to the shower controls. "I want to try. I want to be yours, you to be mine. Boyfriends."

Chapter Four

Boyfriends. After walking away from him—without looking back—Zed wanted to be boyfriends. Loved him, apparently. Had loved him for four goddamned years. Had told Felix to pick his heart up off that rooftop graduation night and put it back in his chest, knowing he carried it with him when he left. Knowing Felix would pine for him.

Had Zed loved him while he was boning his colonial farmer?

Had Zed loved him while he was pictured all over the society nets with Riley Whatsherface?

His fist connected with Zed's face with almost no conscious effort on Felix's part. Zed rocked back, eyes wide with shock, a hand coming up to cup the angry red mark blooming along his jaw. Felix turned so fast, he slid across the tile. He grabbed the door. Then, finding his balance, he pushed it open and stepped carefully across the bathroom floor until he reached the towel rail. They should have done this in the bedroom where soft linens and the funk of sex...

Felix growled, the sound well suited to all he felt inside. He was being chewed up.

"What the fuck?" Zed stepped carefully out of the shower.

"Four years!" Yanked at a towel, not quite sure if he was more angry or hurt or just confused. "Did it take you that long to decide you loved me, or did you just need to test out a few other folks first? Make sure I was the hole that fit best?"

"That is not fucking fair."

"No? What do you think I've been doing all this time, huh? Waiting in a box for you to unwrap when you were ready?"

"Of course not. Flick—"

"Don't call me that!"

Zed looked as if he'd swallowed something sharp. "Felix."

Felix left the bathroom before he could hit Zed again—not that he had the strength for it. He felt sapped, weak. He also felt as though he might cry. He flung his towel across the bed and rummaged in his hold-all for clean clothes. He'd got his undershorts on when two strong arms caught him from behind. Annoyed he hadn't heard Zed's approach, Felix kicked and struggled. Zed's hold didn't loosen—but nor did it tighten.

"Stop, please. Just—"

"What are you doing?" Felix asked.

"Will you just listen to me?"

"I don't want to."

"You're acting like a child."

"You broke my heart, Zed. How did you expect me to act?"

Zed's arms loosened, then fell away. "I...what?"

Felix turned around. "I told you I loved you and you walked away. How did you think I was going to feel?"

"I wasn't ready."

Felix opened his mouth, retort ready to roll...and breathed out nothing but air. He'd said almost those exact words to someone else. Someone who had loved him, who might have been prepared to wait for him. Someone he hadn't been able to commit to because of the man standing in front of him right now.

Zed wasn't the only one who'd been looking for the right fit. Felix had had a fairly seriously relationship with that close friend in specialist training and he'd tried to love Theo as much as he could tell Theo loved him. He'd almost succeeded, too, until he remembered they'd be separated

by the same thing that had torn him and Zed apart. He and Theo wouldn't be stationed together. Not so early in their careers—maybe not ever.

"Fuck," he whispered.

Now truly deflated, he sat on the end of the bed. Zed sat next to him and Felix noticed he'd wrapped a towel around his hips. His skin—as golden as Felix remembered—glistened with moisture. The scent of soap and Zed wafted around them. Felix massaged his chest, right over his heart—which didn't seem to be with the program. It beat solidly and slowly, as if he hadn't just thrown an epic shit fit and hit the man he...

"It hurt," he said, glancing sideways.

Zed's steel blue eyes showed remorse. "I'm sorry."

Felix nodded. He should apologize for the bruise creeping along Zed's jaw, but he didn't feel like it. Instead, he rejoined the conversation Zed had wanted to have in the shower of all places. Had he meant it? Zed would never lie. The better question would be did he know what he really wanted. Of course he did. Zed planned everything.

"You knew. Yesterday, you knew this was what you wanted."

"Yeah."

"Did you know I'd hit you?"

Zed prodded his jaw...gently, but one corner of his mouth twitched. "I should have guessed."

Was this the part where Felix should say he was sorry, or lay out the truth? Maybe the latter could serve as the former. "I lied before. I'm not over you." The pain in his chest sharpened for a second. "I really want to hate you, Zed." No, he didn't. Never that. His breath hitched. "I mean..."

