

A CHAOS STATION STORY >>>

# GRADUATION

JENN BURKE  
KELLY JENSEN

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## Chapter One

*Earth, 2256*

Eyeing the trousers hanging over the back of the chair, Felix caught a fold of fabric between thumb and forefinger and rubbed experimentally. Soft, really soft. He could barely feel the embedded smart fiber that would prevent wear and tear. Edging his thumb toward the outside of the leg, he looked for a seam and discovered it was one of the turned in kind he couldn't pick at. He'd have to do something else with his hands if he wore these trousers to the graduation party. No pockets, either. Who the fuck wore pants with no pockets?

Zed would, and he'd look tall, dark and handsome. Next to him, Felix would look scrawny. And with his blond curls, wide hazel eyes, delicate nose and full mouth he would always look boyish. He could really use a good scar or something.

The door to his quarters clicked softly. Clad only in a towel from a recent trip to the shower, Felix backed into the corner and assumed a defensive posture— arms raised, weight balanced on the balls of his feet. It was late in the day for a last minute prank, but he wouldn't put it past someone to try. The door swished open and a familiar shadow slipped inside the room.

Felix dropped his stance. "How the fuck did you hack the code? It took me twenty-four Standard hours to write that one."

Marnie held up her wallet and grinned. The holo playing above the fold flashed off her exotic features, lighting her dark eyes and making the line of her bangs more severe. "You based it on the same sequence you used for the janitorial closet in second year."

"I turned that code inside out."

"Not enough times."

"Damn it."

She reached up to ruffle his damp curls. "There, there. If you'd used an old fashioned padlock, I'd have been stumped." Marnie couldn't pick anything "dumb" to save her life. She was resourceful, though.

Ducking out of her reach, Felix smacked a wall panel and reached inside his closet for underwear and socks. He dropped his towel and donned both while Marnie stared through him. He wasn't offended by her lack of interest in his private parts. Girls didn't do it for him and he didn't do it for Marnie. She and Ryan had hooked up the year before and, by all measures, were set to be partnered for life. But he did recognize the blankness of her expression.

"Stop thinking so hard," he said. "You'll short something in your perfect brain."

"How would you get around a padlock if you didn't have any tools on hand?" she asked.

"I'd go find some tools."

"Say you can't, just for the sake of this exercise." Marnie always did shit like this— asked him to think. Mostly, Felix enjoyed it.

"I'd try force, first," he said. "A kick to the mechanism. Then I'd go look for some tools."

"But what if—"

"We're going to be late for the party if you keep what-ifying. What are you doing here, anyway?"

She was already dressed in something long, flowy and purple. She looked good, if not exactly Marnie-like. He was used to seeing her in uniform.

“I brought you something.” Marnie held up a shirt. More grey fabric, but less dark than the trousers, and sort of shiny. It looked like one of Zed’s shirts. All swank and soft and costly. Felix chewed on his lips, a habit he’d formed to give himself time to think before he blurted out the first words that came to mind.

“I know gifts embarrass you, Flick”— his friends all called him by the same nickname his sister had given him when she was a toddler. Sometimes it made him self-conscious, but usually it made him feel as if he was with family— “but I also know how important tonight is and I wanted you to feel good about what you were wearing. Zed’s going to take one look— ”

“I was thinking I’d just wear my uniform.” Felix was stupidly proud of the new ribbons on the breast pocket, even though he knew they would mean absolutely nothing after today. He’d no longer be a student who had excelled, despite humble beginnings— top of his class in five out of eight disciplines. He’d be a raw cadet on his way to specialist training.

And he’d be alone.

Marnie’s brows disappeared into her bangs. “What? No, you can’t do that. We’re all getting dressed up.”

Felix reached into the closet for his uniform pants and pulled them on, buying some more time to think. “And I don’t think I’m going to say anything to Zed.”

“Don’t make me kick your ass.”

“What good will it do? This is the last time I’m going to see him for months. Maybe even years. Or ever.” Felix’s heart thumped up and down hard enough to bruise all attending parts. “Besides, he and Emma make a good couple.”

“Zed isn’t in love with Emma.”

“You don’t need to be in love with someone to...” Felix let the rest of his statement fizzle on his tongue. He knew Zed wasn’t in love with Emma, despite the fact they had everything in common, including a career path that would take them to specialist training together.

“I swear, Felix.” He really did prefer Flick. “If you don’t tell Zed how you feel tonight, I’ll do it for you.”

All of his blood rushed to his socked feet. “You wouldn’t.”

“Don’t try me.”

“Marnie...”

“And no whining, it doesn’t suit you.”

Irritated, Felix reached for his shirt.

Marnie yanked it from his hands. “It will be too late tomorrow. Do you really want to go through life with that what-if unanswered?”

“He’s my best friend. That’s enough.”

Cuddling both his uniform shirt and the new one to her chest, she shook her head. “No, it’s not. I can see it in your face every time you look at him.”

“Fuck.”

“He feels the same way. I’ve seen the way he looks at you when he thinks no one is watching.” She probably considered all this covert watching good practice for a career in Mil-Int. “I don’t think he’s figured out what it all means, but you men never know what to do with your feelings. That’s why you have us.”

Marnie had been the one to approach Ryan. It had been obvious since first year he was completely and irretrievably smitten, though. She said she’d only waited as long as she had because their schooling was important. Secretly, Felix thought she was more cautious than she let on, which was why this push to get him to confess his heart to his best friend of nearly ten

years confused the hell out of him. Because if it went wrong, he could lose Zed. What if Zed didn't like guys? What if Felix wanting to kiss him made everything weird? Smaller things could destroy a friendship.

"Just tell him, okay? Yes, this might be the last time you're going to see him for a year or more. But love is patient, and if it's meant to be between you guys, then it will be— wherever you are, whatever you're doing. Wouldn't you be happier boarding that shuttle tomorrow knowing he's in your heart?"

No, because he'd had Zed in his heart for near on six years already and it wasn't enough.

"I'm not giving you a shirt until you promise you'll say something."

"I hate you."

"No you don't."

Hauling in a breath, Felix held it until his head spun lightly and the edges of his vision darkened. Then he let it out. "Fine, I'll say something."

"And you'll wear something other than your uniform tonight?"

"I'll wear the fancy-ass pants and shirt." He breathed in and out again, more quickly, and began unfastening his uniform pants. When Marnie didn't move, he said, "Thank you?"

She leaned into the closet to hang his plain, safe uniform shirt away. "You're welcome." The side of her face was just visible, and the fact her lips fought a smile.

"You sure Mom's not upset about me wanting to go out tonight?" Zed turned his attention from his closet to his oldest brother, Brennan, who had settled back into the cheap, student-quarters couch tucked against the wall of his dorm room. At twenty-five, Brennan looked every inch the young corporate executive, in his well-tailored suit and perfectly groomed hair. Zed grinned at Brennan's slight grimace— he could probably feel the sofa's springs digging into his butt, which was why Zed didn't sit there often— then looked back into his closet for just the right shirt.

"Did she tell you it wasn't a problem?"

"Yeah."

"Then it's not a problem," Brennan said. "*Someone's* feeling guilty."

Zed rolled his eyes and pulled out a deep blue shirt with a silvery sheen. Yeah, this would do. "I know she originally wanted to have dinner—"

Brennan chuckled. "Zed, relax. She knows this is going to be the last night with your friends for a while. Us, you'll come visit on leave, right? But everyone else..."

Everyone else would be scattered out among the stars, at training and then on their first assignments. It hit him hard at that moment that tonight was *it*. This was the last time they'd all be together at once. He'd have Emma with him, and she was awesome— a great friend who posed a great challenge, marks-wise— but her presence wouldn't quite make up for leaving his other friends behind.

Leaving Flick behind.

*Don't think about that.*

"Scary, huh?"

Zed looked up from the shirt clutched in his hands to see Brennan looking at him with a sort-of sad, sort-of proud expression. From somewhere, Zed summoned a weak chuckle. "Yeah."

"I can't even imagine." His low tone, the understanding in Brennan's words, they all illustrated that his oldest brother got it, even if he hadn't lived the same thing himself. "You know, there have been days I've wished you would change your mind and come work for Dad."

That was an old... well, not argument, really, but a discussion he'd had more than once with both his parents and his brother. "Bren—"

"And then you go and graduate, second in your class, standing up on stage looking just... fucking amazing in your uniform, with Mom crying and Dad just about ready to burst, he's so proud, and I realize... that's you. You were never meant to sit behind an Anatolius Industries desk and you *knew* that, ever since you were a kid." He shook his head, but it was a gesture of amazement, not denial. "You're probably more certain of your place in the galaxy than Maddox and I will ever be."

