

May 18

The last 24 hours have been horrific. I keep telling myself, at least we got Candy back. But that's not true, is it? We got what used to be Candy back. Whatever this thing is she's become ... becoming ... oh fuck, I don't know.

My portable com went off yesterday, and I fell on it like a hyena on a zebra carcass. All I wanted was to hear Oses or Betra saying they'd found her safe and sound. I thought my heart would explode with gratitude when the voice on the other end said, "Shalia, it's Candy."

I flat-out screamed in my relief, even though the rough voice sounded little like my friend's. "Candy! Oh my God! Tell me you're okay!"

"I'm fine. I need you to come to me though. And I need you to come alone this time."

That should have raised some warning flags, but I was too over the moon to know she was okay. "Of course I'll come! Where are you? What the hell is going on?"

"Everything will be clear once I can talk to you face to face. I'll give you directions to where you're going, but don't let anybody know you're coming to see me, Shalia. I mean that. I will not be responsible for what happens if someone else shows up."

That got through my giddy sense of relief. "Not responsible? Candy, what do you mean?" My stomach dropped to remember her as I'd last seen her – not the happy Candy I knew. Dressed in drab, ill-fitting clothes and sitting in the dark. Holy shit, was she depressed? Was she suicidal?

"Listen," I said in my most caring tone. "Listen, okay? Whatever is going on, we can get through this. I'm going to help you, Candy. I love you, you know that, right?"

"Just come to me, Shalia. I need you to get here right now."

"All right." I slid my feet into the slip-on shoes I kept near my door. "I'm ready to go. Which way am I heading?"

"Go to the in-house transport that we use to get to the shuttle bay. I'll let you know where to go once you're there."

I admit going to Candy when she was acting so strange was idiotic. Even knowing what I do now, I still would have gone to her though. She was – she *is* my friend. I know she would never hurt me.

I got in the elevator-like transport that not only went up and down between levels, but could also move sideways to access most of the ship. At the time, I thought it could get anywhere in the vessel. I was about to learn differently.

I reached the shuttle bay with its endless rows of escape shuttles. From there, Candy directed me to a far wall. That's where I discovered vertical tunnel-like tubes that ran down into harder-to-access areas of the ship, deep into the *Pussy Porter's* guts. She cautioned me again to not let anyone see me roaming about. It wasn't that hard to keep hidden given how tightly the floor was packed with the small escape

shuttles. Crewmembers were around, but since no one was evacuating, the place wasn't exactly a beehive of activity. I reached the tube accesses without being seen.

"Is this a restricted area?" I whispered as I stared at the big red hieroglyphics posted over each tube. There were about half a dozen. I didn't like the looks of the slender metal ladders within that would take me to only the prophets knew where.

"Yes. So be careful to not let anyone catch you."

"Fuck," I whispered. I did not want to climb into the dim confines of that tube. I really didn't want Captain Woltref, Oses, or Betra pissed off at me. We Earther gals get a lot of leeway with the Kalquorians when we screw up, but this felt like I was pushing my luck. After all, my people were at war with Kalquor not so long ago. I had the uncomfortable vision of being interrogated for potential sabotage. I'd met Oses' second before, the man in charge of the ship's security while my Nobek sweetie was on leave. Nobek Ebnad is a decent enough guy, but he wears an air of ruthlessness like Candy wore perfume before Ama and Mihi asked her to not spray every inch of her body. The weapons subcommander is flat-out homosexual. While respectful of women, Ebnad does not have the same need to treat us like the Second Coming. I did not want to be on his bad side.

Yet I needed to get to Candy. Something had gone terribly wrong with my friend. There was nothing more important at that moment.

"Which tube?" I asked, trying not to notice how squeamish climbing into one of those things was making me. I'd never thought of myself as particularly claustrophobic, but it looked awful tight. I had to remind myself that it must be big enough for huge Kalquorian bodies.

"The one on the far right." When I mistakenly move the wrong way, Candy's uncharacteristically gruff voice showed a trace of her old humor. "Your other right."

I shook my head at myself and then drew up short. "Wait. You can see me?"

"I'm near a computer portal. I've been monitoring you through ship's sensors for the last hour."

"You can do that? Without security clearance or anything?"

"Get moving, Shalia. Someone's approaching your position. If they find you, that could endanger our objective."

What objective? I wanted to ask, but I didn't want to get caught. In fact, the idea of being found by one of the crew had me feeling cornered. I actually had a moment where I thought about how I'd have to fight my way out of the bay if discovered. Candy's crazy situation was making me crazy too.

I reached into the tube, grasping a ladder rung with white-knuckled hands. In a hurry now, I was able to put my nerves on hold as I stepped onto a lower rung. "Up or down?" I asked.

"Down. Quickly, Shalia."

I moved, having to stretch way down with my leg to find the next rung. The ladder was made for a great big long-legged Kalquorian, not much smaller Shalia. It didn't help that my stomach, while not huge yet, still wanted to get in the way of my progress.

