



A Policy of

LIES

Loose Id

Astrid Amara

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Chapter One

Levi Kaszeri stepped off the colony shuttle at the Washoe Station, took one look at the deserted, darkened street in front of him, and made the not-so-startling but nevertheless depressing realization that he was a complete idiot.

Only an idiot walked alone through the Washoe District in darkness unarmed.

Levi moved briskly down the grated street. It was just past ten, and the Tova Star was no longer visible. Only the vibrant colors of the aurora lit his path.

He kept his pace quick but careful. Levi had grown up in a city more deteriorated than the Washoe District, in neighborhoods that had been torn apart by years of war. He had learned how to defend himself at an early age. But it had been years since he had engaged in a street fight, and now, unarmed and in unfamiliar territory, Levi's nerves were getting the better of him.

He told himself that the risk was worth it. He was about to collect the evidence he needed to finalize his story on the Tarus 9 massacre. He had investigated the story for years, and with luck, all his efforts would pay off tonight.

In the dark, Washoe Street didn't look half bad. Though devoid of trees or any other greenery, the district appeared empty but peaceful. The dilapidated storefronts and warped

plastic windows seemed sleepy when shrouded in darkness. The hisses of feral cats sounded like fervent whispers. But the passing odor of a broken sewer line reminded Levi of Washoe's constant struggle with sanitation issues.

All of the other biospheres that made up the Ishan Colony were known across the system for their verdant displays of lush foliage. It was a sign of Ishan's wealth. But Washoe was the pit of the colony. Once the industrial heart of the system, it now lay abandoned as mining operations moved to Ishan's ten moons. All that was left was a wasteland of addiction and poverty, families too poor to leave, too undereducated to find jobs in the other districts, and too depressed to do much more than stare at the violent auroras above them and get high. Washoe embodied the sadness of defunct space dreams.

Levi paused, suddenly wishing he had his voice recorder in hand. "The sadness of defunct space dreams" was the kind of line that the new owner of the *Ishan Report*, Rowan Ryland, would adore.

Levi smiled to himself. Like many of the women in his department, Levi harbored a secret crush on his new boss. Rowan Ryland was not only independently wealthy, suave, and funny, but he was a brilliant marketer and newsman.

Just that morning, Ryland had shown great interest in Levi's Tarus 9 story. There was a confident, older-brother feeling about Ryland that made Levi feel like an enthusiastic adolescent, desperate to please. The thought propelled Levi faster, past what was once the central green of the Washoe District.

The sterile soil of the old park was now a large field of slumbering bodies. The climate-controlled temperature of the sphere protecting Washoe District eliminated the need for shelter, so the region's poorest inhabitants lay out on blankets and claimed spots on the only open land available. Eyes peered at Levi in the darkness, watching him pass by. He heard whispers and a few insults tossed in his direction.

Above him, the magnetic field of the dome protecting Ishan churned out an endless display of swirling colors and shapes. The aurora was particularly powerful here in Washoe.

Levi heard the rustle of cloth to his right. He made brief eye contact with a tall, pale man, his blue eyes startlingly bright. As soon as Levi saw him, the man nodded and passed by. Levi tensed his hands into fists and continued forward past the rickety tables of a sidewalk bar.

Up ahead, he saw the blackened sign of Washoe District's only bank. Its doors shut hours ago, but Levi's informant had given him a pass code that would allow him entry into the bank's hallway of deposit boxes.

A loud boom shook the ground and startled Levi. Adrenalin coursed through him, but the men at the nearby bar didn't flinch, continuing to talk and eye him suspiciously. For them, the sonic boom from the intercolony shuttle station a half mile away was so common, they obviously barely noticed it anymore.

Levi reached into his pocket and pulled out his operator. He switched the plastic card on with his thumbprint and a digital interface hologram appeared above it, wavering in the air as Levi shifted toward the door.

"Door pass code," he whispered, looking nervously back at the men outside the bar. He didn't have enough cash to buy the latest operating system, the one he could control with a neural cortex upgrade, and he hadn't realized how much he really wanted one until now.

The number his informant had given him appeared in the air, and Levi entered it into the door keypad carefully. Banks often had alarms triggered by false code entries. Levi pressed *Enter* into the security panel and held his breath. He had to trust in his informant now.

Truthfully, Levi didn't have a lot of reasons to put his faith in this complete stranger. All he knew was that the informant had given him a few facts regarding the slaughter on Tarus 9 over the last few months, and those leads had all turned out to be genuine. Whoever

Levi's informant was, he or she had accurate information -- information that he desperately needed, not only to finish his story on the massacre, but also to finally see justice done.

Rowan Ryland thought that Levi's steadfast persistence on this story showed he was an excellent reporter, anxious for a chance to prove his worth. Ryland didn't realize that the story of the Tarus 9 cover-up was a lifelong obsession for Levi. It was why he had gone into journalism in the first place. It was the reason he got up in the morning.

Revenge.

It was an ugly word to use, but it fit. Retribution didn't quite cover the depth of hatred that he had for the men who had been responsible for the murder of his family. It didn't seem fair that revenge was still ugly when it applied to someone after something so evil. But there was no skirting around the issue. This story was going to be his revenge. It was going to be the death of Levi's enemies.

"Thank you," the door chimed in a sultry female voice. A lock mechanism hissed, and the door pressed slightly outward. Levi quickly pulled the door the rest of the way open, then made sure that it closed securely behind him.

As soon as Levi entered the deposit hallway, the lights automatically turned on. He made his way down the long wall of silver drawers until he reached C709.

Levi typed in the pass code once more. He noted that he was clenching his right fist again, a habit that his friend Imogen informed him was unnerving.

The box slid freely open. Inside was the implant, just as his informant had said.

It was small, no more than a centimeter square, and filmy. Tiny circuits ran across its plastic surface. Levi stared down at it for a moment in amazement.

Memory implants were very expensive, very rare, and he had only heard of them, never seen one in real life. They were able to record all that a person saw and heard, and were originally designed to record information gathered by spies. Few people who had

implants survived their dangerous line of work, and the implant was the only way to retrieve the sensitive information they may have been exposed to.

However, the process of surgically removing the implant from the brain after it was grafted on was so dangerous that memory implants were now predominantly retrieved postmortem.

Levi peeled back the bandage he had taped to the inside of his left forearm. Then he put the tiny implant against his skin and reapplied the tape, pressing down on the bandage for good measure.

Levi pulled down the sleeve of his shirt, closed drawer C709, and left the bank. The next shuttle back to the capital of Ishan would be leaving in ten minutes.

Outside, the men at the bar continued to watch him as he turned back toward the station. He walked briskly, keeping his face blank of all emotion. He let go of the breath he had been holding as soon as the shuttle station was in sight.

A sharp, stinging pain shot through Levi's upper body. His hand instinctively touched the back of his neck. He felt the contours of a dart. He reeled around in anger, when suddenly the pain blossomed into a burning agony, and then icy numbness. He saw a man running toward him from out of the park. Levi took all of one second to contemplate whether he would be able to fight the assailant. As his legs began to tremble, he made his decision. He ran.

The slow spread of the dart's poison coursed through his body. Each step felt like he was wading through water. His limbs grew numb. The brush of his elbow against his side felt foreign, alien, and then even his chest began to tingle.

Someone pushed him from behind, and he was unable to break his fall. His hands weakly flailed out in front of him, scraping uselessly against the road. His head struck the steel-grated roadway with brutal severity, the pain breaking through his drowning

numbness. With the last of his strength, Levi clenched his fist and punched the man attacking him.

The man cursed and stumbled backward, cupping his bleeding nose.

And then the assailant was back, pushing Levi down. He tried to open his eyes and move, but he was completely paralyzed, lying there as the mugger searched through his pockets and felt through his clothes.

Suddenly, the man on top of him was pulled off his body. The mugger's face was slammed into the roadway beside him.

Levi watched, immobile and stunned, as the tall, pale man he had seen before reached down and with a growl of rage smashed the assailant's face into the steel grate once more. Levi's assailant lay in the street, as motionless as he.

The pale man knelt beside Levi and grabbed his wrist. Levi tried to pull away, but the man held him tightly, pressing two fingers against his wrist.

"It's all right," the man said. His voice was calm, low, and rolled from his tongue with a peculiar accent. "I'm a doctor."

The doctor leaned closer. He looked young, almost too young to be a physician. His pale skin appeared nearly translucent in the dimly lit alleyway. His blue eyes stared down at Levi in concern. The bangs of his golden blond hair hung over his eyes.

"You're...fucking...gorgeous," Levi whispered, his tongue thick in his throat. It was all he could get out before unconsciousness took him.

Chapter Two

Levi had no idea where he was.

His body hurt. He had a sense of dread. He briefly thought he was back on Tarus 9, hiding in the shadows.

Levi bolted upright, only to find that his body was sluggish in response, and his head pounded in unbearable agony.

“Relax. You’re safe.”

Levi squinted in the fluorescent light and saw the man who had rescued him from the mugger. The man inserted an IV needle into Levi’s arm. Levi frowned at the clear fluid being fed into him.

“It’s davirzole,” the doctor said. “It will reverse the effect of the dart you were shot with. Take it easy; it should work in no time.”

Levi took in his surroundings. He was in one of half a dozen empty hospital beds lining a chipped plaster wall. The room was small, the ceiling low, and it was full of ancient medical equipment. There were two dirty plastic windows in the front that were barricaded with bars. A small metal desk was the only other object in the room, and it was crowded with acrylic papers and an old osys interface.

A single fluorescent tube lit the room and made shadows jump across the pale walls. Levi squinted up at his rescuer.

The man looked weary. His short blond hair was so yellow it made his handsome face appear even paler.

There were strange scars on his body as well. A faint gash on his forehead, faded over the years. A fainter line near the base of his neck. And both his hands were marked with small lines of raised tissue that caught the light and glinted like silver. He had medical implants. Implants were so expensive, only the wealthiest doctors could afford them.

His eyes were deep blue, and looked down at Levi with a somewhat bemused expression.

“Do you have any idea how heavy you are?”

“One hundred and ninety pounds,” Levi mumbled. He winced as he spoke, feeling the swelling on his jaw where the assailant had hit him.

“I practically dragged you here,” the doctor said. The corner of his mouth twitched upward. “I’m sure that didn’t look suspicious at all.”

“Where am I?” Levi demanded. His tongue felt thick in his dry mouth.

The doctor handed him a plastic cup of water.

“You’re in the Washoe Free Clinic.” He pulled up a rolling stool and sat beside Levi. “My name is Dr. Tiergan Seoras.”

With sudden recollection, Levi reached for the bandage on his upper arm. He felt it was still intact and breathed a sigh of relief.

Tiergan Seoras stared at him with an intense, unreadable expression. His lean, muscular body didn’t fit Levi’s image of a doctor at all. He seemed too young and too strong. Levi could make out the contours of his arm muscles underneath his plain white T-shirt.

“This sucks,” Levi said.

The doctor smiled crookedly. He gently urged Levi’s shoulder back against the bed.

“You can’t leave yet. I need to examine your head. You have a nasty concussion.”

“I know,” Levi said, scowling. “I can feel it.”

“Good. That means the drug is clearing from your system.” Tiergan leaned over Levi and peered at him with a keen expression. Levi’s scowl deepened.

“What are you doing?”

“Quiet.” The doctor stared at the gash on Levi’s forehead. As he did, Levi saw Tiergan’s left pupil dilate. There was a faint chink of metallic parts whirring, and then he noticed a small metal lens rotate around the inside of his eye. He focused on Levi intently.

“Your robot eye is creeping me out,” Levi told him.

Tiergan smirked. But his focus didn’t waver.

“I know what I’m doing,” he said. His voice, smooth and low, rumbled in a way that was assuring and solid. His accent was strange and implacable. He was obviously not from this system.

“I’ve met some bad doctors in my life,” Levi told him, trying hard not to be worried by the strange noises emanating from the turning, focusing lens around Tiergan’s iris.

Tiergan leaned even closer. Levi could smell a sweetness on his skin, like cloves, slightly hidden under an earthy, masculine scent. He was finding the doctor’s proximity pleasantly distracting.

“This treatment isn’t going to involve you kissing me, is it?” Levi asked, noting how Tiergan’s smile was charmingly crooked. His teeth were very white, his lips full. Levi had to suppress an urge to run his fingers along Tiergan’s mouth.

Tiergan kept staring at Levi’s forehead. “Unfortunately, no.” He moved even closer. “Relax. This is going to sting.”

A small pin prick of light suddenly shot out from the metal lens in Tiergan’s eye. Instantly, Levi felt the flesh of his forehead heating. He told himself to breathe deeply.

“So, how does a doctor working in a free clinic afford an x-eye?” Levi asked.

“Don’t move.”

“What will happen?”

“I could burn the very flesh from your body.”

Levi blanched. “Really?”

Tiergan smiled crookedly. “Nah. Just kidding. But stop moving. I’m going to sterilize and seal the wound shut.”

Levi closed his eyes, and concentrated on not moving. He wondered how much training a doctor in a free clinic would have in using such expensive equipment.

The burning sensation eased to a sting, and then a soft ache. Tiergan became still as stone. It was strange, looking into a man’s face from only a few inches away, his focus so unwaveringly upon Levi’s forehead. Levi had a sudden desire to scratch his scalp.

As soon as the light from his implant extinguished, Tiergan pulled back. Levi immediately missed his proximity.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Levi said. Now that the doctor’s pupil was contracting back to its normal size, Levi wanted to keep him near. After such a harrowing experience, he liked the companionship of a man beside him. It didn’t hurt that the man was also hot as hell.

Tiergan’s eyebrow lifted. “Yes, I did. Kissing has nothing to do with the treatment.”

Levi flushed. “No. The question about how you can afford an x-eye.”

“You’re too nosy,” Tiergan said. He gently prodded the swelling on Levi’s jaw and frowned. “That probably hurts, but nothing is broken.” The doctor’s fingers lingered on Levi’s face for a second longer than need be, and then he removed them. “Give me your hands, please.”

Levi placed his large hands in Tiergan’s, feeling slightly foolish. “So, how does a doctor with cybernetic implants end up wandering Washoe Street so late at night?”

“I was on my way home,” Tiergan said. “It’s only a few blocks.”

“You walk to work? In this neighborhood?”

“Good for the lungs.” Tiergan studied Levi’s palms for a moment, and then rustled on a side table for some tweezers. He then methodically pulled small pebbles of gravel from the abrasions on Levi’s palms. They were so small, Levi hadn’t even seen them himself.

Tiergan’s bangs fell over his eyes as he worked, and once again Levi felt a surge of desire flush through his body. It had been ages since anyone had elicited such an immediate effect on his sex drive. Tiergan’s touch was gentle but effective. Levi only felt small stings as Tiergan picked at the tender flesh of Levi’s palms.

As Tiergan bent his neck lower, Levi saw a barcode tattooed behind his ear. It was so small that most people would never have noticed it. But Levi had grown up in the mining camps of Tarus 9, where indentured servitude was commonplace. He had never considered the possibility that educated men such as doctors could be owned as easily as laborers.

Levi tried to make out the individual characteristics of the barcode, to see if he could look it up later. But Tiergan seemed to realize he was being stared at, and quickly lifted his head.

“You sure you’re a good doctor?” Levi asked.

Again, that charming crooked half smile. “Don’t worry. I’m a great doctor,” Tiergan said. “I’m a terrible person, however.”

“Just my type.” Levi smiled at him.

Tiergan touched Levi’s arm. His touch was confident and assured. Levi could feel a melting inside of him.

Levi shook his head to clear it. This was insane. He had just been mugged. His body shook with aftershocks of adrenalin and fear. All he needed to do now was go home, check the implant, and put this terrible night behind him.

But instead, Levi was flirting with a complete stranger in a dingy medical facility, wishing that he had more injuries for the doctor to tend to.

Tiergan sprayed the palms and split knuckles of Levi's hands with an antiseptic and then placed them on Levi's lap.

"All the gravel is out. I'll give you a pain suppressant for your headache."

Levi tensed. "No. No mind drugs."

"But --"

"I don't like being drugged."

Tiergan stared at him. His eyes were mesmerizingly blue. "Your head is only going to feel worse as the paralyzing drug fades, Mr. Kaszeri."

Levi narrowed his eyes. "How do you know my name?"

Tiergan pointed to Levi's wallet, on the table beside him. "I'm sorry. But I scanned your ID card to see if you had insurance before I brought you inside."

Levi frowned. There was no way that he could ever afford medical insurance on his reporter's salary. He shifted uncomfortably.

"I thought you said this was a free clinic."

"It is." Tiergan placed a hand on Levi's knee. The gesture was at once so innocent, and yet such an obvious come on, that Levi felt his entire body surge to life in response. It couldn't be his imagination anymore. This doctor was definitely flirting with him.

Where Tiergan touched him, Levi felt his skin grow warm. His muscles loosened, he felt almost drunk. Then again, it could also have been the various drugs coursing through his system.

"I wouldn't be treating you if you had an insurance account registered," Tiergan said with a lowered voice.

"You refuse to treat the insured?"

"It's not that I refuse. The insurance companies won't let me. Insured have to see their own doctors. If they come to me, they could be dropped, and I would be fined."

“So you would have left me in the street, bleeding to death?” Levi asked.

“No. I would have erased the insurance registry key on your ID card.”

Levi raised an eyebrow. “That’s illegal.”

Tiergan shrugged. He was looking at Levi almost hungrily.

“I didn’t realize being covered was such a liability,” Levi said.

“You have no idea.”

The two of them sat there for a moment, looking at each other, and Levi’s heart began to race. *Now*, he thought. *Now, now, kiss him. Don’t be such a coward. Just kiss him.*

Tiergan stood. Levi’s skin felt cold as soon as Tiergan’s touch withdrew. He was an idiot. He always missed the opportunity to catch the guys he wanted.

The problem was that Levi hadn’t grown up on Ishan, where men were openly gay and flirtation seemed to be easy. Levi grew up hiding his nature in a devastated war zone.

As Tiergan stepped away from Levi, Levi felt an aching sense of disappointment in himself. He would remain alone forever if he didn’t find some courage and just take a chance with someone.

“You should fully recover from the effects of the dart in about half an hour,” Tiergan said. “Just sit back and relax.”

Levi leaned back and watched Tiergan move around the room, putting his equipment away. Tiergan was strong and graceful, but Levi could see a bone-weary exhaustion in his movements.

Levi closed his eyes. The fact that he had been mugged was beginning to sink in. Exhaustion began to tug at him as well, along with a steadily increasing headache. The more movement he gained through his body, the more his head hurt.

Levi tried sitting up but his head immediately protested, sending a surge of agony through him so startling he groaned. Tiergan put down the bag of garbage he was lifting and moved to Levi’s side. He looked down at Levi and shook his head.

“Most people would be screaming for a painkiller about now,” he said. “I’m impressed.”

Levi tried to play off the pleased rush of joy he felt at the compliment with a shrug. “I had a rough childhood.”

“Are you from Ishan?” Tiergan asked.

“No. From Tarus 9.”

Tiergan frowned. He picked up his bag of garbage once more. “I don’t know many people who grew up on Tarus 9.”

“Not many of us lived to grow up.”

Tiergan paused on his way to the incinerator. He looked at Levi. “Do you want me to turn on the screen so you can watch something while you recuperate?”

Levi drummed up every ounce of courage he had, and reached out to grab Tiergan’s arm. “I’d rather talk to you.”

“Oh?” Tiergan’s eyebrows raised just a fraction. “Why me?”

Levi shrugged. “You’re interesting.”

“Interesting? How?”

“It’s not every day that a guy gets dragged down an alley by a handsome doctor who not only has cybernetic implants but once was owned.”

Tiergan stared at Levi intently. Any hint of a smile was gone. “You see a lot, Mr. Kaszeri.”

“Call me Levi. And I’m a reporter. I’m nosy. It’s my job.”

“So it is.” Tiergan turned and tossed the bag into the incinerator, and then sat beside Levi once more. There was a slight tension in Tiergan’s body language now. He did not reach out and touch Levi as he had before.

“What netcast do you work for?” he asked.

“The *Ishan Report*,” Levi said.

Tiergan looked impressed. “And what story were you working on this evening?”

“It is an old story I’ve been working on for years. It’s about Tarus 9.”

Levi sensed Tiergan’s expression cooling. Of course it was. Nobody wanted to talk about genocide. It was a mood killer. He was losing Tiergan’s interest. He had to act fast.

Levi steeled his resolve. He reached toward Tiergan’s hand and wrapped his fingers around Tiergan’s wrist. “But we don’t have to talk about that. Maybe you could help me take my mind off my pain some other way.”

Tiergan went very still. “What did you have in mind?”

Levi still couldn’t read him. He would have to be bold. “You could touch me.” Levi urged Tiergan’s wrist downward.

Tiergan frowned again. Levi’s heart stopped. God, was he wrong? Was the doctor straight after all? *How fucking embarrassing.* Nothing worse than coming off like a complete pervert toward some straight guy who just saved your life.

“I’m a doctor,” Tiergan said roughly. He swallowed. “You’re my patient. It’s against the rules.”

Well, at least he’s not straight. Levi noticed that Tiergan didn’t move his hand. It stayed, unmoving but firm, on Levi’s crotch.

“What rules?” Levi whispered. “I’m just a bystander who you helped out of a scrape.” Levi took a deep breath, then looked Tiergan in the eye. “I could pay you back for your help in any way you want.”

“Any way I want?” Tiergan’s throat trembled as he swallowed again. His eyes had gotten big, and not because of the implants. They locked with Levi’s.

“Yes,” Levi said.

“Well, then.” Tiergan raised an eyebrow. “I am allowed to take payments in creative ways.” He pressed his palm down, stroking Levi’s already hard cock. Levi’s eyes fluttered closed.

“How’s your headache?” Tiergan asked, rubbing his palm along Levi’s shaft.

“What headache?” Levi whispered, and Tiergan laughed quietly.

Tiergan used both hands to unbuckle Levi’s dark jeans and pull out Levi’s straining cock.

Tiergan pumped Levi’s dick quietly and assuredly. His hand was warm, the metal of his implants glinting in the fluorescent light as he fisted Levi’s shaft and stroked almost roughly.

It had been a while since Levi had done this, an impersonal hand job with a stranger, and while it lacked sentimentality, it still made his heart race, pleasure building in his testicles, overwhelming all other sensations, all other needs. He was conscious only of the steady rhythm of Tiergan’s hand. Levi arched on the bed and then came explosively, coating Tiergan’s fingers.

Tiergan silently reached over and wiped his hand on a towel. His pupils were dilated, he looked flushed, and Levi suddenly wanted to kiss him. As he leaned forward to do so, however, Tiergan quickly pulled back. Levi’s face flamed in embarrassment.

“Better?” Tiergan asked.

Levi nodded. He looked pointedly at the doctor’s crotch, which showed an encouraging bulge.

“Your turn,” Levi said, sitting up on the bed.

Tiergan hesitated. “Are you sure your head doesn’t hurt?”

“It’s fine,” Levi said quickly. He reached forward.

Tiergan stepped back for a moment. He seemed skittish about being touched, despite his own arousal and clear experience with jerking off other guys. Again, Levi found himself at a loss as to what the man was thinking.

Tiergan unbuttoned his trousers, dropping them to the floor. His large, pale cock sprang forward, its tip bright red, already leaking from the slit. Golden pubic hair curled around the base, and his balls hung low and loose, also very pale, with a slightly pinkish hue.

Levi couldn't help but reach out and grasp Tiergan's cock. It was hot and thick in his hands. Perhaps Tiergan wanted nothing more than reciprocation -- another quick handjob -- but Levi needed to taste him, feel that soft heat in his mouth. He pulled Tiergan's hips to him, aiming the shaft toward his lips, and wrapped the tip of Tiergan's cock with his mouth. Tiergan tensed, attempted to pull back, but then he groaned and suddenly he was pumping his hips forward, thrusting his prick down Levi's throat. Levi's lips stretched at the corners to take him all in. Tiergan's cock wasn't unusually long but it was very thick.

For someone who started off reluctant, Tiergan really got into it, his hands fisting in Levi's hair, fucking his mouth with desperate enthusiasm. Levi opened wider, pulling Tiergan to the base of his throat, and Tiergan groaned and then came, hot salty liquid pulsing repeatedly, filling Levi's mouth.

Levi pulled back, mouth full, and as Tiergan's cock slipped over his lips, a trail of cum coated them. Levi swallowed it all down and then sat back.

Tiergan seemed frozen. Then his eyes flashed open. He reached out and wiped Levi's lips with his thumb, smearing them with his cum.

"Thank you," he said. He beamed a dazzling smile.

"My pleasure," Levi said. It was true; his headache was gone, although now he was more aware of the bruise on his jaw.

"Let me walk with you to the station." Tiergan did up his trousers and turned away.

"Thanks." Levi moved slowly, feeling hazy and drugged, and not sure what part of that was the assault, the medication, or the blowjob.

Tiergan locked the clinic behind them with methodical diligence. He had grates and bars and eye locks that made the outside of the clinic resemble a fortress by the time he was done with it. Levi couldn't recognize where he was, but as Tiergan led the way, he saw they were, indeed, only a few blocks from where he had been mugged.

"Did you know the man who attacked you?" Tiergan asked.

Levi frowned. "Of course not. Why would you ask that?"

Tiergan shrugged. "I guess I've been living in Washoe too long. I'm suspicious of everything."

"What happened to him, anyway?"

"I left him there. I called the cops while you were still out and reported it anonymously. They took him in."

"I see." Levi studied Tiergan's blank expression.

Tiergan's eyes turned to stare back. "Something wrong?"

"No," Levi said. "I just thought he was dead."

"He just looked dead."

The dim light of the Washoe Street Station was visible up ahead. Tiergan had led them on a route that sidestepped the location of Levi's assault. He wondered briefly if this was to spare him any lingering emotional trauma, or because Tiergan really had murdered the guy.

"Do you want me to wait with you?" Tiergan asked.

"I'll be fine. Thank you for everything, Dr. Seoras."

"Call me Tiergan."

"Tiergan." Levi said his name and liked the way it sounded on his tongue.

Tiergan seemed to like it as well. A flash of arousal seemed to grow in Tiergan's eyes, and he moved a step closer to Levi on the platform.

"It was my pleasure, Levi," Tiergan said, his voice lowering once more. His gravelly voice filled Levi with a hot ache. "Be sure to come by the clinic if your head gives you any more trouble."

Levi turned and stared at the doctor once more. He tried to figure out whether or not this was a sexual invitation. He was so bad at this. Tiergan had seemed interested, and

momentarily dazzled, but now he just stared at Levi with an expression of professional benevolence.

“I will,” Levi said.

And then Tiergan turned on his heel and plunged into the surrounding darkness.

“I guess we’ll exchange numbers next time,” Levi mumbled. That hand job had been good. More than good. And now he was gone. Well, what did he expect? They got each other off in a medical clinic. End of story.

But as Levi boarded the shuttle, he looked out and saw that Tiergan was still standing there, in the shadows, watching the train.

Levi wondered what the real story of Tiergan Seoras was. But that would have to wait. For now, he had a much more important story to investigate.

Chapter Three

Levi threw the basketball into the net. He caught the ball on the rebound and then dunked it. He smiled for his invisible audience of adoring fans, dribbled the ball around the sofa, and then tossed it from behind the coffee table.

The ball missed the net and instead hit his roommate, Imogen Summers, straight on the head.

“Three points!” Levi cried.

“Asshole.” Imogen shuffled out of her room, still in pajamas, making a beeline for the coffeemaker in the kitchen.

“Your head is a hard target. It’s small and pointy.”

“It’s not pointy.”

“It is. It’s all triangular, like a newborn baby who has been extracted with forceps. I told you not to shave your hair off.”

Imogen did not engage further. This was usually her tactic when Levi mentioned the unfortunate hair-shaving incident of three months ago. Now Imogen’s pointy head was covered with half an inch of thick brown fuzz, which made her look cute and a lot younger than she was, although Levi would never admit that to her.

Imogen fussed in the kitchen while Levi continued to take shots at the hoop. He was actually forcefully restraining himself from grabbing Imogen and begging her to help him, but he had learned early on that his roommate and best friend responded poorly to demands before she had fully awakened.

Levi looked over to make sure the implant he'd retrieved the night before was prominently displayed on Imogen's desk. He wanted her to notice it first and be curious. It was always easier getting Imogen to do his dirty work when she thought it was her own idea.

Levi took another shot and missed. He had been up half the night, and his game had diminished somewhere around four a.m. as he waited for his roommate to rise.

Finally, Imogen emerged from the kitchen, her eyes now fully open. She cupped a mug of coffee in one hand, and held a slice of toast in the other. Her pale yellow robe flowed around her small frame as she walked. It looked as though she were heading back to her bedroom.

The living room of their shared apartment was small, and so it was easy to casually lure Imogen past her workspace. Imogen was a neat freak. Her desk and all of her tools for repairing operating systems were neatly categorized and organized in a world of small plastic drawer units. Everything on Imogen's side of the room was pristine and white.

In contrast, the rest of the room was filled with Levi's clutter: endless stacks of books and drawings, his basketball hoop, and heaps of cleaned laundry that he never bothered to put into drawers. It was easy to get Imogen to walk past her own desk. He just had to make his part of the room uninhabitable. But just to be safe, he stood beside her desk, grinning pointedly.

But she didn't look down at her desk. Instead, she came closer to him and narrowed her eyes at his lips.

"Did you get laid last night?"

Levi shrugged. "Maybe. Why?"

“You’ve got dick-sucking lips.”

“Bullshit. That was hours ago.”

“Aha!” Imogen squealed, giggling in delight. “You did get laid!” She reached out and touched the stubble on his cheeks. “No razor burn. Didn’t kiss much.”

“I got a hand job from a gorgeous young doctor,” Levi confided. “Nice, but not really *laid*, per se.”

“Still, more action than you’ve seen in a while.”

“Not for a lack of trying.”

It was true. Other than some anonymous fondlings, Levi was going through a long stretch of nonaction. He knew his story had a lot to do with it. And the fact that his last boyfriend turned out to be a complete asshole. And that Imogen summarily dismissed the last two guys he brought home as “unworthy.” He had since declared that she wasn’t meeting any of his new dates until he was ready to move in with them.

