



Lonely Shore

By Jenn Burke and Kelly Jensen

Book two of Chaos Station

All they can do is live day to day...

Felix Ingesson has returned to his duties as the Chaos's engineer with Zander Anatolius, his ex-boyfriend-turned-broken-super-soldier, at his side. *Hope* means something again. But there's nothing Felix can do to battle the alien poison flowing through Zander's veins, or his imminent mental decline. With each passing day, the side effects of Zander's experimental training are becoming more difficult to ignore.

When the ruthless Agrius Cartel seeks their revenge—including an ambush and an attempt to kidnap the Chaos's crew—Zander is pushed over the edge. He can no longer hide his symptoms, nor does he want to. But hurting Felix when he's not in control of himself is Zander's worst nightmare—when it nearly happens, he agrees to seek help. Even if that means trusting the unknown.

As Zander places his life in alien hands, Felix appoints himself his lover's keeper. And though he tries to be strong, he can't ignore the fact that he might lose Zander...forever this time.

Don't miss the start of the series—Chaos Station is available now!

67,000 words

Dear Reader,

I'd rather be reading. How many times do you say that during your day? I know I say it probably a dozen times through my day. I love to read, and I'd pretty much always rather be reading, so I'm always stockpiling books to ensure I never run out for the times when I *can* read. I'm thrilled Carina Press is able to give you month after month of books to add to your TBR pile, and May is no exception!

In Lynda Aicher's erotic contemporary romance [Back in Play](#), fun, flirty and sexy-as-hell Rachel Fielding is the perfect distraction Scott Walters needs when the Glaciers refused to renew his contract. But he hadn't counted on falling for her or purging his deepest secrets to her, either. Can their fledgling relationship survive the trials he has ahead?

Eddie Harris's first romantic suspense, *Blamed*, was a reader favorite and she's back with book two, [Ripped: A Blood Money Novel](#), in which a sexy, hot-blooded spy coerces an ice-cold attorney to partner with him to wreak vengeance on the villain who threatens them both.

Joely Sue Burkhart is burning up the pages and testing our boundaries with her latest erotic romance, [One Cut Deeper](#). Her needs are dark. His are dangerous. For Charlie and Ranay, pain is their shared pleasure...until Charlie disappears, and the hunger Ranay loved in him may be even darker than she suspected.

Alyssa Cole rocked our world with her first postapocalyptic romance, *Radio Silence*, and she's back with sexy male/male romance [Signal Boost](#), set in the same technologically devastated world. Months have passed since electricity, and society, stopped working; John is wondering if a life without internet is worth living when he stumbles across a hot astrophysicist who might change his life—and the world.

Also in the male/male category and taking us to whole new worlds is *Lonely Shore*, book two in the stunning science-fiction romance series from Jenn Burke and Kelly Jensen. Zander and Felix are trying to make their relationship work, but two things stand in the way: a criminal cartel out for blood and the rapid deterioration of Zander's mental health. It's a game of duck and cover as they search for answers, and when they find one, the cost might be too high.

2014 RITA® Award-nominated author Kat Latham's [Taming the Legend](#) rounds out our romance offerings in May. In this passionate story of lovers reunited, legendary rugby player Ash Trenton fights to help Camila Morales—his first and only love—save her indebted sports camp...while also fighting to keep from losing his heart to her all over again.

For mystery fans who like their mystery with a side of fun, you have to check out Ricardo Sanchez. You first met Floyd, the PI living his life as Elvis would have wanted, in *Elvis Sightings*. Now he's back in [Bigfoot Blues](#), and his newest case leads him to man-eating mountain lions, chupacabras and plain-old murderers.

Coming in June 2015: Lisa Marie Rice delivers another awesome alpha hero, Julie Moffett's Lexi Carmichael returns with further adventures and Julie Rowe launches a new romantic suspense military

series.

Here's wishing you a wonderful month of books you love, remember and recommend.

Happy reading!

~Angela James

Editorial Director, Carina Press

Dedication

For Zed, our hero.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our editor, Deborah Nemeth, for encouraging us to be more bold. Her advice helped make this book special. As always, we owe thanks to the team at Carina Press for all they do to make every book shine.

Thank you to everyone who listened to us ramble, and ramble, stress a bit and ramble some more. No all writing happens inside the head, or in front of a keyboard.

Co-writing means you never have to do it alone, so I'd like to thank Jenn for being there when certain tasks looked insurmountable. We make a great team.

We really do, Kel. I couldn't imagine going on this adventure without you.

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
There is society where none intrudes,
By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
From these our interviews, in which I steal
From all I may be, or have been before,
To mingle with the Universe, and feel
What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.

—from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* by George Gordon Byron

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Chapter One

Xihe Station, 2269

“Yo, Zed, get that shit up here!”

