

Friends In Low Places

Part 5

Kazem's eyes slowly opened. A bright blue sky and dazzling sunshine greeted him on a fresh spring morning. With soft fur still cushioning his backside, an angelic yet familiar voice filled his ears between the faint sounds of birds chirping...

"Are you awake?" whispered Farishta.

Naturally, Kazem clutched some fur and sat up before looking over his shoulder. He found Farishta staring down at him with a coy smile on her face. As before, she reclined on the ground with a large and fluffy tail still slightly swaying between her legs, allowing him to rest on her lower torso. The much smaller man then rubbed his eyes and faced forward to regain his grasp on reality.

Farishta giggled in response. "I'll take that as a yes!"

Kazem gradually got up, doing his best to maintain his footing. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not for long!" she said, momentarily closing her eyes. "And I have to confess... you look so much cuter whenever you're sleeping! I thought about waking you up, but I didn't want to disturb you, so I hope you received plenty of rest!"

He grunted. "Cute?"

"Maybe a better word would be peaceful..." Farishta said, breaking eye contact. "No offense, but you have a tendency to be grumpy sometimes!"

"I know." he replied, squinting his groggy eyes.

She made a more smug facial expression. "But regardless, did you enjoy your stay at hotel Farishta?"

Kazem spent some time refamiliarizing himself with his surroundings. His vantage point on Farishta's lower belly elevated him a decent distance off the ground, allowing him to see everything in front of him. Unlike before, daylight made things more visible. This included the dirt road, all the trees partially concealing their position, and Kazem's majestic horse feeding on some grass... albeit a less splendid pile of its waste matter joined it on the other side of the tree he tied it to.

“There weren’t exactly many other options available.” eventually Kazem said, looking downward. “Sleeping together is probably more pragmatic for whenever we need to set up camp in the wild too, social taboo or personal discomfort be damned.”

Farishta rolled her eyes. “Oh, come on! You said you were surprisingly super cozy and comfortable and everything!” She laughed again, sticking out her tongue. “I know you enjoyed it.”

Kazem shrugged. “I’ll admit, it was alright. Weird, but good back support. Could have used a pillow or something for my head though.”

“Then maybe next time I should let you try sleeping somewhere else.” Farishta said, slowly fluttering her eyes. Her stomach suddenly rumbled, making Kazem stumble. “Oh, but that reminds me. I need to prepare you a complimentary breakfast or something for the full hotel experience!”

As she spoke, Kazem shimmied down the side of her torso. A few quick movements combined with climbing and sliding had him on the ground in no time. It all happened so fast Farishta blinked a few times before she spotted Kazem strolling towards his horse, already a few dozen paces away.

Consequently, Farishta sat back up with her toes curling. “Wait... where are you going?”

“Just grabbing a few of my things.” he answered, looking straight ahead. “Might need to start a fire or whatever if we’re gonna cook. Got enough food myself, but I’m not so sure about you, so we might need a plan of action.”

She started standing back up, stretching during the process with her arms extending into the air. “Ah... don’t worry! Mary gave me some provisions for the journey. It’s only enough for a few days though, so I might need to try hunting for more food later on!”

Farishta’s shadow extended far enough to block some sunlight for Kazem, making him pause. “What do you usually eat anyway? Well, besides deer and dragons apparently...”

“It can really vary.” she replied, taking a few steps forward. Her sheer size caused more light thumps with each one she took, but her padded feet muffled them. “I mentioned this already, but sometimes farmers in Ashbourne were kind enough to give me some of their livestock! Which got awkward one time since this one old goat farmer called it tribute and referred to me as a goddess, so

I had to correct him for that blasphemy against the gods, but sometimes he also pointed me in the direction of wild goats living in the mountains!”

Kazem spent some time sifting through his jacket and a bag attached to his horse, procuring some flint and dried foods. “That’s... something. It also makes sense since I’ve heard about people up north worshiping certain mergich too.”

Farishta scoffed. “Humans really shouldn’t! Well, unless their goal is to invoke the wrath of the gods. It’s not like there’s any mergich ruling over humans anymore, so it’s really egotistical for my kind.”