Imogen smiled at him and patted his shoulder. “Well, good for you. At least one of us is enjoying themselves.” She looked over at her desk then, noticing the chip. “What’s that?”

Levi dribbled his ball in uncontrollable excitement. “It’s a memory implant. I need you to help me pull images off it.”

“Where did you get this?”

“Trade secret.” Levi stood behind her, looking over her shoulder at the tiny device. “I’ve been told that it is from one of the employees at the detention center on Tarus 9. It may contain actual footage of the executions.”

Levi put his hands on Imogen’s shoulders and began to give her a gentle massage. She could never refuse him anything when he did this. “Can you help me? Please?”

“Mm. A little harder on the left.”

Levi worked her shoulder muscle.

“I’ll take a look at it later this afternoon.”

“Look at it now.” As she protested, he pressed harder, eliciting a faint moan.

“You are so manipulative.” Imogen was practically purring.

“Look at it now. Now. Do it. Look at it now. Look at it.”

Imogen’s eyes snapped open. She turned around and glared at him. Levi gave her one of his award-winning smiles.

“Fine. But I want a half-hour massage afterward.”

“Deal.”

Imogen sipped her coffee and then slid into her chair. She placed the implant under her magnifier. She was quiet for a long moment, staring into the eyepiece. Levi stood at attention by her side.

“This is hot shit,” she told him.

Levi got excited. “Really? You can tell what's on it?”

“No, I mean it’s illegal. It is the property of Trust Insurance. It is not to be removed or viewed by anyone outside of Trust Insurance.”

Imogen pointed with a pin to the serial number and logo. She shook her head. “Why would a life insurance company own memory implants? They wouldn’t care about a person’s life, would they? Only their death.”

Levi shrugged. “Maybe they want to make sure the person didn’t commit suicide or do something that would nullify their policy. You never know.”

“All I know is that Trust Insurance is a multitrillion-credit corporation with high levels of security, and that this is not going to be easy to interface with,” Imogen said.

“Why? I thought you just plugged these things into an operator and you got an image.”

Imogen gave him one of her oh-you-deluded-idiot looks. “First off, this chip is damaged.”

Levi felt instantly crippled with disappointment. “Fuck.” He had so much riding on this. “Fuck!”

“Calm down, Freaky McPanic, I’m not done.” Imogen pointed to the rough edge of the chip. “See here? This part of the implant was damaged when it was removed from whatever poor guy had this in his head until he died. So there may be some problems with the imagery. But it doesn’t mean it won’t work. I’m just pointing out your first problem.”

“My *first* problem.” Levi stared at her.

“The bigger problem is that memory implants are rare,” Imogen told him. “You have to download interpreting software. And Trust Insurance uses its own software for its own devices. I can tell you it’s a genuine Trust Insurance product. But to get the image off it, I have to use their encryption program. Which is...uh...illegal.”

Levi caught the glint of excitement in Imogen’s eyes. “But you can still do it, can’t you?”

Imogen grinned. “Of course I can.”

“Then do it. Please. You know how important this is to me.”

“Yes, but you need to understand how dangerous this is,” Imogen said. “I could lose my business license if osys-technical found out I was tampering with encrypted code. I could get fired. Or arrested.”

“Can you log on as me?” Levi asked. “I will take the blame.”

“I don’t think that excuse will fly.” Imogen sighed. “Look, I will try it. And I’ll be very careful. But you should keep this quiet for now, understood?” Levi nodded.

“Why don’t you go do something useful for an hour, like getting me breakfast, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Levi gave her a kiss on the cheek and then went into his room to change.

Levi’s bedroom was small, more like a closet, and was half the size of Imogen’s bedroom. But Imogen paid most of the rent, and so Levi couldn’t complain. The two of them

had more stuff than the cramped third-floor apartment would accommodate, but the location was too good to leave.

Levi changed quickly into a clean pair of jeans and an olive green button-down shirt. He threw on his sandals and then, at the last minute, remembered to check himself in the mirror.

His black hair was wilder than usual because he hadn't bothered to style it after his midnight shower. And he had a good day's worth of stubble covering his cheeks and chin.

To add to the disaster, Levi was now sporting a very angry-looking bump on his jaw, and there was a small line where Dr. Seoras had sealed the wound on his forehead shut.

Levi smiled at the thought of the doctor.

He made his way back through their living room. Imogen was already in work mode, crunched in a weird crouch in her chair, her earphones in, banging her head to music as she rapidly sped through osys screens on the wall-sized monitor in front of her. Levi grabbed his sunglasses and left the confines of their apartment.

The weather was perfect outside. It was always perfect on Ishan. It was one of the assets of living on a man-made colony. Rather than simply maintaining a static temperature control, the biosphere simulated mild seasons. Right now, Ishan was experiencing fall. The trees that lined the glittering metal streets were full of brilliant oranges and reds, and the air smelled crisp with change.

Levi's apartment was one of a dozen complexes that lined a broad boulevard in the south of the capitol district. There was a shuttle stop directly outside his complex, but he decided to walk.

Ishan consisted of nearly two dozen domed biospheres, linked by magnetic shuttles and underground transportation tunnels, each region with its own character. The biosphere that Levi and Imogen lived in was called the Sapenski District, after one of the ten original founders of the colony, but everyone who lived on Ishan just called it the capitol.

The capitol had been built to aesthetically please its inhabitants. Over the years, its main industry had evolved into tourism, and it had become one of those few space colonies that people on Earth actually thought was safe and pleasant enough to raise a family on.

All around Levi, healthy, vibrant-looking people moved about their business in light attire. Their faces were fresh, scrubbed clean. Older couples sat together at outdoor cafés and chatted over large meals, prepared with fresh produce from the agricultural biosphere to the north of the capitol. A gaggle of teenagers sat around a beautiful stone fountain and giggled simultaneously as they all watched something scandalous on shared osys screen. Everyone here lived their lives in relative peace. Everyone here *wanted* to be here.

It was moments like this that Levi realized how far he was from his roots. These people walked about and discussed health trends and boring days at work and gossiped about the little features of their lives, completely oblivious of what happened to people only a few thousand miles away, on the moons that surrounded Ishan.

His thoughts turned darker as he veered onto the main shopping thoroughfare of his neighborhood, and a large advertisement blared at him from across the expanse of a glass building. It was an ad for the newest model of Surayo space vehicles. The Surayo Corporation mascot kitten purred and rolled in the plush comfort and safety of their latest personal interspace shuttlecrafts, as features rolled over the side of the building.

Levi's hands clenched in fury.

The Surayo Corporation was the largest manufacturer of interstellar vehicles and one of the wealthiest corporations in the colonized universe. Their patented construction outlasted all other space vehicles and had the top safety record for long-distance hauls. Surayo Corporation held the military contracts for almost every nation on Earth and almost every independent colony in the five inhabited systems.

But it was Surayo Corporation that Levi held responsible for his family's murder.

Levi and his sister were both born on Surayo's Tarus 9 mining colony. Their home was a shantytown on the edge of the largest mine, where his father and mother worked to extract the ores needed to construct Surayo's deep space vessels. It was a dark and dangerous job that the corporation felt was too risky for their expensive robotic equipment. It was cheaper and easier to use people.

It wasn't until shortly after Levi's sister was born that the beginnings of a protest started on Tarus 9. Surayo offered no health care or education or benefits. Hundreds of children were born and grew up in this rusting wasteland. And the people who worked the mines finally decided they'd had enough.

It started with a simple request -- a school. The miners of Tarus 9 stopped ore extraction until Surayo Corporation paid for a school to be established for their children.

The protest was peaceful. All of the families had finally come together to defend this request. No one broke through the barricade. It was the greatest solidarity anyone had ever seen in the Tova Star System.

That's when Surayo Corporation called in their private militia. Arrests began. Miners were forced back to work. And the protest quietly moved underground.

Levi's father was tortured for three weeks before he was released. By the time they were done with him, he had spilled the names of his contacts in the protest movement and even made up a few for good measure. His guilt at betraying good people, by lying and accusing the innocent of crimes they had not committed, proved too much for him.

Levi had been the one to find him, hanging in the corner of their rusted room. His father had only been home two weeks and now he was gone for good. Levi's devastation at the loss was quickly overcome as open war struck the colony. Protests were no longer peaceful.

Enraged and desperate, the miners set the mine on fire, gouging the company's profits and attracting the attention of Surayo shareholders. And the slaughter began.

Almost every miner was murdered in a massive personnel liquidation. Levi and a handful of other children hid and escaped the firing squads. He had watched his mother and sister murdered before his eyes.

Levi and the few others who survived the massacre were immediately shipped offworld to Ishan. Surayo Corporation brought in a new team of employees and closed the moon to outsiders for good.

The militia went home.

And Levi was placed in the foster care system of Ishan.

The official story came out shortly after his placement with an Ishan foster family. Surayo Corporation accused a group of terrorists on Tarus 9 for the killings. According to Surayo's spokesperson, hired security had captured and killed the terrorists and helped the survivors of the regime relocate on the much more beautiful and inhabitable colony of Ishan.

The lie turned into a poison in Levi's mind. It corroded his hope, his sense of self, his desire to live. Despite having a loving and generous foster family, despite his successes in school and at university, Levi remained tainted by this bitter deception. He decided to dedicate his life to revealing the truth.

In front of Levi, a cheery street musician entertained young children by playing a pan flute and drums at the same time. Everyone around Levi looked blissful and carefree. None of these people knew what the Surayo Corporation had done to other human beings, or thought about what other tragedies might be taking place at that very moment on the other moons.

Levi entered the shopping complex and quickly purchased some sandwiches and cola for him and Imogen to share. He walked back through the lush green of the capitol, hoping the mile-long stretch of madrona trees and orchid gardens would ease his mind. But everything seemed to mock him today; beauty and happiness outside only exacerbated the anger inside. He was indeed poisoned. He couldn't enjoy even what was good in his life

when he was so busy living in the dark past of his childhood. Even beauty inspired bitterness.

When Levi re-entered his apartment, he noticed that Imogen had hung up her viewing screen along the longest wall of their room. But Imogen was not in sight. Levi called out for her, depositing the food on their coffee table. When Imogen didn't answer, he felt a flicker of fear.

What if Trust Insurance knew he had the implant? What if the Surayo Corporation was on to him? He was risking Imogen's life with this story. It was getting dangerous.

But then Imogen appeared from the bathroom. She had a triumphant, cocky grin on her face, her light skin flushed pink with pride.

"I got it to work," Imogen said.

Levi raised his eyebrows. "Well?"

Imogen sat down on their couch and patted the seat beside her.

"I'll show you."

Chapter Four

A dark room.

Silence.

A pervasive, nervous stillness that reigned almost twenty-four hours a day in that room, punctuated only by the muffled, faraway sounds of misery.

Levi and Imogen watched the implant images from the eyes of a mercenary. They knew he was a mercenary by the patch on the sleeve of his uniform, caught every time his arm came into view. He was called Agent 75, and although other mercenaries spoke with him, he never answered back. The arms were all they saw of the man who provided them images from his own eyes.

At first, the images had been splotchy, scary, frequently shorting out. A face would appear, looming over, and then there was nothing but blackness. The look of an angry general, a curt nurse, and then nothing more.

As the recording progressed, longer passages of time were uninterrupted and more could be seen. But each of the individual scenes they saw before them was clipped short at the beginnings and ends.

“I think this implant has been edited,” Imogen said. She had started watching the recording with her sandwich and cola in hand, as if the two of them were curled up on the couch to enjoy a movie. But after the first few minutes, neither of them felt like eating.

Levi frowned at Imogen. “I thought you said the chip couldn’t be tampered with.”

“The images cannot be changed,” Imogen corrected. “But they can be erased. I think someone has selectively gone through and chosen what scenes they want us to see.” Imogen patted Levi’s arm. “Look on the bright side. It means we don’t have to fast forward through hours of him sleeping, or going to the bathroom.”

Levi couldn’t find any humor in the subject, and Imogen seemed to sense this, and promptly shut up.

This mercenary never left this room, with its steel walls, steel grate floor. He never spoke. There were almost no sounds at all, when he was in there alone.

A single halobulb hung from the ceiling, swaying with the force of air coming from a large turbine fan in the wall. The moment Levi saw the fan, he felt sick. Those cheap industrial fans were all over Tarus 9, an architectural oddity that he had never seen anywhere else.

Only once the victims were rolled in, bloodied and dying, would sounds suddenly come.

The sound on the memory chip was muted and distant, but the implant had captured their cries. Some stared at the ceiling, catatonic. All of them were injured. Bruised, bleeding, and terrified, they came into this silent room.

The mercenary, Agent 75, was rough with them. They begged him to help, but he said nothing, shooting them full of drugs, his long needles plunging into their necks. This man, the man from whose eyes Levi now watched, would lean over the detainees, deaf to their pleas, as he used lasers to suture, rubbed salves, and shot them full of narcotics. He wiped off blood and stared at them, a silent witness to their torment. And while he sometimes healed

them, for the most part, he simply drugged them, and they were dragged back out for more interrogation.

Agent 75 never saw the torture itself. His eyes never left the room. But he heard the distant screaming, the confessions.

Levi's anger grew with each victim, each new visitor to this cold soldier. He scrawled notes anxiously as he watched. He noticed that Imogen's osys was clasped in her hands, but she stared, motionless, at the images on the screen.

"Can you tag this scene for future reference?" Levi's voice came out harsher than he intended. He felt tight as a spring.

Imogen nodded and quietly fiddled with her osys.

The only time the man with the implant spoke was when two soldiers entered the room and attempted to take a woman who was recovering on a narrow cot. Agent 75 stepped between them and the woman.

"She's not ready yet." His voice was distorted, it rumbled through the implant as if in a long tube.

"Too bad." One of the guards moved to take her. There was some scuffle, and the image blanked, and then the woman was gone, in her place another young woman, shivering, naked, and crying as the mercenary gripped her arm and stuck a needle into her flesh.

"You know, maybe some of those blanked images aren't just a translation glitch or a deletion," Imogen said quietly. Her face was drawn. "Did you see how it blanked after the agent got up to challenge the other soldiers? Maybe he got hurt."

Levi looked at Imogen like she was insane. "Hurt?" Levi couldn't keep the anger from his voice. "Imogen, are you watching this? What do you think this man is doing? He is keeping them alive so they can be tortured even more."

Levi found himself looking forward to those blank moments when the image would short out. It was a respite, a chance to escape that dark, cold, clinical room.

Levi managed to watch up to the part where his own father entered the room, beaten severely and begging for his life. Levi dashed to the bathroom and threw up.

But, gruesome as it was, this recording was the proof Levi had spent years looking for. Soldiers whispered about Surayo Corporation salaries as they wheeled prisoners in and out. They discussed the protests, and who they were getting closer to arresting.

And all the while, this pair of eyes, Agent 75, said nothing. He saved men to be killed later. He drugged them to better break them. Levi's rage solidified against this man, who clearly had the skills and training to save lives, but instead aided Surayo Corporation, helping them maim and kill innocent people.

"I wonder what happened to Agent 75," Imogen remarked when it was over.

"He's like Dr. Mengele," Levi hissed. His throat was dry. He felt physically weakened by watching the images. His uneaten sandwich lay limp on the coffee table. "All that man did was extend their misery. The fucking bastard!"

The thought that all those men and women had been forgotten, that their suffering was unmarked by time or memory, became too much. He switched off the screen and sat back against the couch, eyes closed.

He could feel Imogen's tension beside him. Her small hand reached out and touched his shoulder.

"You okay, Levi?"

Levi didn't respond. He was pissed at himself for responding so dramatically to the images. He had known this was what he was going to find. And yet seeing it with his own eyes, endless days of it, was too much, even when expected.

Imogen tried to gently massage him. Her hands were too small to be effective on his broad shoulders, but he finally opened his eyes and tried giving her a smile.

"Are you all right?" she asked him quietly.

“No.” His grief was quickly transforming into a smoldering fury. The rage he had felt all his life was compounded now with more images, more scenes of exploitation and horror that built within him a torrent of hatred.

“You can cry, you know. It’s okay.” Imogen squeezed his shoulder.

Levi looked at her angrily. Imogen was constantly trying to get him to get closer to his inner self. But right now, his inner self really wanted to kill someone, and it seemed like distance was probably a better strategy.

“What are you going to do now?” Imogen asked.

“Now? I’m going to tear apart the Surayo Corporation with this recording.” Levi stood. His leg muscles shook from being balled up with such tension for so long. Outside, the Tova Star was dipping out of the biosphere, and the beginnings of the aurora were visible. Levi had little time.

“Now, I go to my boss, Rowan Ryland,” Levi said. “I go and show him what we’ve just seen. And we broadcast this story tonight.”

“Be careful.” Imogen looked alarmed. “If anyone at Surayo Corporation knows what you have, they will kill you. Do you understand? If they are capable of what we just saw to guarantee their profit margin, then they won’t think twice about crushing you.”

“Then I had better be quick about it, hadn’t I?” Levi grabbed the implant on the way out the door.

Chapter Five

Levi assumed that getting in to see Rowan Ryland would be difficult.

After all, there were over a hundred reporters employed at the syndication headquarters, as well as countless other technicians and assistants who made sure the broadcast transmitted without a hitch for the eighteen-hour days on Ishan. Rowan Ryland was a popular guy, and so Levi expected to be given a number and asked to wait.

But to his surprise, the moment he introduced himself to Ryland's secretary, the secretary smiled.

"Ah, yes! Mr. Ryland informed me to let you in when you arrived."

Levi was stunned. Without a reference, and without an appointment, he was going to meet with Ryland. He hid his surprise under a mask of indifference.

The secretary looked at Levi with a strange smile. Levi dismissed it, ignoring the secretary as she pulled open the large mahogany doors of Rowan Ryland's office.

Levi didn't know what to expect. The only time he had met with Ryland was when he had once come down to the third floor, where all the journalists had their desks. Levi expected Ryland's office to be full of corporate artwork and lush potted foliage. He assumed

there would be an expansive boardroom table and a glittering bar lined with expensive liqueurs from all over the system.

Levi did not expect the framed jean jacket. The amplifier. Or the dozens of platinum albums lining the walls.

Rowan Ryland lounged on a plush leather recliner, feet kicked up, shoes off, in jeans. He chatted into the air on an osys conversation. The moment Levi walked in, Ryland smiled at him, and immediately curbed his call.

"Benson, sorry, gotta run," Ryland said. He motioned silently for Levi to approach. "I'll call you this evening." He clicked off the call, pocketing his osys, and then stood for Levi.

Rowan Ryland illustrated, in Levi's mind, why life was truly unfair. It was bad enough that he had more money than all of the inhabitants on Ishan combined. It was bad enough that all the women who worked at the report would do anything for him, swooning and flirting as he walked through their offices, chatting amiably. It was bad enough that, judging by the way Ryland responded to the women, he was obviously straight.

But why did he also have to be so damned *gorgeous*? It was unjust. He was tall and thin, with graceful arms that tapered to surprisingly lithe and beautiful wrists. In a streak of rebelliousness, he wore one gold loop earring, which only complimented the look he cultivated of a handsome, roguish pirate. His raven hair could rival Levi's for thickness, but unlike his, Ryland's was always perfectly coiffed, left long around his ears. He had dark, long eyebrows and deep brown eyes.

A corporate pirate, Levi thought to himself. *A rebel in cashmere*.

"Levi! So glad you came by," Ryland said, shaking Levi's hand and offering him a seat. Levi noticed, as he stood beside him, that Ryland smelled of aftershave and mint.

"I'm sorry I didn't call first, Mr. Ryland --" Levi began.

“Nonsense. I asked you to inform me immediately regarding your rendezvous last night.” He smiled. “And call me Rowan. When you call me Mr. Ryland, I feel like my father. And I hated my father.” He laughed.

Levi didn’t want to talk about Ryland’s father. He wanted to show him the implant and talk about something far more important. But he also had to be polite, and so he smiled and asked, “Why?”

Rowan smiled impishly back. “Rock.”

“Excuse me?”

“Music. I was obsessed with it as a kid. And my father despised it. When I left home at eighteen to join a band, I was officially barred from the Ryland Empire.”

The guitars, amplifiers, and memorabilia instantly made sense. Rowan must have seen Levi looking around the room, for he stood and pointed to one of the platinum albums.

“I wish I could say this was my band,” Rowan said. “But it isn’t. We never even secured a recording contract. The truth is we sucked.”

Levi smiled. “But you must have made amends with your father in the long run.”

Rowan shook his head. “Not really. He died, I inherited, and the rest is history. I know that sounds callous, but when someone cannot love you for who you really are, then they do not deserve your respect.”

Rowan looked at Levi meaningfully, and Levi froze. Oh god, was this a veiled come on? Was Rowan saying he was gay? Did he know Levi was? What was going on?

Rowan coughed, as if suddenly realizing how personal he was being. “Let me show you my memorabilia collection. Since I realized my band Proto had no talent, I made do with obsessing over other people’s talents.”

Rather than follow him, Levi held up the implant. “I have something I think we should discuss immediately. It has to do with the evidence I retrieved last night.”

Rowan looked disheartened that Levi was not interested in the history of each of his platinum albums. Ryland had a delightful sulk, Levi noted, his bottom lip jutting out just slightly in his disappointment.

"The evidence." Rowan nodded. "I've been waiting to hear how that went. But I thought that first I'd show you my personal side, in case I have any nasty editorial changes that you are going to hate me for later."

Levi laughed, genuinely this time. There was something endearing about a man who wanted him to know that he had failed at his passion before critiquing his own. It brought Rowan off his pedestal a little.

"Sit down," Rowan said, ushering Levi to a comfortable set of suede couches around an enormous square glass coffee table. "Do you want a drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Well, enough of my self-absorbed meanderings." Rowan sat across from Levi, and stared at him intently. "How did your fact finding mission go?"

"I was mugged."

Rowan's eyes widened. "Are you all right?"

Levi shrugged. "I'll live. But I did manage to get the implant."

"Implant." Rowan looked confused.

"It's a memory implant," Levi explained. "Used to record the images from a person's eyes, and the sounds they hear."

Rowan leaned back. He never took his eyes off Levi. "I know what you are talking about now. Who is it from?"

"I don't know," Levi said. "He was a mercenary, some medic who worked at the detention center on Tarus 9."

Rowan stared at Levi intently. All his mirth was gone. "A doctor?"

“Perhaps.”

“Can we find him?”

Levi shrugged. “If he was still alive, he would be in his sixties by now. But in all probability he’s dead. To remove the implant, a person has to undergo a dangerous surgery.”

“What was on the recording?” Rowan asked.

Levi took a deep breath. “I’ll show you.”

Part of Levi wanted to subject Rowan to the horrible entirety of the footage, but he didn’t have the time, or the stomach, to watch the weeks of agony all over again. Therefore, he ran only the scenes that he and Imogen had tagged, important sequences where Surayo Corporation, the peaceful protests, and the torture were clearly mentioned. The evidence of Surayo Corporation’s violence was unmistakable by the state of the victims.

Rowan watched the recording silently, still as stone. He went rigid the moment the images had started. A sick, almost haunted look crossed his features as he watched the misery unfold.

When it was over, Rowan continued to stare at the blank screen for a full minute. He appeared to be in a state of shock.

Levi opened his osys and called up his article. “I have a story prepared,” he told Rowan. “I’d like to read it to you. I have ideas on how we can splice this with the footage. I’m doing searches on the faces of the Surayo officials to see if I can find anyone who might still be alive.”

“Wait.” Rowan’s voice was rough, and slightly wavering, as if he was holding back a torrent of emotion. Levi felt guilty for rushing Rowan. He needed to give him a moment to process this new information.

“I really, really need a drink,” Rowan said. He smiled at Levi nervously, and then went to his desk. He pushed aside a wooden panel to reveal those glittering bottles of expensive

liqueurs that Levi expected all executives to have. The rest of Rowan was unconventional, but at least he still drank like the rest of them.

“You want some?” he offered.

“What are you having?”

“I’m going for a straight shot of whiskey after watching that.”

“Sounds good to me,” Levi said.

Rowan came back with their drinks. He sat near Levi and stared at the wall opposite them as Levi read his piece aloud. He had written and re-written this story so many times, he knew most of it by heart.

Rowan listened quietly, saying nothing until the end. When Levi finished, he closed his osys and turned to look at Rowan. “If I work with the tech team, I can get this story ready for headlines tomorrow,” Levi told him.

Rowan nodded. “Remember how I wanted to show you my weak side before I tore holes in your story?”

Levi frowned. “Damn it.”

Rowan chuckled. “No, it’s not so bad as all that. Look, what you have here is amazing. I don’t think you realize how big this story really is. We are going to make headlines that will reach back to Earth and go to every syndication in inhabited space. Everyone has heard of the Surayo Corporation. And once this story is published, Surayo will forever be linked with torture and murder.”

Levi waited for the criticism. Rowan paused, and then swallowed. “But your story has a flaw.”

Levi straightened. “What do you mean?”

“Levi, all you have is this implant. We don’t know who the images are from, who provided it to you, or even where it was recorded. It could be fabricated.”

Levi stared at him blankly. “Fabricated. All those people. All that blood. Not to mention the Trust Insurance seal, logo, and encryption software.”

Rowan sighed. He downed his drink and grimaced. “I’m not saying that I don’t believe it. I do. But if we are going to fight a giant as big as the Surayo Corporation, we need to be armed. We need more than just this implant. We need a real person, with a real story, who was there, who saw it firsthand.”

“Almost everyone who went into that torture chamber died,” Levi said.

“But your informant,” Rowan pressed, leaning forward. “He or she must have been there. They had to know what this implant is.” Rowan’s eyes had lost their stunned expression, and he looked excited again. “Think about it. If we could find your informant, we could learn how they knew about the chip. We need your informant’s name, who they talked to. But this story is incomplete without a witness.”

Levi leaned back against the couch and sighed. He noted, absent-mindedly, that leaning back in this couch made it very difficult to get back up. He pretended to be comfortable in such a reclining position.

“I don’t know who my informant is,” Levi told Rowan. “I only communicate with him or her electronically.”

“I trust you can figure it out,” Rowan said. “Use whatever resources you need from me. Money is no object. You need to find the informant and convince them to speak on camera.”

Levi nodded, biting back the words of rebuttal he wanted to say. He thought it was important to get the story out now and not wait.

But Rowan was smiling handsomely at him once more. “Levi, you are going to make us all very proud.”

Levi couldn’t help the blush that spread across his face. He was never good at receiving compliments, especially from attractive men.

He struggled from the couch, which was slowly sucking him deeper into its folds. He disconnected the implant from his osys and then looked at it, frowning. If he brought this home again, he could put Imogen in danger.

Rowan watched Levi hesitate, and then held out his hand. "Don't worry," he said smoothly. "Give it to me. I'll put it in my safe. That way, we'll know it's secure, and you don't have to worry about some Surayo security force breaking down your door."

"Thank you." Levi shook Rowan's hand once more, and then departed hurriedly.

Outside, Levi nodded to Rowan's secretary, and made a beeline to the bathroom. As soon as he shut the stall door, he reached for his osys once more and called up Imogen.

Imogen's voice sounded wary. "Levi? Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"Are you okay?" Imogen asked. "Why do you have the image turned off? And it sounds like you are calling me from...a toilet stall."

Levi hated it when people figured out he was calling them from the bathroom. "Imogen...how good are you at hacking osys messages?"

Levi could almost hear Imogen smiling at the other end.

Chapter Six

Washoe District smelled awful.

In the heat of the daylight hours, when the Tova Star shone bright and unobstructed over the biosphere, Washoe's sanitation issues were dreadfully apparent. Despite temperature controls within the biosphere, Washoe's crumbling infrastructure led to substandard ventilation. Everything reeked of sewage.

"You take me to such nice places." Imogen sulked as Levi led them down the very road that he had been mugged on only a week before. It had taken days of research and a lot of Imogen's networking connections to discover that Levi's informant was in Washoe. It made sense, given that his informant had deposited the implant there. But now he had nothing else to go on. All they knew was that the message came from the newest version of the biosphere's operating system, and the name of the district from which the messages were sent.

After Levi had told Imogen of his mishaps the last time he was in Washoe, she had decided that she would accompany him for his second visit. Levi tried to explain that this wouldn't help; if anything, he was going to have to use extra energy on making sure she was

safe. But Imogen had insisted, packing her pepper spray and lecturing Levi about how careless he was about his own well-being.

Unlike the last time Levi had been in Washoe, the streets now pulsed with people. They talked loudly in darkened doorways. They loitered. Music blared out of high-rise apartment windows. Drugs and money were exchanged in broad daylight. And in the midst of it all stood Washoe Park, full of the tents of the homeless, cooking over Bunsen burners and shitting near shattered sewage lines.

"I should start charging you for my time on this story." Imogen watched a man piss in a gutter warily. "My going rate is 100 credits an hour. I charge extra for this kind of olfactory abuse."

"Put together your costs, and I'll submit them to Rowan," Levi told her.

"Really?" Imogen smiled.

Levi shrugged. "Rowan said I could use any resources."

"Great! In that case, he should also buy us lunch."

As they walked, Levi scanned the windows of shops and apartments looking for some clue that could point him in the right direction. The good news was that Washoe only had one major thoroughfare. The bad news was that thousands of people lived along that thoroughfare, in towering high rises, or in the darkened alleyways that snaked out between steel and concrete buildings.

Imogen tripped over a small mound of moldy children's clothing and grimaced. "Who does that?" she cried. "Who just leaves clothes in the street? I'll never understand that. You find one shoe. Who loses a shoe? Just one of them?"

Levi tried to tune out Imogen's ranting. He saw the sign for the bank where he had retrieved the implant, and pulled Imogen inside.

During business hours, the bank looked like a military fortress. Men with machine guns stood guard at the entrance, and every person working there was protected by

bulletproof plastic windows, metal bars, and a thin suit of Kevlar underneath their clothing, visibly shiny around their necklines.