Just under a year ago, Zed had been a galactic hero—a super soldier saving humanity from the ravages of the alien stin. He’d been a major in the Allied Earth Forces with his own team of specialized black ops soldiers. He’d fought hand-to-hand battles against the green bugs, facing their poisonous talons without flinching. He and his team had saved a transport of civilians against direct orders. And now...He eyed the mounds of heavy, fertilizer-filled bags waiting to be carted into the cargo bay.

Now he was a shit-shipper.

Oh how the mighty have fallen.

“This shit’s not gonna pack itself.” Flick’s wide grin told him that the novelty of carting around actual shit instead of the usual shit hadn’t worn off yet. His eyes sparkled and the gentle draft in the dock area tugged at his uncontrollable blond curls. He looked like a kid with a new toy, not a veteran ship’s engineer.

Despite himself, Zed’s lips twitched. Felix Ingesson had never met a joke he couldn’t beat to death. He’d done it when they were kids at the Academy and everyone knew him as Flick—and that personality quirk hadn’t changed with the years, or his new home on the *Chaos*, or the fact he now went by the nickname Fixer most of the time.

“You’re a riot, man.” Elias, the captain of the *Chaos*, disappeared into the cargo bay, presumably to check the load tie-downs. Unlike a lot of cargo ships, the *Chaos* depended on physical straps, not virtual restraints. Made sense to Zed—they wouldn’t crap out if the power died. And despite the recent upgrades to the little ship, parts of her were still held together by not much more than hope and stubbornness.

“I try.” Flick jogged down the ramp to join Zed, coming to a stop with a bounce.

Zed glanced over his shoulder. “Eli doesn’t need your help?”

“Not much I can do. Tough to grip with this.” Flick held up his left hand and flexed the gnarled and misshapen fingers. He’d once worn a glove that helped him with fine motor control, but that device had been destroyed. He leaned against the stack of bags, a dimple flashing in his cheek. “Sides, you’re prettier to look at.”

Being Flick’s lover technically wasn’t new—they’d tried it just before the galaxy had fallen into war nine years before—but Zed couldn’t stop the flush that crept over his cheeks. The past four weeks had been the longest they’d ever been *together*, and he still hadn’t gotten used to the flirting—not that he really wanted to. He liked that hitch in the gut and the rush of embarrassed pleasure. It reminded him of the good things in life.

Lifting a bag off the pallet, he arranged it on the *Chaos*’s loader. It was an easy, simple task, one that required more muscle memory than thought. Flick helped shove the bags into place, keeping the edges straight and making sure there were no holes in the smart fiber packaging. The shit had been dehydrated for shipping and application, but its fertilization elements could be activated with a small amount of water. As they worked, Zed longed to return Flick’s flirting and share some banter to make the job go quicker—but the words wouldn’t come. Not how he wanted them to. Not how they would’ve a few weeks ago.

Focus.

He blinked, realizing that he was now staring at a fully laden cart rather than the few sacks he remembered loading. Pain ricocheted between his temples—annoying and enough to jolt his heart into a faster pace with its implications. He swallowed, surreptitiously looking around. Flick was smiling and shouting something at Elias, who was hovering at the gaping maw of the cargo bay. The words were lost to the pounding pulse in Zed’s ears, but no one was staring at him, no one was even looking at him. Good. All good. He’d lost time with that unintended Zone but not much. Just a small blip.

Zed focused on breathing for a moment, to mitigate both the minor headache and the panic that threatened. There was no point in getting worked up. It was what it was and he’d known for two years that this was coming. At least the instances of Zoning unintentionally only lasted for a few seconds, thirty at most. It could be worse, right? He could still function. That was what mattered.

Maybe if he repeated it often enough, he’d start to believe it.

“Is your ship looking her age? Has space dust abraded away all the shine of her beauty? Restore her now with our patented InstaShine treatment!”

Zed narrowed his eyes at the droid hovering next to them, holograms with customer testimonials spinning around its bulbous head. The pitch of the irritating mechanical voice reverberated, making his teeth ache along with his temples. “No, thank you.”

The droid ignored him, which was just rude programming. *“InstaShine can be applied in a matter of moments and have your ship looking like she was always the fleet’s flagship. On purchase, our automated washers will turn your tired old rustbucket into a gleaming—”*

Flick scowled. “Hey! The *Chaos* isn’t that—”

Zed blinked. The droid was suddenly shaking, spouting error codes. He realized he was clenching his fist—and it hurt. His headache had intensified, too. Had he...?

“Why the hell did you hit it?”

He couldn’t remember hitting it, which meant—damn it. He’d Zoned. Again. Twice in a matter of minutes? *Fuck.*

The droid’s holograms shattered into pieces before fading into nothingness. *“Err—thank you for your pur—another happy—InstaShine—rinse commencing—”*

Zed straightened. “Oh no.”