“So it annoys you whenever people try to worship you like that goat farmer or whatever?” he asked with a more bemused look. “You’re practically a minor celebrity in Ashbourne from what I’ve seen so far. It’s kind of funny.”

Her tail shot up, showing signs of embarrassment as she scratched behind one of her ears. “I mean... the attention is nice and it can be flattering, but I prefer trying to treat humans as equals.”

He returned with his new materials in tow. “Trying?”

Farishta’s face scrunched up. “You know what I mean! Being bigger than most people means I always have to be aware of how strong or powerful I can be without realizing it...”

“I’m still adjusting to it all.” Kazem said, focusing on a specific spot on the ground where grass gave way to a sizable patch of dirt. He walked over to it and grabbed a nearby stone. Utilizing it and another adjacent rock, Kazem began forming a ring. Only a reverberating thooming sound with air blowing against his back made him stop in his tracks.

“Whatcha doing now?” she asked playfully.

Kazem looked back at Farishta, finding her lying on her belly. She nonchalantly kicked her feet in the air and rested her head on her arms. Farishta’s feline face also remained extremely close to his current position as she watched his every move.

“Just told you.” he said in a low tone. “Then again, I keep talking about making a campfire without actually doing it. On the other hand, we might not actually need one since I got some dried provisions, and I doubt you mergich even cook your food.”

“And that would be right!” she said, tail flicking behind her. “Besides some rare treats such as tea, I usually eat my food raw.” Farishta formed a more toothy smile showcasing a few cute little fangs sticking out from the corners of her mouth. “You humans are really missing out on all the juicy flavors and nutrients if you need to cook all your meat!”

He stepped on one of the stones to embed it into the dirt. “I’ll pass on the food poisoning. Cooking and preparing stuff usually makes it more tasty anyway, so on the contrary, you’re the one really missing out.”

Farishta frowned. “How so?”

“I guess it depends on whether mergich have some kind of cuisine to begin with.” Kazem said, reaching into a coat pocket. “For example, I got some sausage and cheese. Dried fruits, meats, and preserves on my person. Spices. So I really doubt something like raw pork is all that appealing, and the closest experience I’ll get to raw meat is either a bloody steak or certain seafood.”

Her nostrils flared a little. “To be fair, I occasionally marinate meat to season my food too! I’ve never really had something like processed meat or cheese though...”

“Why not?” he asked, cocking up his head.

With a roll of her eyes and a smirk, Farishta raised a hand to compare it to Kazem. Her palm and fingers combined more than rivaled his overall height. She also unsheathed some claws on her fingertips for several seconds. “Did you forget already? I need far more food than most, especially if I want to even taste anything!”

Kazem scratched behind his head. “Right.” He looked left to right, not finding much in the way of other stones or potential sources of tinder or firewood in the arid environment. “On second thought, forget the campfire. We can do that somewhere else. For now, it might be smarter for us to eat any provisions we picked up at Ashbourne before we start trying to catch or cook anything.”

She returned to using her arms as a headrest. “Can I try some of your food then? I’ll share some of my own snacks in return!”

“You gotta be shitting me.” he replied, retrieving more rations from his jacket. Kazem then pulled out a dried apple slice from a corresponding container and held it up for emphasis. “You just said it’d take absurd amounts of foodstuffs like this for you to taste anything at all.”

“Then try putting something on one of my taste buds, silly!”

After saying this, Farishta stuck out her tongue. It flexed in front of Kazem, spreading out and forming a U shape as its edges folded almost like a taco.

Kazem sneered. “I don’t know if you’re doing this to mess with me, but I’ll indulge you a little.”

Farishta closed her eyes and made a more playful expression. Nonetheless, Kazem went about tossing a single fruit chip, which fluttered down before randomly landing on her tongue. As a result of its lousy placement, Farishta opened her amethyst eyes and narrowed them. He shrugged. After retrieving a handful of more dried fruit slices, Kazem placed them on a visible taste bud near the tip of her tongue. She beamed up and made something of a show by curling it up before it all retreated back into her mouth.

From there, Farishta softly swallowed and let out a sigh of relief. “Ah... yeah, I’m still having trouble tasting anything.” She giggled a bit. “Sorry! I guess we’ll have to try again!”