"I like the message this bank gives to its customers," Imogen mused. "This bank says *your money is not safe here. We will be robbed and probably murdered in the process. Just deal with it.*"

Levi laughed. He waited in a long line before he was able to speak to one of the customer service representatives through a sheet of glass, using a microphone. The woman would not give Levi any information regarding the owner of the safety deposit box. Despite several pleas and flashes of semi-intimidating identification, this woman would not budge. If she was not afraid of being shot at, then she would not be afraid of Levi's shady credentials.

A few blocks down from the bank, Levi recognized another building from the week before. It also resembled a fortress, with bars. It was the Washoe Free Clinic. A surge of excited anxiety coursed through his stomach, making him feel momentarily sick and giddy.

"What's wrong with you?" Imogen was a master at detecting Levi's most subtle emotions.

"Nothing," Levi said quickly, hoping he didn't do anything embarrassing like blush. Several of his fantasies over the week had included Dr. Tiergan Seoras, and the last thing he needed right now was Imogen teasing him about another bad choice. Tiergan was experienced, but he was so hard to read.

"Let's go into the clinic," Levi said, pointing to the building.

"That's a clinic?" Imogen scowled. "Boy, these Washoers sure know how to create an inviting atmosphere, don't they?"

"You said the message was from a faster, newer model of operator, right?" Levi asked.

Imogen nodded. "A Gen-6 osys."

"So who in Washoe District could afford a new operator?"

Imogen smiled. "Businesses. Or maybe a medical facility."

It was as good an excuse as any to talk to Dr. Seoras again.

“Right,” Levi said. “So let’s go in.” He pulled open the heavy steel clinic door.

Inside, the clinic was wall-to-wall bodies.

Levi had thought the space was small and overcrowded with beds and equipment when he had seen it empty. Now the place burgeoned in human chaos. Behind the small desk to the left of the entryway, a line of ten folding chairs ran long the wall. Patients waited in the chairs. But the line extended beyond the seats available, and so people stood along the far wall, or sat on the floor, waiting. The line looped back on itself, making the place look like a refugee camp.

The six beds were occupied. The room buzzed with the mumbled noise of conversations, of the medical equipment chirping, and of someone throwing up somewhere. The place smelled of humid, hot bodies.

In the midst of it all was Dr. Tiergan Seoras.

He laughed as he sat next to a patient at one of the beds. The older woman he tended looked up at him and smiled, showing her noticeable lack of teeth. Tiergan bandaged her arm as he spoke, and the woman looked enchanted.

Levi scanned the room, but could detect only three other employees. One was an older lady, sitting behind the desk at the front door, flipping through stacks of forms and directing patients into the queue.

There was an older Asian gentleman also, in a lab coat, taking someone’s pulse at the end of the row of beds. And there was another old woman, cleaning up some terrifyingly organic mess in the corner.

“This is awful,” Imogen said. She pinched her nose shut. “I’m waiting outside.”

“Are you sure?” Levi didn’t like leaving Imogen alone in Washoe.

Imogen looked about to gag. “The street is safer than a closed room full of sick people. Have fun. I’ll be outside.” She turned around and left.

Levi felt suddenly embarrassed. Tiergan was so busy; there was no way he was going to have any time to talk to him. As soon as Tiergan finished bandaging the one lady's arm, he practically ran to the next bed.

The thing that Levi noticed the most about Tiergan's appearance was that he seemed so in his element. He didn't dress like a doctor, even now. He wore jeans and a plain brown T-shirt, over which he wore a lab coat with his name stitched on the lapel. But it looked like an afterthought, some formality he didn't need.

But there was still no question that he ran this place. He drifted from patient to patient confidently, effectively, in charge and clearly in his own version of heaven.

The patients in line did not seem upset or surprised by the wait. Levi realized this was the best they could hope for, not having any insurance. The costs at any other facility would ruin them. And so everyone patiently waited, speaking in low voices, retching quietly, coughing and covering their mouths.

"Can I help you?" The woman behind the counter looked pointedly at Levi.

Levi swallowed a momentary revulsion when the woman made eye contact. Her face had been scarred terribly. She looked as though one side of her mouth had melted, burned white and shiny. Her left eye was missing, and in its place was a knot of scar tissue, puckering in a portion of her face. Her pale skin was leathery, wrinkled, showing that the years had not been good to her.

But in her one blue eye, Levi thought he saw something familiar. This woman resembled someone he knew, someone he'd seen before. But Levi couldn't place the memory.

"Hey!" the woman snapped again, looking annoyed. "Are you just going to stare at me or are you here for a reason? I don't have all day."

Levi straightened. "Oh! Sorry. I just... I came to see if I could speak with Dr. Seoras. But I see he's busy, so --"

“Levi.”

Levi turned. Tiergan Seoras stood right next to him.

Tiergan’s expression was, once again, unreadable. Levi had forgotten how soft his skin looked, how bright his blue eyes were, the thickness of his lips. His hair was slightly mussed from the workday, and made him even more charmingly boyish.

“Can I help you?” Tiergan asked. Not unfriendly, but not particularly welcoming, either.

“I wanted to talk to you for a moment.” Levi flushed.

Tiergan raised an eyebrow, and then gently took Levi’s arm. “Come to my office.” His accent was subtle, but it was mesmerizing. It lilted softly, and lent his low, grumbling voice a sensual quality. He led Levi toward a long green curtain in the corner of the room.

His office ended up being a curtained-off corner full of boxes, changes of clothing, an osys screen, a wet vac, a broom, and several empty cup-of-noodle soup containers.

Levi smirked. “Nice office. It’s like you are the Wizard of Oz behind this curtain.”

Tiergan didn’t laugh. “What are you doing here?” he asked quietly.

Levi’s stomach unpleasantly churned. “I have a quick question. Do you have a Gen-6 osys here at the clinic?”

Tiergan frowned. “Of course. We can’t download blood analyses without one. Why?”

Levi shrugged. “I’m following up on a story, and --”

“Your Tarus 9 story?”

Levi was surprised he remembered. “Yes.”

Tiergan sighed, looking toward the curtain. “Look, I can’t talk for long. We’re really slammed today, and there’s only the two of us while Dr. Reynolds is off.”

“Two doctors? That’s it?” Levi shook his head. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like, to tend to so many needy people all day.

“We also have a few dedicated volunteers who help out.” Tiergan snaked a finger through the opening in the curtain and pointed to the older woman who was busy changing the sheets on one of the beds. “That’s Maija. She comes in to help every other day.” He then pointed to the woman at the front desk, who was now grilling one of the patients. “And that’s Kera.”

“I hate to break it to you,” Levi whispered. “But she was kind of mean.”

Tiergan smiled. “It’s not personal. She pretty much hates everybody.”

“Oh.” Levi tried not to laugh as the patient Kera was helping cowered.

“She’s an amazing accountant,” Tiergan said, looking back at her fondly. “And she is the only human being I’ve ever met who can complete the 2019-C claims waiver form in its entirety.”

“A valuable trait in any volunteer,” Levi said.

“Kera is more than just a volunteer. She and I go back a long way. She is the one who inspired me to open this clinic.”

“Are you two dating?” Levi asked before he could help himself. He couldn’t really imagine anyone as sultry as Tiergan dating a mutilated older lady, but the world was full of strange pairings, and there was clearly love in his eyes for this woman.

Tiergan looked at him, a puzzled expression on his face. He moved closer. “Not my type.”

“Too old?” Levi was finding it hard to speak with Tiergan so close. All he wanted to do was touch Tiergan’s lips. “Too scarred?”

“Too female,” Tiergan whispered, leaning even closer. “I thought it was pretty obvious that I’m gay.”

“Well, I always like to be sure.”

“Having you suck my cock wasn’t clear enough?” Tiergan asked, his voice low.

Levi swallowed. The words pooled in his groin, sending a pleasant rush of heat through his bloodstream.

Then, suddenly, he remembered where he had seen Kera's face before. She had been on the implant recording. Kera had been fifteen years younger and a lot healthier. But Levi had no doubt that this was the woman that Agent 75 discussed on the recording, the only time he had spoken.

A surge of excitement filled Levi. This woman was clearly his informant.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have any information for you," Tiergan told him.

The comment startled Levi. "What do you mean by that?"

"You want to know my osys model," Tiergan said. "I can only assume I have some data you want."

"Actually, I want data your assistant has." Levi tried giving Tiergan his most charming smile. "I need to speak with Kera."

Tiergan narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Did you know she was on Tarus 9?"

"Yes."

"I think she might be my informant." Levi wanted Tiergan's trust, needed him to understand how important this was.

But Tiergan's expression immediately closed. He straightened and stepped back from Levi.

"Look," Levi said, putting his hand on Tiergan's shoulder. "My editor won't publish my story until I have my informant. If I don't get to talk to her, I will lose my chance to go public about the massacre."

Tiergan stared at Levi coldly. It was as if he were a completely different person from the man who had just been whispering to Levi a moment ago.

“Can I talk to her?” Levi asked.

Tiergan shrugged. “Ask her. I doubt she’ll talk. She doesn’t like discussing her life before she came to Ishan.”

Levi nodded. “I can understand that. I know she was tortured. Some bastard mercenary drugged her and made her suffer for months.”

Tiergan stared at him dispassionately. “It’s not my concern. Do what you will.” He turned to leave.

“Wait!” Levi reached out and grabbed his shoulder.

Tiergan turned back, his expression inscrutable.

Levi didn’t know what to say, but he definitely didn’t want Tiergan leaving pissed at him.

Levi urged Tiergan against the back wall. Tiergan raised an eyebrow.

“I confess, the story isn’t the only reason I’m here,” Levi said lowly.

Tiergan studied him silently for a moment. His jaw clenched, as if he was debating something to say. Levi thought he had lost his interest. And then Tiergan suddenly reached out and stuck his hands into Levi’s pants. He palmed Levi’s balls.

Levi’s heart beat frantically. He curled his fingers around Tiergan’s belt and yanked him closer. He rubbed the outside of Tiergan’s trousers, feeling the hard bulge of his erect cock.

Tiergan’s eyes glinted dangerously. “See? Totally fucking queer.” His hand pumped Levi’s dick inside his pants, and Levi’s mouth opened in a silent moan.

“I want to fuck you,” Tiergan whispered.

Levi moaned. “Christ, you’re forward, aren’t you?”

Tiergan’s mouth curved into a lascivious grin. “But sadly, I don’t have time right now.”

Levi thought of Imogen, out in the street and alone, and realized he didn't have time to be screwing in a closet either. "I know. Neither do I."

Tiergan sighed, and withdrew his hand. Every part of Levi's body protested his movement, and he involuntarily moved forward for more contact.

"Let me buy you dinner," Levi blurted. "To thank you properly for the other night."

Tiergan eyed him slowly. Then his eyebrow raised. "I don't close up until after ten."

"I can wait."

Tiergan stepped forward, leaning in close, his lips just above Levi's ear.

"Does 'any way I want' still apply?" he whispered, his voice gravelly.

Levi nodded. "Of course."

Tiergan lingered a moment longer, lips flirting along the tip of his ear.

"I'll meet you at Kitchen Kochee, at ten o'clock." Before he left, he turned and gave Levi a lopsided, boner-inducing grin. "Bring lube."

It took Levi several additional minutes to get himself under control enough to step back out into the clinic. By then, Tiergan was fully engrossed in his work once more, and didn't even spare Levi a second glance.

On his way toward the entrance, Levi stopped at the front desk, and smiled down at Tiergan's assistant, Kera.

Kera looked up at him coldly. "What do you want?"

Levi produced a card, which he handed to her. "My name is Levi Kaszeri, and I'm a reporter for the *Ishan Report*." He waited, looking to see if there was any recognition in her one eye. But Kera's expression didn't waver.

"So?" she snapped at last.

Levi coughed. “Well, I’d like to talk with you sometime. I’m doing a story on the Surayo Corporation’s cover up of the massacre on Tarus 9 and want to ask you a few questions.”

Levi expected that Kera would be reticent to talk, especially there, in front of people. After all, she had chosen to remain anonymous as Levi’s informant.

But Levi did not plan on the absolute malice that immediately radiated from Kera. She visibly tensed, narrowing her one eye at Levi and glaring at him as if she had the power to curse.

“Not interested,” Kera said. She busied herself with papers on her desk.

Levi leaned over her desk. “Look. I’m also from Tarus 9. I cannot express in words how much I want to see those bastards suffer. And I need your help.”

Kera glowered at Levi in silence for a long moment. Her eye flickered around the room, as if searching for some sign. And then she looked down at her paperwork once more, turning pointedly away from Levi.

“No,” Kera said finally. “I have nothing to say. I will not speak with you.”

Levi didn’t think she was going to budge any further that day. But he decided he would ask Tiergan about her that evening, and find another way to approach her.

Chapter Seven

“Can I ask you a few questions about Kera?”

Tiergan refilled both their glasses of wine. He looked at Levi, but did not respond. Levi stared back at him.

“I can’t help you,” Tiergan finally said. He looked down at his plate. He had ordered spicy scallops noodle, and the butter sauce steamed dramatically. The moment Levi started asking about Kera, Tiergan had stopped eating.

The restaurant was relatively quiet at that hour. Tiergan was already there when Levi arrived, waiting at the entrance of the restaurant with his typical blank expression. Levi felt some apprehension, until he noticed that Tiergan had clearly bathed and shaved before their date, and now sported an attractive blue button-down shirt and khakis. He was making an effort to impress, at the very least. It had to mean something positive.

Levi wore a pair of charcoal slacks and a tight black long-sleeved T-shirt that framed his upper body well and complemented his dark hair, which he had gone through the effort of styling. He could make it look good when he bothered. He used to put the effort in more often than not, back when he was actively recruiting sexual partners. These days, he only

bothered when trying to weasel information out of horny men. This evening he was accomplishing both.

Tiergan seemed noticeably attracted by Levi's appearance, raking his eyes over Levi's body, then making eye contact. He smiled slightly, a sign of approval. As they ordered and chatted about the recent elections on Ishan, Tiergan's eyes never strayed far from Levi's body, and seemed singularly focused on Levi's lips. His glances gave Levi a pleasant tingle in his stomach.

But every time Levi tried to turn the conversation to Tiergan's assistant Kera, Tiergan switched the topic of conversation back to Levi.

"How long have you known Kera?" Levi persisted.

"At least fifteen years," Tiergan said. "Did you go to university here in Ishan?"

Levi nodded. "Sapenski College of Arts. Journalism degree."

Tiergan raised one eyebrow. "That school has an excellent reputation. And quite a party scene."

Levi laughed. "Actually, I was pretty shy back then. I was never any good at picking up guys. An aftereffect of a fucked-up childhood, I suppose."

Tiergan stared at him. "So you grew up on Tarus 9."

Levi nodded. "Until I was shipped offworld by the Corporation."

Tiergan paused for a moment. "And your family?" he asked finally.

"My father hanged himself, and my sister and mother were both strangled."

Tiergan went pale. Levi swallowed, the food sour in his throat. He really, really knew how to ruin things, didn't he? No wonder no one wanted to get to know him. He was a walking depressant.

"I'm sorry." Tiergan looked down at his plate, as if it held the script for their conversation. "That must have been...I can't even imagine."

“I will get my revenge,” Levi said, his voice low. He leveled his eyes at Tiergan. “As soon as this story is published, I will see those bastards hang for their crimes.”

“But you can’t publish without your informant,” Tiergan said. “Is that right?”

Levi nodded. He leaned forward. “That’s why it is so important to speak to Kera. Without her, I have no story.”

“You could publish it elsewhere,” Tiergan suggested. “If your editor at the *Ishan Report* won’t take it, someone else will.”

Levi shook his head. “He’s right though, isn’t he? I don’t have enough evidence to nail them. I have this memory implant, but that’s all. Surayo can claim it was faked. They can deny all knowledge of this mercenary. I have nothing without an actual, living, witness. I need Kera.”

Tiergan looked up from his plate, his expression almost angry. “Ask Kera then, but it has nothing to do with me. I am not her keeper. I can’t help you.” He sounded almost disappointed in himself. “I can’t. I’m sorry.”

“You told me that Kera inspired you to open the clinic in Washoe,” Levi said. “What did you mean? How did she inspire you?”

Tiergan sighed. “Kera had rough experiences back on Tarus 9, like you, and when she managed to escape and make it here, she had nothing. She ended up in Washoe because her only surviving relative was here.”

Tiergan met Levi’s eyes. “When I became a doctor, I knew I wanted to help the people that everyone else forgot, the ones who had nothing. I had always wanted to open a free clinic, but I didn’t have the resources or the know-how at the time. And I didn’t know where to go, who to help.”

“And then you met Kera?” Levi prompted.

Tiergan nodded. "I wanted her to see that there was hope, even after all the misery she had lived through. I wanted her to find inspiration again, find her belief in the world once more."

Levi found himself momentarily jealous of Kera. Tiergan obviously cared deeply for her.

Tiergan shook his head. "It was difficult. We had little funding, and the insurance companies fought us the entire way, trying to shut us down." His angry expression faded as he grew more enthusiastic, talking about the clinic. "But we were successful," he said. "It's managed to last all these years."

"What you are doing is very important. I hope you realize what a difference you are making," Levi smiled. "As soon as I finish this story, I want to do one on the free clinic. I think people need to know what you are accomplishing, against such odds. It's inspiring."

Tiergan seemed pleased by the compliment, and reached his hand across the table. He grabbed Levi's hand. His palm was heavy and warm. It was an unexpected feeling when looking at the glint of metal underneath his skin. Levi forced himself not to glance around at the other tables, to see if others were watching. Such open displays of affection between men were not a crime here, although on Tarus 9 he would have paid dearly for such blatancy.

"What you are doing is important too," Tiergan said. "Assuming you report the truth."

"I always report the truth," Levi said. "I feel very strongly about that. Perhaps that's why I've never been promoted."

"I could tell that about you the moment I saw you."

"You could tell I've never been promoted?" Levi chided.

"I could tell you were an honest person," Tiergan said. He rubbed his thumb into the muscle of Levi's hand, massaging him. It felt wonderful and was so obviously a come-on that Levi let himself breathe out and release his inhibitions. Regardless of how hard it was to read Tiergan's expressions, he clearly wanted him.

“I like the style of your articles,” Tiergan commented. “Your personality comes through. You are a very thorough researcher.” Tiergan’s mouth twitched.

“You read my articles?”

Tiergan nodded. “This afternoon. In between a bone fracture and a split lip.”

Levi laughed. “Well, luckily it doesn’t take long to read my portfolio. I’m not high up enough to get the good stories, and since I refused to write for the fashion section, I don’t get much published.”

“Hopefully you’re not paid on commission.”

Levi snorted. “I am. Why do you think my bedroom’s the size of this dining table?”

“Is your bedroom far from here?” Tiergan’s voice lowered. His accent was so erotic when he whispered so deeply.

Levi swallowed. “Only a few blocks.”

“Good. I want to eat something other than noodles.” Tiergan’s eyes burned brightly.

Levi’s hand was trembling as he held it in the air. “Check please,” he croaked.

* * * * *

The moment Levi had his apartment door opened, he quickly called out.

“Imogen? Are you here?” She usually spent Thursday nights with her mother, in the greenbelt biosphere, but Levi wanted to make sure before he brought Tiergan inside. The last thing he needed was his nosy little friend butting in on what promised to be a triumphant end to his celibacy streak.

“Who’s Imogen?” Tiergan asked.

“My roommate.” Levi opened her bedroom door, and saw the light was off. He grinned at Tiergan. “She’s gone. We’re alone --”

Tiergan pushed him against the wall, grinding his hips into Levi’s. Levi moaned. Before Tiergan could do his trademark pull back, Levi leaned forward and kissed him.

Levi didn't have any expectations, but he was still shocked by the way Tiergan kissed him back. It was rough and hungry, all-consuming, his tongue hot and probing. Tiergan grabbed Levi's wrists and pinned them against the wall. He pressed against Levi, devouring him, lips locked together, tongues clashing. For someone who seemed initially reticent to kiss, Levi couldn't remember the last time a man had shown such absolute desire for it.

Levi couldn't breathe. He kissed back with the same force, his head and hands pinned to the wall, trapped by almost bruising affection. Tiergan unbuttoned his shirt, and Levi reached forward to do the same. He broke their kiss, panting. "Bedroom. Over there."

Tiergan said nothing. He kissed him again, forcefully, tearing at Levi's clothes. The two of them fumbled with belts and pant legs and shoes, struggling toward the bedroom in a jerky, clumsy strip.

Once in the bedroom, Levi slammed shut the door. Tiergan immediately embraced him, pushing his bare cock against Levi's, circling to rub them together, his tongue piercing, his hands groping hungrily, kneading into Levi's buttocks with clear intent.

Levi fumbled with the light switch. When it finally clicked on, Tiergan broke their kiss and blinked. "What..."

"I want to see you when you fuck me," Levi said, his voice rough with need.

Tiergan seemed to struggle with breath for a moment, and then he stared at Levi, hard. "Get on the bed. On your hands and knees. Stick your ass in the air and spread your legs."

Levi's body buzzed with anticipation. He slipped past Tiergan and reached into his bedside table, pulling out the lube he hadn't used in an eon. He handed it to Tiergan and then did as he was told, presenting himself on his hands and knees. He felt exposed, vulnerable, and it was so exciting he could feel precum already oozing from the tip of his cock. There was something almost dangerous about Tiergan, the way he was distant, and then so demanding. He felt the bed droop and then Tiergan's warm, soothing hands on his butt cheeks, massaging them.

“You look fucking amazing,” Tiergan said, his voice husky. His accent swarmed in Levi’s mind, becoming directly associated with the feeling of his cock bobbing between Levi’s legs, brushing against his sensitive inner thighs. He heard Tiergan squeeze out some lube and warm it in his hands.

Levi couldn’t help it; he reached down and touched himself, spurred on by Tiergan’s rough voice, his body heat behind him.

Tiergan gently pushed Levi’s hand away. “No. I want to do that.” He gripped Levi’s left hip and with his other hand smeared lubricant along Levi’s crack, slipping his finger inside his anus.

Levi sucked in his breath at the invasion.

“You’re so tight...so hot...” Tiergan’s voice broke on the words. His finger gently pressed into him. Levi breathed deeply to relax his muscles. It felt incredible, but also shocking. It had been years since he had done this.

Tiergan was quiet behind him. Levi only heard Tiergan’s breathing, which got louder and more ragged as his finger pushed deeper inside, making it past the tight sphincter muscle. Levi pressed back to take more of it, and then Tiergan slowly worked another finger in. As he sank them deeply, Levi jerked forward, moaning as his body rang out in pleasure.

“Oh. That’s...that’s really good,” he croaked.

Tiergan laughed quietly, touching the same spot over again. Levi felt like he was having his dick stroked from the inside. Tiergan’s fingers were assured but gentle. For someone who was otherwise so rough, his touch was soft, like a caress that reached to Levi’s core. As he dipped his fingers in and out of Levi’s ass, his other hand softly stroked the underside of Levi’s scrotum, then reached forward and formed a hard fist around the base of Levi’s cock.

Levi squirmed. He rarely gave up this much control. He couldn't touch Tiergan, couldn't see him -- all he could do was feel, be pleased, exposed and open, Tiergan's fingers coring him out.

"You better fuck me now, because I'm about to come," Levi gasped. Tiergan didn't stop, his hand pumping as his fingers stretched him wider. He felt Tiergan insert a third finger, and Levi groaned. His sphincter shuddered and opened, struggling against the invasion. Levi had never been spread open so wide; it felt amazing. He wished he had a mirror, wished he could see his own ass, gaping and swallowing half of Tiergan's hand.

And then suddenly, Tiergan withdrew his hand and urged Levi onto his side.

"Turn over," Tiergan whispered roughly. As Levi shifted onto his back, he watched Tiergan slick his cock with more lubricant. His prick curved upward toward his abdomen, thick and hard as a pistol.

Tiergan lifted Levi's legs, placing them over his shoulders. Levi watched him carefully, suddenly nervous, despite such a thorough preparation. If he was wide enough for three fingers, he could accommodate Tiergan's thick cock; but Tiergan's expression was still distant, his cheeks flushed but his eyes unreadable.

Who is this guy?

Tiergan must have read Levi's apprehension. He smiled crookedly. "You okay with this, then?" he asked, his accent lilting on the last word.

Levi nodded. "Kiss me."

Tiergan smiled and leaned forward. Thank God Levi kept up his yoga. He was bent in half as Tiergan kissed him. This time, Tiergan didn't ravish his mouth. It was a slow, reassuring kiss, a small lick, followed with a slightly deeper press of his tongue, and then even deeper, filling him, so all Levi was aware of was being consumed, taken, being filled.

Tiergan reached down and guided his cock into Levi's slick ass.

With so much preparation, Tiergan's prick slid right in, although the heat and width of him still took Levi's breath away. He tensed around Tiergan's cock. He was stuffed full, his skin stretched to near breaking, and it was suddenly wonderful, amazing, perfect.

"Breathe, Levi," Tiergan whispered. His blue eyes looked down at Levi intently. A high flush colored Tiergan's cheeks, his pupils dilated, but the pulse at his throat was slow and steady. How could he be so calm, when Levi himself was about to burst?

Tiergan gave an experimental thrust forward, and white dots appeared behind Levi's eyelids. Each thrust filled him entirely. He looked down, amazed at the sight of Tiergan's flesh disappearing inside of his ass.

"More," he urged, and Tiergan complied, pumping faster, deeper with each stroke. Tiergan gripped Levi's hips and reamed him against his shaft, hitting Levi's prostate. Levi cried out and bucked against him. Again, and again, explosions of pleasure shuddered through him, and then he did explode, cum spurting onto his chest and stomach, unable to contain it any longer. He clenched his ass down on Tiergan's cock and then Tiergan came as well, a quiet hiss of breath escaping his gritted teeth as he poured his seed into Levi.

Tiergan didn't immediately pull out. He rested his head on Levi's chest, panting. Levi was still charged, his body vibrating in aftershocks of pleasure.

Tiergan softly kissed the base of Levi's neck. "Levi, relax your muscles. I have to pull out."

Levi hadn't realized how tightly he was clenching down on Tiergan's softening cock. He breathed out, and Tiergan slipped from inside of him, a small trickle of hot fluid leaking out with it. Tiergan lowered Levi's legs gently.

Levi reached over and pulled a used towel from his laundry basket. Tiergan took it and gently wiped between Levi's legs.

"The bathroom's the next door on the left, if you want to wash off," Levi said.

“I will in a minute.” Tiergan wiped his cock off quickly and then threw the towel back into the laundry bin.

Levi watched him, expecting any moment for him to yank his pants back on and take off. Instead, Tiergan lay down alongside him, kissing his neck affectionately. Levi couldn’t stop the goofy grin that spread across his face at the contact. He pulled Tiergan closer, resting his head against Tiergan’s toned chest. Despite his heavy breathing, Tiergan’s heartbeat was surprisingly slow and steady.

Levi felt stretched and knew he would be sore in the morning, but he didn’t care. It was worth every second of it.

“I’ll probably be unable to walk tomorrow,” he said. Tiergan’s chuckle made Levi’s head rise and fall on his chest.

Levi ran his hand over Tiergan’s chest. Now that he took time to notice, he saw countless scars along his body. He made out a long, straight scar that stretched from just below his collar bone to the bottom of his sternum. It looked as though he had some sort of chest surgery.

There were smaller scars, too. Levi ran his fingers lazily along Tiergan’s pale skin, feeling circular marks, almost like burns, along his arms and torso, on the back of his neck, even behind his knees. Tiergan sighed and rolled toward him, and Levi saw a jagged, uneven ridge of scar tissue that sliced from Tiergan’s navel to his left hipbone. It looked like he had been slashed with a sword.

“How did you get this scar?” he asked quietly.

Tiergan had his eyes closed. He didn’t open them, but instead continued to lazily run his fingers through Levi’s hair.

“Tiergan?”

He opened his eyes and stared at Levi. “Surgery.”

“What kind? It looks crude.”

A bitter smile curved one corner of his mouth. "Cheap surgery."

"Why?"

Tiergan rubbed his hand over his face. "I had some problems with my lower intestine," he said finally. "I had to remove part of it."

Levi stared at the jagged contours of the scar, the uneven depth of it, and looked back up at Tiergan's face, aghast. "For Christ's sake, tell me you didn't do this to yourself."

Tiergan shrugged. "I couldn't afford insurance, and there weren't any other doctors around."

Levi felt sickness wash over him at the very idea of cutting into his own flesh. Even with all of Tiergan's advanced surgical enhancements, the process had to have been excruciating. He couldn't have anesthetized himself.

"That sounds like a shitty experience."

Tiergan snorted. "Yeah."

"I don't know how you did it."

"Honestly, I don't know either. It's amazing what a person can do when they have no other options." He yawned, and then wrapped his arms around Levi tighter, pulling him closer. Within minutes, Tiergan's breathing changed, becoming slower and deeper, and his soft lips parted slightly as he fell asleep.

Levi propped himself up on his elbow and watched Tiergan as he slept. His body was both alluring and frightening -- his lean, pale frame, finely marked with muscles, ruined by countless scars and injuries. Levi reached out and gently stroked the thin lines in Tiergan's hand, where his implants were, sliding under the skin like a metal skeleton. Everything about him looked painful and beautiful.

Levi closed his eyes and tried to sleep beside him. But excitement over this new relationship, worries about his Tarus 9 story, and a sinking regret that he hadn't prodded Tiergan for more details about Kera kept him awake most of the night. He must have fallen

asleep, however, for when he opened his eyes again, he found himself staring into Tiergan's blue eyes. Tiergan was staring with a look of almost tenderness. But the second he realized Levi was awake, his expression closed again, and the glimpse of feeling disappeared. He kissed Levi briefly, and then sat up. He squinted out the window.

"Where are you going?" Levi asked.

"The rains have turned off, so it must be two in the morning," Tiergan said. "The last shuttle back to Washoe leaves in half an hour."

"You could leave in the morning." Levi hoped he didn't come off as desperate. But the masculine aroma of Tiergan's body, the heat of his flesh, was giving Levi visions of a reprise.

"I have to go on a supply run before the clinic opens in the morning. I better leave."

