

Something huge loomed behind Kali.

'What are you doing? Ouch, stop that!'

'The fat one resists,' said a voice behind her. It moved away and edged around her and into her line of sight. At first, she failed to focus on the huge being that circled her. When it did come into focus, she immediately looked away in disgust. It resembled a huge bird of prey, yet it had no feathers or skin. 'Let us have our fun, fat one,' it said. 'We only want our fun.'

It came closer and she cringed away. 'Why does it resist?' it said to the other things around her.

'The beast was supposed to be accompanied, it was not expecting to face us alone,' said another blur, which came down from its dais and materialised into some kind long, lithe reptile. 'Tell us, beast, what would you have of us?'

'There have been no rains for months and my pride-,'

Loud wheezing interrupted Kali, and she realised that one of the things was laughing at her. 'My, my, and we almost went an age without hearing this sad tale again,' it said.

'The fat one hassss no power over ussss,' said another, before approaching her side. 'What ssshould we do with it? I feel the power of life floooow-ing from it. We mussssst have it.'

It placed two front appendages on Kali's side and rocked her back and forth. She tried to turn and bite but the rolls of fat on her neck prevented any such movement. She roared, but they laughed more and then it bowled her onto her side.

'Make it fatter, Scapreous,' said another. 'Make it fatter, ha!'

'Yes, we may as well squeeze what we can from the beast whilst we can,' said the reptile.

Kali looked up at the one who had pushed her over, Scapreous. Like the others, she had to look hard before it came into focus. Scapreous resembled a huge tree of a kind she had not seen before. It had no face or mouth, so when it spoke it surprised her, the voice seeming to come from all of it at once. 'Very well, very well,' it said.

It reached out with a branch and pressed painfully into her belly. She squirmed and at first, nothing seemed to happen, but then she felt pressure, and then she felt herself shifting relative to the ground. No, she was not moving, she was becoming bigger, even fatter! She tried to look at herself, but it became harder as her neck grew thicker.

Her belly swelled massively and splayed her legs apart. Rolls of fat swallowed her shoulders and the new flesh spilt across the ground. Her skin became uncomfortably tight and she tried to protest, but her growl came out as a snort as the rolls of fat pressed down on her larynx.

'Be careful, you'll burst the beast,' the reptilian one said.

'Ssssilence, I know what I'm doing,' Scapreous said. 'Har! Har! Har! Look at herrrr!'

She was a sight to behold. A mountain of flesh and folds of skin that barely resembled a lion. As she felt the fat on her neck begin to expand towards her muzzle, she knew that she had to do something before she was rendered nothing more than an inanimate object.

Her breathing was becoming difficult and laboured, and she could no longer move by her own volition. The things were clearly enjoying themselves. They poked and prodded her and laughed continuously, but she refused to give in to despair. There had to be a way out of this place. The gods always played by rules, one just had to know what those rules were.

Sikio had mentioned something important, right before she was transported. Something about her heart not being able to cope. This was important somehow, and there was something that he had said weeks ago about Kifi. Then, she remembered.

‘Stop,’ she said. ‘Stop and listen!’

‘What does it ssssay?’ said Scapreous. ‘Sssstop? But we do not want to sstop.’

‘Tell me, how did I get here?’

‘The beast makes irrelevant noises,’ said the reptilian one. ‘There is no reason to stop. We are having so much fun!’

‘Did I- Ooofff,’ she said, as the reptile stood on her paunch, knocking the air from her lungs.

‘More noises,’ it said.

‘Don’t mind her, Fascidusss. Ssshe can’t sstop ussss.’

‘Am I dying?’ she said, and the laughing stopped immediately. ‘Is that how I got here?’

‘The beast knows,’ said Fascidus.

‘The fat one knows nothing,’ said the giant bird of prey. ‘Her guide is dead.’ It spat on Sikio’s broken body and Kali looked away in anger.

‘I’m dying, aren’t I? Sikio activated the spell early because he feared we would both die before we could save my home.’

‘You talk such rot, beast,’ said Fascidus. ‘Scapreous, finish this quickly.’

‘Very well,’ it said, and once again pressed a branch-arm to her side.

‘No!’ she said, but her body expanded quickly, much faster than before. ‘Stop this-,’ she struggled against the heavy rolls of flesh pressing down on her lungs, crushing her throat.

The creatures started laughing once more.

‘Stooooop!’

She was now half a dozen times wider than she was long; a shapeless mass of blubber spreading across the floor, filling what was left of the space around her. Her head no longer reached the floor

but hung limp against her own body, which expanded under her. Through two fleshy cheeks and a ton of fat pressing on her larynx, she managed to utter the words, 'Kifi... With my dying breath, I summon you.'

