

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. Daria followed her mother to the left into a long corridor. It was a weird building. Cold and colourless. A simple and functional building with no windows. Just light. Kind of. As if the walls were radiating. Strange.

“We are deep under the earth aren’t we?” she asked.

“Yes.”

A mild buzz to the right. Out of a side door came a small robot. In front of him hovered a tray. Daria’s pace eased as she turned her head to the robot. Why was the tray hovering?!

“Where are you taking me?” she asked her mother when she caught up with her.

“To the medical lab. We need you close to him.”

“Aha.”

A huge door opened up a few yards in front of them. A large man came out. And another. And another. And a fourth one. Daria stood there, glued to the spot, and stared at them in disbelief. Quadruplets?! The four men went past her without so much as looking at her.

“Muum?” She suddenly felt creepy. “They...” Endla stopped at the door and looked at Daria. “I will explain later. Come on now, this is the entrance to the lab.”

Precariously, she followed her mother and stopped again as soon as she was standing inside. Infirmary – she got that. But hovering stretchers, holographic images everywhere that made no sense and doctors and nurses working in absolute silence? A few steps in front of her was Passio, still on the stretcher, surrounded by people leaning over him, holding him down while his body seemed to be out of control with spastic cramps.

“Oh my God, Passio!” She forgot about her own insecurity and ran towards him.

“Wait!” her mother yelled.

Passio rose up again with all his strength. This time, the people around him weren’t able to hold him down on the stretcher. The sheet previously covering his body slid down and an arm reached out to toss a tool held by one of the female doctors out of her hand. Furred claws were reaching out, uncontrolled, shredding the sheet into bits. His bare chest moved upwards. He was not naked, but covered in golden-brown fur. His head twitched and a silent, painful scream came out of his lungs. Foamy saliva was dripping down his inch-and-a-half-long fangs, running over his yellow-brown lips and furry chin. His broad nose was vibrating and a shimmering white was all that was left of his steel-blue eyes.

Fur everywhere.

Pelt.

Fangs.

Claws.

Animal.

Daria tumbled backwards and screamed. The female doctor looked at her impassively. “Endla, calm her down. I need her here and I need her fast!”

“Get it together, Daria! Stop screaming!” Her mother grabbed her by her shoulders and shook her hard. “Daria!”

No reaction. She was trapped in between the world of dreams and reality unable to comprehend what was happening. She screamed and screamed and....

“Honey, I hate to do this but,” Endla slapped her hard in the face.

The pain on her cheek seemed to enter into Daria’s mind immediately. She went silent, still feeling shocked. “Daria, you hear me? Stop screaming! We need you. He needs your help!”

Daria breathed heavily, her sight locked onto Passio. She could not believe nor realize what she saw in front of her. “What? What is he?” She tried to move her eyes away from him and look at her mother.

“A Katee’Lhi. A creature from a different planet, from a galaxy far away.”

“An alien?” Daria struggled with speech.

“If you look at it that way, yes. But he is harmless. He would never do anything to you. Don’t let his appearance frighten you. Remember? Never judge a book by its cover.”

She stroked Daria’s arm. “He likes you. He needs you. Go to him. Please.”

“To him?” she was panicking. “To HIM? I can’t touch THAT.”

Endla looked at her seriously. “He is still the same man you met. He just looks a little different. It is only his appearance that has changed. His feelings are still the same. You understand?”

“His feelings?” Did her mother mean that this hairy thing over there would be in love with her? That an alien was in love with her? Daria started to shake uncontrollably and she forced herself to look into his direction again.

The female doctor looked at her. “Please come over here, Daria.”

“Why?”

“Because there seems to be an emotional bond between the two of you. He needs something familiar, something he knows, so he can calm down.”

“And what am I supposed to do?”

“He needs your scent.”

“My scent?”

The doctor rolled her eyes. “He is a Katee’Lhi. His emotions are coupled to scents. His last action, while he was aware of what he was doing, was to get you and himself into safety. Inside the car he was able to smell you, so everything was fine there. Now your scent has disappeared and the last remaining working bit of his mind is telling him that you are gone, not safe. Even with him being in this state, he still wants to run away and escape to find you and to protect you. He will only calm down once he can smell you again. Now would you PLEASE come over here?”