Levi sat up as well, admiring the flex of Tiergan's buttocks as he walked around the room gathering his strewn clothing. He loved the loose droop of his testicles, the taut muscles of his stomach, the fine, thin elegance of his wrists. His hair was a tousled blond mess, his lips luscious red, and for a moment, Levi couldn't believe his luck, couldn't account for someone this intriguing ending up in his bed.

Levi got out of bed as well. Tiergan seemed momentarily distracted by the sway of Levi's cock. Tiergan stared at it for a long moment, and then swallowed.

"I'd like to see you again," Levi said.

Tiergan tore his eyes from Levi's cock and nodded, a pink tinge of arousal on his cheeks. "Sure."

"I'll probably be by later on," Levi told him. He reached into his dresser and pulled out a clean pair of boxers. "I still want to talk to Kera."

Tiergan's jaw clenched, but he nodded. "I'll see you then."

At the door, Tiergan was back to being distant. He seemed to hesitate, wanting to tell Levi something. But instead, he just kissed Levi briefly. "Be safe, Levi."

And then he was gone.

Chapter Eight

Levi stayed up researching Kera on his operator. He discovered a few details about her, but nothing that provided an address, her age, or any other facts that he could use to track Kera down and speak with her alone.

While in research mode, Levi also looked up any details he could find on Tiergan. Oddly, there was hardly any record of him at all, other than a mention of his name and the clinic in an old news story from years ago. Tiergan was one of those rare human beings who had no presence on the net at all.

When Imogen came in that morning, Levi asked her to look further into the identification number on the memory implant chip, and whether it tied to any specific Trust Insurance database.

Imogen agreed, but with a caveat. “Only if you tell me who you were fucking last night.” Imogen smiled as she stirred her thin, watery coffee.

“How can you tell?”

She pointed to the empty bag of potato chips. “You only eat an entire bag of chips after you’ve been screwing,” she said with a smirk. “So tell me who he was.”

Levi yawned. “No.”

Imogen narrowed her eyes. "There must be something wrong with him, if you don't want to tell me about it."

"We fucked, what else is there to know?"

"Where'd you meet him?"

"On a story."

"What's he look like?"

"Gorgeous. Blond, blue eyes, all muscle. Lots of freaky scars though."

Imogen grimaced. "Was he a soldier or something?"

Levi shrugged. "Maybe."

"You mean you don't know?"

"I don't know anything about him, other than he has a bit of a domineering streak and a big dick."

Imogen shook her head. "You know, you really should make an effort to get to know these guys first."

Rather than engage in this lecture any further, Levi gulped the last of his coffee and made his way to work.

The reporters who had desks on the third floor of the *Ishan Report's* headquarters did not keep regular schedules, so Levi spent the first half hour in the office greeting fellow employees and catching up on gossip before he was able to finally sit down and check his messages.

He immediately recognized the digital address on his first message. It was that of his informant. Levi opened the e-mail quickly and downloaded the document onto his osys -- a medical file of various patients imprisoned at the detention center.

Levi added the document to his growing file of evidence. He scanned it closely for any clue as to who sent it but determined nothing.

He rapidly dispatched the rest of his messages, turning down an offer to write an exposé on alleged cheating amongst parent-coaches within Ishan's T-ball league and another offer to follow up on the fall scarf-knotting trends.

From the internal osys at his desk, Levi was able to access the *Ishan Report* archives, which included documents not available on the public net. He was able to find Kera Stark's original immigration papers. She arrived on Ishan seventeen years ago, a political refugee from Tarus 9. She had spent two years in an immigration center, awaiting the outcome of her case as it was reviewed by Ishan's immigration council. Once finally granted refugee status, she moved in with her mother-in-law, although the street address was not provided. It listed no formal occupation, and no other details about her family, other than the fact that she was a widow. She had moved to Washoe when she was twenty-eight years old, making her forty-three. She looked much older.

If Levi was going to find out more, he was going to have to ask her himself.

* * * * *

The following morning, he took the shuttle back to Washoe. For the entire twenty-minute shuttle ride, Levi focused on crushing the anxious butterflies swarming in his gut, making him excited and nauseous. He hadn't called Tiergan or warned him of his arrival, and he hoped that his reception would be warmer than last time.

Of course, Tiergan hadn't called him either. That sort of stank.

Nevertheless, the memory of Tiergan's bruising kisses, the way he had pushed Levi against the wall, the slow, unapologetic power of his entry, all these memories made Levi willing to risk a little humiliation in the hopes of seeing him again.

But his main reason to go to the clinic was for Kera. Part of him almost wished that Tiergan wouldn't be there, so he could focus on Kera alone, and not have those damned butterflies interfering with his professional demeanor.

To his disappointment, neither Kera nor Tiergan was at the clinic when Levi arrived. Dr. Park Thao was working through the arduous process of dismantling the security system and unlocking the doors.

Already, the line for the clinic wrapped around the building. It was going to be another full day for Park and Tiergan.

"Hello," Levi said, smiling at the doctor. "I'm Levi Kaszeri, a friend of Tiergan's."

Park Thao looked him up and down as if assessing Levi's height and weight ratio, and then nodded. "Yes, he mentioned you yesterday."

Levi felt his stomach pleasantly turn.

Dr. Thao turned his attention back to undoing a series of electronic combination locks. "You can wait for him inside, if you want."

"Thank you." Levi followed Park inside, noticing that he shut the door behind them both. The people in line watched Levi enter warily.

The clinic was dark. Park turned on the light and started laying out various instruments.

"I don't open officially until Kera or Tiergan is here," Park explained. "I can't take care of everyone *and* process their paperwork. I'm not that noble."

Levi leaned against the wall. "You do get paid, don't you?"

Park laughed dryly. "I suppose you could call it a salary. It barely covers rent."

"I'm sure you could find more lucrative work," Levi said. "So why do you stay?"

"For Dr. Seoras, of course." He turned on several monitors. "There isn't a person in Washoe who hasn't been helped by him at some point in the last ten years, including me."

"Is he a hard boss?" Levi asked.

Park snorted in laughter. "I don't even think of him as a boss. The only requirement he has is selflessness, which is a huge requirement, I might add. He expects me to give the best

care and give it constantly, without question, and without reward. So in that way, he's hard. But when you're with Tiergan, you want to help him. You want to join his cause, because he believes in it so strongly." Park stopped folding down a bed sheet and smiled. "He's one of those guys that makes you believe in the goodness of people."

Levi felt foolish for asking such an obvious question. Of course people wanted to help Tiergan.

It was also such a different side to Tiergan than Levi had seen. With Levi, Tiergan was passionate but reserved, almost cold. But to everyone else, he apparently was warmhearted and open. Imogen's warning about not knowing his new lover echoed through Levi's mind. He immediately silenced the warning.

"You can wait in Tiergan's office," Park said, pointing to the green curtain in the corner. Levi nodded, and then stepped behind the curtain. He spotted the shiny silver card of Tiergan's Gen-6 osys on the desk, and his heart raced. He could confirm whether or not this was the system that had sent the messages to him. Closing the curtain, Levi quickly switched on the card, letting the autoscreen adjust to his height and materialize in front of his eyes.

He looked around for the connecting chip, and found a set of stickers beside the card on the table. They were small and round, with tiny chips embedded in the paper. He peeled one off and placed it on his temple, as he had seen Imogen do before. Immediately, options and menus appeared on the floating screen.

Levi thought his way through the system. He navigated to personnel records, and looked up Kera Stark's home address. She lived only three blocks from the clinic.

He then tried to find the sent-mail directory, but the new operating system was difficult to navigate, and random thoughts he kept having about the story, his craving for a bagel, porn, and various other uncontrollable urges kept throwing off the system. The message "Did you mean to ask me about A-N-A-L-S-E-X?" flashed across the screen.

“Damn it!” Levi scrunched his eyebrows together. Obviously, these new thought-controlled operating systems required practice, or at least someone with clearer focus.

“I have no screen shots of anal sex in that database,” Tiergan’s cool voice came from behind Levi. “Although we could probably make a few if you wanted.”

Levi swiveled, startled, to see Tiergan smirking at him. To his dismay, he felt his cheeks burning. He quickly peeled off the sticker and closed down the screen.

Tiergan brushed past him, depositing a large box full of pharmaceuticals beside the desk. He then stared at Levi, a look that was almost predatory. Levi felt a tiny bit like weeping.

Tiergan suddenly lunged and kissed him. His kiss was fierce, demanding. He gripped Levi by the back of the neck, his tongue mercilessly plunging into Levi’s mouth.

And then he pulled back once more.

Levi stood, stunned, by Tiergan’s smug detachment. Tiergan seemed to recover from his libidinous attacks instantaneously. Meanwhile, Levi would be reliving that kiss for hours.

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Tiergan asked. He started unbuttoning his shirt, and Levi felt himself grow warm in anticipation. Tiergan was going to fuck him again, right then and there.

But then Tiergan slung his shirt over the wet vac and unhooked his lab coat from the wall.

“I...” Levi realized he hadn’t answered him, hadn’t said a word since Tiergan entered. “I... just wanted to check my mail,” he stammered. “My osys doesn’t work effectively in Washoe.”

“Liar.” Tiergan raised an eyebrow.

Levi felt his entire face flush. “Sorry.”

Tiergan pulled on his lab coat. “You’re a reporter. I expect a certain amount of privacy invasion when you’re around. Did you find Kera’s address?”

Levi coughed.

“Obviously.” Tiergan smirked. “Subtlety is not your strength, Levi.”

Damn, Levi loved the way Tiergan said his name. It came out almost as a growl, low and powerful.

Tiergan threw his stethoscope around his neck, and stuffed several cheap lollipops into his pocket.

“Are those for the children?” Levi asked, desperate to change topics.

“Nah, they’re for me.” Tiergan offered him one. “I don’t get a chance to eat lunch.”

Levi took one and pocketed it.

“Kera should be here shortly,” Tiergan said. He no longer faced Levi. He sterilized his hands with a spray, his back toward Levi. “You can wait for her here. But I have to go to work.”

Levi peeked around the curtain. Park had opened the door and the clinic promptly filled with people.

“I can’t believe you help this many people every day,” Levi said. “You are really a saint, aren’t you?”

Tiergan frowned. “I’m not. Not at all.”

“You have given your life to these people,” Levi said. “It’s like missionary work.”

“More like penance,” Tiergan said. He sighed. “I can’t even help most of them. I don’t have the equipment or the medication. Even when there is a simple cure, they can’t afford the treatments they need.” He reached into the box he brought that morning and showed Levi a small bottle of pills. “These are donations I get by begging at other clinics. It’s pitiful.” He dropped the bottle in disgust.

“I want to help you,” Levi suddenly blurted out. He rolled up his shirtsleeves before he could change his mind. “What can I do to help?”

Tiergan blinked. “Are you serious?”

“Yes.” Levi hoped that spending time volunteering at the clinic would soften Kera toward him. Besides, with that many people in the waiting area, it seemed unlikely that he would spend any time with her or Tiergan otherwise. “Tell me what to do.”

Tiergan smiled, and for the first time, there was a genuine happiness in his expression. It made him look young and boyish. He squeezed Levi’s shoulder. And then he fumbled in one of his boxes silently. He triumphantly pulled out another lab coat and grinned.

Levi pulled on the coat. It billowed around him like a cape. “Was your last assistant a whale?”

“I usually don’t employ attractive young men,” Tiergan said.

“Why not?”

“Too distracting.” Tiergan looped a white cotton belt through the belt holes of Levi’s gigantic coat. As he did so, he paused to briefly and thoroughly feel up Levi’s ass.

Levi leaned into Tiergan, throat going dry.

Tiergan tied the belt and then put the stethoscope in his ears and placed the chest piece against Levi’s breast.

“Your heartbeat is accelerated.”

“Gee. Wonder why.”

Tiergan leaned in and laid a line of small kisses along Levi’s neck. Levi turned and captured his lips, kissing him desperately. Tiergan thrust into him, pulling him into a powerful embrace. And then he let him go. “See? Distracting.” He smiled at Levi and handed him a bottle of sterilizer and a roll of disposable towels. “If you could sanitize the exam tables between patients and take their temperatures, you would be my savior.”

“What do I get for it?” Levi’s mind was still stuck somewhere around their kiss.

Tiergan lowered his voice. “Anything you want.”

“Anything.”

Tiergan nodded. Then he flashed a dazzling smile and burst through the curtain door, onto the stage of the clinic.

For the next six hours, Levi worked his ass off.

The constant pace of Tiergan’s work world was grueling. Tiergan tended one person after another, with no breaks. Every patient was greeted with a smile, touched fondly on the arm. He asked about family members. He looked appropriately upset when informing patients of bad news.

But the strongest emotions came when he could not help someone.

Levi was wiping down a table next to Tiergan when he saw him look down an older gentleman’s throat, and frown.

Tiergan sat there in silence for a moment. Then he ran his hand over his face. “Mr. Adash, you have sideropenic dysphagia. And while this is almost completely treatable with iron supplements, I don’t have any that I can provide for you.”

Mr. Adash’s large, watery eyes drooped. “I am unemployed. I can’t afford any medication.”

“I’m sorry,” Tiergan said. “I can recommend a natural treatment that will ease your difficulty in swallowing until you can get back on your feet and get yourself some supplements.”

Tiergan outlined a prescriptive diet and instructions. Levi furtively watched him as he changed a pillowcase. Tiergan’s job was one where he spent most of every day telling good people bad news.

But Tiergan seemed to find joy when he was able to help someone. That pure, genuine smile of his came out as he checked an old injury and found it healed, or heard that someone was in remission. The closed, unreadable expressions of his face disappeared here, and while

it disappointed Levi to realize that they were reserved just for him, it also gave him hope. If Tiergan learned to trust him, then maybe he wouldn't be so detached in the future.

Kera came in late that morning and began her daily duty of corralling the throngs into some semblance of order. She bellowed out instructions to the patients and forced them to fill out paperwork correctly. Levi could tell that they were all used to this. He longed to talk to her then, but the nervous glare Kera kept giving him held him back.

Kera finally approached Levi, as he took another armload of dirty laundry to the back of the clinic.

"What are you doing here?" she barked at him.

Levi dropped the sheets. "Helping Tiergan. Same as you."

Kera's frown deepened. She turned to Tiergan. "T, we're out of halothane."

Tiergan gave her an okay sign with his hand, but didn't move his head. He stared at a young man's arm, using his enhanced eye to detect the location of a bullet.

The man Tiergan helped was obviously high, Levi noted.

"Levi."

Levi approached Tiergan. A surge filled his groin every time Tiergan said his name. "Yes?"

"Would you hand me the bandage on the table over there?" Tiergan's glance did not waver. He stared intently into the man's wound with a serious expression.

Levi handed him the bandage. He took it without looking up. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Levi looked at the instruments on the table, but could not see any that would be used for surgery. He was still trying to figure out how Tiergan was going to remove the bullet, when there was a low whirring noise. A small blade emerged from the tip of Tiergan's right pointer finger.

Cybernetic hand-tools were the kinds of body improvements only the top specialists in the system could afford, so Levi had never seen them in use. He watched with queasy

fascination as metal emerged from his flesh and carved into the young man's wound. Not for the first time, Levi wondered how Tiergan had bankrolled all of these personal improvements.

Tiergan worked silently, using his fingertip blade. When he reached the bullet, he withdrew the scalpel and another tool emerged from his middle finger, reaching into the wound and extracted the metal smoothly.

Tiergan sealed the wound shut with the laser in his eye. And then he turned and quickly dipped his tools in sterilizing fluid before they withdrew back into his hand.

"That's nasty looking," Levi commented as he watched the metal recede.

Tiergan looked tired but satisfied. "It's a weird feeling, I'll give you that." He turned back to the young man. "Come back in three days so I can check there is no infection."

The man barely acknowledged Tiergan's comment as he got up hazily and walked out of the clinic.

"Another satisfied customer," Tiergan said.

By the time the last patient left the clinic, it was well past seven o'clock in the evening. Tiergan looked like he could barely stand. He gave Levi a tired smile.

"Nothing personal, Levi, but...I think I'm going to go home and sleep."

"It's all right." Levi was exhausted himself, but he had no intention of returning home immediately. "I think I'll walk Kera home and make sure she's safe."

Tiergan stared at him hard. "Kera can take care of herself."

"Still, I'd like to talk with her." Levi saw her gathering her things, and quickly took off his lab coat.

"I'm off," Kera said, waving as she made her way to the closed grate.

"Kera, wait." Tiergan glared at Levi for a moment and then went over to her. He spoke with her quietly. Levi couldn't hear a word, although he strained to listen in. The way she kept sneering in his direction made it obvious what the topic was.

Finally, Tiergan rested his hand on the top of her head fondly and then beckoned him over. "I'll see you two later."

"Good night," Levi said.

"And Levi?"

Levi turned back to Tiergan, who summoned a half-crooked smile. "Thanks. For helping."

Levi smiled back. "Any time."

Outside, the dark street had emptied of all life once more. Kera buttoned up her coat, even though it was not any colder outside than it had been inside the clinic. As soon as they got ten steps from the clinic, Kera turned on him.

"You ingratiated yourself with T pretty fast, didn't you?"

Levi hid his shock with a cough. "Tiergan has nothing to do with what I want to talk to you about."

"Yeah, I know." She scowled at the dark street. "You think I'm giving you secret information about the uprising on Tarus 9. Tiergan told me."

"Aren't you?"

"I'm not your informant," Kera stated. She walked faster.

Disappointment flooded Levi.

"And even if I was your informant, there is no way you could get me to talk about it on the record. It's suicide."

Levi hurried to keep up with her. "Why not?"

Kera shook her head. "You are nice to look at, but not too bright, are you?" Before Levi could defend himself, she continued. "Do you know what Surayo did to keep us quiet twenty years ago? What makes you think they would allow something like this to come out now?"

They killed thousands without thinking twice. Killing me is something they could do in their sleep.”

“I see.” Levi’s excitement grew. Kera wasn’t going to admit to being his informant, but she still had information that he could use. It would take patience, and a lot of convincing, but Levi was certain he could get her story, if he gave her enough reason to do it.

“Don’t you think it’s worth the risk, knowing that you could finally have revenge? You would help to make sure justice is served.”

Kera glared at Levi with her one eye. “Justice served. Yeah, right. Even if I did tell my story, and even if you published your big piece on the massacre, what makes you think that the bastards truly responsible for what happened will pay?”

Levi realized he couldn’t answer her. There were no guarantees that the actual individuals responsible would be caught. But he had to try, and so he pushed on. “If you won’t speak on camera, will you at least let me talk to you off the record?”

Kera stopped outside of a dilapidated apartment complex, right on Washoe Street. A conglomeration of unfriendly-looking men watched them from the steps.

“And what do I get in return?” she asked, eyeing Levi in challenge.

“Dinner? Laundry? Sexual favors? You name it.” Levi flashed her a smile.

Kera stared at him blankly and then laughed. She shook her head. “No, thank you. I think you’re more Tiergan’s type than mine.”

“True.”

“You know, if you hurt him, I will personally cut out your heart.”

Levi blinked. “Hurt *him*? I’m the one who’s in danger here. One minute he’s on me like I’m a walking aphrodisiac, and the next, he looks at me like I’m some stranger off the street. I can’t read him at all.”

Kera gave him a small smile. “He likes you.”

“Yeah?” Levi stepped closer, feeling childishly pleased. “So what will it take, Kera? I need your help. How can I re-pay you?”

Kera studied him quietly. And then she nodded, as if to herself. “Help Tiergan.”

“Excuse me?”

“At the clinic. He needs help.”

Levi frowned. “If I volunteer at the clinic, you’re willing to talk on camera?”

“No.” Kera glared at him. “I told you. Not on camera. But for every day you volunteer, I’ll tell you more about my own story, off camera. That’s all I’m going to offer.” She turned to leave.

Levi reached out and gently touched her arm. “Kera, wait. Don’t you want something for yourself? I can offer more than just my time, you know.”

Kera shook her head. “If you want to help me, then help Tiergan. He needs it more than I do.”

Levi nodded. “Of course. I’ll do it.”

“I’m not promising to tell you anything you don’t already know,” Kera told him. “But it’s the best I can do.”

“It’s a deal.” Levi shook her hand enthusiastically.

Kera turned to the steps of her apartment. The men loitering around the entrance made way for her.

“I won’t disappoint you,” Levi called out. The men regarded him with bland contempt, and Levi realized he was a complete and utter ass.

Still, he waved at Kera until she shut her door.

Chapter Nine

Levi was a fit guy.

He played basketball four nights a week, he ran, and when he was on a story, he chased leads all over the colony, sleeping little, constantly on his feet.

But after three weeks volunteering at the Washoe Free Clinic, he felt like an old man. He was beat, and not just from the grueling pace of activity, or standing eight hours a day. Mentally, he was exhausted. Watching people die, give birth, get bad news, cry in pain -- it took more emotional strength than Levi thought he had.

On Tarus 9, he had seen terrible things, but managed to survive by distancing his emotions from the cruelty around him. But this was different. This wasn't cruelty. It was simply the brutality of life, the desperation of poverty and human unkindness mingling with love and affection and a surging need to heal. It was beautiful and heartbreaking all at once, and Levi ended every day wanting to go home, pass out, and die in his sleep.

Levi wasn't given any technical tasks, and his volunteer position followed the pattern of that first day, when he had volunteered his time of his own accord. He laundered bed sheets, sanitized tables, wrapped bandages, read temperatures. He cleaned up spittle and blood and spent countless hours cleaning up after the endless onslaught of patients.

Tiergan never took lunches, but Kera did, and although Levi was usually so exhausted by this time that he would have preferred to crawl into a corner and take a nap, he used every lunch break to grill Kera with questions.

It was difficult to befriend her, not only because she was reticent to talk, but also because she was a complete bitch. She never warmed to him, no matter how much vomit he mopped up. But she eventually answered Levi's questions, hesitantly at first, providing no dates or names, or any specifics.

But Levi persisted, not only because this was his best chance at getting Kera to agree, but also because of the added perk of spending time with Tiergan. Granted, their time to speak to one another was fleeting, sandwiched at the beginnings and ends of days, and slipped between bouts of influenza and broken bones. The clinic rarely quieted enough for conversation, but Levi still enjoyed working beside Tiergan.

And after closing up in the evenings, Tiergan would accompany Levi back to the shuttle station, and the two of them would talk. It was companionable, and relaxing, and Tiergan, too, seemed to look forward to this moment, when the two of them could discuss random things that had nothing to do with his practice, or Levi's story, or the poverty around them.

But their time together was always too short, always in the streets, never in privacy. And while Levi did manage to woo Tiergan back to his house on a couple of occasions for a few great fucks, it almost seemed as though Tiergan was purposely keeping Levi at arm's length, despite enjoying his company.

Levi usually brought lunch with him when he worked at the clinic, and started bringing in lunches for Kera as well, something healthier than the bland grub she ate on her own. Oddly, this warmed her to him more than all his sacrifices within the clinic itself. She began to open up, scarfing down Levi's sandwiches as she answered each of his questions with more useful details.

Kera's husband had been one of the first miners to strike for the school. He was imprisoned, but had escaped. She herself was captured and jailed for two months, enduring daily interrogations while the company tried to ascertain her husband's whereabouts.

As open as Kera became about her own past, she continued to insist that she wasn't Levi's informant. And she refused to speak on camera.

At least Imogen was having better luck. She had discovered an internal document at Trust Insurance that identified the serial number on the memory implant. It was listed as a code for "re-commissioned agents," although it did not specify what this designation meant.

No documentation on the net referred to re-commissioned agents. But one of the consultants at Imogen's company had worked for Trust Insurance a few years back. Imogen promised to ask him if he'd be willing to dig into their files.

The afternoon before Levi was scheduled to meet with Rowan to discuss his progress on his story, he was beginning to feel desperate. The clinic was unusually quiet, and Kera and Levi shared a lunch at her desk, speaking in low voices as Tiergan and Dr. Reynolds both tended to a very sick older man.

Levi asked Kera if she would be willing to sit for a short, filmed interview.

"We can mask your face and your voice," he assured her. "We do it all the time. No one will know your real name."

"No."

Levi hadn't touched the pasta salad he'd brought. He pushed it away from him in frustration. "For God's sake, Kera! You once braved torture to protect your husband. Why can't you do this?"

Kera put down her fork, leaned across the desk, and slapped him hard across the face. The people in the clinic went quiet, watching.

“I never protected him!” she snapped. “I had no idea where he went, or what he was doing after the militia arrived! I would have told them anything, but I knew nothing. He left me to my fate.”

Levi felt sick. He assumed that there was something noble in the people who resisted torture. But now he realized what was truly sick about the situation. People like Kera were just normal people. She did not even have nobility to fall back on. She would have done anything to get them to stop. And still they didn’t. In a way, it was worse. His cheek stung but not as much as his pride.

The patients waiting in the clinic turned away, bored again. They started talking, laughing, and coughing as if nothing had happened.

Levi looked out the window of the clinic. Through the bars, he could see men and women walking by, loitering. He could hear the sound of a delivery truck. Everything out there suddenly seemed so banal.

“My father told them everything,” Levi said quietly. He kept staring out the window. “That was what finally did him in, at the end. The guilt of betraying everyone he worked with.”

He could feel Kera’s sharp gaze upon him, but he didn’t turn. “What was your father’s name?” she asked.

“David,” Levi said. “David Kaszeri.”

Kera nodded. “I remember him.”

“You do?” Levi stared at her, wide-eyed.

“I didn’t know him well,” Kera said, after a long silence. “I met him at the detention center. There were times when we were all thrown in together. He seemed like a nice man.”

Levi’s lunch blurred in front of him. His throat felt tight. He purposefully didn’t think about his father when he thought about Tarus 9. To do the story well, he had divorced his own grief from it, leaving only his rage. But now everything flooded back to him.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were personally involved in this investigation of yours,” Kera said softly.

Levi didn’t respond. He wiped his eyes and gazed solemnly at his pasta.

“Levi, would your father have challenged the board of the Surayo Corporation, after what they did to him? Would he tell the whole world about the humiliation they inflicted upon him?” Kera’s voice was shaky.

Levi forced himself to look at her. “My father betrayed his friends and then hanged himself. So I doubt it highly.”

Kera stared back at him, but said nothing. It was the ultimate sign of a Tarusian. A sordid past was nothing new. Everyone on Ishan blanched when Levi told them about his father. But Kera just nodded, as if she had known this would be his fate.

“I know why you are asking me, Levi.” She sighed. “And I appreciate what you are trying to achieve. But I don’t want to go through it all again.”

Levi was about to protest, but a sense of hopelessness overcame him. There was no point. She wouldn’t talk, and he would fail. He swallowed and stared down at his lunch again, willing his emotions under control. The mention of his father had served him no good. Now he felt sick and angry at himself.

He heard Kera’s chair scoot back as she got up to clean her plate. He remained sitting, staring, until he heard Tiergan’s voice, low and soft, behind him.

“Are you going to eat that pasta, or are you going to kill it with your eyes?”

Levi glanced up at him. Tiergan was staring at him with a very intense expression.

Levi shrugged. “It’s yours. I don’t have much of an appetite.” He looked around, and noticed, for once, the clinic was nearly empty of patients.

Tiergan still looked at him with an expression that seemed as if he were trying to tell Levi something telepathically.

Tiergan reached out and clasped the back of Levi's neck fondly. Relief coursed through Levi at the contact.

Tiergan gave him a small smile. "I actually despise pasta salad."

Levi frowned. "I brought bread as well."

Tiergan's hand stayed on Levi's neck. Levi looked around. The few patients watched with detached interest. Tiergan had never shown affection toward him in the clinic before.

There was warmth in Tiergan's eyes. "I have something tastier at home. I wanted to see if you'd join me."

Levi's eyes widened. "You're actually going to eat lunch?"

Tiergan motioned to the nearly empty room. "It's a rare opportunity, and I thought I'd take advantage of it."

Levi stood immediately. "Of course." Levi's depression receded in the wake of his enthusiasm to see how Tiergan lived. "Finally, an invitation back to your house," Levi said.

Tiergan shrugged. "It's somewhat embarrassing, now that I've seen where you live."

"Do you have any roommates?" Levi asked.

Tiergan shook his head. "Nope."

"Any possibility of being interrupted over the next hour?"

"None whatsoever," Tiergan said. "I'm certain of it."

"Then your apartment is perfect," Levi said. He let Tiergan lead the way.

Chapter Ten

The outside of Tiergan's apartment complex was disfigured. The rusted corrugated sheet metal was tearing off the building in long, jagged strips. Graffiti scarred almost every surface. Bleary-eyed, sickly, pale men and women clogged the entrance and watched Levi sharply as he entered with Tiergan.

But even the shadiest-looking of them greeted Tiergan warmly.

"Who's that, doc?" one of the men cried out, eyeing Levi.

"My friend, Levi," Tiergan told him. "And nothing's going to happen to him whenever he's here, right Jake?"

The man grinned, showing cheap false teeth. "Friend of yours is a friend of mine, doc."

Tiergan nodded and then yanked open the rusting door to let Levi inside.

The interior of the building wasn't any cheerier than the outside. Tiergan's apartment was on the fifth floor, and they had to walk up a dark and depressing staircase, strongly scented with urine, to get to his door.

But inside Tiergan's apartment was a different world altogether.

Tiergan had transformed the small space into a haven of subdued elegance. He had laid down pine floors. The walls were painted, each room a different, bright color. His kitchen was spotless. A charming antique table stood in the living room near the barred windows.

And everywhere -- on the walls, in frames perched on every flat surface, in the corners -- everywhere, there were paintings of birds.

Levi wanted to look around and explore Tiergan's private world, but the second the front door was locked Tiergan grabbed him and pushed him against the wall. He kissed him deeply, and then pulled back, a mischievous glint in his eyes. Tiergan stepped back, looking Levi's body over appraisingly. "I think that after that slap you might need a thorough physical examination." He cocked his eyebrow inquisitively.

Levi's throat went dry. *Playing doctor? Really? With a real doctor? Jesus.* "Yeah. That sounds like a good idea."

Tiergan reached into his back pocket and pulled out a latex glove.

Levi bit back a groan. Damn, Tiergan could get kinky. But he wasn't about to argue.

Tiergan pointed toward a door. "Go in there and undress. I'll be with you momentarily."