'Noooooo!' the beings around her howled. The noise was deafening and unnatural, and she tried to close her mind to it. A shape on the floor moved. She looked and found that Sikio was standing. He was no longer ripped apart and broken, but whole and before her.

'Sikio,' she said, and the noise around her seemed to recede into the background.

'I am not Sikio, I am merely using his body.'

'He's really dead?' she said. She realised that she could speak more easily now, despite the crushing weight of her body all around.

'I'm afraid so.'

Her struggling heart sank to the floor and she forced back a sob. 'Are you Kifi?' she said.

'Yes,' said he, the manifestation of death. 'And I know you, Kali. I know that you have suffered to bring me here and you do not need to suffer any longer.'

'You're really here,' she said. 'And that means I am dying, or am I dead?'

'Soon, very soon, Kali, but do not worry. It will not hurt and soon you will be free,' Kifi said with a kind smile.

'I need to ask for your help. My home is suffering the worst drought we have ever known, and I need you to bring back the rains to save my pride and everything that lives there. Sikio was preparing a spell that would bring me here, but I don't know what he planned to do once we were here.'

'I see. That does sound like the Sikio I know. As my agent, he always wanted to follow his heart and intervene to help others. It makes sense that he would follow this path now, but this went against my nature, as it does now. Sikio was always something more than I could understand, I am only death, after all.'

'It's *against* your nature? Are you telling me that you won't help us?'

'I am telling you that I cannot help, whether I want to or not.'

'I don't understand,' Kali said. 'Then how did Sikio stop the flood and save his pride? He told me that you did it for him in exchange for a hundred years of his life.'

'Sikio gave me those one hundred years, as he told you, not in exchange for stopping that flood, but so he could gain the knowledge to stop this from happening to others. With the right mind, in the service of a god a mortal may learn more about their world and how it functions than a simple entity like myself ever could.'

Kali listened quietly and the implications of this sank in, and then she said, 'His pride, his home, you couldn't help them, and he lost everything. Then that means that I cannot save my pride. I cannot save my home.'

'Oh no,' she said in a whisper. This was it, the end, and she had saved no one. It was all for nothing. She felt a wave of despair begin to overwhelm her. No. No! This had happened to her, but she would not let it happen to anyone else ever again. 'Kifi,' she said, trying to hold her head high against the weight of the blubber. 'I pledge my life to you if you will only let me learn the ways that Sikio learned. I want to help others and never let this happen to anyone else again.'

Kifi did not answer immediately and seemed to take a moment to think. 'You do not want to owe that kind of debt. Sikio paid it in full and I know that he did not wish you to do the same. To respect my friend's wishes, I will not allow this.'

'Then, there really is nothing I can do. Soon I will be dead and then my pride and everything I have ever known will be dead, too.' She closed her eyes and finally gave in to despair.

'You showed great selflessness just now that reminds me of Sikio. He was willing to let go of everything so that he could help others, too. Because of this, I will make an exception that I rarely make and tell you this: yes Kali, soon you will be dead,' Kifi said. 'These husks around us are nothing to me. Look and see how they cringe away.'

Kali opened her eyes and looked to the edge of the space. Just as Kifi said, they cowered in the dark corners, small and afraid, nothing like the hulking monsters they were before.

'These are the petty gods of the living who bully mortals because it is the only way they can show what little power they have. The gods of 'plenty'', Kifi said with venom. 'I am death, nothing more. I have no power over the living just as these creatures have no power over the dead. And now Kali, you are dead too.'

Then Kali's heart stopped, and it never started again. And now she stood upon the ground, not as an amorphous blob, but as a lithe lioness: compact, yet powerful. Then she realised the power that she had. 'I am dead, but I am still a lion whilst I'm here.'

She climbed a dais to reach one of the small, cowering creatures, grabbed it by the scruff of the neck and threw it down onto the platform. 'I am Kali,' she said. 'I am dead, but you brought me here, to a place where I may remain after death. I am both dead and living. You have no power over me, yet I have power over you.'

The creature, Fascidus, did not answer. Kali swiped at it with her claws and it left a rake in its reptilian hide which bled.

'Yes, yes,' Fascidus said, cringing. 'The beast is right. Do not hurt this divine one any longer. What does it wish?'

'You,' she said and then turned around and looked at the twelve daises that surrounded them. 'All of you. If you wish to survive this encounter, listen now. First, bring the rains back to my homeland. Now.'

'Very well,' said Fascidus. 'Scapreous, make it so.'