Zed swallowed hard, concentrating on conquering the lump in his throat and not breaking down, thank you very much. He didn't want to head to dinner with red, puffy eyes. "So you came here to make me embarrass myself, huh?"

Brennan snorted. "No, that's just an added bonus." Shifting on the couch, he pulled out his wallet and fiddled with the holographic interface. "There."

Zed's wallet beeped and he retrieved it from where he'd placed it on the bed as he got changed. "What'd you send— oh, damn, Brennan." He stared at the interface, his chest tight.

His brother had forwarded him a message from the administration of Shepard Academy, thanking the Anatolius family for their contribution and confirming that a permanent full scholarship would be implemented for disadvantaged kids— like Flick— who'd never see inside the doors of the school otherwise. Zed had always suspected Flick's scholarship hadn't been official— not that his father would ever admit to paying Flick's tuition. He knew how Flick would react to that news.

"Dad's real proud of him, too, you know," Brennan said quietly.

"Yeah, I know." God, his jaw ached from all these stupid emotions. "Look, you can't name it after him though, okay? He'll lose his shit."

"But—"

"Trust me. If he sees this, he's going to know that the scholarship he won was bogus, and that will just piss him off."

Brennan chuckled. "That sounds like Flick."

Zed nodded. "Tell Dad— tell him thanks."

"Tell him yourself tomorrow. We're still on for breakfast, right?" Brennan levered himself up from the uncomfortable sofa and straightened his clothes. "You need to give Mom a last opportunity to hug and kiss and be mushy."

"I know. And yes, I wouldn't miss it. Now will you go and let me get dressed?"

Brennan strode over to Zed and slung an arm around his neck, pulling him in tight. "Have fun tonight. Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Damn it, Bren, that means I'll be home by nine."

Brennan flicked his fingers against Zed's forehead. "Asshole."

Zed turned and grabbed his brother in a bear hug. "Love you."

Brennan made a tscking noise. "Save the mush for tomorrow."

## Chapter Two

Dinner was on Zed. He didn't wave around the size of his wallet often, but for tonight, for the best friends he would probably ever have, he would. Also, he knew if he didn't, Flick would probably order the cheapest bowl of soup on the menu and the guy needed to *eat*. He'd never quite bested the habit of making do with the least amount possible.

As Zed watched Flick inhale the giant bowl of fruit he'd ordered him as a surprise dessert, a thread of worry wound through his chest. Up until now, there'd been pain at the thought of leaving Flick— an impending sense of loss. But would Flick remember to eat something more than a protein bar if Zed wasn't around to remind him? Would there be anyone to shove him toward his bunk instead of letting him stay up too late to tinker on his latest project?

Maybe Flick would find a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend. Zed frowned. That was something they'd never really talked about. Was it weird, that they never had? Usually their chats focused on the two of them, their plans, their thoughts, their in-jokes, their latest projects. He'd thought about telling Flick about his time with Dawna— losing his virginity was a big deal, right?— but it had never felt like a good thing to do. Not that Flick didn't know about it— fuck, by a day later, everyone knew Dawna had seduced him, because apparently *she* had no problems talking about it. But Zed kept the details to himself.

It would've been a good time to ask Flick about his thoughts on that. *Sex*. But... he hadn't. For some reason, he just... hadn't.

*Coward.*

"Zed, I can hear your brain working from over here."

Zed blinked and looked across the table at Marnie, cuddled up next to Ryan. She wore a happy, slightly dopey smile— probably thanks to the amber-colored aperitif in her hands.

"What're you thinking about, man?" Ryan prompted.

"Stuff." Zed nudged his specialty coffee with his fingers, making the handle of the cup turn. "You know."

Marnie made a disgusted noise. "We're not going to wallow. Not tonight."

Emma nodded. "She's right. Tonight is about celebrating the last six years. Celebrating us." She raised her glass. "To us."

Glasses clinked together, but Zed didn't miss the fact Flick said nothing. He was being quiet tonight— not uncharacteristically so, because Flick could brood with the best of them. Just... a lot more subdued than usual.

Zed draped an arm over Flick's shoulders and tugged him closer. "You okay?"

"Sure." With a bit of squirming, Flick retrieved his wallet and set it on the table. A couple of key selections on the holographic interface brought up a holo-recorder.

"Uh oh, Flick's collecting evidence."

"Shut up, Ryan," Flick grumbled, though Zed could hear the slight smile in his voice. "I just... keep talking, all right? I want to be able to remember your voices and... shit."

Emma practically melted— so not her, but Zed blamed the booze that had been flowing through dinner. "That's so sweet, Felix."

"Yeah, yeah."

"He's your bestie, Zed," Marnie said. "Did you know he had a secret sweetness streak?"

Zed hugged Flick a little closer. God, he was going to miss this. "I suspected."

"You did not." Flick elbowed him in the ribs, not hard. "Asshole."

“Aw, but you love me.” Zed tugged at Flick again when he stiffened against him and slouched in the booth, grinning at his friends. “Okay, let’s tell some tales for Flick’s holo. Remember the time Marnie promised us we weren’t going to get caught putting itching powder in Neal the Asshole’s underwear?”

Marnie shook her head. “Hey, that wasn’t my fault!”

Zed sipped at his coffee as the table degenerated into shared memories and laughter as they relived the best moments of their time at Shepard Academy. Flick was warm, solid, secure at his side, and... damn, he was going to *miss* this.

“Come dance with us!” Marnie tugged on Felix’s hand, pulling him toward the cacophony of light and sound pulsing through the middle of the club.

Shaking his hand loose, Felix waved her off. “Maybe in a bit. When I find my feet.”

Judging by the shape of Marnie’s lips, she’d scoffed. It was hard to hear anything in the din. “You’ve got five minutes!” Turning, she disappeared into the throng with Ryan.

Holographic images swirled across the dancefloor, weaving streamers and ethereal forms between the writhing bodies of the dancers. Even without four shots of whatever he’d been drinking burning a path from his sinuses to his gut, Felix would have had difficulty telling fantasy from reality. The squawk and grind of the music buzzing between his temples didn’t help. He continued to stare into the crowd, though, hoping for a glimpse of Zed.

There he was. Despite his height and bulk, Zed moved like quicksilver. Felix loved to watch him dance. It was as if the music moved inside Zed. Or something like that. Emma danced with him and she put on a good show too, alternately flirting with Zed and the guy behind her, hips rocking forward and back to keep both guys involved. She had one arm curled around Zed’s shoulders and the other flung behind her to tease the other guy’s hair.

Felix’s gut clenched every time she rocked into Zed.

The holo show brightened, blotting out the dancers as the music changed tempo. Hazy starscapes pulsed through the air, spinning and contracting. Felix thought he might throw up. He looked down to find his feet, unsure if they were still attached to his body. Then he was yanked sideways. Someone had caught his wrist. He stumbled into a crush of bodies, hands flailing about for purchase. When he looked up, Emma’s face loomed close to his. Too close. He could smell her breath. The weights at his shoulders were her arms.

Felix turned his head, looking for Zed, and Emma caught his cheek, subtly forcing him to face forward again. “He went to find the head.”

“Oh.” Belatedly, Felix thought to play dumb, pretend he hadn’t been looking for Zed, and that she shouldn’t something... something. But his thoughts were too swirly and Emma wore a grin she’d borrowed from Marnie. The “knowing grin.”

Her hips bumped into his. “C’mon, loosen up. Or I’ll pour another shot down your throat.”

His feet had been moving, sorta. But the music hadn’t caught him yet. Felix didn’t dance much. Not outside of his head. Closing his eyes, he tried to feel the beat like Zed did.

Emma let go of his shoulders and grabbed his hips. “Like this. Jesus, Flick. For an athletic guy, you move like shit.”

“I don’t really wanna dance.”

“Yeah, you do.”

There was no point in arguing. Emma always got the last word. And, really, she was only looking out for him in her own way. He let Emma move his hips and gave in to the weird

rhythms pulsing through the air. The holograms seemed to caress the exposed skin at the back of his neck, and the floor moved beneath his feet. Or maybe his feet were moving. Maybe he was actually dancing, and feeling freer for it. He tipped his head back and closed his eyes again. Did it matter what he looked like? No one could really see him.

