

## Chapter 3: The Mutant and the Monster

It was a long moment, then several, then a minute, then three, time ticked a bit as In-ka processed. Sergals had a bit of a reputation to say the least. To say a bit more: they had a reputation for being violent cannibalistic rape and murder machines. To say EVEN MORE: this world's nations were mostly founded, at least originally by this or that species: the wolf packs, lion prides, etc. The larger they all grew and more powerful they had to interact, peacefully or violently. Some were more separatist preferring to segregate, others more open to interaction and eventually integration. Interestingly the more warlike were often the first to integrate as they conquered areas with the other species causing automatic diversity, though not necessarily equality, in their populations. Sergals were one of the most separated races and hence empires. Unlike many others they originated on a smaller fractured continent called 'Tal', but were also lucky in that they were the only race to evolve on their continent, or at least the only one that survived.

In the past when conquests were common they had gained quite a name for themselves in their raids of the nearby main continents where the other races evolved. Piracy was common alongside more proper attempts at conquest, and minimal if any peaceful trade. The raids involved the theft of goods and of people who would be taken back to Tal to be put to whatever use their captors intended. Behavior like that wasn't wholly unheard of in the time period in question but coupled with the iron curtain of secrecy regarding anything that took place on Tal and the rumors and myths abounded.

These notions would only be bolstered by the last of the major sergal conqueror types, a woman named 'Rain' who, as the legends said, murdered most of her home city personally and formed a gang out of the remaining. She then used this gang to take more local territory catching Tal lords off guard as she went. Eventually she was both general of all the armies of Tal and Empress as well, having murdered or enslaved any who wouldn't serve her. Not trusting anyone else, she took her brother as a husband and used him to continue her line back home as her armies spread outwards to the other continents.

Many believe that the only reason she stopped was that the damage she had caused to the economy of Tal, not to mention a noticeable population decrease, left her unable to field a strong enough force to go on the global conquest she desired. Rain's iron grip on her country and any info about it, meant that outsiders had little to no knowledge about what actually went on during her reign, or even when exactly she died. Things had been far more peaceful since her rule, and relations had improved considerably, but Tal was still very closed off to visitors, preferring to use their conquered territories on the other continents to do business with the outside world, even in those areas there were few non sergals and few sergals anywhere else. Kate was certainly an oddity in these parts.

"You're.. a... r-really?" In-ka finally stammered out, suddenly more aware of Kate's clawed hand on her shoulder than she was before.

"yes really." Kate said and sighed before continuing, "Most of those rumors are totally untrue, though getting people to believe me that they are untrue is hard enough."

"Most?"

"Ya." Kate said with an exhale, then after a pause, "Most". Kate seemed to notice at this point that she still had her hand on In-Ka's shoulder and finally released it, somehow the release of the claws sent

almost as much of a shudder down In-ka's spine as they had causes when they gripped on in the first place.

Once her shoulder was free In-ka let out a long breath she hadn't realized she was holding and tried to will her bounding heart rate to calm down. Was tried to find the words to ask which rumors were actually true but also didn't really want to know the answer to that so once again found herself stuck in a pause, This time though Kate would be the one to break the silence.

"Do you want me to go away?" Kate asked, and In-ka could hear sadness in her voice as she started to stand up.

In-ka was suddenly gripped by an unusual impulse, the impulse was much stronger than she would have normally expected from the shy and largely passive wolf. She had assumed her reactions to Kate's clawed hand on her shoulder had been fear. It would have made perfect sense of course given what In-ka had been told about the mysterious sergal empire on Tal, and Kate's confirmation that only 'most' rumors were false. However if it HAD been fear then Kate leaving should have been a relief, but instead it sent In-ka's stomach into a knot almost as tight as it had been the day the track star had tried to force himself on her, she suddenly just knew that she couldn't let Kate leave, all the rumors and history implying that she was a monster didn't matter in that second and a second was enough for the most assertive outburst she had ever had to flow out. In-ka bolted her feet in an instant and shouted "NO!" At the top of her lungs.

It was now Kate's turn to feel taken aback. She almost stumbled taking a step back from the sudden outburst, "I-inky?" She asked.

