

SKIP TRACE cut scene “Therapy”

Originally, this scene occurred near the end of SKIP TRACE. Though it was cut during the developmental edit phase, the need for therapy wasn’t cut from Felix and Zander’s story. In between SKIP TRACE and INVERSION POINT Zander and Felix kept regular appointments with Dr. McMann. This scene is the second appointment. Zed attended the first alone.

“Good morning, Zander.”

Dr. McMann’s pleasant, melodic voice cut through the tension that permeated her office. Zed tried to let it wash away the weight that had his shoulders bunched and curved, but Flick fidgeted beside him, and his muscles knotted again.

“Good morning, Doctor.” He smiled, but it didn’t feel very steady on his lips. “This is Felix Ingesson, my, uh...”

“His,” Flick said.

Amusement flashed over the doctor’s features. “Lovely to meet you, Felix.” She waved to the couch. “Please, have a seat.”

Zed sat, pressing his thigh against Flick’s. The engineer vibrated, his leg bouncing. His hands alternately clenched into fists, then gripped together. He might as well have been yelling *fuck no* at the top of his lungs...yet he hadn’t tried to get out of this appointment and he wasn’t making any real attempts to leave now. Zed dropped his hand to Flick’s leg to get it to stop bouncing and the engineer’s mangled palm slapped down over top of it.

Dr. McMann settled into one of the chairs across from the couch. “And how are you two doing?”

“Good,” Zed said quickly. “I mean, not perfect, but...good.”

“I’m glad to hear it. And I’m glad Felix decided to accompany you today.”

Flick snorted and a corner of his lips curved upward for a breath.

“Even if he isn’t,” the doctor said with a chuckle. “At the end of our last session, Zander, I asked you to think about what you want and work on giving yourself permission to want it and have it. Did you manage that?”

Zed huffed out a breath. On the one hand, he was thankful that the doctor seemed to grasp that Flick didn't want to be the focus of this session—that wasn't Zed's intention in bringing him here. On the other, he'd kind of hoped she'd forgotten about his homework. "Yes and no," he hedged. "You heard the news, right?"

"That you were arrested? Yes," she said quietly. She watched him for a moment. "As cliché as the question is, how did that make you feel?"

Betrayed, disillusioned, hurt, depressed...he could put so many words to it, and yet none of them quite covered the gamut of emotions. "My entire life, I had one goal," he said, looking at his lap instead of meeting the doctor's eyes or being tempted to glance at Flick. "I wanted to serve. I wanted to be in the AEF. I wanted to explore, I wanted to protect people, I just...I..."

"You wanted to be a hero," Flick offered, his voice barely audible.

Soft laughter escaped Zed's lips on a breath. "Yeah."

"It's a noble goal," Dr. McMann said.

"It was a stupid goal. I mean, how fucking naïve could I be? How didn't I see that the AEF didn't give a fuck? I was blind, so damned blind, and...God, I'm not a hero. I was never a hero."

"The civilians you rescued would argue that," Dr. McMann said.

"That was one action. One. Out of thousands."

"And some of those weren't as heroic?"

Zed gritted his teeth. "No. There was one..." He glanced at Flick, knowing why his mind ventured to this particular dark spot on a regular basis. "My team's assignment was to infiltrate a colony the stin had overrun. Dark drop, a thousand clicks out, and we had to make our way to the settlement. Ever see pics or vids of the colonies the stin attacked, Doc? They don't destroy buildings, if they can help it. See, people might get trapped inside, and that means the stin can't fight them one on one."

"I know," Dr. McMann said, her voice steady. Of course she'd know—he wasn't the first soldier to seek her out for post-war treatment. "Go on."

"We walked into the town, and there were bodies everywhere. Men, women, children, fucking animals. The stin don't care who they sink their claws into, as long as they get to do it." Zed was aware that the doctor's office had faded, that he was falling into memories, but he couldn't stop it. "We were waiting in an alley, me and my partner for the mission, when we saw a stin walk by. Once it was past, I almost stepped out into the road, but then I saw movement."

“It was a slave, a human slave. I’d heard the rumors that the stin sometimes kept pets. Trophies. We knew there were work camps, too. He was shuffling along behind the stin, like he was on a leash.”

He could still remember the flash of hope he’d felt, even if at the time he’d refused to acknowledge it—and then the crash of emotion as he remembered that Flick was dead, that he wouldn’t be walking along a street on a colony on the ass-end of nowhere. He rubbed his chest at the memory of the ache in his heart.

“The slave saw me. He opened his mouth to alert the stin. So I drew my knife and sank it into his throat.” Zed’s jaw flexed and he closed his eyes, keeping his head down. “I killed him.”

“Your mission had to take priority.”

“Fuck the mission,” Zed spat. “There was no one left on the colony to save except him, that one guy. I killed him in favor of laying bombs to make a stupid and totally ineffectual point. And…” He closed his eyes tighter.

“And what, Zander?”

Zed stayed silent for a long minute, the doctor’s question echoing, as he gathered the courage to answer it. “And what if it had been Flick?” he breathed.