“Is your goal to eat all my food?” asked Kazem. He grabbed a spare apple from one of his jacket’s many pockets, then began slightly tossing it in the air and catching it like a softball.

“Oh, don’t be like that!” she replied, twirling her toes in the air. Her large tail made audible swooshing sounds as well. “We have plenty of food thanks to Mary, and I just want to experience some more traditional human cuisine!”

“And you never had the chance to do that over the centuries if you’re a million years old or whatever?”

Farishta rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you stop asking me silly questions and feed me that fruit you’re holding?” She gradually opened her mouth afterward. This revealed ivory fangs and the rest of her maw as she stuck out her tongue once more. “Ahhhhhh~”

Kazem glared at the flexing abyss at the back of her throat, where he noticed she lacked a uvula. He quickly pitched the apple like a baseball. It almost immediately vanished with a barely audible gluck as Farishta’s face contorted, making her close her mouth.

“Hey!” she said, laughing a bit following this. “Don’t be mean! I guess I got what I asked for, but I didn’t even get to taste it...”

“Fine...” he said with a grunt, “Are you more interested in trying cheese or salami?” Kazem sifted through his pockets as he spoke. “That should be more flavorful than those dried apple slices.”

Farishta made another toothy smile. “That’s more like it!” She brought a hand to her chin and looked up at the sky. “I think I might try...”

“A MERGICH?!” shouted someone nearby.

Both Kazem and Farishta looked towards the road. A lone man with red robes and a magical staff embedded with a ruby strolled towards them. Although his attire and hood covered most of his features, he had a relatively scrawny and pale body, and his staff originally emitted a bright glow before it began convulsing and flickering. Farishta observed with bewilderment as her eyes went wide, while Kazem almost immediately dropped his food and grabbed his pistol.

“What a fascinating find!” continued the mage. “To think I almost gave up on trying to track the artifact down, but fate and fortune favored me! You should have stayed on your island with the rest of your kind, colossi, since I’d imagine your fur is highly flammable!” He raised his staff in the air, which suddenly stopped emitting any light or energy altogether. His other magical rings and accessories abruptly failed as well. “Ahaha... I will... uh...” He shook his staff a few times. “What?”

Kazem gave the man a death stare, putting away his pistol. He clenched his fists and walked towards the newcomer with malicious intent in his eyes like a raging fire.

“Um... who are you?” asked Farishta as her own eyes darted between the two humans.

“Why isn’t this blasted thing working?!” said the mage. He focused on the staff and showed visible signs of stress, reaching for a blue potion on his waist. “Is this some tomfoolery on your behalf if I can’t cast any spells?”

Farishta blinked several times. “What?” She started standing back up, making the newcomer recoil. “I’m so confused. Do you need help?”

“No... NO!” shouted the mage. All his attention focused on the giant gradually looming over him as Kazem approached from an angle. “This isn’t right! They never said anything about a-”

In a sudden strike, Kazem punched the man in the stomach. The mage let out a gasp with the air knocked out of his lungs, stumbling forward. Kazem then tripped him over. The mage fumbled and dropped his staff with his otherwise pristine robes getting dirty during the commotion as he fell to the ground, allowing Kazem to place a boot on the back of his head mere moments later to force his face into the dirt.

The mage squirmed, kicked, and screamed throughout the assault as Kazem unsheathed a dagger.

“Oh my gods, Kazem!” Farishta said, covering her mouth with both hands.

He sighed and transitioned to placing his foot on the mage’s upper back. “What?”

“You’re hurting him!”

“I know.” he replied with a blank stare. “I’m half tempted to beat him within an inch of his life for threatening to set you on fire.”

She frowned. “Seriously, Kazem? Please don’t do that! You don’t have to protect me of all people, and I don’t think he made a threat or anything either by calling my fur flammable...”

Kazem returned his dagger to its sheath. “It might as well be the same thing if he’s a rogue elemental mage. But whatever.” He grabbed a bundle of rope from his coat. “I won’t hurt him... much.”

The mage finally managed to regain his breath. “DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHO I AM?”

“No.” Kazem said, who rapidly overpowered the far more frail man. He pulled on the mage’s limbs to more effectively wrangle and tie him up, forcing him into a more compromising position. It all culminated in the mage being bound by his hands and feet, which were then tied behind his back.