The droid vibrated for another instant before water burst forth in a stream powerful enough to shove the heavy bags of fertilizer out of their neat pile. Sputtering, Zed scrambled to grab them, envisioning one breaking open and spewing activated shit across the floor of the dock—oh God, the fees that would probably come from that. Flick, drenched in the spray, flailed and slipped. Zed automatically reached for him and lost his grip on the bag. He tried to secure it but managed instead to jab a hole through the smart fiber. Just a little hole. Maybe the water wouldn’t—

Foam spurted out of the hole in the bag, a huge foul-smelling brown stream that forced the hole to grow larger to accommodate it. Zed jolted backward, but Flick, still on the slippery section of the floor, couldn’t escape the foam’s trajectory in time.

The scream that emerged from his lips was worthy of any horror vid.

“Flick!” The activated shit was mostly harmless, right?

Steps pounded down the ramp. Elias stumbled to a stop. “What the fuck did you do?”

The water spurting from the droid slowed to a trickle and it shook, dropping a foot in height before regaining altitude. *“Would you like to leave a testimonial?”*

“I have shit in my mouth!” Flick wailed.

“Thank you for choosing—pleasant day—our latest customer—I have shit in my mouth!” The

droid weaved its way down the dock like a drunken sailor.

Zed clamped his lips together, but when he heard Flick's "testimonial" drift back up the dock again as the droid approached a new potential client, he couldn't stop a snort of laughter. Not even his headache and what it meant could deter it. He tried, though. He really did. He glanced at Elias and realized his mistake immediately when he recognized the mirth dancing in the other man's dark eyes. He might have been able to stop laughing if Eli hadn't started.

Soon, though, it was all they could do to remain standing upright.

"This isn't funny!" Flick had managed to regain his feet and was trying to clear his face of the vile brown substance. He grabbed chunks of it from his eyes and tossed it to the ground. "This shit stings.

"Shit." Zed snickered.

"Oh my God, I'm going to piss myself," Elias gasped.

"I hate you all." Flick glared at them and took a step forward—only to slip and fall back on his ass. He collapsed backward and crossed his arms. "Fuck it. I'm not moving. Y'all can figure out cleanup.

* * *

Shit stank. That fundamental truth was never more apparent than when shit clung to every pore. The smell was singeing his nostril hairs. Elias and Zed were laughing so hard, they could barely get a breath in, so they probably couldn't smell him yet. Bastards. But as much as he wanted to stick with his threat and remain flat on the deck, Felix couldn't stand the feeling of the shit oozing into his clothing and grabbing at his skin. He rolled onto his side and pushed up out of the slick puddle of brown nastiness, spat a glob of it onto the floor and grimaced as his teeth ground together, releasing the bitter taste into his mouth again. He dug a clump of something from one nostril and flicked it away.

Zed and Elias laughed on.

Felix stepped carefully out of the shit zone. He crunched crap between his teeth as he mentally debated whose ass to kick first.

"Captain Idowu?" a woman called from the bottom of the cargo ramp.

The smartly dressed woman wore station colors, but instead of the ubiquitous coverall dockworker usually wore, she was attired in a tailored suit. Her hair had been gathered into a series of knots over the top of her head. Two different earrings dangled from each exposed ear. One was a holo, the other an emitter. The ever-changing configuration was distracting.

Elias straightened out of his dead-man-laughing posture. "That's me."

She opened her wallet and activated a holo. "Gert Balar, Xihe dock security. I have an order here from the captain of the corvette *Chaos*, registration delta four..." She insisted on reading the entire registration sequence before getting to her point. "You are in violation of docking code 342 B."

"In Standard?"

"Chemical contamination of the pier. The cost to decontaminate the affected area and surrounding zones will be—"

"Hey, hey, wait a minute. The droid malfunctioned. It's not our fault."

The argument quickly escalated.

Felix had crewed with Elias for close to five years, eighteen months of that on the *Chaos*, their ugly but functional corvette. They'd learned early on in their partnership that Felix negotiated better with circuits than people. Leaving Elias to do the captain thing with dock security—Zed and his charming smile alongside—Felix made his way through Cargo One with the intent of washing the shit off his

skin before it stained.

Nessa O'Brien, ship's doctor, stood in an open hatchway, swallowing, not coincidentally blocking his access to the interior of the *Chaos*. "You can't come in here."

He'd never have taken Nessa for having a delicate gag reflex. She must have seen shit during the war. Worse shit. That joke was getting old fast. "Aww, Ness. This stuff stings. It's burning my skin."

Nessa waved her medical wallet over his torso, where his SFT hung in a lifeless ruin, the smart fibers rendered catatonic by the sludge of activated fertilizer. The shirt was dead. "It's mostly nonreactive, except..." Her lips clamped together.

"Except in my crevices. Tell me something I don't know." Felix scratched at his arm, his shoulder, his neck and cheek. Thought about scratching his ass. "I need to get it off my skin."

"A shower isn't going to get the residue out of your epidermis, and it will only reactivate the fertilizer that has already dried. We don't have soap strong enough to counteract the process, and I'm not sure our water cyler can handle it."

Felix's usual curse—*shit and double shit*—died in the back of his throat. Instead, he breathed out a mournful whine, barely heard over the roar of the moisture extractors being set up across the cargo bay.