"I uh.. I... I don't want you to go" In-ka stammered out, "S-sorry for yelling"

"Its fine" Kate said and slowly sat back down, "so uh.."

In-ka sat back down as well and wracked her brain to come up with a description of what she was feeling. Not finding much she decided to default to something that might be a quote from a children's cartoon, but it applied to this situation, "You're my friend. I don't care what your species is. I still want you to be my friend."

"Thanks" Kate said and smiled, In-ka couldn't see it but Kates tone still told her of her friend's reaction. "So did you have any questions?"

In truth In-ka had many questions, some mundane and some she didn't want to upset Kate by asking, but one floated to the top of her mind, "What do you look like. I.. I heard that sergals look pretty fierce."

"I uh. I guess I." Kate mumbled a bit finding words, "We're pretty angular I guess, I'm sorry I'm not sure how to describe how something looks to, well to you."

"Ya I suppose that's fair. The only way I can really get a good idea of how something looks is to touch it all over."

"I see" Kate said, then continued with something that might have been a half joke question, "Do you want to touch me all over?"

In-ka felt her heart rate go up again, "You mean, like touch your face, right?"

"Sure if that's how it works. Wherever you'd like"

In-ka knew she was glowing but had a hard time stamping it down this time for some reason, "I uh, I mean. Uh. Sure that. That would give me an Idea what you look like."

Kate sat facing In-ka and held still while In-ka slowly reached her hands forward and placed them on either side of Kate's muzzle. She slid her fingers up to the sides of Kate's nose and felt forward to the tip.

"You are fairly triangular" In-ka said sliding her hands back up the sides of Kate's face feeling the shape of it.

"A little bit yes." Kate said and closed her eyes as In-ka got to them.

"Certainly unusual, though nothing I'd describe as scary, though I guess scary 'looking' isn't me area of expertise" In-ka felt over Kates triangular face and head, her rear facing ears and her hair down the back of her head. As she felt Kate's ears she could have sworn the sergal let out a low rumbling murmur, but she didn't seem angry so she continued. Once In-ka's hands were running through Kate's hair and down the back of her neck the rumble got louder. "Kate?"

Kate made a noise instead of responding and it seemed the sergal was barely paying attention and was evidently enjoying having In-ka feel up her hair. Sliding her fingers lower she started to reclassify this as a 'mane' rather than hair. It didn't just come from her head and seems to be rooted all down her neck to upper back. The rumby noise Kate was making remained constant. Not wanting to be inappropriate and slide her hands too low she brought them back around to the front of Kate's neck and slid them up to her lower jaw. In-ka had noticed that Kate seemed to have a rather long neck. In fact almost a foot of the taller girl's height seemed to be right here. That implied that the rest of her frame wasn't quite so gargantuan, though being over six and a half feet tall was still quite tall even with the neck. Sliding her hand up along Kate's lower jaw she found it the same angular shape coming to a point before letting go and sitting back.

"Finished?" Kate asked.

"I think so" in-ka said, you're different but... interesting."

"You to, Inky" Kate said and reached out with both hands, placing them on either side of In-ka's face.

"ah, Kate?" In-ka asked, her pulse quickening again.

"Fair's fair"

"but you don't need to feel to see." In-ka protested.

"Fair's still fair." Kate continued to feel up In-ka's face. Sliding her hands up and down just like In-ka herself had done moments ago. The wolf shuddered and tried hard to remain silent though an unladylike moan was building in her throat. Kate wasn't so much exploring the shape of in-ka's face, she could see that just fine after all, she rather seemed to just be petting in-ka. Gently caressing and rubbing her head all over. "I wish you could see." Kate mused, "Your eyes and your glow is beautiful"

"I uh" In-ka got brighter, "Thanks, uh" She paused as Kate lifted her muzzle up to look more directly at her. "Kate what are you doing?"

"Taking a huge risk" Kate said simply

"What sort of risk?" In-ka asked feeling a bit nervous again all of a sudden.

"This one" Kate took a deep breath, "Do you want to feel me anywhere else? . . . GAH!!!"

Kate flinched back slamming her eyes shut as she was basically flash banged, minus the 'bang' part.