

Cut scene from *Lonely Shore*: Snakes on a Ship

As we celebrate the launch of the last book in the Chaos Station series, we thought we'd take a look back at a scene in *Lonely Shore* that didn't make the final cut. Elias, Zed and Felix are trying to off-load some ill-gotten wine to a questionable buyer on an even more questionable station. Hope you enjoy!

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They paused outside a shaded window and, as one, lifted their chins so they could read the holo floating just over the door.

"Renenutet's Emporium," Zed said.

"Sounds Ashushk," Felix said.

"More Egyptian," Elias countered.

"Yeah?" Felix scratched his head, his finger still encountering little more than soft stubble. How long did hair take to grow anyway? "Well, so long as it's got nothing to do with moths and cartels, it's all good."

"Snakes," Elias said.

"Huh?"

"Renenutet was an Egyptian goddess who appeared as a hooded cobra." Elias nodded toward the flattened snake head symbol pressed into the molding over the columns flanking the door.

"That has got to be the most obscure fact in your head," Felix said.

Zed looked at Elias as if he waited for the captain to either refute the statement, or produce another obscure fact. Instead, Elias just grinned. "Yeah, it's pretty out there." He looked back at the door. "If a woman with a snake head greets us inside, though, I'm gone."

Right. Elias didn't like snakes, which was probably why he had a head stuffed with oddball facts about them.

The interior of the emporium was almost disappointing. No snake-headed goddesses floated out from dark corners and no tattooed gangsters leapt up from behind the counter. Instead, an old man stood up, patted a frail hand across the dusty countertop in front of him, located an old-fashioned looking pair of spectacles, slipped them over his beak of a nose and looked up. His eyes, magnified by the convex glass, blinked owlishly at each of them in turn. A pink tongue dragged across curiously fleshy lips as he returned his attention to Zed.

"Captain Idowu?" The old man's gaze roamed across Zed's broad shoulders, down his flanks, centered and rose again.

Cheeks dusky with a faint blush, the soldier pointed toward Elias.

The captain took a step forward. “Mr. Renen?”

“Indeed.” Renen’s magnified gaze hadn’t left Zed. “You’re a big fellow, aren’t you?”

Elias’s shoulders twitched, as if he resisted the urge to lean into the path of the old man’s gaze. Instead, he introduced the big fellow. “My security officer, Mr. Loop.” By agreement, they didn’t use Zed’s real name in places where it might stir up more than dust. Elias waved in Felix’s direction. “And my engineer, Mr. Ingesson.”

Renen continued to study Zed. “Nice to make your acquaintance, Mr. Loop.”

Zed offered a brusque nod in return. The color on his cheeks had narrowed from a blush to annoyed spots. Renen spared a quick glance for Elias and an even shorter pass of Felix before returning his attention to Zed, apparently oblivious to, or excited by, the veiled threat of the larger man’s expression. “You have some wine for me?”

Elias made a small noise in the back of his throat, which was unnoticed by Renen. Felix swallowed the beginnings of a chuckle as Zed reached up to tug at the collar of his grey shirt. Imagine if he’d worn black. Renen’s large eyes followed the soldier’s fingers and then his myopic gaze fixed on Zed’s chest. Felix nudged Zed’s ribs and jerked his head toward the hovering sleds of wine. Apparently negotiation was the sexy security officer’s job today.

Zed cleared his throat and said, “Twelve dozen bottles of Risus varietals. They tend toward the more full-bodied grape. Shiraz, claret, Bordeaux-style. A dozen malbec in there too.”

Renen spared a glance for the crates, then quickly looked back at Zed, lifting his white whiskered chin so he could meet the soldier’s eyes. “You seem to know your wine, sir.”

Feeling evil, Felix grinned. “Mr. Loop has a keen appreciation for the finer things, Mr. Renen.” Which was nothing but the truth.

“Indeed.” Renen pushed his spectacles up his nose and rounded the counter so he could sidle up to Zed. “And your asking price?”

“Was in the sales form we forwarded,” Elias put in.

Renen flicked an annoyed glance in Elias direction. “But not a final figure.”

