

Inside, a long shining table boasted baskets and platters of food. Wren, Andros and Tatom gaped. Karma swept a graceful hand slowly toward the table. “Once I show you where your seats are, you’re welcome to the buffet.”

The escort locked eyes with Dyvah—the other three were all struggling visibly with the task of ripping their eyes away from the fragrant table. Dyvah nodded, and after the briefest pause they continued to follow Karma to a circular booth in one corner of the ornate, glittering room. On the surface of the polished tabletop a small placard read: ANDROS D’ORION AND GUESTS.

“This is your booth for the evening. When the show starts the fourth wall will recede and you’ll be in direct view of the stage.” Karma glanced at her tablet. “The interview is in thirty minutes, so eat quickly. Some helpers will be in to show you the way.”

“Thirty minutes,” Andros repeated.

“Good! Which of your guests will you take with you?” Karma asked. She looked at Wren, glittering and coiffed, in expectation.

“Tatom,” Andros placed a hand on Tatom’s shoulder.

Karma frowned, clearly questioning his judgment. “Oh. Well, clock’s ticking.” She pointed at her tablet and fluttered off with small, rapid steps.

Wren looked across the luxe, carpeted room at the enticing buffet. “We have thirty minutes to kill . . .”

“It wouldn’t hurt,” Tatom agreed.

“It would be stranger if we *didn’t* eat something,” Andros pointed out.

“Our last meal,” Dyvah said without thinking.

Andros, Wren, and Tatom all turned to look at her, surprised.

They all burst out laughing.

Wren leaned on Andros, her laughter tinkling and charming. Andros bent forward, hands on knees, and looked up at Tatom with streaming eyes. Tatom issued crude guffaws that Dyvah wasn’t sure she had ever heard from him before. She herself wheezed out giggles between raspy attempts for air.

After several seconds they quieted themselves, until the judgmental frowns from two elderly women under a holo chandelier sent them into renewed frenzy. Glowering guests of unknown refinement muttered among themselves.

“Stop,” Wren hissed, tittering. “Stop . . . before we . . . draw . . . too much attention.” She clutched her sides.

“I’m trying,” Andros said, wiping his eyes.

“Last . . . meal . . .” Tatom chortled.

“It’s not even funny,” Dyvah moaned, her chin quivering.

After marshaling an impressive amount of self-discipline, the four passed through the buffet, savoring the smells and appearance of each dish.

They agreed that Andros should go first, since he had made the feast possible. They watched with exquisite restraint as Andros took a millennium selecting a bread roll. At last he wrapped a large hand around a dark, yeasty-smelling roll with small white and black seeds, and placed it with great care in the center of his

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plate before moving forward two steps to the next brightly illuminated dish.

Wren considered for only a moment before choosing a light tan, fluffy roll with a dusting of flour.

Tatom chose a round, golden bun and brought it up to his nose. He inhaled deeply, then turned to Dyvah with a euphoric look on his face. "It smells sour! And it's *warm*."

"It *is* sour," Dyvah whispered, smiling. "And salty." She selected one of the same, knowing already that the outside would be crispy and the inside would be soft.

"Green beans!" Andros jabbed a rigid finger toward a glowing tray of cooked green beans with what appeared to be melting butter.

There were roasted potatoes with mushroom gravy, sliced pan-fried soy loaf, wild rice and fresh tomatoes, boiled eggs, and a shortcake with sweet, pink strawberry frosting topped with white strawberries that her father had only last season successfully grown. Dyvah, Andros, Wren, and Tatom carried their heaping plates back to their VIP booth, where they set themselves to the solemn litany of eating.

The first time Dyvah had seen such a feast, she had felt unworthy. The idea that she alone should enjoy such a wealth of food when those she cared about starved had been too horrible to accept.

Now, in the company of her friends, as she prepared to risk everything, she ate with relish. The notes of garden vegetables, ripe grains, spices, and sugar flooded her senses. She just wished she could have shared it with Rey, who even now sat in a cell somewhere.

"Are you crying?" Wren asked, breaking the silence.

Dyvah's eyes—closed while savoring the shortcake with her father's strawberries—fluttered open to see who was crying, but found instead that everyone was looking at her.

She touched her cheeks. "Oh."

Before she could explain—what exactly?—two men in tight, black jumpsuits arrived at their booth. "Andros D'Orion?"

Andros quickly shoveled a last forkful of cake into his mouth and nodded.

"We're here to escort you to the interview. Right this way." The taller of the two helpers gestured toward the door.

Andros and Tatom both rose and gave Dyvah and Wren meaningful glances.

"Good luck," Dyvah said.

"You too," Tatom agreed.

"Andros!" Wren stood up. "Kiss me goodbye."

Andros lifted just one eyebrow, looking smoother than Dyvah would have believed had she not seen it, then leaned forward and caressed Wren's mouth with his own. He wrapped a large hand—no longer clumsy—around the nape of Wren's neck as he deepened the kiss.