'Yesss, very well. Cloudssss, rainssssss, the river will flow, and life will flourish,' Scapreous said. It leant over the dais and pressed a branch to the floor, which quickly took root and spread. Then, a

sort of pulsing light flowed from its body and into the ground, which then spread like a wave from the dais and across the platform. 'It isss done.'

'Very good,' said Kali. Then she pressed a paw down on the neck of Fascidus. 'You, listen. You are the gods of the living, yes?'

'Yes, beast. We are twelve of many.'

'Bring Sikio back.'

Fascidus lifted its reptilian head and looked at Kifi, who stood and watched the whole ordeal with a look of satisfaction. 'Will the dark one release this beast to us?'

'He will,' said Kifi. 'Kali, you must know something first. None of these creatures, nor I, have the gift of raising the dead. This is simply against our nature. Perhaps you and Sikio will one day learn how to overcome this, but for now, it cannot be so.'

Kali did not immediately understand. Then, she remembered something Sikio had told her: *Kifi cannot save lives, they may only harvest your mind.* 'You cannot give life, no, but can you save minds?' Kali said, and Kifi nodded. 'You,' she turned to Fascidus, 'you creatures can create life. Will you create new life for myself and Sikio, and deliver our minds to those bodies?'

'Yes...,' Fascidus said.

'And we will remember our lives and all of this?'

'You will,' Kifi said.

'This will work,' Kali said. 'I can see my pride, my friends again!'

'No, beast, this is not possible,' Fascidus said.

'Then make it possible,' Kali said.

'Tell the beast, Leathon. It is not possible!'

The bird-like creation descended from its dais. 'We do not deceive you. We will create new bodies for you to inhabit, yes, but this is a slow process, and they will not be born of another. Your new bodies will take root and grow in the earth itself. This process will take years, decades. Your kin may well be gone when you emerge.'

'Gone,' Kali echoed. She turned to Kifi. 'Is this true?'

Kifi nodded, 'We are constrained by our nature and must act within these confines.'

'I see,' she said. 'You are inhabiting Sikio's body here. Would it be possible to speak to him before we leave this place?'

'I can grant this wish whilst you remain here,' Kifi said. 'I will take my leave and allow you to finish preparations.'

'Thank you for everything, Kifi,' said Kali. 'I really mean that.'

'I did nothing,' said Kifi. 'You did this. That said, the advice that I offered was gladly given for the sake of this kind soul.'

And then like the setting moon Kifi was gone, and Sikio was in its place. 'Kali,' he said. 'I am here.'

'Ah, Sikio,' said Leathon. 'I see you have gotten fatter.'

Sikio growled at Leathon and it shrank away from him. 'I do hope that there will not be any problems in meeting Kali's demands.'

'No problems, no problems,' it said.

Kali ran over to Sikio and embraced him. 'I thought you were gone. I can't believe my pride did this to you.'

'They were desperate, starving, and driven to madness. We did not see their struggle in the weeks leading up to this. I can forgive them, Kali, and I hope you can too. After all, we are here now,' he said. 'I knew you could do this. I knew you could save them without me. You have a good heart, and I am so glad that we met.'

They stayed in their embrace for a long time whilst the lesser gods of plenty scurried about and worked around them, and when it was time, they both allowed themselves to be pulled from that place, and back to their world.

Epilogue

Trapped.

She was trapped.

Crushed from all sides and in total darkness.

Kali tried to take a breath but inhaled earth instead of air. She coughed and convulsed, but she barely moved. She regained control of herself and held her breath. What could she do from her position? She tried to think, where was she? What was happening? Her memory failed her.

Before long she realised that she had held her breath for longer than should be possible and felt no strong desire to breathe at all. Perhaps she would not suffocate after all, but she was still trapped. What had happened to her, how did she get here? Nothing. Her memories were an impenetrable fog.

Then, a name: Sikio. She fought against the impulse to say his name, the taste of dirt in her mouth reminding her of why this was a bad idea. Who was *Sikio*? He was someone important, surely, otherwise, why would his name come to her? Oh! *His* name. Sikio was a male. A friend? A mate?

There was something else, too, something important. He had made her a promise, but what was it?

The drought. The rains. He had promised an end to a drought that had ravaged her home. He had promised to save them all. Perhaps he had but did not help her now. She was still trapped in the dark alone, yet she was not overwhelmed with panic, despite this. On the contrary, she was calm and her strong hunter's heart beat a steady rhythm. She did not know why or how, but soon she would be leaving the dark, to emerge into the light once again.

That was when she heard a noise; someone digging furiously above her, which got louder by the minute. She felt the dirt above her loosen up, and she tried to force herself to move. At first, she remained stuck, but then she could stretch her neck, then her shoulders and forelegs. She arranged her forelegs in the right position and pulled herself up. Slowly but surely her body began to shift, and then she was moving.