"Shh. I know what you mean."

Zed leaned toward him and Felix met him halfway. Not for a kiss—they weren't acting out some romance holovid. Their shoulders touched and seemed to meld together, and the simple connection felt like a combination of support and complicity. After a moment, Zed shifted so he could bring his arm up around Felix's back. Felix turned into the sideways embrace and put his arms around Zed's waist. Tucked his face in under Zed's chin and hugged him tight.

"I'm sorry," Zed whispered. "It was so new and...I didn't trust it. I didn't trust *me*."

"Couldn't you trust me?" Flick muttered into Zed's chest.

"I should have."

"Damn straight."

"I didn't mean to break your heart." Zed brushed a hand over Flick's wet curls. The words, maybe the gesture, elicited only a grunt. "The timing was..."

"It sucked," Flick supplied as Zed's voice drifted into silence.

"Yeah."

"No matter what you said about arranging postings and shit, the timing still sucks." Flick lifted his head to eye Zed. "Why now?"

He could say he was older and wiser, but though the *older* part fit, the *wiser* sure didn't. The scar on the back of his head was a reminder of just how wise he wasn't. "I love being in the AEF. I loved being focused on my career. Anyone I've been with—I was with them because they didn't interfere with that focus. They might have been fun company, someone to spend downtime with, but they didn't matter. Not like a partner should. And then I was laid up for a few days, where I couldn't watch a holo or read or really do anything but think."

"You must have been in heaven," Flick said drily.

Yeah, his penchant for deep thinking had been well known amongst his friends at the Academy. “Not really.” He sighed. “Look, what I’m trying to say is that my focus shifted. Less about the job and more about what I left behind. Who.”

“Me.”

“Yeah.”

“And you really think we can make this work?”

“I want to try.” Zed held Flick’s gaze. “I’m ready to try.”

He left the question unspoken, but it hovered in the air between them anyway.

Are you?

In answer, Flick pushed up and caught Zed’s mouth with his. The first kiss was gentle—almost hesitant. The second less so—but it wasn’t bruising or punishing, either. Just...forceful. As if it had waited years to be unleashed. Zed opened his mouth and welcomed the invasion. Needing it. Wanting it. Warmth rushed through him at the realization that even if their future was balanced on the weight of a *yes* or a *no* from Flick, they would still have this.

He let Flick push him back onto the bed. His towel opened and fell away, and Zed wasn’t sure if it had been helped by Flick’s clever fingers or merely movement and gravity. He scooted back, his neck arched to keep his lips in contact with Flick’s as they moved to the center of the massive bed, and ignored the twinge from the bruise on his jaw. This moment was worth the pain of a hundred bruises.

Somehow, Flick managed to wiggle out of his undershorts. When the full length of his body pressed Zed into the mattress, it was free of any clothing. Nothing separated them. Skin on hot skin, a sensation Zed had dreamed of feeling with this man in particular, but had worried he never would. He gasped as their cocks came in contact and immediately gave a thrust upward, wanting more. But kissing was too important, too *needed*, to just stop. The connection of lips on lips was deceptively simple—never before had Zed understood just how essential it could be.

Flick moaned into his mouth and his hips took up the motion Zed’s had insisted on. His cock slid in the groove that separated Zed’s abdomen from his thigh, as though it had been made for that specific purpose. And it was good, so good, but Zed wanted more. With an effort, he braced a hand on Flick’s chest and tried to separate their mouths. It took a couple of tries before he could resist the siren call of Flick’s swollen, reddened lips and form words.

“Wait.”

“Hmm?” Flick’s buttocks flexed and Zed almost—*almost*—groaned and fell back into pure sensation.

Fuck. What was he going to ask? Oh yeah. “I want to make love.”

“Isn’t this—”

“You inside me.”

That got Flick’s attention. He froze and pushed back just enough to stare down at Zed, his eyes searching for...something. “Do you mean...you want to...Really?” he finally managed.

Zed swallowed and nodded.

“Have you ever....?”

Zed shook his head.

This time, the shudder went through Flick’s body. He leaned forward, his forehead resting on Zed’s. “Okay...fuck. Okay.”