Shipping shit wasn't their usual thing, unless you used the term broadly. Hauling cargo from one end of the galaxy to the other didn't pay as well as skip traces and bounties, but since running afoul of the Agrius Cartel, the lower the profile of the job, the better. The profit margin on this one was starting to look a little thin.

Qek poked her head around Nessa's shoulder. "What is that smell?"

Nessa turned to regard their pilot, a diminutive ashushk with wide eyes that were about to disappear in a crimp of blue wrinkles. Qek—short for Qekelough, which was a mouthful even without grit caught between his tongue and teeth—let loose a delicate shudder as she eyed him.

"That smell is Fixer," Ness said.

Felix looked down at his streaky brown self. The stink was rolling off of him in dizzying waves. "Look, I'm going to pass out from my own funk if I don't get clean. What do you recommend?"

"We have only just refilled our water tanks. If you use the shower, you will likely seed the entire system with traceable elements," Qek said, inferring that their water would smell and taste like *shit* until they purged the system. "I would recommend a chemical wash station."

"Oh, hell no."

"Fix—"

Felix chopped the air with a mottled brown hand. "Been there, done that, not doing it again."

"It's the only way to get the stink off of you," Nessa said. "Permanently."

"Fuck!" He knew she was right, but...a chemical wash station? They were reserved for the processing of undesirable elements—people leaving quarantined zones, those suspected of carrying communicable diseases, people covered in shit, and...

"You have visited a chemical wash station before?" Qek asked.

"Yeah." Something in his tone had Qek and Nessa exchanging a glance. "The AEF put me through one. After, you know, I got back." Former POWs were always submitted to chemical wash stations. Standard procedure. Couldn't have stin bugs crawling all over AEF systems.

"Would you like me to accompany you to the station?" Qek offered.

"Nope." Felix gestured toward the cleanup operation taking place outside. "Oversee this, will you? Eli's charm might run out any minute, and Zed..." Had a crease between his brows, the sort he got with a headache. "Zed might trip over another bag and double the cleanup bill."

Worry for Zed proved an effective dampener of the anger crawling up his spine at the thoughts of the war and being a slave to the stin. The fact his skin burned was distracting too. The breath huffed out of him on a sigh. “Okay, I’m gonna go get everything that makes me *me* scrubbed away.”

Nessa’s lips twitched. “Wait just a minute, I’ll get you some clean clothes to take with you.”

Her quiet laughter echoed in the corridor as she disappeared, Qek trailing after. Felix grumbled quietly in his throat. He wouldn’t want to hang out with him, either, not while he stank.

His wallet buzzed. Extracting it from his pocket took all of his concentration. He fumbled with the flexible plastic square until Zed appeared at his side, one of his large hands plucking it from his clumsy grasp. Zed opened the wallet and a holographic display appeared just over it. Felix quickly scanned the incoming message.

“Client for our other shipment. He wants to move the meeting up.”

Zed manipulated the display, activating a map location. “One dock over, and he wants to meet in twenty minutes.” He glanced up. “I’ll take Ness.”

“Like hell you will. I might stink, but I can still...” Felix paused to spit out another brown glob. “Ugh.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “I just need to hit a wash station. Be ready in five.”

Zed’s brows made a bid for his hairline.

“Ten minutes.”

“Flick, it’s going to take an hour to get that stink off of you.”

“Well, if you hadn’t hit that damned bot. What was with that, anyway?”

Zed didn’t have a temper, not really, which was probably why he’d made such a great candidate for the project that had fucked him up. The AEF would never have asked Felix to be one of their super soldiers. He was far too temperamental—and he’d been “retired” by then. But Zander Anatolius? Perfect soldier, perfect super soldier. The experimental program might have ended the war, but it had wrought changes in Zed and his team that could not be undone. In Felix’s opinion, the cost had been too great.

He tried to hide it, his headaches, the fact that his attention wandered from time to time. But Felix knew Zed like no other. His heart beat in time with Zed’s. He loved him. Always had, always would. He saw the tightness around Zed’s eyes, noticed when Zed failed to finish a sentence.

Had he been in control when he punched the InstaShit droid?

Scrubbing the heel of his palm over his brows, Zed effectively hid his gaze as he answered. “Damn thing was annoying.”

“Not half as annoying as being covered in shit, man.” Felix caught Zed’s elbow and pulled his hand away from his face. “You all right?”

Zed met his gaze. His eyes were the color of steel and could warm and cool accordingly, flashing a chilly blue when he was annoyed, a softer blue-toned gray when he was overcome with emotion. Felix liked watching Zed’s eyes when they made love, the shift of color and intensity. Seeing Zed’s feelings march from one extreme to another. He searched for signs of stress and found none. He wasn’t convinced. Five years of covert ops meant Zed could lie, even to him.

“Truth,” he said, hoping to coax Zed into admitting something.

“I’m good.”

“Then why did you hit the bot?”

“I didn’t mean to hit it that hard.”

Had he meant to hit it at all? That was the question Felix wanted to ask. He chewed it over a second then spat it out. “You knew you hit it, right?”

