

TERRAN INSURRECTION

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Tristan Matthews looked at his watch again in the dark, twisting shadows. Turning his wrist to catch the feeble light from the dim streetlight at the mouth of the alley, he cursed silently under his breath at the lateness of the hour. Where was Mert? He had told him he was on a tight schedule and did not have time to mess around! Damn it all to hell—now he was going to have to evade the militia because he was past curfew! He had half a mind to call off the whole thing. But he knew he wouldn't. Where else could he make a connection like this? It was not as if he could go up to just any street corner asking someone for what he wanted!

Tristan almost jumped out of his skin at the sound of breaking glass coming from his left, further down the alleyway, the noise so loud in the stillness it sounded like a bomb going off. His breath caught in his throat and he slipped backward a step into a deeper pool of inky blackness, trying to meld himself into the brick wall at his back. He glanced quickly to his right to reassure himself there was nothing blocking his path if he needed to run that way; the alley opening was still clear and the meager light beckoned him to safety. He could feel the rough and worn edges of the bricks abrading the skin of his shoulder blades through his thin windbreaker and he did not care, pressing even harder and praying to himself that Mert was the cause of the noise and not a patrol out looking for curfew violators. The initial fright over, he began hyperventilating, adrenaline pumping into his system and preparing him to fight. Or maybe to run—he wasn't sure yet. His bulging eyes strained to see anything in the darkness. The noise had emanated from deeper in the alley. The darkness absorbed the light from the streetlamp and not enough remained to cope with defining anybody—or anything—that was back there.

“Gotcha!” a voice hissed near his ear.

“Crap!” Tristan turned to his left and punched instinctively in the direction of the voice. He missed completely, his right hand completing an arc and slamming into the wall with a dull thud, followed by a low moan of pain from Tristan.

“You bastard, Mert,” Tristan raised his aching fist and licked his bleeding knuckles, “that wasn't funny!”

“Yes it was,” Mert laughed softly. “Keep your voice down, idiot. Someone will hear us. You got the money?”

“Yeah, I got it,” Tristan's truculent voice held a sharp edge of anger. Now that he knew where Mert was, he was able to make out his features in the shadows. Mert stepped into the pale light and Tristan saw he was wearing the same ripped and worn clothes as the last time they had met. That had been a week ago. From the smell, the clothes had not been washed since then either. Draped over Mert's stocky frame was an old leather trench coat that could get him camp time if a Skag caught him wearing it. Killing animals and wearing their skins was taboo. Mert's

fetid breath smelled distinctly of meat, another action that could land him in trouble. Tristan glared at Mert, taking in his greasy black hair and scruffy appearance.

“Don’t you ever wash anything?” Tristan sniffed in Mert’s direction.

“What’s it to you? Besides, this coat is genuine leather and you are not supposed to wash it. It would ruin it or something—my old man told me that.”

“Maybe not, but what about the rest of your clothes? Or yourself? Ever heard of a shower before?” Tristan pinched his nose for a second, and then continued his revenge. “See, there are these metal things that stick out of the wall, usually in a bathroom, and the amazing thing is you turn these little knobs and—”

“Cut the crap,” Mert’s angry whisper intruded, “this isn’t a hygiene class. You want your stuff or not?”

“Yeah, I want it. But I should get a discount—you were late and now I have to steer clear of the Skags on my way home.”

“You? I thought your old man was a Skag lover—you can go anywhere and not get in trouble,” Mert smiled cruelly when he saw Tristan wince. “Don’t you have like a free pass or something since daddy works for them?”

Mert realized he had gone too far with the father thing when Tristan’s face hardened and his body tensed. The realization came too late and before he could say anything else, Tristan had him by the lapels of his coat, choking off his breath and voice as he shoved him into the wall. Tristan’s light blue eyes darkened in anger. The muscles on Tristan’s forearms bulged and Mert felt himself inching up the wall until his feet were dangling free of the ground. Lack of oxygen caused him to see red spots exploding in his vision and he heard Tristan’s voice as if it was coming from a tunnel.

“Take that back, Mert,” Tristan’s voice was deeper and more menacing—Mert knew he was in trouble. “Take it back, or so help me God, I’ll—”

Unable to speak, Mert pounded his hands frantically on Tristan’s shoulders. Tristan’s anger subsided when he noticed Mert’s flailing taper off and he realized he was killing him. He dropped Mert and stepped back, taking deep breaths to calm down. He watched the teenager fall to his knees in the alley, gasping and retching. Color was slowly returning to Mert’s face and he was beginning to breathe easier. Tristan felt relief—he had to learn to control his anger! Mert may be a weasel, but at least he was ready to help in the fight against the Skagorians. Not like the majority of Earth’s surviving people, who were willing to sit idly by, like sheep in a pen, as the Skags went about ruling the planet.

“I’m sorry, Mert,” Tristan knelt next to him and tried to put a hand on his shoulder. Mert jerked his shoulder away and coughed a couple of times.

“You almost killed me, asshole,” Mert’s raspy voice accused. He let it go at that, fearing Tristan might go off again. He continued his deep breathing and examined Tristan for signs of more violence. For a long-distance runner barely six feet tall and not that muscled, Tristan sure had some power! Mert outweighed Tristan by a good 30 pounds and they were almost the same

height, but Tristan made up for it in sheer will power. Mert should have known better. He'd seen Tristan in action once before and knew what he could be like when he was angry—good thing he was normally so easy going. Deciding it was mostly his fault and he got what he deserved, Mert put out an olive branch.

“Jerk,” Mert smiled tentatively.

“Yeah,” Tristan smiled back and laid a hand on Mert's shoulder. This time Mert allowed it to stay. “I am a jerk. You okay?”

“I'll live. I'm sorry for that crack about your dad.”

“It's okay. I know you didn't mean...”

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