“Do you prefer to—”

“I prefer to do exactly what we’re gonna do.” Flick chuckled and lifted his head. The laughter faded quickly, replaced by heat. “I’m gonna make it so good. I promise.”

“I trust you.” And he did—with every particle of his being.

Flick found lube in the nightstand drawer. He didn’t ask about it, but the fact that he found it without Zed directing him to it said he remembered Zed’s need to plan and be prepared. There might be years separating them now, new experiences, but they were still them. Zed and Felix. Best friends and now...

Zed hissed at the feel of slick fingers down below. It wasn’t like he’d never touched himself there—he just had never shared it with anyone.

“You okay?”

“Don’t stop,” Zed ordered, forcing himself to relax.

Another stroke of a finger, then it sank inside. Zed groaned.

“Can’t believe you’ve never...” Flick’s finger wiggled, then another joined it. The burn was unfamiliar...but good, in a weird sort of way.

Zed brushed his fingers against Flick’s cheek, encouraging him to look up. “No one else ever mattered enough.”

Flick whispered something—might have been a curse—and crooked his fingers. Zed jolted with the shock of overwhelming intensity. His cock bobbed against his lower abdomen for a second before Flick bent forward and engulfed the leaking head in his mouth.

“Christ!” Zed pushed his head back into the mattress, trying to find enough willpower not to come. His hips rocked, pushing his dick up into that warm cave of a mouth, and back onto those amazing fingers. He’d never felt anything quite like it—all encompassing. His movements quickened, beyond his control, and he nearly whimpered when Flick released his cock with a pop.

“I’ve got you,” Flick murmured. He pulled over a pillow and tucked it under the small of Zed’s back, then positioned himself over Zed, moving his hands to either side of Zed’s torso to brace himself. “Better to be on your stomach for the first time, you know.”

“Want this. Want to see you.” Zed gripped Flick’s ribs and tugged him forward. “C’mon.”

Flick looked down and gripped his cock to line himself up, then lifted his gaze to watch Zed’s face. “Tell me if you want me to stop, if you want to change positions, or—”

“Felix, *please*.”

A little growl escaped as Flick gave in and pressed forward. Zed held his breath at the sensation of something that felt really fucking big pressing at a hole that was really fucking small, but Flick didn’t stop. He kept moving, pressing, demanding that Zed’s body allow him that intimacy that he’d never allowed anyone else. He slipped inside, millimeter by millimeter, and damn, it hurt. Zed’s erection flagged.

“Gets better,” Flick said, his voice strained. “Fuck, you’re tight.”

Zed focused on breathing, on relaxing muscles he’d never been so aware of. Finally, Zed felt Flick’s balls against his ass and he let out a shuddering sigh.

“You good?” Flick brushed a finger against Zed’s cheek.

“Not sure.” The burn was still there, the stretch, but it was eclipsed by an intense feeling of fullness that Zed couldn’t decide if he liked or not. It was definitely the weirdest feeling he’d ever experienced.

Then Flick rocked his hips back and forward, and Zed understood why anal sex was a thing.

“Oh my God,” he breathed. “Again.”

Words abandoned him shortly after, leaving him awash in sensations. That magic spot Flick had teased earlier—his prostate—sparked incessantly now, stimulated to the point of mindless,

almost-but-not-quite pain. Zed's mouth dropped open and his head fell back, totally incapable of rational thought, or words, or even making sounds.

It was so goddamned *good*.

Flick shifted position and he was suddenly pegging Zed's gland on every thrust. Zed's eyes rolled back and his hands struggled to find something, anything, to hold onto. He settled for Flick's arms, grabbing them right above the clenched fists that belied the intensity of it all for Flick, too.

"Getting close," Flick gasped. "Fuck...oh, fuck."

Oh...that was something else he could grab. One of his hands flailed for his dick. He gave it a stroke, thinking he could come from just that one caress—but his body was so overstimulated, it was almost painful. He'd have to chase his orgasm, and he did, timing his strokes to Flick's thrusts. Sounds started to emerge from his throat, whimpers he might have been embarrassed about if it was anyone but Flick hearing them.

But it was Flick. The man he loved.