Emma's hands left his hips. Felix opened his eyes to find Zed had returned. The chaotic patterns of light turned Zed's eyes to steel rather than blue, and his mouth was slanted into a sleepy-drunk smile. Felix's gut clenched tighter, as did points farther south. If Emma bumped her hips to his anytime soon, she was in for a surprise. She had turned to dance with Zed, but did the swept back arm thing to keep Felix involved, then she melted or something. Must have been the holos or the liquor swirling through his veins, because suddenly Felix was dancing with Zed.

No hands on hips or curled about shoulders, no grinding, flexing, simulated sex. Emma had taken that with her— apparently supposing they'd forget she'd gone and bump into one another by mistake. Maybe she *had* known about Felix's erection.

She'd also taken all the breathable air with her, because none existed between him and Zed. Just this weird state of expectation and temptation. A longing that didn't feel all his own. Why was Zed looking at him like that? What did the question in his eyes mean?

Maybe Felix was just doing it wrong, the dancing thing. He had grace in the gym, but not here.

Zed raised a hand as if to touch him. Felix batted it away. Instinct had him following up, pushing his palm to Zed's opposite shoulder as he sought to unbalance his opponent. Realizing what he'd done, Felix rocked back. Shit. That wasn't...

He needed air, space.

Thrusting his way through the dancers, Felix stumbled across the dark floor of the club looking for the exit. He bounced around for a while until he found the staircase leading to the roof.

What the hell?

The music and the dancers flowed around Zed, unnoticed, as he stared at Flick's fleeing back. His blood buzzed with energy even as his mind felt a bit blurry with the shots Marnie had bought all of them. He'd lost himself in the energy of the dance, appreciating Emma's moves— damn, she could roll her hips like no one's business— and then Flick had been there and he'd wanted to be closer. He'd wanted to hold him. He—

Fuck, he had a hard-on.

It wasn't the first time he'd gotten horny on the dance floor. Bodies moving, butts and groins rubbing... erections were kind of a given. But he hadn't gotten hard watching Emma.

He'd gotten hard watching *Flick*.

"Are you gonna go after him?" Marnie shouted in his ear.

He turned to her. "What?"

"Are you gonna go after him?" She arched a brow.

"I— " He stared at the crowd again.

Marnie laid a hand on his shoulder. "You're gonna regret it if you don't."

Yeah. Yeah, he would.

He ignored the part of himself that begged him to stand still and *think*. Thinking could be overrated— it was something his instructors had cautioned him about. Considering every angle was all well and good, but sometimes action had to happen on instinct. He pushed forward,

through the crowd, aiming for the area where he'd lost sight of Flick. Breaking through the edge, he stumbled and caught himself against the wall. The bass beat of the music thrummed through him and he felt unsteady, as though he was walking on the deck of a ship and not a concrete floor. Was it the music making him feel that way? Or the emotions, hardly acknowledged, cascading through his mind and heart?

*Stop fucking thinking.*

He yanked open a nearby door to find a staircase leading up. Unless Flick had slipped back into the crowd, this is where he would have had to go— there were no other exits. Zed leaped up the stairs two by two until he reached the top of them and another door. Then he paused, filled with a certainty that opening it would lead him somewhere unknown. Somewhere he'd never considered going.

He could turn around. He could walk back downstairs and find Emma in the crowd. He felt nothing for her but friendship, but she was a good friend. An awesome friend.

Not as good as Flick, though. No one was like Flick.

He pulled the door open and stepped through.

## Chapter Three

The roof was not designed for visitors. A bulky HVAC unit sprawled over one half, blocking Felix's view of the sprawling metropolis of Titusville. The other half was blessedly dark.

Felix looked up. The stars always seemed weird when viewed through an atmosphere. Closer in some inexplicable way, as though they were stitched to a blanket draped around the planet. Yet also farther away. Unattainable. Felix gulped at the humid Florida air, filling his lungs. The taste of the dancefloor lingered on his tongue, and when he licked his lips, they felt numb. The sonorous bass continued to pulse through his feet, though that might simply be a memory. The roof of the club was otherwise quiet.

A breeze whispered past his cheek. Despite having spent six years planetside, stray air currents still incited a sense of unease. Station-born always knew where the vents were. Just as they always knew the location of every accessible bulkhead and maintenance panel. Their lives could depend on such things. Air that moved under the influence of atmospheric pressure, outside of a domed habitat, was just... strange.

A pang of homesickness wound through him. Though distance could be relative, tomorrow he'd put another system between himself and Pontus Station— he'd be another step removed from his home and family— and right here, right now, it was hard to remember why he was going. Surely the AEF didn't really need another engineer.

Felix scanned the rooftop again, looking for somewhere to camp out for a while. He'd have to go back downstairs soon, or risk the party joining him. But five minutes to get settled would go a long way toward getting him through the rest of the night.

The roof access door creaked open. Someone tripped through, kicking aside the brick Felix had used to prop it ajar.

Shit.

The door swung closed with a heavy clang.

Double shit.

"I hope you told someone where you were going, because that brick you just tripped over was holding the door open."

"Flick?"

Triple shit. The very person he needed space from. "What are you doing up here?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

Nope, not playing word games with Mr. Tricky Dicky Smarty Pants. "I just needed to cool off. It was hot down there."

"Yeah." Zed moved away from the shadow of the door, and the ambient city light caught his frame, highlighting his broad shoulders, the shine of his dark hair— and the fact he had one hand wrapped around the back of his neck. It was a nervous gesture, one of his tells. "Everything okay with you? You've been kinda weird tonight."

"M fine. Just gonna miss everyone, you know?"

"You've got the passcode to my jazer account, right?"

Felix swallowed. Jazer comms were expensive, which was why Zed wanted him to use his account rather than rely on the slower, less costly relay point or ripcomms. Neither would be the same as this, though, standing so close he could smell Zed's cologne. Talking face to face.

As always, Zed read his thoughts. "I know it's not the same, but it's not as if this is it. We're just gearing up for the next adventure."

That last brought a smile to Felix's lips. "You sounded like me just then."

Zed shrugged. "Bound to happen." He glanced over shoulder. "So what's this about the door?"

"It locks from the inside. If no one saw you come up here, then we'll have to message someone to come rescue us."

"Marnie knows we're up here." Of course she did. Zed dipped his chin and a shadow obscured his face. "Flick... is..." He gripped the back of his neck again. "Wanna sit and talk awhile? Just you and me?"

Felix argued with himself for long enough that Zed looked up again, showing his confused expression. And something else. Hurt? Not stepping toward him, not flinging himself into the wide expanse of Zed's chest, took every ounce of self-control Felix had. He'd gotten away with that when they were boys, but now? It would take more than self-control to govern what happened next.

Instead, clearing his throat, he spoke roughly. "Sure. Um, yeah."

Over near the edge of the roof, a large, square duct folded away from the bulk of the HVAC forming a long, low bench. Felix climbed over it so they could sit facing out, with a view of the city and the stars. Zed sat next to him, close but not too close. Felix shuffled over, reducing the gap. This could be the last time he sat next to Zed like this. Probably ever. If Zed and Emma didn't hook up during specialist training, then Zed would meet someone else out there in the big, wide galaxy. This night could be the end of...

Would it be dramatic to say *all things*?

He didn't know what to say, had never known what to say, but Felix knew if he didn't say something, now, Marnie's disappointment would be the least of it. *Just do it*. He could treat it like a project, right? Start small, with a test, and then alter the plan to suit his result.

He grabbed a quick breath. "This is what I'm going to miss the most." Rocking sideways, he bumped his shoulder to Zed's. "Just you and me."

The warmth that spread through Zed's body at the innocent touch of his friend's shoulder was new. Or maybe that was just his system shaking off the effects of the dancefloor. Or, hell, maybe Flick's body acted as a windbreak.

Maybe Zed was going a little crazy. His heart was definitely beating too fast and his throat had tightened. Blood rushed through his ears, a low rumble that drowned out everything but Flick's voice. He could chalk it all up to being upset about leaving Flick tomorrow— because he was— but that explanation didn't quite hit all levels of truth. So what was it? Why was he feeling so unsettled? He didn't want to say goodbye, but the dread in his chest felt... bigger than it should.

Flick leaned away, putting space between their shoulders. Fuck, Zed had fallen into thinking-mode, letting the silence stretch too long. Making a concerted effort to shut off his brain, Zed slung an arm around Flick's shoulders and pulled the smaller man to his side.