Levi walked into the bedroom in a daze. The room was painted a dark slate, with simple, tasteful wood furnishings. The bed was large and made, neither of which Levi could say for his own bed.

He undressed completely and then sat on the edge of the bed, heart hammering in his chest. He heard Tiergan rap on the door and he entered a moment later, carrying a canvas medical bag with him, which he placed on the bedside table.

"Hello, Levi," Tiergan said. None of his prior lust showed. He looked unerringly professional. It was almost creepy, the way Tiergan could turn it off. Tiergan pulled up the desk chair and sat across from Levi. Levi felt ridiculously exposed, especially as his cock hardened and bent toward his stomach. Tiergan gave him a look that Levi recognized from

the countless hours he had now spent at the clinic. It was friendly, and trustworthy, and very concerned. “So let’s take a look at that bruise.”

Levi fumbled. “It’s really nothing.”

Tiergan patted Levi’s knee reassuringly, the way he did for his patients in the clinic. His demeanor was achingly professional.

“Why don’t you let me be the judge of that?” Tiergan tilted Levi’s head to the side, truly examining the bruise. Gently he opened Levi’s mouth and ran his finger along the inside of Levi’s cheek. “Seems like you’ve got a small cut on the inside of your mouth. Kera hits pretty hard, doesn’t she?”

Levi nodded. He didn’t give a shit about Kera now. The fact that he’d deserved that slap made him want to think of her even less. He closed his mouth around Tiergan’s finger, sucking. Demonstrating his technique.

At first Tiergan didn’t react and for a moment Levi thought he’d been mistaken, that Tiergan really did mean to examine him in a completely nonsexual way. Then came that wicked glint in his eye again.

“I better go ahead and check you over, just to be safe.” He reached into his bag and pulled out a stethoscope. He warmed the end between his palms, and then motioned for Levi to stand.

Levi stood still as Tiergan placed the stethoscope against his heart. Tiergan looked at the clock at his bedside table. *Christ, he’s actually giving me a medical exam.*

“Your pulse is extremely rapid,” Tiergan said.

“You think?” Levi sounded out of breath.

Tiergan patted his shoulder. “Bend over please.” He motioned toward the bed.

Levi braced himself with outstretched arms, his hands gripping the edge of the mattress as he spread his legs wider. He heard Tiergan rustle around in his medical bag once more, and then slip on his latex glove.

“Just relax,” Tiergan said quietly. He parted Levi’s cheeks with one hand. With slow, cautious patience, Tiergan circled the tight pink ring of Levi’s opening with his fingers. Levi’s entire body quivered.

And then slipped a cool, lubricated, latex-covered finger into Levi’s ass.

Levi tensed in surprise.

“Breathe deeply,” Tiergan said calmly. Levi stuck his ass out further, forcing his muscles to relax.

Tiergan slowly slid his finger inside of Levi and then back out, circling around Levi’s opening, pushing back in and pressing against Levi’s prostate. Levi began to whimper.

“How does that feel?” Tiergan asked. His voice had gotten husky. He re-lubricated his fingers and pushed two inside of Levi, pumping them gently in circles, and then scissoring them to spread Levi open wider.

“Good,” Levi croaked.

Tiergan gave his prostate another deep stroke, and then withdrew his hand. He patted Levi’s ass.

“I need you to lie on the bed and spread your legs.”

Levi felt ready to burst. His arms shook as he crawled onto the bed and flipped onto his back.

“Please spread your legs wider.” Tiergan assisted him, pushing Levi’s thighs apart. He shook his head. “I still can’t see well enough. If you would be so good as to grab hold of your knees and hold your legs up for me...”

Levi did as he was told, his entire body shivering with excitement. He was so exposed like this, ass out on display, legs obscenely spread. He gripped the backs of his knees, tilting his hips forward to present his hole and his twitching cock.

Tiergan was a damned good actor, Levi decided. He maintained his professional air as he pushed at Levi’s inner thighs, his face blank of any arousal. But his eyes had gone dark,

pupils dilated, and he was breathing rapidly through his nose. Levi glanced down and saw the poor doctor's own cock was straining against the belt of his jeans. But Tiergan did not acknowledge it at all.

Tiergan lubed his gloved hand once more and continued to probe as he reached forward with his other hand to pump Levi's cock with rhythmic precision.

Levi's consciousness flirted between desperate frustration for more, and stunned pleasure. At this point, he was sweating and writhing on the bed. His arms shook as he held his legs pried open.

It only took a few additional strokes and then Levi came explosively, covering his stomach and Tiergan's hand, arching his back. Even after coming his entire body felt enflamed, shivering from such sweet, prolonged torture.

"Everything seems all right down here," Tiergan said.

"What do I owe you, doctor?" Levi asked.

"What have you got?"

"Come here," Levi said huskily, letting go of his legs to pull Tiergan toward him. They kissed fiercely.

Within seconds, they were both fumbling with Tiergan's clothing. Tiergan freed his own swollen cock and, without pausing, placed a hand on each of Levi's knees and spread his legs apart. He immediately pushed his thick cock against Levi's entrance. Levi sucked in breath as Tiergan slid his length into Levi's hole. All thought dissolved. Tiergan pushed himself all the way in, until Levi could feel Tiergan's testicles slap against his butt cheeks.

The feeling against his prostate, so soon after coming, was dizzying. Tiergan pumped faster, thrusting his cock into Levi, until with a strangled moan, he came, filling Levi's insides with hot liquid.

Levi's nerves were inflamed. His sphincter spasmed around Tiergan's cock as he pulled out.

They both said nothing, breathing heavily, catching their breaths. Tiergan lay next to Levi on the bed.

Tiergan chuckled quietly. "That was interesting."

Levi grinned into his shoulder. "For a second there I actually thought you were going to just give me a physical and let me go."

Tiergan laughed. His hand traced along Levi's arm lazily. "It was hard to control myself, I'll give you that."

"I hope I haven't completely corrupted you," Levi told him. "Don't want you thinking naughty thoughts the next time you actually do have to palpate someone's rectum."

Tiergan shook his head. "That's different. I can turn it off when I'm working. This...you...that's something special."

Levi closed his eyes, giddily savoring the words. He reached out and placed his hand over Tiergan's chest. Tiergan's breathing was still heavy, but his heart thumped slowly against Levi's palm, steady and rhythmic. Levi wondered what kind of cardio workout Tiergan did to maintain such an immutable heartbeat.

Finally, after what felt like another day, Tiergan rolled out of bed. "Hungry?"

"Famished." Levi sat up to watch Tiergan move naked into the kitchen. Levi used Tiergan's bathroom to wash up and then joined him in the kitchen, not bothering to put clothes on either. There was something pleasantly comforting about watching Tiergan cook without a stitch of clothing on.

As Tiergan pulled ingredients from his fridge, Levi wandered his small living room, looking at the pictures on the walls. "So what's with the birds?" Levi asked.

"I like them. I like painting them."

Levi looked closer at the meticulous shading and coloring of one of the portraits. "You painted these?"

Tiergan nodded. "I paint any bird that I've seen in real life. It helps cement the experience in my mind."

"Where did you see all these birds?" Levi had never seen a wild bird in his entire life. The only live bird he'd ever seen was a pet parakeet in a high school friend's house.

"Back home, on Earth," Tiergan said.

Levi turned to face him, shocked. "Earth? You are actually from Earth?"

Tiergan raised an eyebrow. "Where did you think I came from?"

Now that Levi took in his appearance and his accent, it made sense. He sounded different than anyone he had ever met in the Tova Star System. And his skin tone had that natural tint that was unique to those who had been exposed to the Sun.

"Where?" he asked.

"I'm from Ireland originally," Tiergan explained. "But I lived all over until I came here."

"Why did you come to Ishan?" he asked, suddenly curious why anyone would leave the exotic natural world of Earth for life in space.

Tiergan shrugged. "Work."

Levi studied the picture more closely. "I can't believe there are still so many species of birds alive." The picture he looked at was of a black bird soaring over water. Its variegated gray and white feathers under heavy dark wings captured a wildness and grace that made Levi suddenly yearn to be outside somewhere. The only breeze he had ever felt had been manufactured by air climate control systems, at regularly scheduled hours. The wildness of a stormy sea beneath the black bird conjured images of danger and wind-swept cliffs -- things that Levi had only heard about in stories.

"That's a storm petrel." Tiergan's voice was soft and surprisingly close behind him. Tiergan walked around him, his genitals brushing against Levi's thigh as he handed Levi a

plate. "They are pelagic, so they only come ashore when breeding. I was very fortunate to have seen one on land."

"It's remarkable," Levi said.

"Sailors used to believe that the appearance of these birds near their ships forecast the coming of a storm." Tiergan smiled at him. "Aren't you going to eat?"

Levi looked down at his sandwich, surprised by its complexity. Imogen and he usually made sandwiches with one ingredient, and a slathering of condiments. Levi took a bite and groaned. "This is the best sandwich I've ever had."

Levi savored the taste of the sandwich, the feel of Tiergan's bare chest, solid and warm on his back, and the flirtation of his cock bumping up against his bottom as they shifted.

"I had some leftover sauce from dinner and thought it'd go well with the prosciutto," Tiergan said.

"I've never said 'goes well with the prosciutto' before," Levi told him, and Tiergan laughed. "For a doctor with a lousy salary, you get some fancy ingredients."

"One of my patients owns a grocery the next biosphere over. From time to time he trades me food for treatment."

"You really do take payment in creative ways," Levi said, turning to grin at him.

Tiergan raised an eyebrow. "I liked your payment a lot."

Levi stared at him. Was that a veiled attempt at affection? Was Tiergan trying to say something more?

Momentarily flustered, Levi turned back to the wall, eating his sandwich as he walked around the room, admiring Tiergan's artwork.

"What's this one?"

Tiergan came up behind him. His soft cock nestled comfortably between Levi's butt cheeks, and he leaned close, his own sandwich forgotten in his hand.

“That’s a crossbill,” he said. They walked closely together, from painting to painting, and Tiergan told him all of their exotic names.

“This one is a Pacific golden plover,” Tiergan said. “And this here is a lesser kestrel.”

They passed spotted crakes, and great bustards, and long-toed stints, and a great grey shrike. Tiergan’s illustrations showed a fastidious attention to detail, each stroke perfected.

Levi’s attention was toward the pictures, but Tiergan’s was wandering. His press against Levi’s backside was becoming harder, and more noticeable. His hands came around Levi’s chest and pulled him tighter, reaching up to slowly rub Levi’s nipples.

“You’re going to be late for the clinic,” Levi whispered.

“Fuck the clinic.” Tiergan growled into Levi’s neck. He turned Levi around and dropped to his knees, and immediately pulled Levi’s soft cock into his mouth.

Levi’s eyes closed and he groaned. How could he need this so much, so desperately, only minutes after they had just screwed? His craving for Tiergan’s touch was insatiable.

“I don’t think you mean that,” Levi gasped.

“No, I don’t.” Tiergan stopped his ministrations, and looked up with an apologetic smile. “Sorry.”

Levi sighed. “Fine, suck me half way then leave me.”

Tiergan kissed the tip of Levi’s erection, and then stood. He kissed Levi’s mouth. “I’ll make it up to you.”

Levi grinned. “How?”

Tiergan raised an eyebrow. “Another check-up, maybe? Tomorrow night?”

Levi swallowed. “Yeah. For some reason, ‘investigative reporter’ kink doesn’t work nearly as well as a medical fantasy.”

Tiergan laughed. He ran his hands along Levi’s flank. “You could fuck me if you wanted to.”

Levi pressed into Tiergan and groaned. “Oh. Yes. That would be nice.”

Tiergan reluctantly pulled from Levi and went back to the bedroom to dress.

Levi sat on Tiergan’s bed and pulled on his socks, pleased by the informality between them. There was a casualness to their companionship that had been lacking earlier.

“How’s your story coming along?” Tiergan asked. He was busy buttoning his shirt, and he didn’t look at Levi.

“At an impasse,” Levi told him. He ran his fingers through his hair, to try and work some order back into it. “Kera still refuses to speak on camera, and my editor won’t publish it without her. And all I can find out about the implant was that it came from some sick bastard who has probably been dead for fifteen years, and was named ‘Recommissioned Agent 75,’ whatever the hell that means.”

Tiergan went completely still.

“I don’t suppose you could talk to Kera?” Levi asked. “Make her see how important it is that she speak to me on camera?”

Tiergan buckled his trousers. “Don’t ask me to do that.”

Levi pulled on his shoes, suddenly ashamed of himself. He shouldn’t be using Tiergan, regardless of the reason.

“I’m sorry.” Levi stood. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“I want to help you,” Tiergan said, finally meeting Levi’s eyes. “I really do. But I can’t do that.”

“It’s okay.” They finished tying their shoes in an uncomfortable silence. Levi cursed himself, cursed his dogged obsession with Tarus 9. What was Tarus 9 anyway? A childhood of nightmarish memories. What he had here, now, with Tiergan, was hot and good. It was healthy, and happy, and it was something he could not jeopardize just for the sake of his story.

Levi decided then and there not to mention the story to Tiergan again. Not until it was completed.

* * * * *

Levi left Washoe to meet with Rowan and give him an update on the story. Even though he had little to report, he was still flush with fucking and high on life, and he rode the elevator up to the twenty-fourth floor of the *Ishan Report* headquarters with a grin on his face.

Rowan Ryland's secretary announced his arrival, but had Levi wait until Rowan's current guest departed. Only a few minutes later, a small man in an expensive suit emerged, looking red in the face and ready to kill someone.

"Rowan will see you now," the secretary said calmly.

Levi entered hesitantly. The stormy expression on Rowan's last guest didn't bode well.

"Ah! Levi Kaszeri, my favorite young reporter!"

Rowan reached out and shook Levi's hand warmly. He held his hand longer than necessary. *Now what the hell did that mean?* Levi was getting tired of not understanding what people were trying to subtly tell him.

"Did you listen to Proto?" Rowan asked.

Levi stared at him blankly. "Excuse me?"

Rowan laughed. "Proto! My old band! I sent you a netfile of our recordings. I want your honest feedback."

Levi flushed. "Sorry! I've been so busy with this story; I completely forgot to listen to it."

Rowan looked genuinely crushed. "Wow. I'm really disappointed."

Levi reached out and touched his arm. "I'm sorry! I promise I'll listen to it tonight. You will have a full report in the morning."

Rowan smiled then, his eyes brightening. He reached out and slapped Levi's shoulder. "If you want, I could take you out tomorrow, maybe for lunch? You could give me your analysis then."

Levi felt the moisture leave his throat. This was definitely an invitation for a date. A month ago, Levi would have been tripping over himself to accept.

But his ass was still sticky from Tiergan, and he had no interest in anything, or anyone else. Besides, he had to work at the clinic. "I'm afraid I can't. I'm meeting with my informant tomorrow."

Rowan slapped Levi on the back. "I knew you could find him! Who is he?"

"It's a woman, actually," Levi told him. "A victim of the interrogations."

"Do you have her story on film?" Rowan asked. He stared intently.

"Well...not yet." Levi coughed. "She needs more time. She is speaking readily to me in private, but it will take a little more convincing before she's willing to brave the camera."

Rowan frowned. He sat down on his plush leather couch, and then motioned for Levi to do the same. Levi sat awkwardly. There was an intensity to Rowan's stare that was both flattering and a little unnerving.

"What's her name?" Rowan asked.

Levi swallowed. "I promised I wouldn't tell anyone until she is ready."

Rowan frowned. "Let me talk to her."

Levi shook his head. "She only speaks with me. I can barely get her to trust me now. The last thing she needs is to be ambushed by the editor-in-chief."

"I'm not asking for your permission, Levi." Rowan stared at Levi, all levity gone.

"But --"

"We've already wasted a lot of money and man-hours on this story. I can offer her assurances you cannot," Rowan said smoothly. "Guarantees for her safety. I have connections

with the Ishan security forces. I will make sure no one hurts her for disclosing the truth. She only needs to make a brief statement and tell us where she got that implant.”

The assurances would help. But Levi was sure that Kera would do nothing but clam up if Rowan approached her. If Levi had learned anything over the last three weeks of playing Kera’s lunch buddy, he had learned that Kera had very strong sense of loyalty. And if she knew Levi spilled her secrets to Rowan, without her permission, she wouldn’t talk to either of them ever again.

“I have more information on the mercenary it came from,” Levi said, hoping to redirect Rowan’s interests. Rowan lifted an eyebrow but didn’t respond, so Levi continued. “It apparently belonged to someone called Re-Commissioned Agent 75. I am looking into what that means now.”

Rowan’s eyes narrowed. “Agent 75, you say? Do you know where he is?”

Levi shook his head. “No. But I have another lead that may be promising. But the man has to be in his sixties by now. And with that implant removed, he may just as likely be dead.”

“Perhaps.” Rowan tapped his finger on the side of his mouth. “But that still leaves us both with no story.”

Levi scooted forward. “Rowan, I only need a few more days. I’m sure I can get her to talk.”

Rowan assessed him for another moment, and then nodded. “I’ll give you two more days to persuade her your way. If you fail, then we do it my way. Is that understood?”

Levi nodded. He stood quickly, suddenly desperate to be out of there. Rowan’s change from flirtatious and friendly to businesslike and demanding was disconcerting. And Levi had no idea how he was going to get Kera to talk on camera in two days.

Rowan followed him to the door. His bright smile was back, and he shook Levi’s hand warmly. “I know you can do this, Levi. I have faith in you.”

Levi smiled weakly back.

“And now I have to make some calls, and pretend like I know what I’m doing to run an international netcast.”

“Right.” Levi turned to thank him once more for the extra time, but Rowan shut the door on his face.

“See ya,” Levi told the door. He stared at it in frustration for a second longer, and then turned toward the elevators. Rowan’s secretary was looking at him with a bemused expression.

“You look upset,” she told him.

Levi shook his head. “Mostly confused. Did you know that he’s got a split personality?”

The secretary laughed. “He’s one weird guy, I’ll give you that. He’s always interested in seeing you, though. Every morning he asks if you’ve checked in.”

“Really?” Levi wondered if it was him or the story. He tilted his head. “Do you think he’s gay?”

She shrugged. “Who knows what he’s into? He’s full of surprises.”

“Like what?” The reporter in Levi couldn’t help but ask.

“Did you know he spent eighteen years in the military?”

Levi did the math in his head. There was no way Rowan was that old. “That’s got to be a mistake.”

The secretary shrugged. “I saw his CV myself.”

“Odd.”

She gave him a sympathetic smile. “Did he yell at you?”

“A little.” Levi sniffed. “I think he asked me on a date. And then threatened to take my story away from me.” He frowned. “In fact, I’m not sure what the hell just happened in there.”

The secretary laughed. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, half the men and women who enter that office leave either screaming or in tears. I have no idea what they talk about, but it gets pretty ugly.”

“Other journalists, you mean?”

The secretary shook her head. “No. They’re outside appointments, advertisers, and other business representatives from Ishan.”

“Odd,” Levi said again, curiosity nibbling at the corner of his brain. He told it go fuck itself. He had other things to worry about, like how he was going to get Kera to talk in forty-eight hours.

* * * * *

Proto was awful.

Levi spent the evening shooting baskets, listening to the horrid clash of discordant wind instruments and thunderous bass lines, dribbling furiously to keep himself from panicking about his impending deadline.

Imogen came in later that evening, carrying with her a bag of takeout for them to share. The second she heard the blasting sound of the band, she grimaced.

“Oh, God, tell me you aren’t seeing a musician.”

“Nope.” Levi scored two points, and then collected his ball. “Music off,” he told his osys.

“Why are you listening to that crap then?” Imogen moved into the kitchen.

“It’s my boss’s band. I think he’s trying to woo me in some perverse way.”

“Your boss is obviously deaf,” Imogen shouted from the kitchen. Suddenly, her head popped around the doorway. “Oh, shit. He’s not the one you’re sleeping with, is he?”

“No!”

“Good. Because I bet that slimy rich kid has screwed about half of Ishan.” Imogen re-emerged, holding two steaming plates of tandoori chicken and rice.

Levi raised an eyebrow. “What’s the occasion?”

Imogen sat cross-legged on the sofa. “I’ve had a breakthrough.”

“The psychological kind?”

“No, you ass, with the implant.”

“Really?” Levi sat beside her and grabbed one of the plates. “I could use some good news right now.”

“We’re going to meet with Creon tomorrow, and he’ll tell us more.”

Levi’s fork paused on the way to his mouth. “Creon. That’s a name?”

Imogen shrugged. “He’s a hacker. What do you want?”

“Okay, forget the name,” Levi said. “What does he know?”

“He’s the one who did some consulting work for Trust Insurance a few years back. Since he still knows the access codes to their systems, he was able to do some digging, and says he has information to share.”

“What?” Levi asked, mouth full.

“He wouldn’t tell me over the osys. It sounds pretty juicy, and he’s scared of being overheard.”

“That sounds promising.” Levi tucked into his dinner, feeling relief for the first time since he left Rowan’s office. At least he could have something to report to Rowan the following day, which could buy him more time with Kera.

The only thing that would have made that night better would have been a visit from Tiergan. But Levi knew better than to hope for it.

So it was a pleasant surprise when Tiergan called. Judging by the background of the visual link, Levi could see Tiergan was still at the clinic, despite it being well past seven o'clock.

"Still working?" he asked.

Tiergan nodded. "The paperwork I was going to finish at lunch got mysteriously delayed."

Levi grinned. Tiergan had a glint in his eyes, but he looked exhausted.

"Speaking of work," Levi said, "I have to follow up on a lead tomorrow, and so won't be able to make it to the clinic until later."

Tiergan nodded. "A lead is good."

"This one could possibly get me out of the hot water I'm in."

Tiergan raised an eyebrow. "What is it?"

Levi considered telling Tiergan about his conversation with Rowan and of the implant, but then remembered his decision not to bring up Tarus 9 again until the article was completed.

"I'll tell you when it pans out. Are you free tomorrow night? Maybe you could come over after work."

Tiergan shrugged. "Sure." He was distant again, his eyes blank of emotion. The man was so damned hard to read. He gave Levi a brief smile. "Have a good night." Tiergan cut the call.

Levi shook his head. Just when he thought he was getting to know the man, he lost him again. Two steps forward, one step back. This romance was turning out to be a lot of work. He just hoped it was worth it.

Chapter Eleven

The Yaro District of Ishan was the commercial center of the satellite. It was designed by an architect who must have admired himself. That was Levi's theory for why every single surface in the district was reflective. The Tova Star reflected off the huge mirrored skyscrapers, the shiny mirrored artwork, and the mirrored shuttle stations to create a blaze of light and colorful refraction. Yaro was full of spontaneous rainbows.

Levi searched the promenade for Imogen. On one side of the mirrored promenade, the glittering waters of Lake Ishan lay green and motionless. On the other side, shops and cafés spilled out onto the walkway, all of them hedged in by the sharp mirrored towers of the dozens of skyscrapers. Yaro looked both sedate and spiny.

Finally, Levi spotted Imogen, sitting in her crouched position, arms wrapped around her legs, wearing bright red jeans and a tank top cut a little too low. Levi raised an eyebrow. Imogen almost never showed off her cleavage. That meant that she was into whoever her contact was.

The restaurant was full of men in suits and women in expensive tailored dresses. Levi felt underdressed in cargo pants and a T-shirt. He quickly sat down beside Imogen, hoping none of the other clientele noticed.

The man sitting across from Imogen had a very round face, with badly spiked hair and a terrible sense of fashion. His faux leather trousers were absurd. But one glance at Imogen's face warned Levi against saying anything negative about this Creon. She stared at him with an expression of rapt interest.

Imogen made introductions, and Levi and Creon had a very stilted conversation about the benefits of the new Gen-6 platform before the waiter finally arrived and rescued Levi, taking their order.

Once their order was in, Creon leaned closer.

"I found the reference you asked about, recommissioned agents," Creon nibbled nervously on a breadstick. "You are never going to believe what I discovered."

"What?" Levi asked, scooting closer as well.

"Recommissioned. It's a term used to refer to certain insurance policy holders."

Levi frowned. "So recommissioned agents are a labor force of policy holders?"

Creon nodded. "Exactly."

"I thought they only dealt with life insurance," Imogen said.

Creon shook his head. "No, they also provide corporate insurance, political insurance, you name it. But recommissioned only applies to a very small subset of their clients. Specifically, policy holders who Trust Insurance has resuscitated, as per the terms of their life insurance policy."

"Resuscitated." Levi looked to Imogen, hoping she was making more sense of this than he was. "I have no idea what that means in this context."

Creon grinned. "It means exactly what you think it means. It means people who were dead and brought back to life."

Levi stared at Creon in silence for a moment. And then rejected the notion entirely.

"No. Ridiculous. I have no idea what you're talking about."

“Look,” Creon said, leaning closer. “This is so secret; I think the three of us are the first to find out about this outside of Trust Insurance. But apparently, they can bring people back to life. People that have died. And they can keep them alive.”

“Why would they do that?” Levi asked skeptically.

“Because they bought life insurance,” Creon said slowly. “And the company wants to recover what they paid out on the policy.”

Imogen apparently forgot that she was flirting with Creon, because she said, “You are fucking crazy. Buying life insurance doesn’t mean they own your life.”

Creon glared back at her. “I know what it means, and you are the moron.” He pulled out his operator and switched it on. He pointed to a specific document in the directory, and then took out two plastic screens from his bag and held them up to the image to capture the document. He handed one screen to Imogen and one to Levi.

“Read this policy. And then tell me I’m crazy.”

Imogen threw the screen back on the table. “I’m not reading an insurance policy. I wouldn’t even read my own insurance policy. It was almost one hundred pages long.”

“Exactly!” Creon said. “Few people read the fine print. But check out the sections I’ve highlighted for you.”

Levi scrolled through the pages on the screen, until he found a small highlighted section of text sandwiched between clause 5.112 on subrogation and the beginning of section 6.0 on limitations of liability:

Trust Insurance reserves the right to full reimbursement of all costs paid to identified beneficiaries and for additional costs accrued through the recommissioning of policy holders as per section 41.3 in the claims options form 130-430. If such reimbursement may be collected through the resuscitation and recommissioning of the

policy holder's life, then Trust Insurance hereby claims full ownership of that life until all benefits are fully reimbursed.

Levi stared at the paragraph, willing it to make sense. "Do you have form 130-430?"

Creon pulled up another document and transferred it to Levi's plastic screen. "I had to dig for about four hours to finally locate form 130-430. Form 130-430 is a description of the types of services and skills identified by Trust Insurance as beneficial to future company stability."

Levi frowned. "So they resuscitate the policy holders who they think will be able to pay back their own insurance payout?"

"Right." Creon tapped his fingers against the table anxiously. "Let's say you get a life insurance policy through Trust. You designate a beneficiary, and that beneficiary is paid a set sum upon your death, right?"

Levi nodded. "That makes sense."

"Right." Creon smiled. "But what this clause states is that there are certain policy holders whose skills are deemed valuable by Trust Insurance. And when those individuals die, Trust Insurance claims the right to resuscitate them, and have ownership of them until such time that all the benefits that were paid out to their loved ones are earned back."

A small, tingling sensation was creeping up Levi's spine. This was bigger than Tarus 9. This was bigger than Surayo Corporation. They had stumbled upon a really, really huge story.

"I don't get it," Imogen said, scowling at the table. "Levi, you're my beneficiary if I die. So I get run over by a shuttle, and then Trust spends a ton of money to bring me back to life? Why not just stop paying Levi? Why go through all that effort?"

"Because now they've got slave labor," Creon told her.

"I'm your beneficiary?" Levi asked, touched.

Imogen gave him a smile. "Yes. You get 15,000 credits if you do me in."

“But...” Levi shut up as the waiter came by with their food. All three of them smiled benignly as he offered them pepper. As soon as he was gone, they all leaned in together once more, the lunch temporarily forgotten.

“How long do these people live?” Levi whispered. “These...recommissioned agents?”

Creon shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t have the specifics.”

“This is amazing,” Imogen told Creon. “You’re a genius!”

Creon shrugged shyly. “Well, it was just a matter of research.”

“Was it all encrypted?” Imogen asked.

“Yeah.” He snorted. “You should have seen the security locks they had around this stuff. I had to write a code in V-deck just to get the key for the file types, and then --”

“As fascinating as this is,” Levi interrupted, “I just want to clarify. We need to find the name of someone who was brought back to life by Trust Insurance, and who died again recently. Can you get a list of names? Some association between the number 75 and the person who he was?”

Creon started eating and spoke with his mouth full. “I can try. There are tons of files in there; I just have to narrow down what kind of file I’m looking for.”

“And I’ll start cross-referencing Trust Insurance policy holders with men living on Tarus 9 during the incident,” Levi said. He scrawled a few notes on the plastic sheet that Creon had given him, and then looked down at his untouched lunch.

He couldn’t eat now. He was so excited with this revelation that he had to get to work on it immediately.

“I’m going to run. Can you have them bag my lunch for me?” he asked Imogen.

She looked up from where she had been staring at the top of Creon’s head. “Huh? Sure.”

Levi grinned. “I’ll leave you two be.” He stared at Imogen. “See, I’m like that. I let people just be.”

She smirked. “Don’t forget to pay on your way out.”

“Yeah, I will.” He turned and shook Creon’s hand. “Thanks. This is amazing.”

Creon smiled. “I hope you bust this wide open.”

Chapter Twelve

“I can’t.” Kera stared into her coffee cup as if the answer to all of life’s secrets bobbed on the surface.

They had been sitting in an uncomfortable silence for several minutes. The rest of the cheerful population of the Capitol District’s trendiest café laughed and chatted loudly. But the two of them sat morosely, the bright red plastic chairs mocking their somberness. Levi questioned his decision to invite Kera here, to this young and carefree location, when he had such a serious request for her.

“There is just no way. I’m sorry, Levi.” Kera swallowed. For the first time since Levi had met her, Kera seemed upset about letting him down.

“Kera.” Levi steadied her voice, tried to keep the anger out of it. “I like you a lot. And I don’t want to make you uncomfortable or put you in a dangerous position.” Levi sighed. “But if I don’t produce my informant to my editor, he is going to drop the story. This is a story I’ve worked on for ten years. You’ve already given me so much information --”

“I’m not your informant,” Kera said bleakly, sounding defeated. “I’m not your informant.”