Yet I feared getting caught, so I moved fast. Probably too fast. I shudder now to think of how foolhardy I'd been to descend into that dimly-lit space where the bottom yawned so far below me.

Candy's voice was a tinny beacon of sound coming from the com on my belt. "Terrific. Go down three levels and then take the conduit to your right."

"My right or my other right?" I joked, trying to lighten the mood a little. My heart pounded from nearly being caught and the exertion of rushing down the ladder. The baby kicked, as if to punish me for being so stupid as to take on this adventure.

Candy didn't respond. My arms and legs were beginning to ache from the long stretching it took to descend the ladder when I got to the level she'd directed me to.

"There," her voice breathed with satisfaction. "Not far now, Shalia. Take the conduit until I tell you to stop."

The narrow passage I found myself in was a kaleidoscope of blinking lights, control panels, and piping. There were small sections of wall here and there that were utterly blank; dull gray surfaces with nothing to look at. The ship hummed contentedly all around me. I fancied this was its heartbeat, though I knew I was nowhere near the *Pussy Porter's* engines.

I walked carefully, suspicious of the power I felt vibrating the air. I was afraid to touch anything, though I doubted I would be electrocuted or harmed. The whole situation had me paranoid by that point.

I must have traveled 100 feet or so when Candy's voice called from my com, "Stop."

As I halted, one of the blank sections of wall opened inward, showing me a darkened space beyond. A cool blast of air wafted over me, and I shivered.

"Go in." Candy sounded eager now.

"Where is this place?" I asked, reluctant to enter the area where the light was so dim I couldn't see two feet beyond the opening.

"It's the bulkhead area next to the ship's hull. Come on. You're almost with me."

I had a moment of bizarrely wishing for my percussion blaster. Don't ask me why; I don't know. I just had a bad feeling about going into that quiet, dead space where Candy wanted me. The urge passed quickly and I stepped through the door.

"Turn right and straight on. I'm just a few yards away now."

I thought I could hear Candy's voice echoing slightly in the dimness. I hurried to find her.

The space between the hull and the bulkhead wasn't totally dark. Some wall panels glowed, probably plenty for sensitive Kalquorian eyes to see by. I passed a lit computer interface that cast an eerie green glow. Every ten feet or so, I passed beneath supportive struts that ran from the floor to arch across the ceiling.

I was nearing one of these struts when Candy's voice came from in front of me instead of from my com. "Stop there, Shalia. Don't come any closer – at least not yet."

I halted, still concerned by how Candy didn't sound much like Candy. Now that I had found her, caution showed up. "Are you okay? Tell me the truth."

"I'm fine. What about you? How are you feeling?"

There seemed to be some undercurrent to her question. It was as if she was asking about something beyond my general health and well-being.

A truthful answer would have included phrases like: *scared shitless, angry, freaked out* ... but I didn't want Candy to run away again. So I tempered my reply a little.

"I've been worried sick about you, Candy. We all have. The Kalquorians are turning the ship upside down trying to find you. What is going on?"

"You don't know." Her sigh was both concerned and frustrated. "Why is it not working with you?"

Her reply had me more flummoxed than ever. "Hey, I'm perfectly willing to work with you on whatever the problem is. Just tell me what I've done wrong – what any of us have done wrong. We'll fix it. I promise."

"You just need more time. Maybe there was damage through the years. Maybe hibernation sickness of some kind. I can wait for a little while longer. As long as we can stay hidden, the objective will be achieved."

It was like talking to someone who spoke another language. "What is this objective? This is the second time you've mentioned it. And why won't you come out where I can see you?"

I was on the brink of charging forward, of yanking Candy out from behind the strut she hid behind, of demanding answers. I thought maybe she'd gone insane. I was sure of it, in fact. I wanted to shake the crazy right out of her.

"Yes, you should see. It might help. It might hurry things along if you recognize me."

With that, Candy stepped out from behind the strut, out into the dim excuse for light. All my questions died in my throat when she came into view, replaced by new questions. And horror. A whole lot of horror.

Candy had taken off the gloves and coat I'd last seen her in. She wore one of her frilly tank tops and a short skirt despite the chill in the space next to the hull. She seemed unmindful of the cold that had my body covered in gooseflesh.

Even in the soft light, I could see gray plating over the entirety of her left arm and covering most of her chest and neck. Candy wore some sort of crazy armor. Tubes, fluorescent green in the light of the nearby computer panel, snaked from wrist to elbow and from elbow to shoulder.

I knew the armor of Earth's now extinct ground troops as well as the protective gear that our police forces had worn. Kalquorian armor was built into their uniforms. What Candy wore bore no resemblance to any of that stuff. It was alien armor, the likes of which I had never seen. And yet it seemed familiar for some reason. I had a flash of déjà vu that came and went before I had an adequate grasp on the memory.