"I'm gonna miss it too," he assured Flick. *A whole hell of a lot.*

Flick leaned into Zed's side. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Zed squeezed Flick's shoulders and bent to press a kiss to his floppy blond curls.

He realized what he'd done just as his lips made contact with Flick's scalp. His heart thumped painfully. Physical signs of affection had always been a hallmark of their relationship, partially because Flick could be so standoffish. Being one of the few people allowed to touch

him freely was a gift that Zed recognized and cherished. He never shied away from slinging an arm around Flick's shoulders or giving him a hug or ruffling his hair or... hell, he'd even given Flick's hand a squeeze once or twice when they'd both needed reassurance about something.

And then... there'd been that time with the kisses.

He didn't know if Flick remembered it. It had been shortly after they'd arrived at Shepard Academy, two weeks maybe. One day, Flick just hadn't been around— which was odd, to say the least. In those first few days, he'd clung to Zed's presence, adjusting to both the schoolwork of the Academy and being planetside for the first time. For him to disappear suddenly made no sense, but Zed had thought at first that maybe Flick just needed some space. By the second missed class, though, he'd known something was wrong. He'd started searching for Flick, and when he couldn't find any trace of him, managed to get the school administrators involved. It had still taken the rest of the day to find Flick— he'd been stuffed in a locked footlocker in an unused dorm room by one of the class assholes as a lesson, or maybe a joke.

Zed would never forget how his heart had leaped into his throat when they'd popped the lid on the footlocker. Flick had been drenched in sweat, barely conscious, limp and out of it. He'd stirred slightly as the cool air brushed his sodden curls— and then Zed had kissed him, on his forehead, his cheeks, his temples, trying to show Flick just how much he meant to him, how sorry he was that he hadn't found him sooner. In that moment, Zed had understood just how much he loved his friend.

Then a nurse had pried Flick from Zed's fingers. Eventually Zed had calmed down and when Flick didn't mention the kisses, he assumed he didn't remember them. Just as well. It would have made their friendship weird, right?

Except now he was kissing Flick again... and it wasn't weird. At all.

He lifted his lips away from Flick's head. Gently, he nudged Flick's chin around so he looked up at Zed. Zed examined the face he knew almost better than his own— and why was that? Why had he invested so much of himself into this boy— man— sitting beside him? He'd never had a friend like Flick, one who made it easier to breathe when he was around because Zed knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that no matter what happened, Felix Ingesson would have his back. Always. A friend who calmed him and excited him, one who made Zed want to be more. Better.

A friend he loved, with every fiber of who he was.

"Zed...?" Flick whispered.

Confusion dwelled in the breathy tone, confusion Zed couldn't dispel because he felt it too. The boner he'd had on the dancefloor returned, more insistent. But... he wasn't... he'd never felt this sort of attraction for another guy. Not that there was anything wrong with guys who wanted other guys— who cared, as long as everyone was happy? He'd just never considered...

*Hadn't you? Are you sure, Zander?*

Flick's hazel eyes were so fucking perfect, and his lips, parted slightly, were so fucking inviting...

*Stop thinking and do.*

Zed lowered his lips to Flick's. And his brain went silent.

Zed was kissing him.

Actually, Zed's lips were touching his in something like a kiss. A soft press, breath held for long enough for their lips to adhere. Felix thought about pushing him away, just briefly. His right

hand clenched, fingers curling into his palm. Instead, he leaned forward, his outward breath a release of a sort.

He kissed Zed.

Their lips moved at cross purposes before catching together in the sweetest harmony. Zed's mouth softened beneath his, then firmed as he kissed back, sealing the gesture. Felix tucked his hand— fingers uncurled now— between them. He paused there, unsure if he wanted to grab Zed's shirt or push him away. Zed's lips were at his again, a firmer press this time. Felix hummed into the connection, the sound one of pleasure and confusion.

He was kissing Zed. His first kiss, and he felt as if he'd been given something divine. The tingle at his lips might as well be magic— something he had wanted so badly, he must have imagined it. Surely he wasn't imagining it.

Felix pulled back, panting softly, thoughts reeling. "Did you just... kiss me?"

Zed looked about as stunned as he felt. "I did."

"Did you, um..." Felix tugged at the curls on top of his head. "Did you mean to? Like, you didn't just sort of slip down from my head to my mouth or something?"

"No."

Zed's mouth found his once more, and this time Felix was ready for the kiss. No more prepared, but ready. He leaned in, lips parting in invitation. How he knew to do that, he had no idea. The desire to have Zed in his mouth felt as natural as the need to taste Zed's lips. To feel the brush of his tongue, to know him in this way. When the tip of Zed's tongue flicked across his lips, Felix met the play. Then it seemed their mouths were fused, and that if they were pulled apart, they'd suffocate.

Who knew kissing was so good?

Felix grabbed at Zed's shirt, the silken SFT fabric slipping beneath his fingers until he found purchase. The heat of Zed's skin radiated through, and the urge to strip the shirt away all but consumed him. The raw nature of his need shocked him. The deep thrum of it, the passionate stirring of his blood and... fuck, he was so hard.

"Wait." His lips still touched Zed's. He could taste Zed's breath. "Wait." Letting go of Zed's shirt, Felix leaned back a little more, knowing he couldn't talk with Zed's mouth so close to his. "I... Is this...? How did you know?"

"I didn't. Hell, I don't even know why I kissed you." A crease appeared between Zed's brows. "Well, yeah, I do. I think maybe I should have kissed you way before now."

Felix's heart lurched in his chest. "Or I could have done it. I... did you know I wanted to?"

Zed shook his head. The corners of his mouth had turned down and he looked sad. "Is that why you've been avoiding me today?"

"I haven't been— " A dark brow arched over a stern, steel-blue eye, and Felix swallowed the lie. "I haven't been avoiding you *all* day. Just when..." He ducked his head. "Just when we were alone. Because I had something to tell you, and I knew it was going to change everything. Or maybe not." One should hitched up in a shrug.

Zed reached for one of his hands, enfolding it in a firm, but gentle grip. His thumb caressed Felix's palm. "You can always talk to me, you know that."

"But what if I need to talk *about* you? Do you really want to hear how much I'm going to miss you? That I don't know if I can be by myself after this. How many times I've imagined kissing you. How I feel in here." He thumped his chest. "And it's too late, Zed. I was afraid, and now I've left it too late. This kiss is all we're ever going to have."

Flick's dramatic proclamation rang with truth. Zed wanted to deny it, wanted to point out that the two years they'd spend in specialist training wasn't forever— but that wouldn't be fair to either of them, would it? Fuck, why hadn't they talked about this days ago, when Flick had first started getting all quiet and un-Flick-like? Zed had known the impending separation was bothering him— he'd have to have been stupid not to see it— but he kind of thought excitement would eventually overwhelm the fear. Except he hadn't known exactly why Flick had been scared, and now that he did...

"It doesn't have to be," Zed murmured. "All that we ever have, I mean."

Something like a whimper escaped Flick's throat. "Don't. Just— don't just say that."

"I'm not." Zed nudged Flick's chin to face him again. "Hey, Felix. When have I ever lied to you?"

Flick grunted and shook his head.

"Right, never. And I'm not now."

"I don't want your pity—"

"This isn't pity." Zed blew out an exasperated breath. "It's... I don't know what it is, but it's not pity. Maybe if we'd gone out dancing before, I would've figured it out, but *someone* doesn't really like the clubs." Immediately, Zed regretted his joking tone when Flick's shoulders hunched a little more. He clasped a hand around Flick's neck, rubbing. "Hey, no, I'm not... no blame, okay? I didn't know. I didn't know you wanted to kiss me and I didn't know I *wanted* you to kiss me."

Flick peeked up at him through his unruly curls. "You never thought about it?"

"No. Well... maybe." Zed's lips screwed up into something between a grimace and a smile. "In passing. I never really thought there was something there to figure out, you know? I like girls."

Flick snorted. "Yeah, Dawna made sure the whole school knew that."

"So, I figured... I don't know what I figured." That the passing thoughts he'd had about Flick's mouth were an aberration? That the times he'd caught a glance of Flick's ass or his chest and started feeling *weird* were a fluke? Sighing, he bent forward, cradling his head in his hands for a moment before looking sideways at Flick. "Do you like both?"

"No, just..." Flick swallowed. "Just guys."