“No,” Elias confirmed.

Between them, the *Chaos* crew had settled on a lowest sum they’d take for the wine. Felix could sense Elias subtracting zeroes from that figure now, anything to shorten the deal and pull Zed out from under. Zed, who’d made a heroic effort to stand still beneath the scrutiny of the ancient lecher, probably wouldn’t fight it. Felix, who cared little for credits, would happily abandon the crates...after he’d watched his lover squirm just a little more.

“We’ll take three hundred per crate,” Zed said.

“Oh, I’ve something else in mind.”

Felix swallowed a chuckle and it hurt, damn it. He reached up to massage his neck and Elias looked over, his eyes shining with mirth. Felix shook his head and Elias put a hand to his mouth, ostensibly to rub at his chin. Zed’s shoulders stiffened.

Zed could flirt. A crook of his lips and Felix was his...utterly. No surprise there. But one look from his steel-blue eyes could melt the resistance of even the iciest bitch. He used his power with discretion, however, as if he figured he might actually have to follow up at some point, and while the soldier’s taste was wide and varied, it did not include wizened old gentlemen. Ever.

“What would that be?” Zed asked, his tone carefully neutral.

“An even trade. I have a shipment of Vernese Pythons that will fetch three hundred credits each, maybe more.”

Elias’ shoulders lined up with Zed’s. “A shipment of what?” he asked.

Renen produced a wallet, folded it open and tapped. A blank wall, one that had previously garnered no more attention than it warranted, began to slide into the floor. Behind, stacked in four rows of three were a dozen Perspex cubes holding twelve snakes. Big snakes. Fucking huge snakes, massive coils pressed up against the thick plastic. Through the series of pinprick ventilation holes that marked the upper edge of each cube, a chorus of hisses slithered through the air, a soft susurrus that caressed the ear and the fine hairs along the back of the neck.

Felix’s stomach cramped as he shivered. He didn’t have a particular phobia of snakes, but reckoned twelve—whose bodies ranged from the thickness of his thigh to Zed’s—were eleven too many. Twelve too many. Shit, Elias was going to—

“Nope.” The captain backed into Felix and edged around him toward the door. “No deal, no sale. No way, no how. No snakes on the *Chaos*, not now, not ever.”

Zed turned to his captain, a glint of evil lighting his cool blue eyes. “They’re in cubes, Eli. Perfectly safe.”

Elias glared at his security officer. “Ever seen that old vid? *Snakes on a Plane*? It’s a fucking disaster waiting to happen, man, and it ain’t happening on my boat.”

Zed cocked his head to one side. “We could sell these for twice what he’s giving them to us for.”

Wrapping a hand around Zed’s meaty forearm, Renen inserted himself into the conversation. “Oh, indeed. It’s a fair trade for me. The wine is much easier to sell on station than the snakes. A deal we can both profit from.” He rubbed Zed’s arm.

Zed smacked his hand away. “You might have mentioned the snakes in your initial communication.”

The snakes hissed.

“But I prefer to deal in person. It’s so much more pleasant, don’t you think?” He gazed up at Zed. “We might never have had the chance to meet otherwise.”

Oh, God.

“Never going to happen, Renen,” Zed said through gritted teeth. Then a large hand hooked Felix around the neck and pulled him in close. “See this man?” Zed paused, then looked at Felix and smiled, his cheeks lifting his eyes warming. “He is all I need.” He leaned in and pressed a kiss to Felix’s lips.

While flattered to be possessed so thoroughly in the company of a stranger, Felix couldn’t relax into the kiss. Not because he felt Zed had used him as an excuse. Nope, he’d take any opportunity to be Zed’s. Made him feel better than good, a glow that started somewhere around his toes and worked its way slowly upward. More, the hissing of the damned snakes cut into the moment. Leached the joy out of his fucking joy. Elias panicking behind him sorta ruined it, too, and the way Renen kept licking his lips.

And the fact they were obviously going to be trailed back to the *Chaos* by two sleds of wine.

Still, it was moment and Felix tucked it away into the core of his being. He’d take it out and hug it later. Stretch it, play with it, love it quietly.