“Where did you get the implant?” Levi asked.

“I can’t tell you.”

Levi’s heart raced. “You’ve just admitted you know about it. For Christ’s sake, please help me! I can guarantee your safety. My editor has promised to protect you from Surayo if they seek retribution. But if you don’t speak on the record, how else will anyone know what Surayo Corporation did to you?”

Kera looked up finally, her eye watering. “Levi, if it were up to me alone, I would help you. I would. But I have other people to look after. It isn’t just my story. If I speak, they may ask questions about others who were there, and I cannot betray those who suffered at the detention center.”

“How would you be betraying them by telling the truth?”

Kera took one long gulp of her cream coffee, and then stood up. “I have to get back to the clinic.”

“No! Wait!” Levi leaped up and grabbed Kera’s shoulder. “Do you know who Agent 75 was?”

Kera’s face drained of color. That was answer alone.

“Is it true he was revived from the dead? Brought back to life by Trust Insurance?”

“I can’t talk about him.” Kera’s voice was a scratchy whisper. She pulled away from Levi’s hand.

Levi remembered that this man was one of Kera’s torturers. He lowered his voice. “Would you be able to identify him if you saw him?”

Kera looked like she was going to be sick. “I’ve got to go. I’ve said too much already.” She turned to leave.

Levi trailed after her. “I know you must hate Agent 75 for what he did to you. But if you give me his name, I can promise that you will be taking a step toward preventing this kind of thing from happening ever again.”

Kera turned and stared at Levi, her face crumpling into an expression of confusion. “Why would I...” She shook her head. “I’ve got to go. The doctors are waiting for me to open the clinic.”

“Kera, you have to trust me --”

“I don’t trust you!” she snapped. “I’m going now.”

Levi watched Kera leave the café. Now he had nothing to report to Rowan. He had failed.

* * * * *

The message from Rowan was curt and to the point.

“See me. No later than 2 p.m.” Rowan hadn’t even signed it.

Levi made his way to Rowan’s office, desperately trying to come up with some excuse to buy himself more time.

Rowan’s secretary wasn’t at her desk, but Rowan’s office door was ajar, so Levi let himself in.

At first, it seemed as though Rowan didn’t notice him. He faced away from the door, looking at a mounted screen, smiling tightly at an older gentleman who stared back at Rowan in shock.

“...very few options open to you, I’m afraid,” Rowan said. “You can pull your advertising from the syndication, but that will only encourage me to go ahead and publish the fascinating details of your company’s annual report.”

The man on the screen’s eyes widened. “You can’t be... How do you know about that?”

“I’m a journalist, Mr. Yale,” Rowan said. “I have all sorts of information at my disposal. And although I have taken every precaution to keep this damaging report from the public eye, I cannot vouch for my continued discretion if you do something as rash as what you are suggesting to me now.”

The door clicked behind Levi, and Rowan turned instantly, glaring at him.

"I have to go, Yale," Rowan said quickly. He smiled once more into the screen. "We'll talk this evening at the reception."

"Yes..." the man on the screen looked palpably nervous. "We'll talk."

Rowan cut the screen and swiveled in his chair to face Levi. His smile had transformed, light and cheery.

"Hi, Levi."

Levi smiled. "I listened to Proto."

Rowan laughed. "Finally! What'd you think?"

Levi cleared his throat. "Very...experimental."

"That's a polite way of saying you hated it." Rowan motioned toward the seat across from him, and Levi took it.

"It wasn't quite my style," Levi explained.

"What do you listen to?" Rowan asked.

Levi shrugged. "Blues."

Rowan shook his head. "You know, just because you came from a depressing place doesn't mean you have to listen to depressing music."

"I actually find it cheers me up," Levi said.

"Well, as you probably think about my band, there's no accounting for taste." He smiled. "There's a concert tonight that you may be interested in, at the Galaxy. I have a reception to attend, but afterward, we could go if you're interested."

Levi shifted in the chair. "Actually, I'm busy, I'm afraid."

Rowan's eyes narrowed. "A date?"

Levi shrugged. "Sort of." He looked apologetically at Rowan. "I'm in a sort of relationship."

“Really?” Rowan frowned. “I hadn’t heard that. Who is it sort of with?”

Levi blinked. Rowan and he didn’t know any of the same people outside of work and Levi didn’t discuss his private life with fellow reporters. Why would Rowan think he knew anything about Levi’s life at all?

“No one you know.” Levi couldn’t decide what would be worse; talking about his awkwardly hot-cold relationship with Tiergan, or telling Rowan that he still didn’t have Kera on camera.

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that.” Rowan smiled. “I think we could have gotten along splendidly.”

Levi stared at Rowan’s handsome face. What were the odds that two handsome men would fall for him the same month?

“Is she talking?” Rowan asked.

Levi couldn’t follow the quick change of topic. “Who?”

“Your informant. You promised to have her story by now.”

“Oh. Yes.” Levi hoped the lie wasn’t visible on his face. “But I still need more time. In exchange for the wait, she promises to also bring in the person who gave her the implant.”

Rowan stared at him. “Why doesn’t she speak now?”

“She wants to get her contact to agree as well.”

“That wasn’t what I asked for,” Rowan said. “I asked for her. I want to speak with her.”

“She is going to bring us her contact in person,” Levi reasoned. “Isn’t that better?”

“When?”

Levi sighed. “As soon as she can.”

“Enough is enough, Levi.” He pulled his feet from the table. There was no mirth left in his eyes. “You’ve tried but you’ve failed. Now give me her name. Let me convince her.”

Levi swallowed. “I can’t. I promised her. I need more time.”

Rowan stared at Levi steadily. In a calm, measured voice, he said, "Your time has run out."

"Rowan, we have her personal account, anonymous yes, but it is still valid. That, coupled with the footage on the implant --"

"Forget the implant," Rowan snapped. "It's not worth shit without an eyewitness."

Levi's hands clenched into fists. He considered saying many things, and then forced himself to turn away. He needed to think, be calm. He was filled with such sudden rage; however, he had to concentrate on walking toward the door.

He heard Rowan behind him, and restrained the urge to turn and deck him.

"I don't like being an asshole," Rowan told him. "And I want this story to succeed. But without an eyewitness, it's not going anywhere."

Levi turned and looked him in the eye. "Then give me back the implant. I need to return it to her."

Rowan shook his head. "I'll hold on to it for a while longer. We might still be able to find a use for it."

"Yeah. Maybe we can get Trust Insurance to run some expensive ads on our network." Levi gave Rowan a cold smile.

Rowan laughed and slapped him on the back. "Now you're thinking like an executive!" He winked.

Levi slammed the door on his way out.

* * * * *

Levi's fury raced through him as he headed back to his apartment. He was such a fucking idiot. Leaving his key piece of evidence in Rowan's hands, without a copy? Now, even if he did want to freelance the story, he wouldn't be able to.

He stormed past expensive boutiques in the shopping district. The glint of something in the window caught his eye. Angry and frustrated and foolish, he rashly marched in and bought the item, spending more money than he had but too angry to think rationally.

When he got home, Tiergan called, and reported that he would be by later that night. He saw Levi's expression, however, and paused.

"What's wrong?" Tiergan asked immediately.

"Bad day." Levi clenched his teeth. "My story's screwed. Without an eyewitness it's over." Despite his promise to himself not to discuss Tarus 9 with Tiergan, he still found himself explaining away his misery.

Tiergan stared at him hard. "Take it to another syndication, Levi."

"I can't. My boss has the implant. Like an idiot, I gave it to him."

Tiergan's eyes grew wide. "Fuck."

Levi sighed. He looked at Tiergan's genuinely distraught expression and shook his head.

"Sorry. I shouldn't be dumping on you. Why don't you come over around ten and I'll have some dinner ready...well, bought...for us by then?"

Tiergan looked distracted. "I'll be there." He closed the connection.

Levi then sat down on the couch and spent the rest of the afternoon researching Agent 75.

The whole "back from the dead" angle to this story was something he still hadn't truly come to terms with. He just didn't believe it. And he still didn't understand how it related to what happened on Tarus 9, to the massacre, and Surayo Corporation.

But as he re-read Creon's documentation, it was clear that something secretive was happening to policy holders at Trust Insurance. It wasn't necessarily illegal. These people had signed their contracts, agreed to the terms. But what that actually meant for them was unclear. Also unclear were the vagaries of Trust Insurance's ownership of a life.

As Levi reviewed other contracts that Creon had forwarded, he received a message that new electronic file had arrived in his inbox. The digital address showed it came from his informant; Kera had sent him something new.

Levi quickly opened the attached documents. There were nine of them, all official reports filed through Trust Insurance regarding the Surayo Corporation, dating back twenty years. The reports were official complaints registered against Surayo Corporation for their unlawful treatment of protestors on Tarus 9.

Levi was halfway through reading the first report, when he spotted a small electronic signature at the bottom of one of the pages. The signatures on the other pages had been blanked out, but a segment of this one remained. Blowing up the image, Levi determined that the document had been electronically filed by * * * * *75, with a forty-digit address identifying the original osys user that the report had been filed by.

Levi's heart raced as he wrote down the number. This was finally something solid, something he could trace back to the original agent. He sent out a silent thank you to Kera, and then began a detailed search of osys registration databases until he found the appropriate registry, dating back two decades and recorded on Tarus 9. Reading over the data, divided into the ten administrative districts of the colony, Levi felt a sudden wave of nostalgia. He hadn't thought about the Tarus 9 districts in so long. Childhood memories rushed back, all at once, overwhelming, overpowering. The smell of rusting metal, the flavor of the water, slightly minty with additives. The feeling of red dust everywhere, in his hair, on his fingertips. The dimly lit walkway to the trading store, his mother's sour lemonade, the creak of aluminum seats in the kitchen, the constant blaze and flash of the mining torches, the trembling vibrations of tanks in the street, the metallic taste of the steel grate under his mouth, where he lay, face down, hiding, beneath the dented remains of a shuttle.

Everything hit him, all at once, and he looked away from his screen and breathed large gulps of air, begging the memories to go away, forcing himself to forget, just a little bit longer, to make it distant, make it somebody else's tragedy.

Imogen entered the apartment, ranting about the cost of milk in Ishan. She stopped, staring at Levi's face.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I found the osys registration number for Agent 75," he said hoarsely. "Can we use that to get a name?"

Imogen sat beside Levi and looked at the screen. She nodded. "I think so. I'm meeting with Creon tonight. We'll use his hole in the firewall to get through."

"Going to dinner with him?" Levi asked.

Imogen smiled almost shyly. "Maybe we can both get something out of this story."

* * * * *

Tiergan looked freshly scrubbed when he arrived, his hair slightly damp, curling at the edges. But even washed and shaved, his eyes were still hooded, and he looked asleep on his feet. As he walked into the living room, the slight hitch in his step returned, as it always did when he was tired.

Levi kissed him. It was slow and sexy, full-mouthed and sleepy. Levi pulled back and smiled at him. "I'm almost done. Have a seat; I'll just close up these files."

Levi tagged sections of Kera's documents and closed them one by one. The reports represented a year of official complaints against agents working for Trust Insurance. They listed misdemeanors, incidents breaking conventions for the treatment of prisoners, human rights violations.

"What are you reading?" Tiergan asked, suppressing a yawn as he leaned against the wall. He closed his eyes.

"Reports from a witness on Tarus 9." Levi closed the last of the reports. He didn't mention they were from Kera, since his conversations with her were still a sore subject between them.

The reports were fabulous -- even more of the evidence that Levi needed for his story. But it still wouldn't convince Rowan. It still wasn't enough.

Levi suddenly grabbed his osys card and threw it against the wall.

He had almost forgotten that Tiergan was behind him. When Levi turned, Tiergan watched Levi intently. He looked slightly shaken.

"I thought those reports would be good for your story. Aren't they?" he asked quietly.

Levi rubbed his hand over his face. "It doesn't matter, Tiergan. Forget it. Without an eyewitness Rowan won't run my story. All this does is mock me. More data. More proof of the atrocities. And yet I can't do a damned thing about it."

Tiergan pushed off from the wall and sat next to Levi on the couch. He ran his hand through his hair. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't know." Levi sighed loudly. He noticed that Tiergan looked very serious. He realized he was forcing his burden back on Tiergan, despite all his promises. He had to stop this. Nothing could be done right now, not until Imogen got the details on the registration. The last thing he needed to do was let his frustrations ruin the good thing he had here.

"You didn't come here to discuss Tarus 9 with me, did you?" Levi said, resting his hand on Tiergan's knee. "I have a present for you."

Tiergan didn't react the way he had hoped. He leaned back on the sofa still seeming preoccupied.

Levi fetched the present from his room, and handed it to Tiergan nervously. Now that he thought about it, it was stupid. They had been screwing around for a month, hardly a long-term relationship, and yet he had gone and spent a lot of money on a triviality for him.

Tiergan gingerly took the wrapped box. He looked at it quizzically. "Is it an EKG monitor battery? Because I could really use one of those --"

"No." Levi sat beside him on the couch again. "It's not for the clinic, or any of your patients. It's for you."

Tiergan frowned. He unwrapped the gift slowly. Then he held the small activator in his hands.

He looked at Levi, bewildered. "What is it?"

Levi reached over and pressed the *on* switch.

Both Levi and Tiergan yelped as the holographic hawk flapped by them. Tiergan swore in his shock, and dropped the activator. It didn't affect the hawk's movements, however. The image soared through the tiny room, looking as realistic as any bird Levi had ever seen on a nature show.

"It's been programmed to act just like a real hawk," Levi told Tiergan. "It even expects to be fed. You are supposed to hand it air, and it will take it from you."

Tiergan stared at the bird swooping through Levi's living room, his face lit up like a child who had just seen Santa Claus. All his seriousness disappeared. His expression was one of wonder and delight.

"It's incredible!" Tiergan cried, and then he laughed, watching avidly as the bird cleverly perched on top of Imogen's desk, picking at its feathers with its beak before taking off again.

"I had no idea they could make holograms so dynamic," Tiergan said. Tiergan held out his arm, and the hawk squawked loudly and flew onto his elbow. Tiergan laughed. "Luckily, its talons are not as sharp as a real bird of prey." He grinned at the bird on his arm. "Amazing. It's absolutely amazing! So realistic!"

Levi smiled back, thrilled that the present was such a success. "I'm glad you like it."

Tiergan studied the bird's feathering, rapt. "This looks like a...sharp-shinned hawk? The striations of his wings are similar to a Cooper's hawk, but his tail is forked." The bird flew off his arm suddenly with a squawk and a flap, and Tiergan laughed, shaking his head in wonder as he watched it fly around the room.

"I love it." Tiergan gripped Levi's shirt suddenly and pulled him in for a breathtaking kiss. But as suddenly as he started it, Tiergan pulled back. He frowned. "Jesus, Levi, this must have cost a fortune."

"Don't worry about it," Levi urged. He wanted those lips back on him.

The bird gave one last cry, and then settled itself back on Imogen's desk to preen.

"How the hell did you pay for it?" Tiergan asked.

Levi's hand ran along Tiergan's belt. "It's a present. It's none of your business."

"But..." Tiergan swallowed, looking at Levi with a choked-up expression.

Levi's hand dipped lower, into Tiergan's waist band. "You deserve it. Now come into the bedroom and show me your gratitude."

* * * * *

Levi slept on and off, his head on Tiergan's shoulder. He stared at the planes of Tiergan's chest, the steady rise and fall of it as he breathed, the shape of his soft cock, sleeping on Tiergan's powerful thigh. The room smelled of semen and Tiergan's musky body, and Levi closed his eyes, reveling in it.

How was it possible that he felt such contentment? Tiergan was still little more than a stranger, and one who was often cold at best. This wasn't a perfect match. Tiergan was a mess, and yet Levi felt real happiness as he lay there, the smell of him filling his senses, the heat of his warm body making their points of contact sticky, holding them together. With Tiergan, he forgot his bad memories, his anger, his journalistic failures.

Levi thought Tiergan was asleep. But when he shifted to look into his face, he saw that Tiergan's eyes were wide open, staring at the ceiling. He wore a serious expression.

"What's wrong?" Levi asked, stomach lurching in fear.

Tiergan turned to look at him. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You're glaring at the room fan like it just made off with your wallet."

The corner of Tiergan's mouth twitched. "Maybe I just hate fans."

"That's not it." Levi felt sick. This was it, the break-up look. The present had been too much. He had gotten clingy.

"It's me, huh?" Levi asked quietly.

Tiergan's eyebrows came together. He stared at Levi, puzzled. "What?" He shook his head. "No! It's not you at all, Levi." Tiergan's hand stroked down Levi's side.

Levi breathed a sigh of relief. "What's wrong then?"

Tiergan sat up. He looked uncharacteristically nervous. "I think you're...look." He ran his hand through his hair. Then he turned and stared hard at Levi. "I'm crazy about you."

Levi smiled, but Tiergan didn't smile back.

"But there's something I need to tell you," Tiergan said, his voice low.

Levi felt the blood freeze in his veins. Oh God. He was married. He was wanted. He killed people on weekends.

Tiergan let out a shaky breath. "Before I tell you this, I want you to know something." He put his large hands on Levi's thighs, as if spreading him open. But he just held him there, staring into his eyes. "I don't want this to end."

"Well, neither do I," Levi said. "But..." he prompted.

Tiergan wore the same expression Levi's foster mother had when she'd informed Levi that his cat was dead. It was full of regret at being the bearer of bad news.

Tiergan took a deep breath. "If we are going to continue seeing each other, you need to know about my past. Something I don't think you are going to like."

Levi swallowed his fear. "Just tell me."

Levi's bedroom door slammed open.

The noise was so startling, both Levi and Tiergan jumped. Tiergan snatched up the bed sheet and wrapped his naked waist.

Imogen stood there, looking mad in the dim hall light, breathing heavily as if she had just run home from another biosphere entirely.

“Levi...” Imogen panted, holding the door open. “I need to talk to you. Now.”

“For fuck’s sake!” Levi cried, fishing around for his boxers. “Don’t you fucking knock?”

Imogen frowned at Tiergan. “Sorry to interrupt, but this is very, very important.”

Levi was furious. What Tiergan was going to tell him was also very, very important, but something about the panicked expression in Imogen’s eyes made him keep silent.

“I’ll go,” Tiergan said. His voice was rough, and he still looked nervous, but he hid it quickly by dressing. He had his clothes on and his shoes tied in record time. Levi haplessly watched him move about the room.

“Sorry about this,” Levi told him. He pulled his T-shirt on.

Tiergan nodded. “It’s all right.”

“We’ll talk later.” Levi kissed him.

Tiergan only gave him a tentative kiss back and then left the bedroom.

“Don’t forget the hawk!” Levi called out. He heard the front door click, and then Imogen pushed him back into his room and shut the door.

Levi pushed her back. “Jesus fucking Christ, Imogen! Can you be any ruder? He was just about to tell me something important!”

“Yeah? Well, you are going to want to hear this.”

“What?” Levi snapped.

Imogen stared at him. “I found recommissioned Agent 75. I found his name. I know who he is. And he’s *still alive*.”

Levi’s body went cold. “Who is he?”

“He lives here, on Ishan. He’s still a practicing doctor.”

Levi felt the blood drain from his face. Sickness and horror crept up his throat. “No.”

Imogen continued. “He works at the Washoe Free Clinic in the Washoe District. He --”

“Oh God!” Levi pulled on his jeans and shoes and ran to the front door.

“Wait!” Imogen cried. “Don’t you want to know his name? Recommissioned Agent 75. His name is Doctor Tiergan Seoras.”

Chapter Thirteen

It was raining. It always rained between midnight and two a.m. in the capitol. It poured steadily, relentlessly, soaking Levi's cotton T-shirt in moments, saturating his hair. He hardly noticed. He ran toward the shuttle station as fast as he could.

And then he saw Tiergan, walking with a slight hitch in his step, huddling in his dark brown jacket as his head got drenched with water.

Levi ran up and shoved him.

Tiergan caught his balance, barely, and reeled on Levi. His expression of rage disappeared as soon as he saw Levi. The corner of his mouth curved upward.

"Hey, handsome."

Levi punched him in the nose.

Tiergan stumbled backward, hand to his face, going completely white.

Levi's hand exploded in pain. "You sick fuck!" Levi lunged at him again, but this time Tiergan was quick enough to grab Levi's wrist, twisting him away. Levi kicked at Tiergan's leg, and Tiergan stumbled backward. His eyes were cold but he did not strike back. Blood ran from his nose, diluted in the downpour.

Tiergan clutched at his nose. "Levi, calm down. I can explain --"

“Explain what? Why you tortured innocent people?”

Tiergan held up his hand. “Now, hold on! Technically, I never tortured anyone. I just --”

Levi punched him again, his fist glancing off Tiergan’s jaw. Tiergan fell back against the pavement. Levi’s mind swarmed with fury. He wanted to kill Tiergan. The pieces all fell into place. Kera hadn’t been lying when she said she wasn’t his informant. It had been Tiergan all along.

“Just shut the fuck up!” Levi shouted. He circled Tiergan. “All this time. You *knew* I needed my informant, and you left me hanging!”

“Levi, I had no choice --”

“No choice!” Levi’s rage flooded all reason. He shook Tiergan by his jacket. “Goddamn you! How can you have such a weak excuse?”

Tiergan’s eyes suddenly smoldered. He shoved Levi away from him. “Stop it! Just calm down. Look, I was trying to tell you tonight, but --”

“It’s too late.” Levi stood. He angrily wiped the water from his eyes. “You should have told me the minute you sent me the implant.” Levi grimaced. All those images had been *his*. Tiergan’s.

“You’re a fucking coward,” Levi spat.

“Levi, you don’t understand --”

“I understand perfectly,” Levi snapped. “You did what you did to stay alive. And in your selfishness, you let hundreds of people suffer. You disgust me!”

Tiergan looked like he was going to throw up. A flash of sympathy filled Levi, only to be replaced with rage. He had fallen for this guy and he was a liar. He was not who he claimed to be.

Levi turned away and left Tiergan there, because the sight of Tiergan beginning to cry made Levi feel heartbroken. That was the worst part. He still cared for the bastard, hated seeing him so upset.

Fuck him. Levi forced himself not to turn back. He had to cut Tiergan from his life. It would be like cutting that implant from his brain. Painful, but necessary. He had to be purged. And Tiergan was going to be punished.

Levi passed his apartment, and ran to the next shuttle station.

He would give Rowan his eyewitness. He would give him his headline story. He would give him a story that everyone in the entire system would never forget.

Chapter Fourteen

At eight thirty the following morning, Levi stood behind a dumpster in the Washoe district, wearing a suit, watching the entrance of the Free Clinic.

He hadn't slept at all. He had spent most of the night with Rowan, drafting their headlining story. Copy was written, scenes from the implant identified, and excerpts from Tiergan's official reports, filed twenty years ago, were excerpted.

Everything waited for the final, dramatic moment, when Levi and a camera crew would confront Dr. Tiergan Seoras about his role in the atrocity.

Rowan had promised Levi his best camera team, the team that usually went with the top headline news reporter, Angus Chase. Levi couldn't believe his luck. To have Angus Chase's personal crew serving his story was a sure sign of success.

Levi kept turning to look for the arrival of his crew from the direction of the shuttle. Until they arrived, he remained hidden, not wanting to run into Tiergan early. Once the crew arrived, they would surprise and corner Tiergan as he opened the clinic.

Levi had his list of questions already prepared. He had even practiced his stony reporter face in the mirror.

But every time he read through his questions, he imagined Tiergan's face. The way he looked a few hours ago. Levi's stomach would clench and the slow, oily sensation of guilt would drip down his throat, flood his heart, make everything feel tainted, slick with sadness.

Levi was still infatuated with him; that was the problem.

But there was more than just Levi's career on the line now. Levi had to go through with this, for all those people who lived now only in Tiergan's memory. The countless, nameless faces that came into Tiergan's room.

How could that cold, silent participant on Tarus 9 be the same person who greeted everyone at the Washoe Clinic so warmly? It was sick, the deception. If only the others knew what he was capable of.

And they would know. That morning.

Why Tiergan bothered giving him the implant in the first place confused him. The surgery had to have been dangerous. If he was unwilling to risk his identity, why help Levi at all? Was it a lingering sense of guilt?

Or perhaps Tiergan wanted Levi to go after Surayo Corporation, but not him. After all, Tiergan had filed those official reports.

But he was not opposed enough to change jobs. When push came to shove, he worked for them.

The fact that Tiergan was over forty years old was another disconcerting aspect of the whole affair. Tiergan lived only because of cybernetics and physical enhancements. There was something deeply unnatural about Tiergan that made him look so young, and be so strong. Levi recalled his steady heartbeat, even in the throes of passion, and wondered how much of Tiergan was still human, and how much was machine.

A man walked past Levi in the alleyway. He gave Levi an odd glance and then continued his way toward Washoe Street. Levi realized he did look absurd, wearing a well-pressed suit and hiding behind a dumpster. He had dressed carefully for his first live netcast,

spent a good amount of time that sleepless morning on his hair, and prepared himself for his major debut. After this morning, Levi's life would be forever changed. His career would rise, his fame would increase -- his lifelong goal accomplished.

With his camera, Levi zoomed in and watched a line of patients form near the entrance of the clinic. Yawning, stumbling, carrying loved ones, the sick of Washoe formed an orderly line along the wall of the clinic, making themselves as comfortable as possible for the long wait.

And then Levi saw Tiergan.

He walked to the clinic, a hitch in his step. Using his camera, Levi saw his face. It looked as though Tiergan hadn't slept either. His eyes were red and raw, his nose slightly swollen, and he looked miserable.

Good. Levi fought back the instinctive desire to comfort him.

Tiergan mumbled greetings to his patients quietly. Kera met him at the door. She took one look at his face, and suddenly the two of them whispered together as he opened the clinic doors. Levi couldn't hear what they said, but Kera dropped her bag and hugged Tiergan tightly. She rubbed his back. Levi felt an unjustified stab of jealousy.

And then disgust. How could Kera hug the man who had been part of the regime that had burned her face, ripped out her eye?

Tiergan and Kera entered the clinic, closing the door behind them. They didn't officially open until nine. Levi knew Tiergan and Kera would be preparing the room for the onslaught of patients.

Levi looked toward the end of Washoe Street, toward the shuttle station. The camera crew would be arriving any moment.

Levi's operator beeped in his pocket. He withdrew further behind the dumpster and took the call.

It was Rowan. He smiled at Levi. "Hey, star reporter. How are you doing?"

Levi nodded. "Fine. Is the crew on its way?"

"Yes. Where are Tiergan and Kera?"

"They just went inside the clinic. The doors to the public will open in a few minutes."

Rowan nodded. "No problem. The crew should be there momentarily. I want you to go in now, before the patients fill the clinic. I don't want footage of him helping the poor. It detracts from the torturer angle."

Levi nodded again. "I'll be inside in a minute. Tell the crew to meet me at the door."

Rowan smiled at him. "Everything for the live feed is ready on this end. I have the implant footage and the report paragraphs ready to be interspersed with the interview."

"Good." Levi felt sick rather than pleased. "I'm ready."

"This is your moment, Levi," Rowan told him. He looked moved. "I'm proud of you. Sorry I had to be an ass to get us here, but this story is going to shake the system in every inhabited colony across the universe. In two hours' time, Surayo Corporation's name will be disgraced."

The thought gave Levi courage. "I won't let you down," he told Rowan. Rowan closed the connection, and Levi pocketed his operator.

Levi stepped toward the clinic but hesitated. This was his moment of triumph, and he felt like he was going to puke. *How disappointing.* He had hoped success would taste sweet. But as he thought of what he was about to do to Tiergan, expose him, make him suffer, Levi couldn't conjure any sense of righteousness, only guilt.

Remember what he did to those people. Levi hardened his resolve.

He had waited too long. It was almost nine, and the camera crew would be there any second. Levi craned his neck to look for them. He was so distracted by the thought of their impending arrival that he didn't hear the rumble of the helicopter. He only saw it, briefly, as it hovered over the clinic, and then flew away. Levi had never seen a helicab in this part of town before.

That was the last coherent thought he had before the ground beneath him shook and the clinic exploded into flames.

Chapter Fifteen

The explosion blew Levi backward, slamming his shoulder into the concrete wall of the building beside him. He crumpled to the ground, landing hard on the steel grates of the alley. The metal bit into his palms. He glanced up in time to roll out of the way of debris from the falling dumpster.

Levi's body shook with adrenalin as he fought for breath. Dark gray smoke billowed from the clinic. The roof was engulfed in flame. Patients were on fire. Bystanders screamed. Traffic came to a halt. Everything was collapsing, everything in chaos.

Tiergan and Kera were still inside the building.

Levi ran toward the clinic, his right shoulder pulsing with pain.

There were no sirens, no sounds of rescue. Levi pushed past the panicked throngs. He gagged on the smell of burning hair. Twisted rebar protruded from large crumbling chunks of concrete. Paper and shriveled pieces of plastic fell from the sky like rain. Levi choked on the dust in the air so thick he could barely see. Gray powder coated everyone from head to toe.

As the rest of the Washoe Street onlookers ran from the fire, Levi ran toward it, ignoring the alarms in his mind, thinking only of Tiergan, burning to death inside.

“Tiergan!” he shouted. He fell as he stumbled over rubble, his ankle twisting painfully in a gap of concrete. His trousers ripped and he skinned the palms of his hands as he scrambled over the debris. Through the smoke, he made out a gaping hole in the wall of the clinic. He rushed inside, immediately dropping low as the smoke thickened.

At least the main room of the clinic was not on fire. Crumbled concrete and smoke blocked his passage. The air was too foul to breathe, so Levi crouched, climbing over the chunks of concrete on all fours.

Levi called out Tiergan’s name again and then started coughing. He climbed over hot sheets of corrugated metal. His trousers got caught on a jut of rebar. This was madness. He couldn’t see a thing.

The sound of the roaring, creaking roof was deafening, and burning debris fell through a hole in the ceiling.