They *really* should have talked about this sooner. Zed had never really delved into his own sexuality. He'd kissed women. He'd had sex with a woman and he'd really enjoyed the act, if not the next morning. He thought that made it pretty fucking clear he was into women.

But his dick wasn't hard right now because he was thinking about a woman's flowing curves. No... he was remembering how Flick smelled, how the slightest hint of stubble had rubbed against Zed's cheeks, how his lips had felt soft yet firm and not as plump as others he'd kissed.

Flick fidgeted. "Look, maybe we should just... you know, pretend this didn't happen."

"Is that what you want?"

The hesitation before the not-so-casual shrug told Zed way more than Flick's words. "Yeah. Sure."

They could walk away. Zed could forget he'd kissed a man. It would be less confusing to just stick with one gender, right? Easier. But he knew— *he knew*— if they walked away now, like this, Flick's words would come true. That one kiss would be all they would ever have.

Maybe it would be a bump in their friendship, eventually laughed off. Maybe not. The idea of not seeing Flick again after specialist training... not acceptable.

“That’s not what I want.” Zed lifted his head to meet Flick’s gaze. Flick’s eyes widened an instant before Zed cupped the back of his neck again and pulled him in for a kiss that was less tentative than their first two. Zed shuddered as their lips connected again, as though they completed a circuit. Gently, but with intent, he pushed Flick onto his back and leaned over him. The feel of Flick’s legs opening to cradle Zed between them was almost enough to blow his mind.

So good. So fucking *right*.

“This okay?” Zed pulled back to gaze down at Flick, noting how big and dark his hazel eyes seemed in the dim lighting. “I’m not hurting you, am I?”

Flick shook his head vehemently and Zed thought that the answer would be the same even if he had a stunner in his hand. “No, it’s good. I...” Almost involuntarily, it seemed, Flick’s body arched and he pressed his groin against Zed’s.

Fireworks. That was the only way Zed could describe it. He closed his eyes to shut out the sight of Flick’s mouth falling open, otherwise this was going to be done way too quickly. “G-God. You ever done this before?”

Flick rubbed against him again. “No, but—”

Zed’s eyes snapped open. “Never? Kissing?”

Flick’s gaze slid sideways.

Shit. *Shit*. Zed lowered himself, snaking his arms under Flick to hold him in a full-body, way-more-than-friends hug. “I don’t really know what the fuck I’m doing here, but... do you want this?”

“Yes.” Flick’s voice was shaky with need.

Zed did too. The responsibility of being Flick’s first time humbled him, but now that it was here, a possibility, he was all-in. He wanted to make this good. He wanted Flick to know he was loved. But taking this step scared him, too. He remembered what he’d been like the morning after he’d slept with Dawna, all but convinced it meant they were supposed to be together. Here, now, he’d give his left nut to have the time with Flick to explore this for more than just one night—but asking Flick to wait or making promises based on just these few hours, or expecting to base something long-distance on feelings so newly uncovered...

It wouldn’t be fair to either of them.

He drew in a shuddering breath. “Then here’s the deal. Tonight, I’m yours. I want to share this with you. I want to be your first.” Zed swallowed, feeling like acid was stripping the lining of his esophagus. “But not your only, Flick. Promise me.”

## Chapter Four

Felix pushed Zed off him, which he wouldn't have been able to do if Zed hadn't been ready to go. Zed had always been bigger than him. Broader across the shoulders, taller. Just... more. Felix felt the loss immediately, as if he'd stepped out into a vacuum. Beneath his stupid fancy shirt and pants, his skin itched and tingled. His cock ached. He was so hard. Zed was too, and the memory of their erections bumping together made him want to moan.

Felix rolled off the wide duct and stood. He couldn't catch his breath. He couldn't think. But Zed's words rolled around and around in his head. Like the stars overhead, they wheeled when they should be fixed points. *Not your only.*

It was stupid to feel the way he did. Zed was right *here*. They'd kissed. They could do more. But Zed didn't want him in the same way.

"Flick?" Zed formed a bulky shadow next to him.

Felix could smell his skin, his sweat. Taste him on his lips and tongue. "This isn't what I want," he said, cringing at the lie. He craved Zed with obsessive need.

Dipping his chin, Zed gave a short nod and it seemed that would be that. Tension continued to snap between them, but Felix knew if he moved forward, by even a step, the presence of Zed would capture him and he'd never pull free.

And Zed didn't want that.

"This is Marnie's fault," Felix muttered, pulling out his wallet.

Pacing toward the door, he tried pinging Marnie and got no answer. He couldn't say he was surprised. But when he got to the door, he almost laughed. No padlock, but as the door opened outward, there was no handle on this side, and no panel. Nothing for him to hack, nothing for him to bash into submission. Nothing but him and Zed and the stars.

God, he hated feeling trapped like this.

Raising a fist, Felix pounded on the smooth metal. "Marnie? I know you're there. Open the fucking door." He tucked his wallet back into his pocket and attacked the door with two hands. "Marnie! This isn't going to work. You're just pissing me off."

A warm hand closed around his shoulder. Felix shrugged it off. Zed grabbed him again and Felix turned toward him, right fist cocked and ready.

Zed ducked sideways. "Jesus."

"Just keep your hands off me."

Straightening, Zed held up both hands as he took a step back. "Talk to me. Tell me what's going on. 'Cause one minute you're grinding against me, the next you're taking a swing at me."

"I told you I didn't want it. Can't we leave it at that?"

"No. Because you're lying to me. Since when did you start lying to me, man?"

Chest tightening, Felix looked up at the stars and wished he could just launch himself into the sky. Take off, disappear, or maybe cease to exist. He didn't hear Zed step forward, but he felt him, and took a step back.

"Flick, please. Let's not end things like this. You're my best friend. Always."

Felix met Zed's questioning gaze. "What if I want to be more? Always."

Zed shook his head. "Why would you want that? You've got your whole life ahead of you. Training, and then you're going to travel the galaxy. With your skills, you'll see the whole fleet. I can't be the one to hold you back."

“You’ve never held me back. It’s because of you I’ve got this far. And I don’t know if I can...” Felix swallowed. “You’re going to have Emma and Marnie and Ryan are going to Mil-Int together and I’m going to be alone. By myself.” He took another step back. “I told Marnie this was a bad idea. You didn’t need to know any of this.”

“I already knew most of it.”

Felix shook his head. “You don’t know all of it.”

“Then tell me.”

He didn’t want to, but what did it matter? There would be no perfect time for his confession, and they were out of time to fix what he’d probably just broken. So why not throw the words out there? Maybe then Zed would feel it. Maybe he’d hurt. Or, just maybe, he’d pick them up and... carry them. Hold the words close until they could see each other again.

Drawing on every mote of courage in his lean frame, Felix squared his shoulders and looked Zed square in the eye. “I love you.”

Zed almost, *almost* replied with a casual “I love you, too,” because he did. He didn’t know exactly when he’d started loving Flick— sometime shortly after they’d met, probably— and he knew it wasn’t quite like what he felt for his two older brothers. But one look in Flick’s eyes told Zed that he was dead serious about this love thing. This wasn’t some declaration of brotherly fealty, but the real deal, the heart fully invested, the can’t-breathe-without-you sort of love.

And he was telling Zed this *now*?

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me sooner?” Zed turned and kicked at nothing, needing to take out his frustration. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Flick deflate, as though Zed’s words had punctured something important. “Goddamn it, we talk about everything.”

“Not that,” Flick said, his voice small.

Zed blew out a breath, then agreed, “No, not that.” But they should have. He speared his fingers through his coiffed hair, which had already mostly been wrecked by the dancing, and tugged. It was a Flick gesture, one he’d picked up years ago. He tilted his head to look up at the stars, winking through the atmosphere as if they knew the answer to this problem but weren’t going to tell anyone.

Flick loved him. Like that.

Fuck.

“I love you too, you know?” Zed sighed. “But I don’t know if... if it’s the same as what you feel. I mean, I feel better when you’re with me. I love spending time with you and sharing jokes and stories, watching a holo, whatever. But I *just* figured out that maybe guys turn me on just as much as girls.” And that was a revelation he would need to examine in way more detail, but not now. “So I don’t know. If we had more time...”

A soft, sad chuckle left Flick’s lips. “Yeah, if we had more time.”

Zed closed the distance between the two of them and carefully reached out to rest his hands on Flick’s shoulders, prepared to field another punch. The fight seemed to have abandoned his friend, though, leaving him smaller than moments ago.