“Would you have done the same thing?”

“I don’t know.” God, he wanted to grab for Flick’s hand and squeeze it, but he doubted Flick wanted to touch him just then. “I want to say no.”

“But you can’t.”

“No, I can’t.” He forced his eyes open and looked at Flick. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

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Not what he expected.

If he sweated anymore, his body would collapse, all husk-like. And dead. If he continued to fidget, he’d wear through the reinforced seams of his pants—a challenge he might just have set for himself. Felix had expected the stomach cramps and the whole feeling like a stranger in his skin thing. He remembered that from his last visit with a shrink, four years or so ago. Back then. Back when he’d been pulled lovingly back into the embrace of the AEF and charged with desertion, piracy and treason.

Fuckers.

Felix closed his eyes, blocking out Zed's face. The pain, the guilt, the horror, the need in that gray-blue gaze. Not what he had expected.

The one rational brain cell in his head piped up with a simple song: *Forgive him*. It wasn't Zed's fault. None of it had been Zed's fault. Even if Zed hadn't walked away from him after graduation, they'd probably still be here, sitting on this not-so-comfortable couch, basking in the not-so-soothing attention of Dr. What's-her-face.

Opening his eyes, Felix caught her gaze, searched it and quickly found what he looked for: excitement.

What sort of person thrived on the pain of others?

Fucking parasite.

This had been a bad idea.

Before his thighs could break contact with the couch, that one brain cell rallied a few others and declared martial law. Zed needed this, maybe more than he did. Anger, raw and brutal, swept through Felix. His limbs trembled with it, his psyche vibrated. He knew Zed and the doctor could see him shake. He knew they figured Zed's cold and calculated kill was the cause. It was, but not for the reason they thought. Oh, no. It was much more complicated than that. And it was damned hard to think with rage trickling into his brain, shaking everything up.

The doctor opened her mouth. Before she could ask anyone how shit made them feel, Felix pointed a crooked finger at her. "Don't."

To her credit, she didn't blanch.

He turned to Zed. "They don't want heroes. They want tools. And when they break them, they toss them...us aside." He couldn't be telling Zed anything he didn't know, right? Felix gestured toward the doctor. "Tell her what you want. What you think you can't have."

Zed's throat moved as he swallowed, the sound tight, the movement probably painful. Felix remembered that, too, from his last visit with a professional. Hell, his throat dried up every time he had to admit he'd made a mistake, or that he'd had an emotion other than self-pity. Hadn't always been that way. For three and a half years... Okay, for maybe three years, he'd been all right. Not solid, but good enough. Then Zed had walked back into his life. Felix didn't understand why the one thing he wanted more than any other had to cost so much, but looking into Zed's gray eyes, he figured he wasn't the only one struggling to pay the debt.

How had they ever imagined they could just pick up where they left off?

Zed spoke, and the single word, the choked-up little cough, sounded like “you”.

Felix sucked in a breath and held it.

“It’s you, Flick. I want a life with you.”

Felix breathed out. The back of his eyes burned, but he didn’t blink. Lord knows, that would only encourage the tears nestling in his ducts. “Good,” he said, his single-word answer equally choked.

“I can’t save you,” Zed said.

“I know.” Felix blinked and his vision blurred a little. God, he wanted Zed to save him. He’d wanted it...forever. Since he was eight years old and had his skinny fingers wrapped around the fat wallet of the glossy-haired and rosy-cheeked swank. He’d wanted someone to make his mother well, to restore his father’s arm and pride, to keep his sister out of the back alleyways. And, he supposed he’d wanted that someone to be him. Every little boy wanted to be a hero, didn’t he? But then Zed had just...happened. The credits in that wallet had kept his mother in meds for six months, giving her time to build strength. The scholarship that gave Felix his education had allowed him to move his family out of the bowels of the station, up one level to where the apartments had two rooms...and walls. His career had given him the resources to replace his father’s arm.

Felix looked down at his mangled left hand. The irony failed to amuse him. “We all wanted to die. At some point, we all wanted to die. That slave...” He looked up again, which required effort as his head felt heavy. “You did him a favor. A quick, clean death.” He couldn’t touch Zed’s question, the one that obviously plagued the former soldier, so he told his own story instead. “I had a friend in the colony, a woman I looked after. She was small and sick. Always sick.” She’d reminded him of his mother. “We had a quota every shift and I helped fill hers. I gave her my food, too.” He scoffed. “Not that that was a favor. They fed us this paste—this crunchy, bitter shit. I think it was squashed up roaches or something.”

Felix paused to fill his lungs. His head spun lightly and that one rational brain cell swelled up and throbbed. Or maybe he just had a headache. He worked his jaw, seeking to ease the tension in his neck, and winced at the series of clicks and grates. Zed stroked his knuckles again and the doctor remained blessedly silent.