Flick's hips snapped forward, and he let out a strangled yell, his hands shifting from the bed to hold Zed's hips, the fingertips digging in hard. Flick was coming—coming inside of him—

And that was enough to send Zed over the edge too. A hoarse shout ripped from his throat. It might have been Flick's name, might have been a curse, might have been nothing at all but an animalistic sound of release. His cock jerked, semen fountaining over his abs, as Flick continued to pulse inside of him.

Best fucking feeling ever.

"Jesus," Flick rasped, falling forward. "Jesus."

Zed let his hands fall to his sides, even as his body gave another jerk, another spasm. He felt utterly boneless, incapable of moving. His eyes slipped to half-mast and he knew his lips were slightly curved—but he didn't fucking care.

Slowly, Flick pulled back, separating them, and even the sensation of his come trickling from secret places couldn't rouse Zed from his stupor. A chuckle floated over him and the mattress shifted as Flick flopped beside him.

"In the dictionary beside 'well-fucked' is a picture of you," Flick said, the pride in his contribution to Zed's state apparent. "You okay?"

Zed opened his mouth, but his tongue and throat didn't really want to work together to make any sort of intelligible noise. He settled for a grunt and nod instead.

"I've fucked the ability to talk out of you. I'm awesome." Flick chuckled. "When my legs work again, I'll get a towel to clean us up." He rested his head on Zed's shoulder. "Guess we don't have to worry if we're sexually compatible."

Chuckling, Zed tilted his head to press a sloppy kiss to Flick's temple. Nope, definitely not something to worry about.

It was tempting to lie there until they fell asleep—the fact they'd not long been awake notwithstanding. Over the past couple of years, Felix had rarely had the luxury of lying beside a lover, wrapped in the warmth of the afterglow. He wanted to bask in it. He wanted to count the ways he loved Zed—maybe out loud. He wanted to cuddle and talk and nuzzle and just be.

It was weird, but familiar in a way he couldn't describe.

It felt *right*.

Zed's heart beat slowed with his breath and Felix wondered if he'd slipped under the same spell. Maybe he'd just fallen back asleep. Then Zed's hand found his, fingers threading through Felix's fingers. He squeezed gently and the touch said more than words ever could.

Felix remembered the first time they'd held hands. It hadn't seemed to mean much. Zed was stuck in a duct—he'd been chasing Felix through the bowels of Pontus Station. Felix had nicked his wallet, so the chase was fair game until Zed tried to shove his well-fed body through the same tight air duct Felix so often used to lose pursuers. Felix looked back, ready to thumb his nose at the other boy, and stopped. Zed's expression had not been one of defeat, anger or even humiliation. Instead, he'd smiled, clearly acknowledging Felix's win.

Felix wouldn't have trusted that smile on any other face. He couldn't even say why he had then. But he climbed back into the duct and offered Zed his hand. They grasped wrists, just as the heroes did in the adventure holos, and Felix had pulled him out. Zed let him keep the wallet and they'd been friends ever since.

The second time they held hands hadn't seemed as important until now. It had been their first day at Shepard Academy and Felix had been scared witless. He'd been the smallest, the most poorly dressed, the student with the least amount of luggage. He had an accent, a truncated way of speaking developed by generations of station born, and no formal education. He didn't belong. He'd been staring up at the imposing buildings of the academy, ready to bolt, when Zed caught his hand and entwined their fingers, much as he'd just done. He squeezed and smiled that smile of his, the one that always made Felix feel as if he was the only other person in the galaxy.

"This is just the beginning, Flick."

"No such thing as endings and beginnings. Only middles."

He'd hoped to sound smart and brave.

Now, ten years later, Zed said, "We must be in the middle by now."

Felix laughed—struck by how Zed had known just what he was thinking and glad their thoughts had returned to the same day. Thinking forward had never been Felix's thing—because the present moment was the one they all lived in, right? Same was true back then, same was true now.

He squeezed Zed's hand in return. This time, he had nothing to prove. Oh, he was scared witless, still, but felt no need to cover for it. It was what it was. "Definitely in the middle," he said, lifting his chin to invite another kiss.

THE END

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REUNION

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