Through the thick, choking cloud of dust, Levi searched for Tiergan, panic pulsing through him. He put his hand down to clamber over a large chunk of the front wall and felt flesh. He pulled back his hand in surprise.

Tiergan lay there, unconscious. His left hand was wedged under concrete, his body almost invisible, covered in a thick coat of white dust.

Levi’s throat tightened. He pulled Tiergan clear of the wreckage, and then threw him in a fireman’s hold over his shoulder. He weighed almost too much for Levi to lift. Levi stumbled his way out, coughing violently as he raised his head from the ground.

Outside the building, Levi lowered Tiergan to the ground. Tiergan groaned as he came to, coughing.

“Tiergan!” Levi crouched beside him. “Are you all right?”

Tiergan gave Levi a look so cold, it froze him in place. Blood ran down the side of Tiergan’s head, above his right ear. He curled his left hand against his chest.

“Where’s Kera?” Tiergan croaked.

Levi looked back at the burning clinic, aghast. “She’s still inside!”

Tiergan stood and stumbled back into the building, barely able to stand. Levi ran after him.

“Get out of here!” Tiergan turned and hissed at him. “It’s not safe.”

Levi searched the haze, clambering through the wreckage once more, turning over broken furniture and pieces of the wall frantically to find her. The remaining segments of the roof screeched as they melted, preparing to fall. They were going to be trapped.

The bathroom door beside Levi exploded outward. Before he could react, Levi felt the air punched from his gut as Tiergan yanked him to the ground. Levi fell on fragments of glass and steel. The room blazed with flames.

“Get out of here!” Tiergan shouted. He looked crazed in the hazy dust and fire. He suddenly grabbed Levi by his collar and dragged him, propelling him out of the building. Levi tripped on debris, landing on the rubble-strewn sidewalk.

Behind him, Levi heard the roof give completely. Levi turned and watched with horror as the roof collapsed, trapping Tiergan and Kera inside. The entire clinic was now an inferno.

Levi scrambled backward. Embers flew through the air. And then suddenly the biosphere emergency systems switched on, drenching the entire district in a full-scale downpour.

Emergency vehicles filled the street, screaming in from the nearby biospheres. A medic reached for Levi but he shrugged him off, running toward the back of the building, ignoring the agony of his shoulder, his bleeding palms. He recalled there had been a back entrance to the clinic. He pushed past the injured and made his way to the side of the building, just in time to see Tiergan emerge, coughing and carrying Kera over his shoulder, shrouded in a moving cloud of dust.

In the alleyway, Tiergan lowered Kera as gently as he could. He was still only using his right hand. His face was a mask of white dust and red blood. His bloodshot eyes were the only brightness. He crouched on the ground and coughed repeatedly.

Kera was unconscious. Even from a distance Levi could make out the awkward twist of her left leg.

Levi now saw why Tiergan clasped his left hand to his chest. It was a mess of blood and bone and steel. His fingers were mangled, the appearance made even fiercer by the wires that wove around the exposed bone, protruding through his flesh.

Levi felt absolutely sick. He tried to get himself to stop caring. And yet he approached, unable to stop himself.

Tiergan's eyes narrowed at him. There was no love in his expression. He stared at Levi as though he were a stranger. A shiver ran down Levi's spine.

Suddenly Tiergan jumped up and lunged at Levi. He pushed him against the wall of the neighboring warehouse.

"Levi," he said, his voice hoarse. He stared intensely, taking a moment to catch his breath before he could speak again. "Did you tell anyone about me?"

Levi had told Rowan that Tiergan was Agent 75, and Rowan must have told someone else. Of course he would have. How else had he secured the camera crew?

Levi nodded.

Tiergan leaned his head back and scrunched his eyes closed, looking as though Levi had just stabbed him. Tiergan let go of Levi and limply moved back to Kera's side, feeling her pulse and gently checking the rest of her body for injuries.

"Let me help take her to your place," Levi offered. His throat was scratchy and sore.

Tiergan did not look at him. "I can't go back. Now that they know, they will come to find me."

"Who will come for you?" Levi asked.

Tiergan looked at Levi like he was insane. “Trust Insurance! I still owe them 80 years of servitude!” A shudder coursed through his body, and Tiergan held his face in his hand. “Why did they do this? Why not just take me? Why destroy the clinic?”

Tiergan stared at the fiery remains of his clinic. He swallowed, eyes frozen on the destruction.

If Tiergan was correct, and someone was trying to capture him, then Levi’s leak had caused this. Regardless of how he felt about Tiergan now, he had a responsibility to make sure Kera was all right. Levi crouched beside Tiergan.

“I’ll call a helicab,” Levi told him. “You can take Kera to my place for the time being.”

Tiergan nodded and stood.

Levi had to shout into his operator as the sound of more sirens ripped through the biosphere. Judging by the volume, all of the medical teams from the surrounding biospheres had responded to the emergency. An explosion on Ishan was big news. For a moment, Levi wondered if his camera crew had finally arrived. *They should be filming this*, he thought.

“I should help the injured,” Tiergan mumbled. He started for the street.

“No!” Levi grabbed his arm. “For fuck’s sake, *look* at yourself! *You* are one of the injured. The ambulances are here. Let them take care of the victims.” Levi frowned as he took in Tiergan’s shaking. He looked like he would collapse any moment. “In fact, you need medical attention. Let’s get you into an ambulance.” Levi reached for his arm.

Tiergan fiercely pulled away. “No!”

“But --”

“You’ve done enough damage already, haven’t you?” Tiergan spat.

Levi flinched.

Tiergan swayed on his feet. “If I go to the hospital, Trust Insurance will take me.” He clenched his right fist, and then took a deep breath, as if steadying his temper. “I just need to make sure Kera is safe.”

“She will be. I promise.”

The helicab arrived a few minutes later. It had difficulty landing in the congestion. Levi and Tiergan slowly lifted Kera inside.

Tiergan said nothing during the entire flight to Levi’s apartment. He leaned his head against the window and stared outside, his emotions hidden under his mask of dust, only the raw red around his eyes showing his despair.

Levi pulled off his torn sports jacket and offered it to him.

“Your hand is bleeding,” he said quietly, motioning to the mangled mess Tiergan kept curled up against his chest.

Tiergan looked at the jacket, and then turned back to stare blankly out the window.

Levi thought of Tiergan’s apartment, all those paintings of birds. And now he could never go back. Tiergan radiated a mixture of anger and despair, and Levi had no idea how to help him. Or why he should even do so in the first place. This was what he had wanted, wasn’t it? Revenge for what Tiergan had done to his father?

Kera stirred between them, moaning and holding her head.

Tiergan glanced down at her, tenderness crossing his features. And then he turned back to stare blankly out the window once more.

The helicab landed on the roof of Levi’s apartment building. As Levi fumbled for his credit card, Tiergan used his one good hand to wordlessly hand the pilot a wad of cash from his pocket. He carried Kera out of the vehicle, wincing as her heavy weight swung against his injured hand.

Levi ran ahead of them, opening doors and ushering them inside.

“Lay her here,” he told Tiergan, leading them to his bedroom. Levi helped Tiergan lower Kera onto the bed. Other than her broken leg, the rest of Kera looked filthy but uninjured.

Levi offered Tiergan a towel to wipe his face. As soon as he did, Levi saw how sickly pale he was. In the warm light of Levi's bedroom, Tiergan looked like a ghost. His lips were even going blue. He was about to pass out.

Tiergan sat beside Kera on the bed, as Levi leaned against his wall and watched. Tiergan turned Kera's head slightly, so he could look at a small cut on her scalp. He leaned in closely, and Levi heard the mechanical whirring of his x-eye trying to focus on her wound.

Tiergan flinched immediately, and his hand shot up to his head. He shook his head, as if to clear it, and then leaned closer over Kera's face. The x-eye expanded open, but as he looked at her, Levi saw him grimace. He clutched the side of his head in pain. When he finally pulled back, he had gone even paler.

"You're going to black out," Levi told him.

Tiergan stood slowly, ignoring Levi. He leaned against the wall, closing his eyes, and then pushed himself upright. He stared at Levi.

"I have to get medical supplies," he said. He spoke like a machine, no inflection, no feeling. "I will be gone for fifteen minutes. Once I have finished treating Kera, we will leave your apartment, leave you alone."

Levi felt a surge of fear at his words. *This was what you wanted*, he reminded himself.

Tiergan swallowed, looking at Levi once more, his red-rimmed eyes locked on him. And then he made his way to the front door and left.

Levi stood in his hallway, shaking with adrenalin. His shoulder felt badly bruised, and the cuts on his hands and legs stung. He went to the bathroom and washed the abrasions and sprayed them with antiseptic. He washed his face, and then changed out of his ruined suit and back into jeans.

Kera moaned from the bedroom. Levi quickly went to her.

She was trying to sit up. Levi rushed to help her, propping her back up with pillows so she could lean against the headboard.

Kera's face crumpled in pain. "Where am I?"

"You're in my apartment," Levi said.

Kera looked at him, and then her eyes widened. She grabbed Levi's arm frantically.

"Where is Tiergan? Did he make it out? Is he all right?"

Levi nodded. "He's getting supplies to tend your leg."

Kera sighed and leaned back. She licked her dry lips.

Levi fetched a glass of water for her. She downed it immediately, and then lay back against the pillows, closing her eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Levi asked.

Kera shook her head. "You know," she whispered, her voice scratchy. "It seems like every time I turn around, T is saving my life." She chuckled a little at that, and then closed her eyes again. "I keep telling him not to bother. But he won't give up on me, even though he's always had it worse than me."

Levi blinked. "What do you mean?"

"He was just as much a prisoner as me. They held him captive in that dark room and made him repair the damage they did to us. Every time he tried to escape, tried to stop, they would hurt him. I saw it myself. They shocked him with a cattle prod, and I swear his head hit the floor so hard I thought I could hear it crack. It always shorted out his implants, and he'd spasm with aftershocks. The pain must have been unbearable."

Kera frowned at the memory. "He didn't talk, either. At first I thought it was because he was shy or angry. But then I realized he wasn't allowed to speak to the prisoners and was beaten every time he did.

"And with all that, he still managed to smile every time I was wheeled in. He would smile at me, and stroke my hair and give me painkillers. The other prisoners, they all had similar stories about T. Here is this man, indentured for the next hundred years to pay off his

insurance debt, and he still is able to smile at us and make us feel better, for the few moments we were with him.”

Kera wiped her eye with the back of her hand, and looked at Levi. “Once they came in while I was still barely conscious. They kept asking me about my husband. I could hardly stand, and yet they wanted to interrogate me again. Tiergan tried to protect me. He fought them.”

“And?” Levi asked hoarsely. He remembered the scene from the implanted chip. It had been the only sign of humanity in the man who had worn the implant.

Kera closed her eyes. “They beat him down and...well, none of us had medical attention for a while.” She grimaced at the memory. “After that, I guess he decided he’d had enough. Tiergan slit his own throat.”

“Oh God.” Levi felt like throwing up. He was such a fucking idiot. He remembered wondering about that scar.

“How did he survive?” Levi asked softly.

“He didn’t,” Kera said flatly. “He died. But they just brought him back to life. Again.”

“How did he escape?” Levi looked down at his hands. They were shaking.

“I don’t know. After I was released I came to Ishan and a couple of years later I found him in Washoe. He was a broken man, starving and recovering from his self-inflicted wounds, afraid of going to any hospital, because Trust Insurance would find him and force him back into slavery.”

Kera opened her eye and smiled. “I told him that I remembered he always gave me courage. He made me believe there were still good people in the world. And I told him that it was time someone gave him a smile, and stroked his head. I took him to my mother-in-law’s house and we helped him recuperate. Once he saw the poverty of Washoe, he gathered equipment and donations from other doctors around Ishan. He started the clinic, I think, as a way to rectify the mistakes he made on Tarus 9.”

“What mistakes?” Levi asked. Regret made his throat tight. Why had he never considered the possibility of Tiergan working for Surayo Corporation against his will? “They forced him, didn’t they?”

Kera nodded. “Yes, you and I see that. But he still feels responsible. He blames himself for not fighting harder. For doing his job so well that they could go on torturing us indefinitely.”

Kera rubbed her leg constantly now, perspiration breaking out along her forehead from the pain. “The clinic was the only thing that made T happy.” Kera leaned back in the bed, eyes scrunched closed. Her voice had gone wispy. “Well, the clinic and birds. Until he met you.”

Levi found it hard to speak. “I feel awful. The things I said to him...”

Kera had her eyes scrunched closed. He watched her slide into sleep and then left her, closing his bedroom door behind him. He sat down on the living room couch, staring at the wall screen in front of him.

At once, he understood what his father must have felt, all those years ago, after divulging the names of his friends. Levi had betrayed Tiergan. He hadn’t trusted his own instincts, hadn’t seen beyond his own obsessive lust for revenge. He hadn’t considered Tiergan’s side of the issue, and now Tiergan was injured, hunted, and exposed to Trust Insurance.

Levi hunched over, head in his hands. He probably would have stayed that way indefinitely if it weren’t for the sudden, obnoxious beeping of his operator. The noise rattled him, and he switched on the visual connection angrily.

“What?” he shouted.

“Levi!” Rowan’s face appeared on the screen, his concern plainly visible. “For God’s sake! What’s happened down there? Are you all right? I just saw footage on the Tova Herald headlines! What the hell is going on? Where is our camera crew?”

Levi steadied his voice. “The clinic exploded.”

“I can fucking see that!” Rowan barked. “It’s all over our competitor’s netcast! What the hell happened?”

“Rowan, the camera crew never showed. The building was bombed, out of nowhere.”

Rowan’s eyebrows scrunched together. “Are you all right? What about Tiergan? Did he survive? Did anyone else get hurt?”

“I have a few scratches, but I’m fine. A lot of people were severely injured, though.” Levi was about to tell him that Tiergan survived, but he remembered the look of devastation on Tiergan’s face when he found out his identity had been betrayed. He had a chance now to make things right, to make Tiergan disappear.

“I don’t think anyone inside survived,” Levi said finally. “It was chaos down there.”

Rowan looked ready to punch someone. “What are the odds that a breaking news story would occur at the very location that my crew is supposed to be, and they miss it? Our ratings are in the shitter!” He buried his face in his hands.

Levi realized his anger wasn’t at him. Ratings were all Rowan cared about.

The front door opened behind Levi. He turned to watch Tiergan enter, carrying a plastic bag of supplies in his good hand. Tiergan took one look at Levi’s screen, dropped what he was carrying, and slid down the wall, crouching out of sight.

“Everything’s gone to hell now,” Rowan continued. “Why don’t you come in and we’ll see what we can salvage from all of this?”

Levi was distracted by Tiergan. “Rowan, hold on a moment.”

Tiergan crouched behind Levi’s couch. He was shaking.

“What’s wrong?” Levi asked.

“Turn off the screen,” Tiergan said roughly.

Levi frowned. “Look, I --”

“Turn off the fucking screen!” Tiergan hissed.

Levi crept back to the screen. “Rowan, I’m going to take a shower. I’ll be in shortly.” He turned off his operator and turned to face Tiergan.

“What is going on?”

Tiergan looked furious. “That man,” Tiergan said, “was my torturer. He’s the former commander of the militia on Tarus 9.”

Chapter Sixteen

“Rowan Ryland...” Tiergan closed his eyes. “I should have recognized his last name.”

Levi sat on the floor next to him. He didn’t know what to say. It was still too much of a shock to think of Rowan as anyone other than his boss. The idea of *Rowan* being the man he was actually looking for all these years, the man who had implemented the policy of torture that killed his father, was too sick to contemplate. Then the realization came: he’d been played. Rowan had played him this entire time. A sense of vertigo washed through Levi. He closed his eyes and then focused.

Right now, his first priority was Tiergan.

“You need to lie down,” Levi told him.

Tiergan’s eyes suddenly flashed open in alarm. “We have to go. Now.”

“No.” Levi put his palm against Tiergan’s chest. “Don’t leave. Look, I’m really sorry for --”

“All of us have to leave. Including you.” He winced as he slid back up the wall. He reached down for his bag of medical supplies and looked like he was going to topple over. Levi quickly grabbed it for him.

“Jesus, Tiergan, you aren’t fit to go anywhere at the moment!”

"Your boss is going to kill you if you stay here," Tiergan stared at Levi. "Let's go."

Sudden, icy coldness poured down Levi's spine. Tiergan was right. Rowan *would* come after them, all of them. Christ, he even knew about Imogen.

Tiergan went to fetch Kera. Levi stood frozen, his mind whirling through all the implications of these revelations. Levi's leak to Rowan was the cause of the explosion. *He* was responsible. The thought knifed through him.

Levi's operator buzzed again, and as he looked at the screen, he saw it was an incoming call from Rowan. Levi blocked him.

The front door slammed open, taking Levi completely by surprise.

Imogen almost ran directly into him. She looked breathless and frantic, her osys in her hand.

"Levi!" Imogen immediately hugged him. "Jesus! I thought you were down at the" --Imogen picked a piece of the clinic's wall out of Levi's hair -- "the clinic. I see you have been there. I heard about the explosion. Are you all right?"

"No time to talk," Levi said. "We have to go."

Tiergan came around the corner, supporting Kera as she limped into the room. Imogen's eyes widened further.

"You and him?" Imogen said.

"*And* you." Levi fought another wave of nausea at the thought that he had put Imogen in danger as well. "I submitted your bill to Rowan. He knows who you are, and that you've been working for me on this story."

Imogen frowned. "Rowan? What does he have to do with anything?" Imogen looked upset, but she shouldered her bag resolutely and followed Levi out of the apartment. "Are we in trouble? Where are we going?"

"I'll explain everything when we get to the Galactic."

* * * * *

The Galactic Dreams Hotel was a few blocks away. It was convenient but very expensive, and the deposit on the room exceeded Levi's remaining credits. Imogen made a pained face but nevertheless stepped up and put the room on her own card.

On any other day, Levi would have enjoyed the muted terra cotta color scheme, the in-room hot tub, the minibar. As it was, all four of them poured into the hotel room and immediately sought to help Kera.

She was propped up on one of the two king-size beds, and Tiergan worked to fuse her broken bone together. Levi and Imogen granted them privacy by stepping into the spacious walk-in closet. Levi gave Imogen an overview of the last two hours.

Levi had expected his life to change that morning. But he thought it was going to be the fame, fortune, and the achievement of a lifetime goal that was going to change him. Not a flee-for-your-life and you've-wronged-the-only-man-you've-ever-loved kind of change.

Imogen listened quietly, not interrupting. Her expression grew tighter with each passing word. When Levi got to the bit about Rowan, Imogen finally broke in.

"Are you sure? Is Tiergan sure?"

Levi nodded. "I believe him. It explains Rowan's enthusiastic personal interest in my story. No other reporter at the *Ishan Report* has received the kind of one-on-one assistance that Rowan provided for me." Along with all the other emotions he was experiencing, a sudden sense of depression washed over Levi as he spoke. He wasn't a top reporter who had the boss's ear for his acumen. He was a tool. He shook his head. "Besides, his secretary once told me that Rowan had served in the military for eighteen years. I didn't believe it at the time, but now it makes sense."

Imogen closed her eyes. "You gave him the implant, didn't you? Maybe we could get it if it's --"

“Locked away in his office, on the top floor of the *Ishan Report*?” Levi clenched his fists. “We can’t reach it.”

Imogen fumed in silence. Levi left the closet, and saw that Kera’s leg was bandaged. She was awake but looked exhausted.

Tiergan was in the bathroom. The door was ajar, and Levi saw him standing over the sink, tending his own wounds. Levi hovered outside anxiously, wondering whether he should interrupt and help him.

When he heard Tiergan curse quietly, Levi abandoned propriety and barged in.

“Let me help you,” Levi said. He caught sight of Tiergan’s arm under the running water. The sight of his hand was nauseating.

Tiergan avoided Levi’s gaze, staring bleakly at his left hand as Levi irrigated the wound.

“Would you fetch the bag of supplies from Kera’s bedside table?” Tiergan asked quietly. Levi nodded and brought in the bag, which contained antiseptic and analgesic sprays, as well as several rolls of bandages.

All the bathroom lights blazed. Levi had previously joked to himself that modern hotel bathroom lighting was bright enough for performing surgery. Now the irony of the situation didn’t make him laugh.

Tiergan tried to pick out shards of foreign material from his flesh, using his right hand’s tiny surgical implants. However, his left hand was shaking so badly, he kept missing and cursing.

“Give me your hand.” Levi folded a bath towel and held Tiergan’s left arm flat against it.

“I just can’t get my hand to remain steady,” Tiergan said. “If I can keep it still, I can get to the phalangeal fractures with my x-eye.”

Levi pinned Tiergan's arm down with both hands. Tiergan stared into his wound with his x-eye. The laser light danced over the exposed bone, and Levi had to suppress a momentary wave of nausea.

As Tiergan worked on his hand, Levi watched him turn a ghastly, greenish white, but he didn't stop working.

"Tiergan?" Levi spoke softly.

"Hm?" He kept focused on his broken middle finger.

"I'm an asshole." Levi swallowed. "And I'm sorry."

Tiergan's eye laser switched off and he turned to look at Levi blankly.

Levi realized Tiergan wanted more. But he didn't have it in him. He felt too terrible to put his emotions into words. And so he leaned over and kissed Tiergan's pale lips, softly but purposefully. "I said shitty things."

Tiergan's damned inscrutable expression was still firmly in place. What was Levi going to have to do, beg? Or was it over, impossible to repair now that Levi had ruined Tiergan's life?

"I'm sorry I fucked things up so badly. But you should know that" -- Levi clenched his teeth. No time to be a pussy now -- "Okay. Here's the deal. I'm in love with you."

Tiergan's cold expression instantly crumpled. He reached out with his good hand and hugged Levi roughly. He rested his head on Levi's shoulder. Levi rubbed Tiergan's neck softly, relief coursing through him.

"Do you forgive me?" Levi asked.

Tiergan leaned up and kissed him. Levi couldn't believe he actually thought he could walk away from Tiergan, from this feeling.

Tiergan sighed. "I forgave you even when you meant what you said." Tiergan brushed a strand of hair from Levi's face. "There is nothing you accused me of that I myself haven't thought a thousand times."

Levi shook his head. "I said them because I was an idiot."

"I didn't work for Surayo Corporation."

Levi nodded. "I know. You worked for Trust Insurance."

"I made a terrible mistake signing that life insurance contract, but I did not go to Tarus 9 of my own free will. You have to understand that."

"I do." Levi motioned to his injured hand. "Come on. This still looks awful."

Tiergan flashed Levi a brief but dazzling smile. Levi noted that some color had returned to Tiergan's face. Then he swallowed and turned back to his hand. The laser turned back on and he flinched as he started to work on the fractured bone. Tiergan closed his eyes suddenly, and swayed. "Oh, *fuck*. That really fucking hurts." He gave Levi a weak smile that wasn't fooling anybody.

"Maybe you should take a breather," Levi said, realizing that Tiergan could pass out at any moment, halfway through his own surgery, and that seemed like a really dangerous idea.

"I'll be all right." Tiergan shook his head.

Levi looked at the tangled wires still protruding from the flesh of Tiergan's hand and frowned. But Tiergan simply took a deep breath and leaned back over to finish the job.

When he had fused the broken bones and cleaned the wound, Levi helped him bandage his left hand. He cleaned out and sprayed the gash above his ear as well.

Levi frowned at him. "How do you feel?"

Tiergan gave him a crooked smile. "I feel like someone just tried to blow me up." He held out his left hand in front of him. "The broken implants are sending all these weird electric tingling sensations up my arm. Distracts me slightly from the agonizing pain."

Levi blanched, but Tiergan laughed softly. "Don't worry. It's nothing a strong drink won't mask."

Levi put an arm around him to help him to the sofa. "Luckily, we happen to be furnished with a minibar."

Tiergan's right hand clenched on Levi's injured shoulder, and Levi flinched.

Tiergan immediately withdrew his arm and narrowed his eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're hurt."

"I just messed up my shoulder in the explosion."

"Take off your shirt. Let me see."

Levi stared at him, exasperated. "For Christ's sake, Tiergan. You just operated on yourself. Give yourself a five-minute break before you continue saving the world, okay?"

"I'm not saving the world," Tiergan said defensively. "I feel like shit, and I want to look at your abs."

Levi laughed. He helped Tiergan sit on the edge of one of the beds. "You can marvel at my abs all you like, but later. As soon as you've rested."

"We don't have time to rest," Tiergan told him. He looked at everyone in the room. Imogen sat on the sofa, and Kera was awake, although still very pale. "Rowan will be looking for you, Levi. And it won't be long before he discovers that Kera and I didn't die in the fire."

"That fucking bastard!" Imogen provided her opinion.

Tiergan raised an eyebrow. "Well, at least we know who it is that's after me now." He looked to Levi. "And we know who sent the man to attack you and steal the implant that night in Washoe."

A shiver ran down Levi's spine. He had never even considered the possibility that the man who had mugged him in Washoe was linked to the story. He looked at Tiergan and realized he had been following Levi that night.

"I can't believe I trusted Rowan," Levi mumbled.

"How would you have known better?" Tiergan asked. "He is living a different life now. God knows why he has gotten into the journalism business, but I'm sure it is for no good."

Levi remembered the conversation he heard in Rowan's office. "I think he uses the networks to gather information on other people, other companies. A few days ago I overheard him threatening someone with exposure if they pulled out of their advertising contract."

Tiergan clenched his teeth. "He's discovered that you can get a lot more money out of blackmail than you can through torture."

"But he's so young," Imogen interrupted. "How could he have been there, on Tarus 9?"

Tiergan raised an eyebrow. "How could I have been there? The same reason he was. Rowan was resuscitated. His codename was Agent 56."

Levi shook his head. "How many recommissioned agents are there?"

"I'm not sure," Tiergan said. "The procedure is so expensive; Trust Insurance only used it on people from whom they could get their money's worth. When I was brought back, they told me I not only had to work off the debt of my insurance payment to my family, which was extensive, but also the cost of the resuscitation itself, and the implants. By the time I was fully recovered, I owed Trust Insurance close to 144 million credits. It was so absurd I thought they were joking. That will teach me for not reading the fine print of a contract, won't it?"

"That can't be legal!" Levi shook with rage. "What if other people are out there now, buying life insurance without knowing the repercussions? We have to report this!"

Tiergan sighed. "If you thought Surayo Corporation was a big enemy to overthrow, you would be shocked at Trust's power. They insure everything, including companies and governments, which is why I ended up on Tarus 9. The Surayo Corporation had an insurance policy that protected its right to run the mining operations on the moon. As soon as the protests began, they filed a claim with Trust. Trust sent in its own mercenary team to clean up for Surayo Corporation. All part of their contract."

Imogen shook her head. “Doesn’t anyone wonder why an insurance company has its own *military force*?”

“Who’s going to question them?” Tiergan asked bitterly. “Who do you think is protecting the governments in power? The politicians at the top? Behind every system senator, there is a convenient Trust Insurance policy that will protect him or her in case they lose their seat. Trust Insurance is everywhere, and they have the legal backing to do their will.”

Levi hesitated asking the question, but he had to know. “Rowan died. And they brought him back. Maybe he owes the insurance company like you?”

Tiergan shook his head. “Regardless of whether or not he started at Trust as a slave, Ryland liked his job at Trust Insurance. Levi, he *enjoyed* torturing me. He would make bets with his friends on how long it would take to make me throw up all over myself. He laughed when I begged to be killed. This is a sadistic man who has no sense of right and wrong. He’s worked for Trust long enough to have paid his debt in full even before Tarus 9. And he will continue to live on, indefinitely, getting richer and richer.”

Levi ran his hand through his hair. Immortal Rowan Ryland now had Tiergan’s precious memory chip, the key to Levi’s story. He had burned and killed innocent people, destroyed the clinic Tiergan had dedicated his life to, broken Kera’s leg, injured Tiergan’s hand, and turned them into fugitives. Tiergan told his story with a sarcastic smile, but Levi found nothing even vaguely amusing about the situation. He was furious. And he would have his revenge at last.

“I think it’s time we put an end to Rowan’s eternal life span,” Levi said. He took a deep breath and looked to Imogen. “I need you to find out the key codes to the emergency systems at the *Ishan Report* headquarters.”

“But how are we going to get into his office?” Imogen demanded.

“For that,” Levi said, holding up his operator, “we can thank Rowan’s horrible taste in music.”

Chapter Seventeen

Even in the dimness of the late evening hour, the *Ishan Report's* lights shone from every floor. The news service never slept. A skeleton crew of reporters, technicians, and facility staff continued to work through the night.

"You ready?" Levi whispered to Tiergan and Imogen. Imogen nodded. Tiergan didn't say anything in response, but reached out and placed his good hand on Levi's lower back.

Adrenalin coursed through Levi's body as he used his employee ID card to enter through the side entrance of the building.

Kera was at the intersatellite shuttle station, purchasing tickets for herself and Tiergan to nearby Sedna. They hoped this would put Rowan off their trail for the hour that they needed inside Rowan's office.

Levi didn't like the idea of using Kera as a decoy. But she had insisted on playing a part in the plan, and now, standing inside Rowan's world, Levi realized she was probably a lot safer than the rest of them.

As Levi and Tiergan made their way toward the staircase, Levi's heart raced. Now the building security system knew he was there. It wouldn't be long before Rowan knew as well.

"We have to hurry," Imogen said unnecessarily.

Levi led the three of them through the syndicate's lavish foyer and unlocked the elevator. They stopped first on Levi's floor, navigating by the dim glow of the emergency exit lights.

Imogen immediately sat in Levi's chair and turned on his screen. Within minutes she had hacked into the system connecting the building security system.

"You're right," Imogen told Levi. "He has the codes to his own offices separated from the rest of the operator. I can access the emergency systems, but you'll have to open the doors to his office on your own."

Levi nodded. It was what he expected. He just hoped that his hunch was right.

Imogen held out her hand. Levi wordlessly handed her the recording of his story. All they would need to do is download the flagged scenes from Tiergan's implant, and then they would broadcast the story live, before Rowan could shut them down.

"Okay, ready?" Imogen asked, finger dramatically poised in the air above Levi's computer. "I'm going to arm the fire alarm now. You should have about five minutes to get the implant out of the safe. I'll hook up the live feed here as soon as I get security out of the building."