Wren made the softest of sighs when the kiss ended. Her eyes were lidded and

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Dyvah turned, recognizing the voice a second before laying her sight on the lovely oval face with frank eyes.

“Emily!” Dyvah said, trying not to sound as surprised as she was.

Wren needed no prompting. “Yes, we’re with Emily Brosi’s party. And I must say, I had expected to be treated a little bit better.”

Emily stood just outside the door of one of the suites, trailing pampered teenage girls with small pink plates holding cherry-laden cupcakes. Some of the girls in Emily’s entourage glanced at each other with varying degrees of shock and delight at this unexpected turn in their backstage tour, but Emily stared straight forward at the guard, her pursed lips summoning a strong resemblance to her mother.

The guard, once more frowning, growled, “Best keep them in your suite. They don’t have the right access badges.” He lumbered away, neutralized, at least for the time being, by the Brosi name.

Emily’s eyes locked on to Dyvah’s as she approached, leaving her friends to whisper about the salacious event. “I don’t know what that was all about, but it occurs to me maybe the Stars sent me. Now, what are we up to?”

“Breaking rules,” Dyvah said, grinning.

“Just wonderful,” Emily said, smirking, then to Wren, “Watch out for this one.”

As soon as Emily returned to her suite, Dyvah and Wren jogged, crouching, toward their destination.

The control room was under the operation of the Fleet Entertainment Guild, or FEG, who broadcasted independently of any single ship within the fleet. Since the Javier concert was an FEG production, only guild members were permitted within the control room. Cara had explained she wasn’t linked to the control room, nor the broadcast signal that would send the concert fleet-wide. She could open the door for Wren and Dyvah, but then they were on their own.

“Cara?” Wren asked when they reached the badge scanner.

“You have three minutes and sixteen seconds before the Broadcast Crew is permitted to arrive,” Cara said. The door to the control room opened.

Wren retrieved the small drive from her pocket and sat at the nearest uplink station. Dyvah had gotten them here, now it was all in Wren’s hands. She inserted the drive, and her fingers flew across the command panel, following the steps she had memorized, while Dyvah kept watch.

Wren brought her hand down demonstratively upon her final tap, then looked around, calling, “Cara?”

“Uplink complete,” Cara reported, now inside the room with them. “My calculations indicate you should run.”

Wren and Dyvah stared at each other for a fraction of a second, alarmed, before heeding Cara’s blunt, if sound, advice.



Dyvah and Wren arrived back at the VIP area huffing. Anticipating some pushback from the door guard, Dyvah had rehearsed lines in her mind during their

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clumsy gait as she fought to stay conscious enough to decide what to do.

She cast about for ideas, but couldn't think of any way out of her cell and situation. She closed her eyes, too weary to resist, the reassuring sound of an ocean ebbing in her ears.

A loud clank rattled through the holding area beyond her cell. Angry voices, muted by the closed door but not inaudible, erupted.

"Do it again and I'll break your leg!" It was Calf-man, breathing heavily as he heaved something forward.

Judging by the emphatic retort, that something was Wren Gallo.

"Fine! Break my leg and I'll bring you up on violations of the Citizens Holding Code! Clause four, subsection III states that any use of excessive force for the purpose of diffusing non-violent resistance shall be—"

The clap of a heavy slap against skin stopped Wren mid-sentence. Dyvah leapt up, head careening, and rushed to the small plastech window in her cell door. She saw the back of Calf-man. Protruding from his hands, two slender booted feet shook.

"What did you do that for?" Armpit-man cried.

"I didn't do anything," Calf-man said with meaningful inflection.

Armpit-man harrumphed but said nothing further.

Dyvah watched as the two guards hauled Wren, whose red face was furious and terrified at once, to a cell across from Dyvah's. They swung her back and forth between them and then released her just as she came to the height of a cellward arc. She flew like a dolly into the hard room. Dyvah caught a glimpse of her curling up into the fetal position before Calf-man shut the door and sauntered away. Armpit-man remained for a moment, looking through Wren's cell window, and then he too walked away.

"Wren?" Dyvah called, hoping the sound would find her friend and reassure her. But if Wren heard, she didn't reply. Dyvah listened but picked up only an occasional broken sobbing.

A few minutes later the guards returned. Dyvah remained at her window despite her increasingly trembling legs. Her strength wouldn't last much longer, but she needed to see who, if anyone, the guards brought this time.

Unfortunately, the guards turned down an adjacent corridor. She made out the large, limping carriage of a man being led, not carried.

That'll be Andros.

Dyvah watched until the guards and their captive were out of sight, then collapsed onto her bunk. She was nauseated, dizzy, parched, and sore everywhere. It was a terrible idea to touch her face—she knew that—but raised a tentative hand to her mouth anyway, gasping.

Her fingers brushed over cuts, swollen skin and something half-dried and sticky and tinny smelling.

Blood.

As she ran her hands over the ruined landscape, stars of hot pain shot out from

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