“What the fuck do you mean?”

“Zed, c’mon. You know what I mean.”

“Look, I’m sorry the bag opened on you, okay? Not like I planned this shit.”

“Not funny.”

Zed turned his hand so they clasped arms. “Go get cleaned up. I’ll handle the client.”

A crease teased the space between Zed’s brows. Felix could see him fighting the frown. He wanted to press, but knew that the fight would have to wait. Right here, right now, they were arguing about something they both wanted to be nothing—and they had a client waiting. And shit to clean up.

Felix closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them, Zed had moved in closer and had one hand raised as if he planned to cup the back of Felix’s head. His nose wrinkled and a small coughing sound emerged from his throat. He leaned back. “Can I kiss you later?”

“I should make you kiss me now.”

Zed swallowed visibly.

With a dry chuckle, Felix leaned back and waved him away. “Go. And take Elias instead of Nessa. Xihe is a rough station.”

“Ness can look after herself.”

True, but only Nessa could properly care for Zed if anything happened.

Chapter Two

Maybe it was leftover paranoia from being in covert ops, but whenever plans changed for no good reason, Zed's skin crawled.

He surveyed their surroundings as he and Elias walked to the meet, watching for anything out of place, anything that didn't fit. Nothing jumped out at him—literally or figuratively—but that could be because of the damned headache that had set up residence between his temples. He should've taken something before they left the ship, but that would've clued Flick in that something wasn't right...and he wasn't ready for that, yet.

“Headache?”

Fuck. He should've known Flick wouldn't be the only one watching him. “No.”

Elias arched a dark brow. “You sure? Because you get these little furrows right there when—”

“I'm worried about our meet.”

“Uh-huh.” Elias's lips opened, then closed—then he shrugged. “Now's not the time.”

Zed grunted and led the way into the private dock belonging to their potential client. There would never be a good time for that conversation, which was why he planned to never have it. Even as he had that thought, his gut clenched with a sense of betrayal—not for him, but for Felix. He owed Flick that conversation, didn't he? As painful as it would be, didn't Flick deserve to hear the truth?

With an effort, Zed turned his attention back to the task at hand when they entered the office area. Their client, a rotund man with pale skin and thinning, dirty blond hair, sat behind a nondescript desk that bore no signs of actual work. No holos floated above it. It was like walking into one of the AEF's top-secret installations, where they announced that personnel without the appropriate security clearance were on the floor and every spook shut down their wallets and holos so nothing could be observed.

Yep. He was definitely paranoid.

“Mr. Collins? I'm Elias Idowu, Captain of the *Chaos*.” Elias stepped forward and held out a hand, which the portly Mr. Collins grasped across the desk. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Mr. Collins's head bobbed in an enthusiastic nod. “Sorry to mess up your timetable—”

Elias waved a hand, dismissing the concern. “It's not a problem. This is my security officer, Mr. Loop.”

Zed didn't offer his hand, but instead leveled a look just short of a glare at the client. He knew his role. It was to say “Don't fuck with me” without a word.

“R-right, hello.” Collins's smile wavered, then fell away as he took in Zed's bulk. It wasn't the first time someone had been intimidated when they realized just how much muscle was packed onto Zed's frame, but it seemed as if it was an effort for Collins to turn back to Elias. As though he was afraid to take his eyes off Zed?

Paranoia...

“I had another meeting get rescheduled, so I had to move some things around.” Collins sat down again without inviting Zed or Elias to do so. His hands twisted in front of him, constantly in motion, and he didn't seem to be aware of it. A bead of sweat sneaked out from his hairline to trail down his cheek next to his ear.

Zed's frisson of paranoia pinged louder. No way was he *that* intimidating.

He grabbed Elias's biceps. “We're done.”

Collins rose from his seat, his hands braced against the desk. “W-what? But we haven’t even discussed—”

Zed ignored him and leaned in closer to Elias. “He’s too scared.”

“Shit.” The curse had barely escaped Elias’s lips before he turned and opened the office door.

Only to come face-to-face with a pair of thugs armed with laser carbines. The moth tattoo poking above their collars stated their affiliation loud and clear.

Agrius.

Everyone on the *Chaos* had gotten more familiar than they’d ever wanted to be with the criminal cartel after acquiring a shipment of antibiotics out from under Agrius’s nose. Zed had unintentionally intensified the cartel’s interest in their ship by protecting his crewmates—killing a bunch of Agrius thugs to steal away Emma, one of his oldest friends and a veteran of the same secret training he’d participated in. She’d been in trouble, and he couldn’t *not* act.

That Emma was now dead, that she’d sacrificed herself to save Elias didn’t matter. Or maybe that was the main reason Agrius was after them now—they’d robbed the cartel of a valuable operative. Zed wasn’t about to ask for clarification.

He reached for the Zone. The calmness of the altered state of consciousness brought with it a clarity of purpose he rarely experienced at any other time. With his emotions stripped away, life became simple. He had no fear, no doubt, no concern for his own life. Only the mission mattered.