“Oh shit!”

She tried to seek help from her mother, but Endla only looked at her pleadingly. "Please go to him. He will not hurt you. Please." She took Daria's hand and slowly moved her to the stretcher.

Reluctantly, she put one foot in front of the other. She walked towards the doctor, at the same time trying to stay as far away from Passio as she could.

"I know you are afraid", the other woman said, "But I want you to be strong now. Just stand beside him. I don't think you need to touch him."

Slowly, she followed her request and looked at Passio. He was lying on the table, shaking, twisted, his eyes still turned inside the sockets, his mouth half opened. His long fangs were penetrating his lower lip and left bloody cuts on it.

"We know the drug that he was consuming and will give him the antidote in a minute."

Daria was trying to understand what was happening around her and what the doctor said to her. She closed her eyes. She needed to concentrate and that was only possible when she was not looking at him.

"His body reacts in a different way to the drug than that of a human. Far more intensely. We have to give him a strong dose of the antidote, but I am afraid it will take a while until it kicks in. We have to help him in the meantime to get through it, so he won't hurt himself."

Daria observed the men as they tried to hold him down when he was battered by cramps and pains again. The doctor seemed to be right about him being able to hurt himself. He almost fell off the table a second ago, as if he was not aware at all of where he was. She saw his muscles contracting, trying to fight the hands that were forcing him down.

Passio moaned loudly and suddenly she heard her name whispered silently. She looked over the doctor's shoulder. He looked at her, right into her eyes. A claw slowly reached out for her; then he collapsed again. One of the monitors was starting to beep rapidly.

"We have a problem with his heart rate", one of the nurses shouted, looking at the holographic monitor in the air. Suddenly words were exchanged back and forth in what seemed to be a heated conversation in a different language. From an adjacent room another doctor entered with something like a syringe for an injection. Daria saw how the doctor connected the syringe to Passio's bracelet, injecting some liquid into it. Then she looked at her and explained: "The antidote and a sedative. I hope it will work fast, because his heart will not be able to cope with the distress for much longer." She paused for a second. "Maybe you could help us even more if you don't mind?"

"You mean touch him?" Daria guessed.

The doctor nodded. "I am aware that you have not seen him in his true form before, but I urge you to set your fears aside and take his hand. He needs you."

Daria froze at the thought. "I cannot do this. I can't."

"Please, Daria! I know you can do this." Her mother stood in front of her, with a begging look on her face, the same look she saw in the doctor's eyes.

Daria sighed and looked back at Passio, urging herself: *‘You knew he was different. You wanted him to be different and understand you in a way no one else would. You have father’s confirmation that he is different. Your father trusts him. Will I dare question father’s actions? Father knows what he does... I will help Passio... I have no fear... I’m not afraid of father either.’*

She took a deep breath and moved back towards Passio. Step by step. His eyes were closed again and his hands held on tight to the sheets underneath him. Endla was standing beside her. Daria forced herself to observe Passio’s body. He had the same height and build as before, but there was fur everywhere instead of skin. His facial features were completely different and he had fangs like a lion. Exactly like a lion! He reminded her of the beasts in the zoo, looking at the golden-brown mane surrounding his face. But he had arms, hands and legs like a normal human. She was supposed to take his hand to calm him down. Daria reached out, but could not get herself to touch him, hovering her hand just a few inches above his. She swallowed. Should she really do this?

Endla looked at her insistently, but took Daria’s hand then and placed it slowly on top of Passio’s. “Have faith. He will not hurt you and you can truly help him.”

Daria twitched when her fingertips touched his soft fur, but her mother did not stop. She pushed her hand softly onto his. Daria felt the heat radiating from his body. It felt like he had a high fever. She felt how his tendons contracted when another seizure hit him. When it was over, he rolled onto his side, squirming in pain. Scared to death, she noticed how her lower arm was only a few inches away from his sharp fangs, noticing his nostrils lifting and descending, how he suddenly inhaled deeply again and again.

“He can smell you”, Endla said beside her. “Stay like this.”