

Chapter 5

Kali woke early and sat admiring Sikio for a while, watching his middle rise and fall with each breath. The way his paunch spilt across the ground was a sight to behold. She looked him up and down and was just admiring his thighs when he woke. 'Good morning,' he said. 'What are you looking at?'

'You,' she said and playfully nipped his ear, 'and I like what I see.'

Sikio licked her muzzle in return. 'I like what I see too. Perhaps we can start to improve your eating habits today.'

'So you can make me in your own image?' Kali poked Sikio's tummy with a claw for emphasis.

'Exactly! However, before we get started I need to speak with your queen and ask to take over your hunting duties.'

Something occurred to Kali just then, hunting every day would be a rigorous affair and could damage his wonderful physique. 'I'd like it if you ate well too. After all, I don't want you to waste away.'

'I will do not worry about that.' Sikio yawned and stretched, his flanks quivered as he did.

Neema was still dozing when they approached, but she lifted her head and smiled. 'To what do I owe the pleasure?'

'We want to try an experiment,' Sikio said. 'I will need to take over Kali's hunting duties for a while. I hope that won't be too much of an issue after I proved myself yesterday.'

'An experiment, you say? I'm intrigued. What kind of experiment?'

'Well, nothing exciting. It's kind of between us,' Kali said, with a hint of anxiety clawing at the edges of her mind. Were they really doing this? She had not known that this was what she wanted until the last few days, and standing there now, talking to her queen...

'I get it, I'm just being nosy. As long as someone is filling your spot, I'm happy. But I don't want you going rusty, Kali. You're an important member of the hunt and I want you practising when you can.'

'I will,' she said.

'How long will this *experiment* take?'

'We are not sure, yet. Hopefully, it will not be long,' Sikio said.

'I see. Perhaps you should stay out of Ukuta's sight while we're out hunting, Kali. You know what he can be like.'

Kali agreed and as they left Kali said, 'I think we should find somewhere outside of the den if we want to avoid Ukuta's attention. Neema is easy going, Ukuta is less so.'

'That can work,' Sikio said. 'Do you have anywhere in mind? You know this country better than me.'

'I think I know somewhere.' Kali led Sikio down to the Kundi and then they walked upriver along its bank. 'It's not too far. I used to play there as a cub. I was not supposed to, though, Ukuta always fretted about crocodiles.'

They walked for about ten minutes, then turned off and up a smaller, dried-up stream. After a time they veered off and stopped at a rocky outcrop, not unlike the Sadaka den but much smaller. It was well hidden by foliage and the ground between the rocks was level and dry.

'This seems good,' Sikio said. 'We should get started right away.'

'Right now? Do you not want to rest for a bit first?' It was early in the morning but the sun was getting hot. The shade between the rocks looked inviting and lions, after all, generally spent most of their day lazing around.

'We do not want this to take any longer than necessary, even if we did not specify to your queen how long this will take.'

'I suppose you're right. So, how is this going to work? Will you hunt for me by yourself?'

'Yes, and we will try to get you to eat as much as possible, and every day like I suggested.'

'Every day,' Kali echoed. 'That's going to be weird.'

'I think that you will quickly get used to it.'

'Okay then, Sikio, I suppose I'm ready.'

'Very well,' he said and left to go hunting.

Kali found a spot in the shade and lay down, resting her head on her forepaws. It did not have the familiarity and comfort of the den, but it was a pleasant spot to be in. The heat of the morning made Kali drowsy. She started to nod off just as Sikio returned, dragging behind him a fresh and rather fat gemsbok. Sikio dropped it at her feet. 'We have picked a good time to start. The savannah is beginning to dry up but the prey is still well-fed.'

Kali looked at the gemsbok and puffed out her cheeks. 'I'm used to sharing meals like this with more than a few lions. It's going to be hard to finish this between us.'

Sikio grinned. 'I was rather hoping that you could manage this by yourself. Preferably in one sitting.'

'What!' There was no way that she could finish it by herself. 'Are you serious?'

'If it becomes too much for you, I can help. As I said, we will have to work on your capacity. Let us see how far you can get, for now, then we will see.'

Kali felt more than a little intimidated by the huge meal that lay before her. Even in times of famine, it would have been a difficult feast to get through. However, she had agreed to this and the more she thought about it, the more she was sure it was what she wanted. 'Well, here goes I guess.'

She tucked into the belly area of the gemsbok first. Its flesh was still warm and the meat soft. It was pleasant to eat and the fresh juices did much to enhance the flavour. She gorged herself, as lions do,

and Sikio nuzzled around her belly as it rounded out. Soon she began to feel stuffed as 50 lbs of meat weighed heavily in her belly, but she decided to press on as best she could. Eventually, each mouthful took a little longer to chew and swallow, and she began to pant heavily between each bite.

‘You are doing well,’ Sikio said. He licked her cheek. ‘Just keep eating.’

Kali swallowed a few more bites but had to stop. She could not remember the last time she had eaten so much in one sitting. Her belly was well-rounded and hung low to the ground, and the pressure inside was becoming uncomfortable. ‘I don’t think I can-’ she took a breath, ‘eat any more.’

‘Why don’t we take a short break and see how you feel in a little while?’ Sikio said.

‘That sounds good, but I don’t think I can eat another bite.’

She settled herself down on the ground and puffed her cheeks out. Sikio grinned at the curved mound of her middle. ‘I think that with a little persuasion, we can get a bit more food in here,’ he said. He placed his paws on her belly and began to knead and rub. It was taut and did not easily yield, but he gently worked his way through her fur, applying pressure in just the right spot-

Kali belched loudly. ‘Oh! Sorry about that.’

‘That is quite alright. Perhaps now you are ready for some more?’ he said, still rubbing her stomach.

The massage had helped release some pressure, but she still felt painfully full. ‘I’m not sure I can even get up.’

‘What if I bring the food to you, to make it easier? Just think of how fat you could get.’

‘You’re such a tease!’ She sighed. ‘Go on then, I’m sure I could fit in a few more bites.’

Sikio made his way over to the gemsbok and after some rummaging, he carried over a hunk of meat in his mouth. He leaned down and Kali took the meat from him. She chewed deliberately and had had to force herself to swallow. Sikio went back and forth a few more times, but at the last Kali groaned. ‘It’s starting to hurt.’

‘Then we will stop. You have done well.’ He went over to her middle and nuzzled it affectionately. ‘I think that you will fatten quickly.’

Kali smiled and rolled onto her back, groaning. ‘We have to do this every day?’

‘Yes, every day.’

Sikio rested his head lightly on her paunch and she shut her eyes. *Every day*, she thought to herself and chuckled. The motion made her stomach hurt and she sighed. ‘What is funny?’ Sikio said.

‘Nothing. I think I’m going to enjoy this.’