Protect Captain Idowu.

Shoving Idowu behind him, Zed grabbed for one of the thugs’ weapons. He slammed the barrel into the man’s face, the crunch of cartilage telling him he’d struck well. He sliced his other hand into the second man’s throat, then curved his fingers into the nape of the guy’s neck and yanked him forward into his upraised elbow. Another crunch, another cry of pain.

“Don’t kill them,” Idowu said.

Zed grunted. “Acknowledged.” That was an addendum to every mission—despite the risk it entailed, he was to leave as many opponents alive as possible. It made no sense in wartime, but...

This isn’t wartime.

Zed blinked. The Zone faltered but he held on with his mental fingertips, knowing that if the altered state of consciousness fell away now, he’d be less than useful to Idowu. The mission was not complete.

“Are there more?” Idowu demanded from Collins, who was hiding behind his desk.

“Th-there were six. Outside, maybe? I don’t know! They told me I had to cooperate or—”

Zed glared at the man. “Alternate exit?”

“I-I don’t—”

Engaging his superior speed, Zed darted forward and grabbed Collins by the throat. Hefting his bulk against the wall wasn’t easy but the way the man’s eyes bulged with fear illustrated the effort was worth it.

“Alternate exit?”

“Col—” Collins swallowed hard. “Collins-five-eight-eight-nine!”

Behind the desk, part of the wall flickered then faded, revealing a door. Idowu had already started for it as Collins explained that the holo would stay down for fifteen seconds, tops.

“Don’t call us for any more jobs,” Idowu growled as he opened the door.

“W-wasn’t my fault. They *threatened* me, and I—”

Zed changed his grip and slammed Collins’s head down into his rising knee. The portly businessman crumpled into a heap, unconscious. Or maybe dead—Zed didn’t bother to check.

“We need to—” The Zone flickered again and Zed staggered against the doorjamb.

“Shit, Zed, you okay?”

No. He wasn't.

Review later.

He brushed past Idowu, calling up his mental map of the station and comparing it to their current location. This wasn't one of the stations built and operated by his family so he wasn't as familiar with it and had no special access codes, but that hadn't stopped him from memorizing the blueprints from the Net.

“We need to leave Xihe Station as soon as possible.”

“I'll get Qek to reserve an earlier spot in the exit queue.” Idowu grabbed Zed's elbow as the door slid closed behind them. “You're pale as hell, man.”

Zed kept walking. “Review later.”

“Fuck,” Idowu grumbled. “There better be a later.”

* * *

Felix ran his hand over the top of his scalp, enticed by the soft tickle of the two millimeters of hair he had left. After his date with the chemical wash station, an hour in engineering with his latest project—a replacement web-work glove for his mangled left hand—would hopefully dull all memory of the intimate scrubbing.

“You look much younger with no hair.”

Eyeing Qek's bald head, Felix scowled. “I look like an ashushk.”

Her face wrinkled into a smile. “You are not blue.”

Nor was he brown, anymore. In fact, Felix had never felt so clean, and he hated it. Not that personal hygiene and he had a loose relationship—he liked a hot shower and would sell children into slavery for an hour in a deep tub. Okay, maybe not children. Or slavery. And he liked his baths best when he had Zed there to wash his back.

Mmm-hmm.

The wallet resting on the work bench buzzed and skittered into the base of the mold they were using to construct his new glove. His left hand was next to useless without it, and a ship's engineer functioned better with two hands. Felix tapped the wallet, flipping it open.

“*Fixer?*”

Alert to the urgent tone of Elias's voice, he immediately replied. “What's up?”

“*Zed has a headache.*”

Shit. Only one reason Elias would call with a seemingly inconsequential health update for Zed. Guilt clenching, Felix pushed away from the work bench. “What happened?”

“*Tell you when we get there. Have Qek confirm our departure time, maybe see if an earlier slot opened up, and alert Nessa to the situation.*”

Qek had her own wallet out and unfolded across her palm, holographic display shimmering above. “Would now be a good time to employ one of the override codes Mr. Anatolius stored in the pilot's comm?”

“Not on a Shi Corp station. Too much attention.” Reciprocal agreements were all well and good until criminal cartels got involved, and a niggling sensation at the back of his squeaky clean neck told him that Agrius was the cause of Zed having to Zone. Everyone else liked the crew of the *Chaos*. Mostly.

Elias conferred with Zed, their conversation just out of range of Elias's comm, then he reported back. "*We should be safe in the jump queue. See you in ten.*"

Jump-space was the shortest navigable distance between two galactic points. Someone who was sufficiently determined might figure out where they were headed, but the *Chaos* would be practically invisible until they got there, secure in the envelope provided by their ashushk star drive.

Felix tapped the wallet again. "Ness! Zed and Eli are on their way back. Something happened with the client. Zed must have had to Zone. Eli reported a headache and he's still talking, but I don't know if that means—"

"*Take a breath, Fix. I'll take care of him.*"

Felix breathed out, but the tightness in his chest did not ease. Though he knew Nessa would take care of Zed, any reminder of his infirmity coiled him tighter than a one-millimeter helical spring.