“I always filled her truck before mine and one day I didn’t get mine finished.” He pushed his hand further into Zed’s lap. “So they crushed my hand.” A hissing gasp wafted over from the

direction of the doctor. “Makes no sense, right? To break me so that I couldn’t work as efficiently. Unless they wanted to make it so I could only fill one truck a day, so I couldn’t cooperate with my fellow slaves. Keep a friend.”

Tears ran freely down Zed’s cheeks. His expression remained stoic, however, as if he knew if he crumbled, Felix would fall apart.

“They killed her, too.” And left her body to rot in the mines, just as they did the bodies of all who fell. Felix didn’t pass that putrid little morsel along, though. The doc looked ready to pass out and Zed didn’t need another cross to bear. “I don’t know what the point of my story is, I just...” He breathed out, shoulders shifting down.

“We can’t always save those who need saving. Who we think need saving,” the doctor said.

Felix glanced over at her. “If you ask me how that makes me feel, I’m going to tear this office apart. And then you might have an idea.”

She nodded.

Zed squeezed his hand gently. “I’m sorry.”

Shaking his head, Felix turned their hands over so their palms could meet. The tattoo on the inside of Zed’s wrist caught his eye and Felix extended his fingers toward it. “It’s okay.” Didn’t feel okay, not really. But that impending sense of doom had eased back a little. He could breathe. His skin didn’t itch and his heart didn’t ache. “I’ll be okay.” Zed’s hand wrapped around his and held tight. Felix breathed into the warm and quiet moment and then looked up at the doctor again. “We ‘bout done here?”

“I think that’s enough for today, yes.”

“I don’t do homework. Give that to Zander. He was always a good student.”

Zed’s mouth twitched. “So were you. In fact, I seem to remember—”

Felix waved his good hand through the air. “Don’t ruin my image, man, or she’ll expect me to come here and actually talk. I planned to do the broody silence thing until she got bored.”

“She has a name, Flick.”

Dr. McMann. And he was being rude. Felix glanced over again and saw about what he expected. Not amusement, but a tolerant humor. She’d met his type before and she’d probably bested them. Trust Zed to pick the best fucking shrink. She wasn’t unpleasant to look at, either.

“Felix.”

He lifted his gaze from her boobs—they didn't do much for him, but they were all nicely rounded and shit.

“There is no blueprint for this.”

Yep, she had him pegged.

“And I don't bore easily.”

He flicked his gaze away and tried not to smile. Standing up, he smoothed the loosened threads on his pants so that they appeared less ragged. “I'm gonna wait out in the...” He waved at the door. “Whatever so y'all can talk about something other than me.” He'd co-opted enough of Zed's session. Glancing at Dr. McMann, he dipped his chin, giving her a quick nod. It wasn't the most polite gesture, but she seemed to take it for what it was—all he could offer right now.

Outside, he prowled the waiting area, ignoring couches that weren't quite plush and not quite sensible. He didn't *get* the feel of the office, what the décor meant, what vibe it was supposed to give off, but he did appreciate that it didn't interfere with his stride, or his thoughts. Nothing poked at him. Zed stepped out of the inner sanctum a short while later and stood close by, but not too close, as if he suspected Felix might explode.

Felix stopped his pacing. “I know your dad paid for the Academy.” Zed opened his mouth and Felix employed a bent finger, pointing him into silence. “I also know he considered it an investment rather than a gift.” He lifted his shoulders. “Who knows what he thinks of the return. But that's not why I'm here, why I've always been...” Would it be corny to put his hand over his heart? Felix did it anyway, pressing his palm flat to the front of his shirt. “Here. For you. You make me want to be a better man, Zander. You always have. I've always wanted to measure up, be your equal. I know I don't need a shitload of credits to qualify, or a face that makes your heart skip or whatever. I just want to be with you because...” Fuck. “This is going to sound stupid.”

“Nothing you say is stupid.”

He'd counter that later, when his snark returned.

Felix moved his hand to Zed's shirt, let his fingers curl into the soft silk. “You're my hero, Zed. Always have been, always will be.”

Zed pulled him into a fast, hard hug, crushing him against his massive chest. Air puffed out of Felix's lungs, but that was okay. He didn't need it, not right then, not when it might have otherwise emerged on a sob. Tucking his head into Zed's shoulder, he leaned in and hugged back. Hard.

“Love you.” Zed’s whisper ruffled his hair.

Felix squeezed him just a bit tighter. “Love you too.”

Zed’s hold loosened and both their chests heaved with the effort of drawing in a full breath.

Felix stepped back a little and rolled his shoulders.

“Let’s go break stuff,” he said.

“Want to hit the gym at the Damianos Building?”

“Yes.”

Once the clamor of the concourse outside the suite wrapped around them, Felix said, “We can talk about the rest of it later, ‘kay?”

Zed offered a short, sharp nod. Then, a smile. A feral and sorta sexy smile. “We’ll beat the shit out of some of Bren’s recruits. Or a kick bag. Or each other.”

“Or all three.”

“Then we’ll fuck.”

Felix grinned.

“And then we’ll talk.”

“It’s a deal.”