“What I meant before?” he said softly. “I don’t want you to not live your life because you’re waiting for something that might not happen. Okay? We’re probably not going to be able to do more than exchange the occasional jazer— ”

“That would be enough!”

Zed rubbed Flick's shoulders. "No, it wouldn't. And I know you, Felix Ingesson. You'd use those messages as an excuse to cordon yourself off and not even consider the possibilities around you."

"But—"

Whatever Flick was about to say was cut off by an explosion overhead. Zed whipped around to watch brightly colored sparkles cascade through the night sky, falling to earth like a hundred tiny meteorites. Crackles chased another boom, then another, and a holo played across the darkness.

"Congratulations to the Shepard Academy Class of 2256," Zed read, his voice quiet. He looked back at Flick, taking in the sight of his best friend's features illuminated by red, then blue, then green, then red again.

*Beautiful.*

A sudden urge to trace the lines of Flick's face with his fingertips threatened to overwhelm him, but Zed tamped it down. Why had he never really noticed how strong Flick's face was before? In the years since they'd met, Flick had filled out— age and good food conspiring to strip the slim boyishness from his features. He'd never be the sort of guy that you'd expect to find on the front lines— not like Zed, who was built like a truck and only seemed to get wider with every passing year— but that was okay. Flick was a fix-it guy, someone who dwelled behind the scenes. His delicate fingers were magic.

"C'mon. Sit with me." Zed pulled at one of Flick's shoulders, then released his grip. "We don't have to talk anymore, if you don't want to." Truthfully, it didn't matter if they spent the rest of the night in silence. Zed just wanted to be here, with Flick, whatever the night brought, because damned if he knew when they'd have a chance to do this again. If they ever did. "Might as well enjoy the show, right?"

Flick glanced at the sealed door, then nodded, his body language transmitting his reluctance with every movement. Zed held back a sigh. Maybe he should just kiss Flick again— stir the flames of horniness so high they forgot everything else. It was tempting, so bloody tempting, but Flick had made it pretty clear he wanted everything or nothing at all.

Zed wished he could give him everything. If they only had more time...

He sat heavily on the duct and leaned back on his hands to watch the lightshow overhead. Flick settled beside him, close enough that Zed could just barely feel the heat radiating from him, but not touching.

"Pretty," Flick said after a few more booms.

Zed nodded as the names of the graduates began streaming by. His was third, after Neal Aarons and Kiro Amago. He didn't say anything as the names progressed through the alphabet, but when Flick's appeared, he bumped his friend's shoulder. Just a reminder that he was there, they'd made it and whatever came next, they'd be all right.

God, he hoped they would be.

## Chapter Five

His name in lights. The flare of familiar letters brought a lump to Felix's throat. He wished his father could see it. Quickly, before the holo faded, he pulled out his wallet and snapped a few pictures. He missed reading the next few names while he chose the best one to share with his family.

Zed leaned over his shoulder— as he'd done so many times before— to watch him tap out the ripcomm. "They'll be so proud of you."

Felix nodded, his throat a little too tight for words. He sent off the message and tucked his wallet away. He looked back up at Zed, who remained inclined toward him, as if still reading over his shoulder. If not for this... man, they were men, now. If not for Zed, he wouldn't be sitting here with his heart swollen with such a mixture of emotion. Pride, anxiety, a little fear, and a big and achy thing called love. But he wouldn't exchange a minute of it— not for all the credits in the galaxy. Because his family was proud of his accomplishments, and his career with the AEF would almost guarantee he could take care of them. Because he'd had the opportunity to learn from the best, and to share the experience with the best. The Fantastic Five: Zed, Emma, Marnie, Ryan and Felix.

No distance could separate them, not after the last six years of friendship. Nothing should be able to separate him and Zed— but what could drive them apart was him not acknowledging this night, what he had right here, right now. He wanted more, but he could have this. One night, one special night. What better memory than sharing all of his firsts with the man he loved?

Reaching up, he caressed Zed's cheek. It was generally accepted that Zander Anatolius was handsome, but Felix saw beneath the strong brows, straight nose, high cheekbones and sensuous mouth. He saw through those cool blue eyes to the soul beneath. He flashed back to ten years before, to a younger and more rounded version of this face. Zed stuck in the ductwork of Pontus Station after having given chase when Felix stole his wallet. He remembered how the expression on Zed's face had stopped him. The combination of admiration and challenge— and the sure knowledge that if Felix helped him out of the duct, he'd be grateful rather than angry. Zed was a good person. The perfect friend and the best sort of ally. Even at eight years old, Felix had known that Zed could show him the galaxy.

Zed leaned into his caress, eyelids fluttering down. Felix traced his thumb along one dark brow, smoothing the short, bristly hairs. It only seemed right he should tend the other, then drop a kiss to each closed eye. The scent of Zed's skin slipped inside him— the same as always, but now different, too. Because now he knew what Zed's lips tasted like, and how they felt against his.

Felix kissed the tip of Zed's nose. A puff of air tickled his chin as Zed chuckled softly. Sensing an eye might open, Felix pressed his thumb gently to the lid. "No."

Zed made a small noise in his throat, but complied, leaving his eyes closed. Felix continued worshiping his face, dropping a kiss to the hint of a dimple in his left cheek, then his right. He kissed the corner of Zed's mouth and tickled the seam of his lips with his tongue. Zed groaned softly, lips parting. Felix kissed the bottom, sucking gently on the plump flesh before releasing it to kiss him squarely on the mouth.

There, his seduction technique faltered. The kiss was awkward, more friendly than sexy. A niggly of anxiety poked Felix in the chest. Before he could listen to it, respond to it, Zed tilted his head and their mouths slid together. Then they were kissing. Properly.

Zed captured the sides of his face with his large hands. In their embrace, Felix felt safe and protected. He had to drag his thoughts away from there, though, lest he spiral back into fearing everything he'd miss after tonight. Instead, he willed his mind to blank, and when that didn't work, he focused on the sounds Zed made while they kissed. The soft breaths, the hum deep in his throat. The swish of fabric as they moved together. The suck and pull of their lips.

Zed's tongue teased his and Felix reveled in the sensual caress. Who would have thought having someone else's tongue in his mouth would feel so good, and so fucking necessary? Needing a deeper breath, Felix pulled his lips from Zed's and nuzzled the side of his face. The rasp of stubble against his cheek sent a thrill across his skin. His nipples tingled. His dick fought the confines of his fancy pants. Again.

Overhead, the sound of fireworks faded away. The sky might still be lit by holos, but Felix no longer cared. He was making his own memories—and he wasn't going to think about what he'd do with them until later. Tomorrow. Next week.

Zed leaned into him, obviously intending to lay him back again. Putting both hands to Zed's chest, Felix reversed his direction, encouraging Zed to lie back instead. Zed complied with a sweet willingness that spoke louder than words. But he did grasp Felix's elbows, pulling him along for the ride, and as soon as Felix was settled against his chest, Zed's hands slipped up under his the back of his shirt.

“Oh!” The warmth of Zed's palms against his skin was electric. Felix arched into him, gasping as their erections bumped together. Surely they'd just been struck by lightning. “Fuck, does it always feel like this?” Zed would know, right? Zed had experiences he didn't.

“No.” Zed's hips pushed upward. “This is for you.”

It almost hurt, which shouldn't make sense, but Felix had jacked off enough times to appreciate the sensitivity of his equipment in certain situations. Apparently it wasn't all due to over handling.

Shifting slightly so that he knelt between Zed's legs, Felix tugged Zed's shirt free of his pants. Immediately, he smoothed his hands upward, but he couldn't get to where he wanted. Pulling his hands back out, he reached for the buttons, hesitating at the first. “I want to see you, is that okay?”

Zed met his question with a dark and hooded gaze. “Yes.”

It wasn't as if he'd never seen Zed without his shirt before, but now it was different. Now he saw the cut of Zed's muscles, and the way his torso tapered from broad shoulders to lean hips, through a haze of lust. He wanted to bite one of those small, flat nipples. He wanted to trace his tongue down the groove between Zed's abs.

Zed shrugged the shirt from his shoulders and reached for Felix's buttons. A blush stung Felix's cheeks and he knew that once Zed undid his shirt, the flush of color would be visible across his chest. Would Zed think he was too...lean?

Once both their shirts were on the ground, Felix attacked Zed's chest with small kisses and bites, starting with the sweep of his collarbones and working his way down. Zed arched beneath him. His nipples were like tiny pebbles, his abs smooth and firm. The fine hair between his pecs tickled Felix's lips. Would he grow more? Felix hoped so. The hair was sexy.