Qek touched his hand before he could leave engineering. "Elias is with him." She did not fully understand human relationships, but she understood what Zed meant to him. "All will be well, my friend."

Felix caught her blue hand in a gentle clasp. "Thanks, Qek."

He rushed toward the forward access. With his old glove crushed beyond repair, he'd figured out how to climb the almost vertical stair one-handed. Still, in his haste he tripped onto the middle deck, catching himself with his bad hand. A dull pain traveled through his arm, following the tendon to his shoulder. Wincing, he stumbled upright and ran through the mess to the aft corridor, where he chased the echo of his footsteps to the cargo bay. The chemical odor of scrubbed metal assailed him as he passed the ramp. Growling, teeth gritted so tight they might crack, he jumped down from the ramp and pushed his way through the clumps of humanity clogging the dock.

He spotted the two dark heads of his companions and made his way toward them. Zed had one arm wrapped around Elias's shoulders. Still, he lurched as he walked. The blankness of his expression gave him the appearance of a drunk or drugged-out spacer, neither of which meshed with his large, tightly muscled frame. Accordingly, bystanders stepped back and away from the pair.

Moving in beside Zed, Felix got the big man's other arm over his shoulder and took some of his weight. Elias hissed a quick thanks and jerked his chin toward the ship. Zed merely groaned. His eyes had that flat, unfocused look.

"Agrius?" Felix asked, torn between hoping for an old foe and a new one.

"Yeah," Elias confirmed. "Six of them."

"Damn it."

"Didn't kill anyone," Zed slurred.

Elias shot him a warning glance. "Let's just get to the ship."

Jaw clenched more tightly, Felix stowed the combination of emotion that struck every time he saw the results of the AEF's project, what they had done to Zed. Anger, sorrow, aimless guilt. Quietly banked rage. None of that would help Zed. None of it would soothe his headaches, fix his blood chemistry. Halt the deterioration he kept trying so hard to hide.

* * *

Blue eyes opened, blinked and focused. Tension sliding off his shoulders to land in a heap on the floor. Felix breathed out. "There you are."

"Here I am." As always, Zed tried to sit up. As always, he groaned and flopped back onto the medical bay bed. His eyes closed and a muscle ticked along his jaw. "How long?"

“Two hours.”

“Are we—”

“We’re in the jump queue.”

“Any sign of pursuit?”

“No. Can you stop being a soldier? For one minute?”

Zed rolled his head to the side and opened his eyes again. His steely gaze roamed the contours of Felix’s face, then lifted to his hair, or lack thereof. “You’re bald.”

Felix ran a hand over his shorter-than-short crop. “Pretty much.”

“Holy fuck. Why are you bald?”

Felix glared at him. “Do you really want the answer to that question?”

The crease appeared between Zed’s brows. He winced, a fold of skin apparently being too much sensation, and then his lips twitched. “Oh...”

“Yeah.” Felix cocked his head. “Next time you Zone and pass out, I’m going to shave your head.”

One dark brow arched. “Seriously? Flick—”

Felix waved him into silence. “I know. Listen, Eli told me what happened. I guess Agrius is pissed about Chloris.”

Zed winced again. “You think?”

The confrontation between the crew of the *Chaos* and the Agrius cartel was going to continue escalating until they found a permanent solution that didn’t include more bodies. They didn’t need a war with Agrius on top of Zed’s issues. Either situation would be a tough course, but both at the same time?

“Fuck.” Felix pushed the heels of his palms over his closed eyelids.

Fingers caressed his cheek. “Hey.”

Felix shook his head, not ready to reveal his expression. He didn’t want Zed to see the pain in his gaze, nor did he want to see the remorse in Zed’s. Holding still, he squashed the urge to go hide in his quarters. He’d taken on Zed’s problems as his own, promised his friend—his best friend and lover—that he’d be here, and he was. But...

Double fuck.

“If it hadn’t been for that stupid InstaShine bot, you wouldn’t even have gone to the meeting. Hell, Eli—”

“Might have more than a sore shoulder from helping me limp back. You could be the one lying on this cot.”

“Damn it.” Felix looked up. “That’s...I...” He trailed off into an inarticulate growl, teeth grinding together for the tenth time that day.

Zed’s hand cupped his jaw. “You’re going to crack your molars.”

“I’ll get them replaced.”

“I’m not going to say I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want you to, I just want...” Felix waved his hands around in a helpless gesture. “I want not *this*.”

Zed recovering from another near miss with a seizure. Agrius, they could deal with. Zed’s health wasn’t a simple matter of negotiation.

Neither was Agrius, obviously, but...

Triple fucking fuck.

Zed stroked his cheek again.

“We should talk to Marnie.” Another old friend from their Academy days, she had a position in

military intelligence that gave her access to information neither of them even knew existed.