Daylight, bright, glorious daylight. Kali pulled herself out of the ground, then someone had her by the scruff of the neck and pulled, and she was free. She lay on the ground, exhausted, and then drew in her first breath of air and coughed until there was no dirt left in her airways.

She looked up, squinted, to see the most striking blue eyes. Sikio. She laughed, stood up with wobbly legs, and embraced him. 'I see you,' she said.

'And I see you,' said Sikio.

Together they worked to clean the roots and dirt from her fur, the former of which felt stuck to her skin, and once she was clean, she looked around at where they were. The den which she had occupied with Sikio was almost unrecognisable. The ground was covered in a mat of lush, green grass and the bushes were thick and filled with songbirds.

They walked out of the den and to the top of the hill and looked out over Kali's homeland. The Kundi was thick and blue and twisted and curved through the valley like a giant serpent. Herds of animals moved around in the valley below, and a flock of birds took flight and flew off into the horizon.

It had worked. Everything was going to be okay. Kali leant against Sikio and they watched the scene for a long time before taking their leave.

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Some unfamiliar lions greeted Kali as she entered her old den, and when she saw the chubby old lioness asleep in the corner, she knew that the visit had been worth it. As Kali approached, the lioness sleepily opened her eyes and said, 'Hello outsider, welcome to our den. Can I help you at all?'

'Perhaps you can,' said Kali. 'It's been a long time since I've been here. Who is running things these days?'

'Oh, that would be my daughter! I managed things for a while, but these days I prefer to rest,' she said. The lioness stood up and stretched, then said, 'You will have to forgive my old eyes, but I don't recall seeing you here before. You do look familiar, though, like an old friend from a very long time ago.'

'Well, it has been a very long time, Utani,' Kali said. 'Though, it does not feel like such a long time for me. I plan to move on soon and travel the world, and I just wanted to stop by one last time to see an old friend.'

'Is that so? Is that so,' Utani said. 'Well, it warms my heart to hear that you have those adventures ahead of you. I hope you are not going alone, this world can be cruel to lone lions, which is why they're always welcome here.'

'I saw how welcoming you all are on my way in here, a far cry from the pride that I used to know, back when you feared outsiders.'

'An outsider changed our minds about that a long time ago. He taught us a valuable lesson, that we need not fear those who are lost and alone in the world. Together with a friend, he managed to save us all, and his reward for this was death. It's a sad tale and I won't burden you with it, though we learned a hard lesson from it and have welcomed outsiders ever since.'

Kali smiled at Utani. It was obvious that the past still pained her, and it fulfilled something inside Kali to hear that Sikio and herself had helped change the pride. There was not much left that she could do for them now and her story here was coming to an end. It was time to move on and start a new life, together with Sikio.

'I won't be going alone,' Kali said. 'Sikio will be travelling with me. We are going to experience the world together and help others where we can, and I can't wait.'

'Oh, that's wonderful,' said Utani. She faltered and a tear fell from her eye and ran down through her fur. 'Kali.'

'Utani,' Kali said, and they both started laughing. They bunted and embraced one last time before Kali said her goodbyes.

'If you ever need somewhere to shelter or settle down, our pride is open to you always,' Utani said.

'I know it is. I hope to see you again someday,' said Kali. 'Goodbye, Utani.'

Kali left the pride and returned to the hill where she had first met Sikio, only this time Sikio awaited her. She approached low in the grass and pounced on him. He startled and said, 'Well played! How did you cross the river without getting your fur wet?'

She had not crossed the Kundi, but quickly understood the joke. 'I'm a good swimmer,' she said. 'Utani says hello, and she has learned a hard lesson, Sikio, they all have.'

'I understand. There are no hard feelings from me.'

'I'm going to miss them all so much, Sikio,' Kali said. 'It makes me so sad to think that I'll never see them again.'

'Never say never,' Sikio said. 'It is a strange life, ours, you never quite know what to expect, or who we will meet on our journey.'

Kali smiled and sat quietly for a while, contemplating all that she had lost. She was still processing her grief, and now she had all the time in the world to do so. She would be leaving behind everything she had ever known, but as Sikio smiled warmly at her she realised that she had not lost everything she had ever loved, and the world had more to offer her yet.

'So,' Kali said. 'Off to the great desert, and then to worlds beyond?'

'Yes, absolutely. However, it is a long journey and we both look rather thin and roguish. How about a few dozen meals to prepare us?'

Kali grinned and nipped at his skinny flank. 'You know me, I won't ever say no to a good meal. Or ten.'

Then both laughed and sat together on the hill for a while until the sun went down, before leaving in the cool of the night.

The end.