"Ready," Levi said.

And, just like that the evening silence was shattered by a high-pitched siren, screaming down the corridors and echoing throughout all floors of the building.

Even expecting the fire alarm, Levi jumped in surprise. And then the building's sprinkler system switched on with a loud rumble, and he was instantly drenched.

"Shit." Tiergan pushed his damp hair back from his face. He frowned at the sprinklers above his head. "I hate chemical sprinkler systems."

Levi touched Tiergan's arm. "Come on." They ran toward the stairwell.

The fire alarm had shut down all the elevators. As Tiergan and Levi rushed to the top floor, dozens of employees streamed down past them in a panic. At the top floor, Levi dashed

to the heavy mahogany doors of Rowan's office and eyed the ID pad. He pressed it and a screen wavered above it, asking him to swipe his ID card or enter the security code.

Levi quickly punched in *P-R-O-T-O* and then *Enter*. The door popped open, and Levi let out his breath.

Tiergan opened it all the way, shaking his head. "How'd you know?"

"The man obviously loves himself," Levi said. "And all the building codes are five digits. It made sense."

"Smart." Tiergan scanned the darkened room. "Where's the safe?"

Levi pointed to the corner of the office. Tiergan moved stealthily across the room.

The lights remained off, but the screen showing the *Ishan Report's* live broadcast feed remained on, muted but flashing bright colors of footage. The light was diffused by the sprinkler system mist, and colors from the screen's images flickered eerily over the entire room.

Tiergan ran his hand along the door of the safe, his head cocked to the side, looking at it thoughtfully. He put his finger on the edge and winced. Levi heard the faint whirring of one of Tiergan's cybernetic attachments, sliding from the skin of his right index finger, slinking into the crack between the door and the frame of the safe.

Tiergan stared at nothing, his face scrunched in concentration as he felt around inside. And then the corner of his mouth lifted into a smile.

"I can open this."

"Really?" Levi felt a giddy rush of silly infatuation. He had always wanted a boyfriend who could break into safes.

Tiergan didn't respond. Instead he moved closer, looking as though he would hug the safe.

"Look away," he warned Levi.

Levi turned his back. Immediately, red light danced across the room. The light was fragmented by the mist of the sprinklers and created a beautiful display of laser light in the darkness. Levi was desperately curious. He knew Tiergan's x-eye had high settings, and he wanted to watch him burn through the metal. But the second he turned even slightly, the light went out and Tiergan sighed.

"I'm serious," Tiergan scolded. "Don't look. It's blinding."

"What about you?"

Tiergan snorted. "My eyes aren't looking at it either."

Levi decided not to argue the fact that Tiergan's eyes were *making* it, because he heard the sound of a thump and the light went out.

Levi turned around. An even, circular hole allowed access through the front of the safe. Tiergan and Levi grinned at each other.

The implant was there and easy to spot. It was in a small plastic box, resting on the top shelf of the safe. The bottom shelf held dozens of credit cards.

"Levi?" Imogen's voice called out from Levi's operator. "I have the live feed hooked and your story ready to go. We're all ready."

Tiergan reached in and grabbed the implant box. As he pulled, Levi saw the thin filament attaching it to the safe. Levi's stomach lurched. "Wait! Tiergan --"

The box around the implant hissed and melted. Tiergan dropped it, and the two of them watched in horror as the box, and the implant inside, bubbled and liquefied. The sprinkler system extinguished the steam, leaving a mangled mess of plastic and metal, and the smell of acid and scorched carpet.

"Fuck." Tiergan looked at the bubbling puddle with wide eyes. "Fuck!"

Levi had no idea what to say. It was gone. Their evidence was gone. Everything they needed to prove the story. The chip that Tiergan had risked his life to remove. All of his memories, melting on the carpet.

Sirens sounded outside the building, and Levi immediately forgot his concerns of the implant.

“Levi!” Imogen’s voice came through on the osys. “I don’t know what you guys did, but the security alarms are going off as well. Police are on their way.”

“I realize that,” Levi barked. He looked to Tiergan. “Now what? Should we broadcast the story without the evidence?”

Tiergan ran his good hand through his damp hair, slicking it back from his face. He looked to Levi sadly. “It’s your call. Maybe we should --”

“Levi!” Imogen’s voice interrupted again. “Outside!”

Tiergan and Levi ran to the window. A helicopter flew by as they pulled open the curtains. Immediately they both stepped back.

“Is it the fire department?” Levi asked.

Tiergan had gone completely pale. “No. It’s Trust Insurance. They found me.” He clenched his jaw, staring at the circling helicopter in fright. The Trust logo was now clearly visible as the building’s outer lights suddenly blazed, illuminating the onslaught of emergency vehicles.

“We have to go.” Levi grabbed his arm forcefully.

“No.” Tiergan held his ground. He stared at Levi, looking wild in the flashing lights. “Broadcast the story first. Then we’ll go.”

“We don’t have time to argue!” Levi shouted, suddenly furious. The idea of Tiergan being indentured for another century filled Levi with cold terror. “Let’s go!”

The office door swung open. Levi turned, expecting Imogen. Instead Rowan strode in, holding a gun.

Levi didn’t have a second to register fear, or anger, or flight.

Rowan fired and pain tore through Levi’s right thigh. He collapsed onto the floor, groping his wound as hot blood gushed over his fingers.

“Levi!” Tiergan started toward him, but Rowan stepped between them.

“You fucking coward!” Rowan spat at Tiergan. He looked furious. “Can’t be a man and fulfill your obligations, Samuel? Think running away will solve your problems? Well, too bad.”

Tiergan lunged at him and Rowan fired again. The bullet shattered a cabinet, but missed Tiergan. Then Tiergan was on Rowan, slamming him to the floor. The two of them grappled and hammered each other with blows that splintered the floorboards.

Levi writhed on the floor, gripping his wound. The pain immediately grew beyond control, beyond anything he had ever experienced. Blackness flirted across his eyelids.

Rowan tried to raise his gun to Tiergan’s face, but Tiergan smashed Rowan’s arm against the edge of the desk. The gun skittered across the floor. Levi watched it, feeling sick but knowing he had to move.

Across the room Rowan struggled past Tiergan’s blows and gripped Tiergan by the throat. Tiergan punched Rowan hard but Rowan’s grasp only seemed to increase.

Tiergan’s face darkened, his eyes rolled back, and he looked as though he would pass out.

Levi pulled himself across the floor, every small motion sending agony through him. He grimaced, holding in a cry of pain. Everything grew starry and black, but he clutched the fallen gun in his bloody hands. He turned back and took aim.

“You bastard! I should have killed you,” Rowan growled over Tiergan.

Tiergan choked for breath and tried to lift his right hand. Levi saw he had his scalpel out. Levi squeezed the trigger and Rowan immediately fell off of Tiergan, crying out. Levi dropped the gun and slumped onto the floor. From a half-conscious haze, he watched Tiergan scramble from under Rowan, reach up to the desk, and smash a huge trophy down across Rowan’s head.

Levi fought to keep his eyes open. After a momentary blackness, he felt Tiergan's hands on him. He looked up to see that Tiergan knelt beside him.

"Jesus, Levi." Tiergan was very pale. He looked frantic. He ripped the hole in Levi's trousers wider and gently pried Levi's hand from the wound.

"Talk to me," Tiergan growled.

"It hurts."

Tiergan's eyebrow raised. "Right." He brushed Levi's hair back. "Don't move." He ran to Rowan's closet, pulled out a clean white dress shirt, and ripped it in two.

Levi closed his eyes and a numb darkness swallowed him. What felt like seconds later, he came to again, in a pool of his own blood, still in Rowan's office, but bandaged.

"Not my prettiest patch job, but you'll live," Tiergan promised him. He placed a hand under Levi's back to help him to his feet. "We've got to get you out of here."

"Not yet," Levi gasped. He pointed at the unconscious Rowan. He tapped the side of his neck inelegantly.

Tiergan frowned. "You want me to slit his throat?"

Levi rolled his eyes. "Get his implant!" he said, pointing once more to Rowan's neck.

Tiergan looked shocked for a moment, but then moved to Rowan's body. He rolled Rowan onto his back.

Rowan's Trust Insurance bar code had been hidden by his hair. Below it, Tiergan quickly made an incision with his scalpel.

Levi tried to watch, but his focus was quickly disappearing. All he could feel was utter exhaustion. His throat was unbearably dry, and he wanted to curl up and go to sleep. He only had to hold on a few more minutes. He forced his eyes open, watched Tiergan's cybernetic tools slide outward. Tiergan used tweezers to reach into the bloody incision and pull out another implant. He snipped at the connective tissue carefully. Even against his worst enemy, Tiergan was still too good a doctor to do a shoddy job.

As soon as the implant was free, Tiergan reached into Levi's pocket and pulled out his osys. He snapped the implant into the docking port and called Imogen.

"Broadcast whatever you can find from the dates of the massacre," Tiergan told her.

"Tiergan?" Imogen sounded scared. "Are you two all right? The Trust helicopter has landed. And security is coming up toward you now..."

"Just broadcast the story!" Tiergan shouted. "We'll find better clips later. Do it now!"

Both Levi and Tiergan turned to glance at the muted screen on Rowan's wall. Only a minute later, the words "breaking news" appeared at the bottom of the screen, and then Levi's article began.

Even without the volume, Levi could speak the words by heart. He watched as the story to which he had dedicated his life unfolded on the screen. The sprinkler system suddenly shut off, and the image became clearer.

Levi's story was on the air. Regardless of what happened to any of them now, nothing would change this. Despite his pain, sudden, absolute joy flooded Levi. Everything would be all right. They had actually managed to succeed.

Levi looked up to Tiergan and motioned limply toward the door. "Go."

Tiergan scowled. "I'm not leaving you." He reached down to lift Levi.

Rowan's office door slammed open once more. Standing there, with four heavily armed guards, was a tall man wearing an official Trust Insurance agent uniform.

"Samuel Seoras," the man said loudly, narrowing his eyes at Tiergan, his mouth bending into a cold, menacing smile. "Time for you to finish your contract."

Panic surged through Levi, but he couldn't move. There was nothing he could do. He tensed in Tiergan's arm, but Tiergan stared back, his expression blank.

The insurance agent was still speaking, listing the terms of service per Tiergan's contract. But Levi wasn't listening. He gripped Tiergan's shoulder, willing him to run, willing them both to spontaneously disappear.

Instead, Tiergan slowly unwound his arm from Levi's shoulder. Levi tried to grip him back, stop him from letting go.

Tiergan squeezed Levi's shoulder. "Take care of yourself," he said.

"No!" Levi glared at the agent. "Don't take him!"

One of the guards grabbed Tiergan forcefully, pinning his arms back to cuff them. Tiergan cried out as they twisted his damaged hand.

The two other guards pointed their guns directly at Levi, standing above him and glaring menacingly. But Levi couldn't muster any more fear than he did at the prospect of Tiergan being taken away from him.

"I'll get you out," Levi said in a mumble. "I promise you. I promise."

Tiergan's smile flickered, sadly, full of resignation. And then the insurance agent smiled, the guard prodded Tiergan with the gun, and they led him away.

Epilogue

Jenemar was one of three mobile medical facilities Trust Insurance owned that were leased out to insured companies upon their need for medical services. Jenemar had previously been in orbit around Calypso, treating the injured military forces of the Calypso revolutionaries, insured under Trust. Prior to that, Jenemar had served a small observation outpost near Aneponi.

By the time Levi's private shuttle had caught up with the medical station, it had only just entered orbit around Sedna. In addition to treating the daily health needs of the station's large scientific community, it was also inoculating the local population against a rampant strain of virus that had overtaken the station.

Levi's shuttle pilot had difficulty finding an empty docking bay on Jenemar. At first, Levi worried that the medical facility was overrun, but once inside, he realized that he had arrived at the same time as the supply shuttles. He maneuvered around dozens of self-unloading pallet carts on his way to station reception.

The Jenemar medical station was very sterile. The air was so dry and crisp it burned Levi's nostrils. The station's white Plexiglas walkways and walls gave the small structure the illusion of more space. But Levi knew, from the net's description of the facility, that space

was not something the station had much of. The only residents on the floating hospital were a small crew of Trust Insurance doctors, nurses, and administrative assistants.

And, of course, security.

Levi made his way to reception, walking slowly. The gunshot to his thigh had healed over the last three months, but it still ached with abrupt movement. He carefully threaded his way past several employees crossing the hall to the cafeteria. He knew it was futile looking for a familiar face here, in the crowd of staff, but he couldn't help himself. The fact that Tiergan was somewhere on this station made it impossible not to seek him out.

Levi swallowed the knot of anxiety in his throat. As he handed the station administrator the release forms, only the slight tremor in his hands gave away his true feelings.

The administrator was no different from the three underwriters and two policy agents that Levi had worked with over the last three months. He analyzed each of Levi's documents carefully, running the plastic sheets under verification scans and crosschecking signatory prints, and then taking his time to compile his documentation and verify the results.

Once it was official, it was easy to convince the administrator to allow Levi access to Tiergan. The administrator seemed more than happy to drop the matter entirely. All it took was a brief call to the medical unit, directions down the hall, and a curt shake of Levi's hand.

* * * * *

At first, Tiergan didn't look up at Levi.

Tiergan had lost weight. It was the first physical change Levi noticed. Tiergan's hair was cut very short, clearly displaying Trust Insurance's bar code on his neck.

He wore spotless white surgical attire. Levi had learned early on in his dealings with the insurance company that Trust had repaired Tiergan's damaged implants, adding the cost of these repairs to his final debt expense. Now Tiergan's previously injured left hand was

scarred but healed, his fist clenched in a familiar way, alerting Levi that Tiergan had been using the cybernetic tools for hours.

Levi saw the metal cuffs around each of Tiergan's ankles, blinking as they communicated with the walls around him. Tiergan was not allowed to leave this room. A Trust Insurance militia guard was also present. He stood along the wall, shock stick in hand, watching Tiergan lazily.

Tiergan had no expression on his face. He looked at the floor as he stood beside his medical table. He expertly changed the sheets on the bed and only then looked up.

He narrowed his eyes. And then with an exclamation that was somewhere between a yelp and a sob, he suddenly dashed across the room.

Levi was trapped in a hug so powerful he felt at risk of suffocating. Tiergan grabbed him tightly and did not let go.

"I can't breathe..." Levi gasped.

Tiergan immediately released Levi, pulling back to look in Levi's eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he choked. He looked over to the guard warily.

Levi smiled. "I came to give you this." He handed Tiergan the certificate of his release. As Tiergan read it over with wide eyes, Levi turned to the guard.

The guard was listening to something on his osys. And then, with a sigh, he pushed himself off the wall and approached Tiergan.

"Don't move," he grunted at Tiergan.

Tiergan froze, obviously well trained. He went slightly pale.

The guard leaned down and pressed a magnetic key against the ankle cuffs. They both snapped open and fell to the floor.

"Looks like you got sprung, Doc." And then, with one last frown in their direction, he said, "You've got ten minutes to vacate the facility or you will be fined for trespassing." He left the room.

Tiergan searched Levi's face, looking confused and thrilled and sick all at once.

"I don't understand...how..."

Levi kissed him.

He intended it to be nothing more than a quick greeting kiss, a reassuring kiss. But within seconds, a torrential wave of desire crashed over him, and he moaned as Tiergan pushed open his mouth and plunged his tongue inside. He curled his fingers in Levi's hair and held him captive to his kiss. Three months of longing and desire poured between them, and Levi could feel every inch of him, the heat of his body, pressed against him, trembling with restrained power, excitement, and fear. Damn, Levi had missed him.

"It's very good to see you," Tiergan said softly, his voice breaking as he looked into Levi's eyes. He frowned, reaching forward to gently touch Levi's thigh. "Are you all right?"

Levi shook his head in amazement. "Am I all right? Christ, Tiergan..."

Tiergan swallowed. "I thought..." He looked away.

"Come on." Levi rubbed his arm. "Let's go."

Tiergan grabbed a small canvas bag from under the medical table and slung it over his shoulder. "This is all I have."

Tiergan followed Levi out of the infirmary and through the bright white hallway of the station. Levi felt tension radiate off Tiergan as they walked past security guards and staff.

Levi punched his codeword into the keypad of his docking bay and the doors hissed open. He motioned for Tiergan to go first, and followed after him, making sure the shuttle door was tightly locked before moving to the shuttle cockpit and informing the pilot that they were ready to go.

The pilot had started pulling away from Jenemar before Levi even returned to the private cabin.

The private shuttle was one of the smaller models, consisting of a main sleeping chamber and a bathroom, a small kitchen, and the cockpit. But Levi had never traveled in a private shuttle before, so even though it was cramped, it felt ridiculously luxurious.

Tiergan sat on the edge of the bed, looking around the room with wide eyes.

"Is this a private shuttle?" he asked quietly.

Levi nodded. He locked the cabin door behind him and sat next to Tiergan on the bed. "All ours. There's a pilot in the cockpit, but he won't disturb us." Tiergan's proximity was too tempting. Levi embraced him, desperate to feel the steady rhythm of his heartbeat against his own, frantic pulse.

Tiergan returned the embrace, his arms strong and assured around Levi, his hands gently stroking Levi's lower back. Tiergan rested his head on Levi's shoulder. He was grinning now, finally, looking tired but pleased.

"I'm terrified I'm going to wake up any moment now and this will all have been a dream."

"I can give you a blow job," Levi told him. "To show you it's real." He smirked.

Tiergan smiled back. "Trust me; if we're going by dreams, you've sucked my cock plenty in the last three months."

Levi laughed.

"How the hell did you do it?" Tiergan asked. He pulled back to look Levi in the eye. "How did you get me released?"

"I paid off your debt."

Tiergan shook his head. "One hundred and forty-four million credits? *How?*"

Levi grinned. "Surayo Corporation. The story caused an immediate uproar throughout the system and they were forced to pay reparations to the surviving residents of Tarus 9. Now the mining operations on Tarus 9 are shut down. The company has suffered huge losses due to the scandal, and there are even rumors that they will be filing for bankruptcy."

“Congratulations,” Tiergan said.

“To both of us. I couldn’t have done it without you.” Levi entwined his fingers deeper into Tiergan’s hair. “Since there were so few survivors of the massacre, I was given a hefty proportion of the reparation. Enough money to buy your contract, rebuild the clinic, and this.” Levi motioned around himself at the private shuttle.

“I can’t believe Trust let you buy me back.”

“I know,” Levi said. “I thought they would just kill me, once they realized I knew about recommissioned agents. But I promised to keep their secrets in exchange for their promise to let you go.”

Tiergan’s smile instantly faded. “But I thought you wanted to stop Trust Insurance.”

“I do,” Levi said. “But if I had gone ahead and published my case against Trust, Kera, Imogen, and I would have been in danger for the rest of our lives. You would have remained indentured for almost a century, unless I successfully closed them down. Even then, it would have taken years to dismantle the company. And when I began to think of what was more important, I realized that I owed it to you and to Kera to just let things be.”

Tiergan looked like he was about to protest, and so Levi cupped the back of his neck and pulled him in for another kiss. The kiss was familiar, warm, but it also had the tension of their separation within it. Time had increased Levi’s hunger for Tiergan’s touch. He relived their short months together nightly, and now, again, flush with the touch of Tiergan’s lips, he felt electrified with the fulfillment of months of longing.

Levi felt Tiergan smile, their lips locked together. Tiergan pulled back, looking almost giddy. “Are you serious? About the clinic? You’re rebuilding the clinic?”

“Kera and I are, together,” Levi said proudly. “We’ve got the permits finalized. You just need to approve the design and details.”

Tiergan’s expression was growing more and more excited. “Do you have a contractor lined up already?”

Levi nodded. "It's going to be bigger too. Better. My only request has been that you get your own office. With a door that locks."

Tiergan laughed. "Levi, you have just given me... God! How much did the building permits cost?" He stood in his excitement and started pacing. "Maybe we can charge some nominal fees to pay back the initial construction costs. Then we could use the funding provided to develop some form of endowment fund for the patients that are really hard up. Or perhaps..."

Levi stood and kissed him, shutting him up. He smirked. "You can worry all about that once we get back to Ishan. Until then, let's enjoy the privacy of the shuttle, all right? It's almost my last splurge from my reparation payment. Once we get back to Ishan, I promise you can talk about the clinic to your heart's content."

Tiergan narrowed his eyes. "*Almost* the last splurge? There's something more?"

Levi nodded, trying very hard not to break out some ridiculous grin in his absolute excitement. "Yeah. We're not actually on our way back to Ishan this very moment."

"We're not?" Tiergan looked out the window. It was a futile gesture, given the speed they were traveling, and the vast emptiness of space, but nevertheless, an old habit that people from Earth always seemed to have.

"No. We're on our way to Earth." Levi grinned. "Ireland, actually." He fumbled through his bag on the counter and handed Tiergan the book he had downloaded, *Birds of Eire*. "I thought you might like a little vacation before you went straight to work on the clinic. Two weeks bird-watching seemed like an interesting idea." Levi dug deeper in the bag and produced a fat tube of lubricant. "I thought we'd use this up when it gets too dark to see the birds."

Tiergan raised an eyebrow. "That's huge."

"Yes. Yes, it is."

"We're going to have to fuck several times a day to use that up."

“You’ll have to get creative.”

“I’m sure I can think of something.” Tiergan looked at the cover of the book in his hands. He swallowed. Happiness shone through his features, and he stepped closer, tossing the book on the counter. “Levi, I don’t know what to say.”

“Thank you?” Levi ventured.

“Thank you,” Tiergan said huskily. “For buying my freedom.” He kissed Levi’s forehead. “Thank you for the clinic.” He kissed the corner of Levi’s mouth. “Thank you for the vacation.”

He kissed Levi’s lips, his tongue surging into him. Levi gasped, forgetting how powerful a lover he was, how compelling. His mouth locked onto Levi’s, lips and tongue hot and soft, sweet to the taste. By the time he drew back, Levi was breathless and thoughtless.

“There must be some way to express my gratitude beyond words,” Tiergan said huskily.

Levi raised an eyebrow. “I have an idea.” He undressed. Tiergan watched with a smile, and then began pulling off his scrubs. Levi helped him out of his trousers. Their fingers met and fumbled at his waistband and they started laughing.

Tiergan was still laughing as he kicked his legs free of the Trust Insurance uniform. The sight of his intense arousal sent a surge of desire through Levi’s body. The light glinted off the implants in his hands, refracted off the shiny texture of old scars. But Levi looked past that, focusing on the light dusting of body hair, dipping down to the muscled planes of his lower abdomen, to the blond curls of Tiergan’s pubic hair from which his cock jutted, ruddy and demanding, standing at full attention.

Levi gently backed Tiergan against the wall of the cabin and then kissed him. Unlike Tiergan’s advances, which were always rough, demanding, overwhelming, Levi liked to build the contact slowly. He kept his lips close enough for only flirting contact, his tongue barely penetrating Tiergan’s lips. Levi stood slightly apart from Tiergan, so that the contact was not all consuming. Every time Tiergan leaned forward for more, Levi stepped back slightly. He

was too keyed up for this to last very long, and he wanted to stretch it out, make them both desperate for it.

Now that Levi's cock was fully erect, it brushed teasingly against the tip of Tiergan's, standing apart as they did. Only the soft head of Levi's cock managed to press against Tiergan's shaft or drag slightly against his testicles.

Tiergan stepped from the wall and tilted his pelvis to grind the contact closer. Levi took a small but very deliberate step backward, keeping their contact merely glancing.

Tiergan's eyes flamed with desire. The corner of his mouth quirked up when he realized the nature of Levi's game.

"You bloody tease!" Tiergan growled. Levi smiled. They kissed this way, lips only, until Levi himself could not restrain his own desires any longer. He swung his heavy cock from side to side, catching it on Tiergan's balls, extending the contact. Tiergan groaned but did not move in for more.

"Good," Levi purred. He reached out and, with his fingertips, guided Tiergan to the bed. Once Tiergan lay down, Levi sat beside him but did not straddle him. He leaned over and continued to kiss Tiergan, slowly and deeply, one finger trailing lazy patterns down Tiergan's chest. Levi could see his ribs, as thin as he was, and he ran his hands along them.

He followed his fingers with his tongue. When his teeth grazed Tiergan's nipple, Tiergan arched upward, and Levi immediately pulled back. Tiergan's eyes darkened.

For each of Tiergan's efforts to press them closer, speed things up, Levi pulled back and slowed down. Tiergan breathed heavily, but did not move, watching Levi with eyes that burned with his arousal. Levi rewarded his patience with a thorough ravishing, with tongue and hands, stroking and kissing. Levi's own desire to be engulfed and swallowed raged through him, and he was nearly mad with his own needs. But it was too intoxicating, watching Tiergan struggle with his urges, eyes flashing open and closed, his mouth parting to utter small moans of encouragement.

Levi reached out and grabbed the lube from the counter, giving his cock a few strokes as he did so. He knelt between Tiergan's spread legs.

"It's...been a long time," Tiergan said with a shaky voice.

"I'm glad to hear it." Levi warmed some gel by rubbing his fingers together, and then slowly spread it over Tiergan. Tiergan's anus constricted and then opened, shuddering around Levi's finger.

Levi took in Tiergan's body, his heavy cock and balls, his smooth, soft thighs, his twitching anus, and found him beautiful. He used his fingers to stretch Tiergan wider.

Tiergan was tight, his hot flesh hugging Levi's finger, opening only with protest.

Levi took his time. Again, every time Tiergan pushed closer, pumped forward, Levi pulled back, withdrawing his finger.

"Okay, Levi," Tiergan moaned.

"Okay, what?"

Tiergan's eyes burned. "Fuck me."

"Not yet."

"Please." Tiergan writhed and Levi pulled his hand back completely. Tiergan groaned.

Levi smiled. "Almost." He stroked himself and then moved between Tiergan's legs, opening him wider. He used a pillow to lift Tiergan's hips and then slowly, barely an inch at a time, pressed his cock inside.

Tiergan's body shivered as he took Levi's cock. Levi exhaled slowly.

"Go on," Tiergan said.

"I..." Levi swallowed. "It's been a long time for me, too. I'm not going to last long."

Tiergan laughed. As he did, Levi pushed more of himself inside. The heat was almost too intense; it was so tight and enveloping, hugging his shaft with exquisite softness.

Levi started a slow, lazy rhythm, but within seconds, Tiergan rocked against him and Levi gave up his control. He thrust deep inside of Tiergan. Tiergan's sphincter spasmed and vibrated as the base of Levi's cock jammed him open, forcing into his tight anus. Tiergan cried out at the sensation. His entire body trembled with need.

Levi wrapped his hand around Tiergan's cock and pumped him in rhythm with his deep strokes.

Tilting his pelvis upward, Tiergan met his thrusts, and they both moaned at the fullness. Tiergan locked his ankles behind Levi's back and used his heels to drive him deeper, setting a faster pace.

"Fuck me harder," Tiergan moaned.

"Say that again," Levi pounded into him.

"Fuck...me....harder!" Tiergan sucked in a huge breath of air as Levi plunged deeply inside, angling his cock to brush Tiergan's prostate, his balls slapping against Tiergan's spread cheeks.

Levi gripped Tiergan's hips and rammed into him, twisting his cock inside until white stars filled his vision, and he was overwhelmed with the sensation of pounding, consuming, claiming Tiergan as his. Levi was swallowed into a swirling orgasm, one that started and continued to burn through him with increasing strength, until he climaxed, his whole body shuddering, semen spurting from him, his wet heat filling Tiergan's ass. With only a few strokes of Tiergan's cock, Tiergan cried out and came as well, coating Levi's hand.

Levi slowly collapsed beside Tiergan, slipping from inside. He instantly regretted the loss of heat. They both breathed heavily, but Levi could hear Tiergan's heartbeat, slow and steady and strong.

Levi didn't intend to sleep. He had too many questions about Tiergan's last three months, too much to share about the new clinic, too much excitement. But the sweet smell

of him, musk and semen and sweat, nestled close, and the blanket Tiergan quickly threw over them, lulled Levi into a nap, his head pillowed on Tiergan's arm.

When Levi awoke, he had no idea how much time had passed. But Tiergan was sitting up, dressed in the clothes Levi had last seen him in back at the *Ishan Report* building. His shirt hung loose, showing the weight he had lost.

Tiergan looked over at Levi, eyes bright and happy. "Have a good nap?" he asked. The lilt in his voice was just too damned sexy.

Levi nodded. "Although you are probably more exhausted than I am."

Tiergan shrugged. "There's not much else to do but sleep when you're off duty," he explained. "Sleeping became my favorite pastime. I would close my eyes, think of fucking you, and everything would be better."

"Flatterer."

Tiergan sat beside Levi on the bed. Levi looked down and noticed his legs were sprawled open obscenely, his balls dangling on the blanket. Tiergan seemed to realize Levi's lewd position as well. He reached down and softly cupped Levi's scrotum. His grip was not a sexual overture -- more possessive, as if Tiergan were claiming him.

"What are you going to do now?" Tiergan asked him.

"Now, I'm going to take a shower, and then see what kind of food they keep stocked in these fancy private shuttles."

Tiergan smiled, but there was a distance in his eyes again, a wariness, that Levi didn't like. "No. I mean...after Earth, when we're back on Ishan. Will you still work for the *Ishan Report*?"

Levi shook his head. "The *Ishan Report* is currently a mess, thanks to Rowan's timely departure. Besides, I need a break from journalism. I was thinking of helping you start up the clinic. I figured you might need a volunteer, if you'll have me."

Tiergan placed his hand on Levi's chest. "Have you? Of course! Nothing would make me happier." The distance between them disappeared. Tiergan kissed him, and Levi felt everything close and open, the life before he had Tiergan and the hope of life with him now, stretching ahead with thrilling possibility.

Outside, the coldness of space flitted by, but inside, here, now, everything was vivid, new, and, best of all, just beginning.

 THE END 

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Astrid Amara lives in Bellingham, Washington, with one man, two dogs, and countless mice. She served in the U.S. Peace Corps and works as a civil servant paid by your tax dollars. When she isn't working or writing, she is either riding her horse or sleeping.

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