When he got down to Zed's navel, he could smell the musk of his crotch. Felix palmed the bulge beneath Zed's waistband and squeezed, drawing the best sound yet from deep down in Zed's chest. A groan vibrated between them. Felix's nuts tightened and his dick pulsed.

Before he could attack Zed's belt, hands caught his and pulled him upward. Felix settled into Zed's chest, sighing as their skin brushed together and stuck in places, from the humidity of the night and their sweat. Zed felt so good against him. Under him.

"My turn to explore," Zed rumbled, before claiming his mouth in another kiss.

At eighteen years of age, Zed had a few sexual experiences under his belt. There was the encounter with Dawna and its widely broadcast success, yeah, but there had been other kisses with classmates, too, and girls' hands rubbing him through his pants. There'd even been one when he was fifteen who was brave enough to reach underneath his waistband and stroke him skin-on-skin for the whole minute it took him to come.

But this... nothing compared to this.

He rolled over, positioning his hand at the back of Flick's head to make sure those bouncy blond curls didn't make the wrong kind of contact with the hard surface of the wide duct. Slowly, gently, he lowered Flick's head to the plasmix and looked down at him, surprised at the kick his heart gave as the meager light teased highlights from Flick's hair.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he admitted, his voice shaky with need. How could he when it was only hitting him now how fucking beautiful Flick was? Why hadn't he realized it sooner?

"Me neither." Flick's smile wasn't wide, but it was genuine. Certain. Whatever switch had gotten tripped to get them back to this point, it wasn't getting flipped off again. "Just do what feels good."

*Do what feels good.* Yeah, okay, he could try.

A breeze kissed his skin, drawing up goosebumps across his neck. He ignored it, his attention solely on the man lying beneath him. For a moment, he just stared at Flick's pecs, noting how his nipples were already pebbled and begging for a touch.

Would they be as sensitive as a woman's?

Bending down, he captured one in his mouth. Flick arched beneath him, letting out a choked cry, and Zed hummed in appreciation of his discovery. He rolled the tight bud between his teeth, then sucked on it, loving the curses falling from Flick's lips. The lean body beneath him bucked and writhed—and *fuck*, that was such a turn on. When he drew back, exposing the reddened, wet nipple to the night air, Flick whimpered.

"Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I almost came," he panted.

Zed grinned, absurdly pleased with himself. "Yeah?"

"I never knew... God, I never knew..." A flick of Zed's tongue to the other nipple was answered with a deep groan. "Need... Zed, need more... oh my God..."

Zed kissed his way down Flick's torso, trying not to think. *Do what feels good.* This felt good—so damned good, with the sounds Flick was making. Zed realized that he would do just about anything to encourage those helpless noises to continue. He paused at the waistband of Flick's pants, hovering over the bulge straining at his fly, and some instinct made him inhale deeply, drawing Flick's scent into his lungs.

His arousal, humming along at a steady pace while he'd explored Flick's skin, spiked. Even after six years planetside, Flick smelled like a space station—there was a tang to his scent that reminded Zed of circuits and a contained atmosphere. Beneath that was a rich undertone—something that shouted *man!* in the lizard part of Zed's brain, the part that was all *desire* and *need* and fuckloads of *want*. If he'd had any doubts lingering about whether or not his own

gender turned him on, the steady pulsing of his cock at that incredible scent would have erased them.

He flipped open the clasp at the top of Flick's zipper and pulled it down, tugging at Flick's pants and underwear as he did so. Flick lifted his butt so Zed could free his erection, which slapped against his stomach, the sound of skin against skin a perfect counterpoint to their ragged breaths.

Zed stared. He couldn't help it. It was the first time he'd seen a hard dick that wasn't his own, and he wasn't so far gone on lust that he didn't want to categorize the differences. Flick was longer than he was— but not by much— and a little thinner, with a perfectly proportioned crown currently dripping pre-come over his abdomen. His balls were tight against the base of his cock and graced with bristly hair just a shade or two darker than that on his head. Zed trailed a fingertip along the prominent vein and Flick's cock twitched.

Flick whimpered. "God, the way you're looking at me..."

Emboldened by the instinctive movement of Flick's hips, Zed wrapped his hand around his erection and jacked.

"Fuck!" Flick's cry was strangled, as though he was desperate to hold a part of himself back.

That wouldn't do. Zed wanted all of him, right here, on this rooftop alongside him. He wanted... well, something he'd never experienced himself, and not something he'd ever done to someone else— obviously— but there was a reason porn existed, right? A boy had to get his education somewhere.

*Don't think, just do.*

Zed pressed his tongue flat against Flick's cock and licked, all the way up from balls to tip— then engulfed the crown and sucked. Flick's whole body spasmed, as though Zed was made of electricity, and nonsensical words poured out of his mouth. Babbling... he'd made Flick babble.

And damn, he liked the feel of a hard cock on his tongue.

It wasn't something he'd daydreamed about but now that he was here, doing this, he wondered why he hadn't. The salty-bitter drops of pre-come leaking from Flick's tip tasted amazing. Flick thrust upward, out of control, and Zed gagged as the erection slammed to the back of his throat. Lesson learned. He encircled the base with one hand to better control the depth. Retching would not be sexy.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck*," Flick moaned. "Don't stop, please don't..."

In answer, Zed sucked harder, faster. He fluttered his tongue into the slit, reveling at the concentrated flavor of Flick, and groaned. His own cock pounded against his pants, desperate for a touch, a brush, a thought, anything. But all that truly mattered in this moment was Flick. Flick's pleasure, Flick's love.

"Gah... Zed, I'm... *fuck!*" Flick's body curved upward, then released. Come flooded Zed's mouth— the taste more bitter than the pre-come. He swallowed some, gagged a little, and pulled back to coax Flick through his orgasm with a hand instead of his mouth. Spit and more covered his chin and he swiped at it with the back of his free hand. Flick shook with tremors, coming down from what looked like an amazing high— and Zed had done that, brought his friend to the pinnacle of physical pleasure.

It wouldn't get awkward now, would it?

Zed had sucked his brains out through his cock. Felix couldn't think. Hell, he could barely breathe. Coming had never felt like this before. Of course, he'd only ever had the comfort of his hand. A mouth? Holy shit. Zed had sucked his cock. Kissed it, licked it, taken it inside his mouth and sucked it.

Why hadn't he told Zed he loved him a year ago?

Zed looked kinda dazed.

"That was 'mazing," Felix said, tongue refusing to work properly. How was he ever going to return this favor without a working tongue? Wait. Was he really thinking about doing this to Zed? Felix's thoughts stuttered again before clearing with a resounding *fuck yeah*.

Zed had moved back, and a sense of loss wound through Felix— not just because Zed had let go of his penis. Reaching down to pull up his pants, Felix tilted his head sideways to get another look at Zed's face, and caught sight of an expression that didn't visit Anatolius features very often: *hesitance*.

"Hey," Felix murmured.

Zed wouldn't meet his eyes.

Nope, they weren't going to do this now, whatever it was Zed was thinking of doing. They were not going to stop and think. Talk it out, remind each other of the fact this was a one night deal. Felix refused to believe that, anyway. When Zed stepped onto his shuttle in the morning, he'd be taking a piece of Felix with him, and leaving a piece of himself behind. What they shared could never be explored in one night. Hadn't Marnie said love was patient? Felix wasn't known for patience, but he could be a persistent bugger.

He tucked himself away and reached for Zed, hauling him back in. "Want to taste myself on you," he said, lifting his chin for a kiss.

Zed kissed him and it was... weird. The flavor of Zed's mouth altered his taste. Felix couldn't say if it was good or bad, but it was definitely sexy. He kissed Zed until the rumble started again, until Zed seemed committed to what they were doing once more. Then Felix began pushing him backward. They really should have scouted a better location than an air conditioning duct for this. But it was nearly as wide as a dorm room bed and they did have a locked door. And the beauty of the stars strung overhead probably couldn't be equaled.

Felix pulled at Zed's belt.

"You don't have to," Zed said, catching his hands.

"S rude to talk when you're being kissed." Felix's lips moved over Zed's. "Besides, where you lead, I follow. Always been like that."

"Not always. I've followed you many a time."

"Usually into trouble." Grinning, Felix pressed another kiss to Zed's lips and discovered that smiling widely made kissing difficult. Their mouths didn't line up anymore. He grabbed at the hard ridge behind Zed's fly and squeezed. Zed's moan changed the shape of his lips, and the kissing got all serious again.