Zed's eyes flattened, the spark disappearing from the cool blue. "No."

"She has ways of getting stuff that no one can track. She might be able to help you."

"No. Subject closed."

"I'm trying to help!"

Zed shook his head. "Too many people know too much already."

Felix slumped back in the chair he'd pulled up to the side of the bed. "I'm sick of sitting in this chair feeling useless." And it had only been a matter of weeks.

"This is the first time I've Zoned since Chloris. It's not a regular thing, okay? And I'm fine. Nessa has exactly the right pain meds."

"The ones that knock you out for two hours. And what about that shit with the droid? You had a headache earlier today. I know you did. You get this crease—"

"Everyone gets headaches."

"But not everyone has stin poison running through their veins!"

That's what Zed's experimental training had done—shot him full of stin venom. The attempt to unlock the secrets of the aliens' ability to phase-shift had been successful, but at a terrible cost. Headaches and seizures were just the beginning. It had been a desperate act for a desperate time. Not many people knew how close humanity had come to losing the war with the stin. Zed's team had changed all that. Their reward? Being forcibly retired by the AEF, told to get lost and lie low.

"Felix, I'm fine. I'm going to be fine."

Rather than give voice to his gut feelings on that, Felix bit his lips.

Zed sighed and flopped onto his back. "I don't want to fight with you," he said, rubbing at his temple. A second later, his broad hand spread across his eyes, as if the striplight was still too bright.

Guilt slashed through Felix's chest. Zed had just recovered from another head-splitting migraine, but he still probably hurt. And, likely, he was right. If he hadn't attended the meeting with Elias, the consequences might have been more dire.

Felix forced air from his lungs in a long sigh. He breathed in, and exhaled again. Then he reached over and clasped Zed's hand, the one covering his face. "This is what we missed out on last time."

Zed rolled his head back to face him. "Hmm?"

Felix produced a half smile, the tug of it not quite comfortable, but somehow necessary. He squeezed Zed's fingers. "We've never been together long enough to fight."

"You punched me before the first hour was up last time."

Felix flapped his bad hand. "You were being a thinky ass, that was different."

"Not sure I see how."

"We were younger then." Less messed up. Less scarred. "Zed..." Felix worked to thrust his worry into one of his mental boxes. He'd wait until Zed didn't have a headache. Until he had a good day, then he'd ask again. Make him understand that if anything happened to him, he'd be leaving a lot more than a pile of dead cartel members behind. "Galaxy was a different place nine years ago," he murmured.

Zed caught his gaze and held it, and between them, their shared history unraveled. Silently, meaningfully. The near misses of their long relationship, the translation from friends to lovers. The war. Felix being declared MIA only six months in, KIA shortly after that. Zed's involvement in the AEF's most desperate bid. And now this—what they'd always wanted, finally handed over with a big fucking codicil.

Lifting one hip, Zed dug into the utility pocket on his thigh and pulled out a small package wrapped

in bright red paper. “Here.”

Felix regarded the little box—about two centimeters thick, less than ten square—then looked up. “What’s this?”

“It’s for you.”

Felix reached for the box. It was light and for a moment he suspected Zed had wrapped up nothing as a joke—as a distraction. That would be just like him. Get everyone all worked up and then distract them with...

No, that was more his own style.

He shook the box near his ear.

“It’s not a fucking bomb. Just open it.”

“Why would I think it’s a bomb?”

“Why haven’t you opened it yet?”

He tore at the paper, revealing one corner of the box beneath, and gasped as he recognized the package. It was a new bracelet, a wrist-model wallet and comm to replace the one he’d lost. Same make, latest model.

“These are fucking expensive!” *Oh nice, Felix. Beautiful show of gratitude.* “I mean...”

“Even if I couldn’t afford it, I’d buy it for you. Want to know why?”

Felix shook his head.

Zed answered anyway. “Because you’d never buy it for yourself. I had to get you new pants before you disgraced your crew and let’s not even get started on the state of your underwear.”

“Seriously?”

Humor and affection had Zed’s eyes twinkling.

Felix looked down at the bracelet and swallowed a little lump in his throat. “Thanks. I...you’re right. I wouldn’t have bought one for myself.”

“You’re welcome.” Humor morphed into mischief. “Now give me a kiss.”

Felix leaned forward to do as he was told. See, he could follow instructions sometimes.

Zed tugged him closer and murmured against his lips. “Ever come right when a ship transitions into j-space?” When stomachs dropped and all internal organs paused function for a brief interval.

A quick thrill of desire shot from his chest to his groin. “Can’t say as I have.” He quirked a brow. “That would take some careful timing.”

Zed’s hand wrapped around the back of his nearly bald head, pulling him in again. “Yep.”

Felix melted into the kiss for a moment, let the taste of Zed, the feel of his lips, feed the hunger inside, then he pulled away, breathless. “Not here. Nessa would have a fit.”

Chuckling, Zed levered himself up. “Then we better head downstairs and make sure everything in engineering is properly stowed for departure.”

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