Belt undone, zip tugged down, Felix urged Zed to lift his hips. He pushed Zed's pants down to his thighs, too eager to get to the good stuff to bother getting them down any farther. He slid a hand inside Zed's underpants and grasped his length.

"God, you're so hot." He meant temperature wise, but Zed could take it any way he wanted. His cock *was* hot, and heavy against Felix's palm. He squeezed. Zed gasped and groaned. Arched upward. Felix let go long enough to tug Zed's underwear down and took a moment to appreciate what he'd unveiled. Thick, hard, and ruddy, with a slight kink to the left. Felix took a

hold of the shaft and straightened it. Pre-come beaded the divot at the top, glistening in the starlight. Felix leaned forward to lick it.

Tasted... not entirely pleasant. But he liked it anyway. It was Zed, and he reckoned with practice, he could get used to it. Learn to love it. And the way Zed was groaning? Yeah...

A moment of uncertainty caught him as he prepared to wrap his lips around the crown. What if he did this wrong? What if his teeth got in the way? Would he choke? He'd heard Zed making a noise like he might have tried to swallow too much. What if he figured out this was the best thing ever, and didn't get a chance to suck Zed's cock again? Ever.

*Shut up and suck it, Flick.*

He opened his mouth and swallowed Zed's cock. Beneath him, Zed shuddered and moaned. His hips thrust upward and the head of his cock nudged the back of Felix's throat. Gagging, Felix pulled back and followed Zed's example of using his hand as a depth gauge.

*Don't suck past this point.*

Sucking to down to his fingers was amazing, though. The taste, the feel of Zed's rigid flesh against his tongue. The way Zed's cock seemed to pulse in his mouth. And having just had Zed's mouth around his own precious had taught him a couple of things: pressure was king, and there was nothing more awesome than the feeling of being wrapped up tight— and of having something to push into and against.

“Oh God, oh God,” Zed whispered-moaned.

With his other hand, Felix cupped Zed's heavy sac. Zed grunted and jerked. More bitter fluid met Felix's tongue. Rounding his lips, Felix sucked up and down in a steady rhythm— four, maybe five times?— then Zed pushed at his shoulders.

“Coming!”

Felix pulled away.

Zed's head tipped back and his hips thrust up. Felix jacked him once more and he came, jetting upward, his whole body following. Felix wished he'd stayed down there to catch it in his mouth, even though he knew he'd have coughed and spat and... well, Zed probably wouldn't have noticed. He was still thrusting and coming. And coming. Jesus, how long had it been since he'd last jerked off?

Felix lowered his lips to kiss the wet and shiny head of Zed's softening dick and Zed shuddered again. “Oh God.”

Felix licked.

“Fuck!”

Felix hummed against the sticky warmth.

“Stop. You're killing me.”

Pulling back, Felix licked his lips. He felt like a cat licking cream from its whiskers. Zed caught him around the back of the neck with one of those big old hands of his and pulled him down for a kiss. Felix went willingly, barely hesitating when his almost dry stomach met Zed's damp and slick skin. The kiss was a tasting sample, both of them licking and sucking at one another's tongues. Then Zed's arms banded around his back, pulling him closer, and they cuddled.

Felix dropped his head into the crook of Zed's neck and shoulder and nuzzled the sweat-dampened skin there, inhaling the scent of Zed's soap and cologne. He could feel Zed's heart beating steadily against his chest. Below his hips, Zed's limp cock smooched somewhere near his own.

Felix never wanted to move. Ever. He wanted to stay right here, in the secure circle of Zed's arms. It had been so long since they'd lain like this. Not that they'd ever formed the habit of cuddling half naked, semen cooling between them. But they'd shared a room for two years, and even after, they'd often spent the night together, squashed side by side in the same bed, Zed making music and Felix reading comics. Conversation had been optional, because so often they hadn't needed words. Just being together had been enough.

Tears pricked Felix's eyes. He tucked an arm around the back of Zed's neck and pulled him close. "Going to miss you," he said to Zed's neck.

"Going to miss you too." Words felt more than heard as they rumbled through Zed's chest. Zed's arms tightened around him. "But I know you're going to do great. Gonna make us all proud. The fleet needs engineers like you."

"And heroes like you."

"Flick—"

"Don't say anything else." Felix pushed upward, against the circle of Zed's arms, and pressed a hard kiss to his mouth. "Let's just keep this, okay? Let this be..." What? He so desperately wanted to tell Zed he loved him again. Speak it against his lips with the taste of sex. "Let this be our night. Like you said." Zed had said one night, but whatever. "Can we... can we not talk about what's next for a while? Can we just remember what was?" Damn, his throat was closing. "I don't want to forget all the fun things we've done over the last six years."

"Last ten," Zed murmured.

"Right, like the time I talked you into stealing those strawberries from the Upper Market on Pontus."

Zed's sudden laugh quickly softened into a chuckle and his cheeks bunched up just like they always did when he found something very amusing. He moved a hand up to muss Felix's curls. "You are such a bad influence on me."

"Pfft." Felix leaned away and stood so he could pull his pants up properly. Idly, he picked at the drying mess on his stomach. Ugh. "We should probably clean up and get dressed before Marnie decides to rescue us."

No matter how they wanted to keep reality at bay, the fact was, they couldn't. It intruded, an unwelcome interloper slipping between them as they sat, sides pressed together and arms over each other's shoulders, watching the stars. Zed didn't mention what awaited them in the morning. No more talk of training or what the future held. Instead, he delved into memories, every single good memory he could think of, and tried to pretend that the pain in his chest wasn't his heart breaking.

Maybe he did love Flick *like that*— God, he didn't know, not for sure. He needed to think, to study the emotions from all angles. He didn't say anything, didn't let on about the turmoil roiling around in his chest. It wouldn't make things any easier and Flick already knew how much Zed cared for him. That counted more than three little words that may or may not be true.

Three little words that would hobble Flick.

They had fallen silent by the time the sky lightened with false dawn. Flick leaned on Zed, his breathing even, and Zed had fallen into a sort of not-quite doze. Rattling at the roof door made him jerk fully awake.

Flick snorted and sat up, blinking blearily. "Wha?"

The door opened. Zed wasn't surprised to see Marnie, Emma and Ryan spill through—really, the only surprising thing was that it had taken this long for their friends to find them.

Or— by the way Marnie was smiling at him and Flick— maybe not so surprising after all.

“Prop the door!” Flick shouted.

“I got it, I got it,” Ryan said, fitting the brick back into the doorway to keep it ajar. “You guys have a nice night?”

Zed glanced at Flick and hoped the darkness and his olive skin tone helped to mask his blush. He cleared his throat. “We had a great view of the fireworks.”

“There were fireworks?” Emma flopped down beside Flick.

“With our names and everything,” Flick told her.

Marnie and Ryan settled on the other side of Zed. “That would have been cool to see,” Marnie said, glancing at Ryan. “Really romantic.”

“Uh huh.” From Flick's tone— and the glare he shot in Marnie's direction— he clearly thought she still had something to do with stranding them up here. Which was ridiculous, because how could she have known Flick would come up here, or that Zed would come after him and be too stupid to make sure the door could be opened from this side before letting it close? “Figured you guys would all be fast asleep by now.”

Ryan snorted. “Hell no. We've been— ow.” Rubbing the ribs that Marnie had elbowed, he continued. “Looking for you.”

“There were so many places you could have disappeared to.” Marnie's brown, almond-shaped eyes were all innocence.

“Marn, I really hope Mil-Int teaches you to have a better poker face,” Zed said. She caught his gaze, hers questioning, and he gave a little shake of his head.

He didn't know what he meant by the gesture, but Marnie seemed to understand. She was good like that, seeing beneath façades and words to get to the truth. And the truth was... he just didn't fucking know where they went from here.

No, that was kind of a lie. From here, they went to specialist training. After specialist training, they would do their first postings. And then...

And then, who knew. He couldn't see that far into the future, couldn't even imagine it. Trying to out-think it, out-plan it, wasn't going to happen. They would all just have to live it.

He squeezed Flick against his side and brushed his lips over Flick's temple. “You're not going to lose me,” he whispered. It was a promise— not the one he wanted to give Flick, but the only one he could.

Flick shivered, whether from the breeze or Zed's words, he didn't know. “Ditto,” he murmured.

It would have to be enough.

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