Farishta took a few steps toward the two. “What are you doing now? I don’t know what that man intended to do, but this is an extreme response!”

It aroused a dismissive wave from Kazem. “I don’t really know his intentions either, so I’m making sure he won’t be a threat.”

“Are you sure?” she asked in return. “This could have been another unfortunate misunderstanding. Like... why would he want to attack or hurt us for no reason?”

“Because that’s just how life is sometimes, Farishta.”

The woman in question let out a sigh. “Still, it’s also really dumb to attack me. If we’re being honest here, I can be quite dangerous to humans even if I don’t intend to be. I’d like to hear what this mage has to say before we do anything too rash...”

Kazem groaned. “As you wish.” He yanked on the mage’s hood to expose his bald head, grabbing it to force him to look at Farishta. “This nice lady here wants to know why some insane and egotistical mage made a threat before trying to cast spells at her.”

“YOU’RE BOTH DEAD!” shouted the mage, coughing and sputtering. “I have connections with the imperial court!” He tried looking over his shoulder. “I have no idea who you are, you absolute thug, but I originally had no quarrel with you. It’s the blasted snake amulet that the emperor wants!”

Farishta put a finger through the loop of her necklace. “You’re... after my amulet?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, mergich.” said the mage with nothing but venom in his voice.

“Why?” she asked, nearly mewling.

The mage spit on the ground. “You don’t know? I assumed you would have encountered at least some of my brethren by now. The Grand Enchantress herself released me and many others from the emperor’s dungeons to search dozens of suspected locations for that necklace, offering-”

Kazem abruptly cut the mage off by placing a hand over his mouth. Using cloth and spare bandanas, he created an improvised gag, tying it around the mage’s face, then forcing it into his mouth until the mage made nothing but muffled vocalizations.

“Wait!” Farishta said with a whine. “Why does he want my jewelry?”

“I don’t know.” Kazem said, dropping the mage altogether before he ate dirt again. “But I think I heard enough. He’s evidently some sort of ex-criminal that got released to steal your necklace, hence why he attacked us.”

“My gods...” she muttered under her breath. “I know my father said my amulet was important, but I wasn’t expecting something as crazy as this!”

He rubbed his eyes. “Neither did I.”

Farishta kneeled in front of the two. “Ugh. So much for having a calm breakfast together...”

“It doesn’t have to be ruined.” Kazem said, crossing his arms. “I can pick up and toss this guy into your mouth if you’re still starving.”

She reeled with her ears folding against her head, sighing. “Very funny, Kazem.”

“But really,” he said while glaring at the mage, “I don’t know what to do with him now. Why, if you weren’t here...”

“Why don’t we just turn him into the authorities at the next village or town we stop at?” interrupted Farishta. “That would be the most ethical thing to do!”

Kazem chuckled at her words. “Ethical...” He shook his head. “Alright. We can do that. There might even be a bounty to be collected. You wanna head out immediately or stick around to eat?”

Farishta broke eye contact. “Oddly enough, I don’t actually feel too hungry anymore. After that man showed up, I felt this tingling sensation across my fur and now I feel kind of rejuvenated!”

“It reminds me that he must not be a very good mage if he doesn’t know much about how mergich soak mana up like a sponge.” Kazem paused after saying this and thumped the struggling mage on the back of his head. “Speaking of which, I’d prefer for you to carry him around. Just to keep him close.”

“Should I carry him by hand then?” she asked, cocking her head to the side.

He made a devious smile. “Nah. I got a better idea. We need for you to keep your hands free while making sure he can’t escape, so let me try something.”

“Normally it makes me happy seeing people smile...” Farishta said with a huff. “But with you? I’m starting to get worried if you plan on saying or doing something horrible whenever I see a particular look on your face!”

Kazem stripped the mage of some jewelry, pocketing it as he traded it for some more rope. “Do me a favor and sit on the ground real quick.”

Farishta made a look of concern. “Why though? And how much stuff do you even have in all those coat pockets?”

He waved her question away. “Just trust me.”

“Fine...” she said with a roll of her eyes.

Farishta then plopped down on the ground with some hesitation, shaking their surroundings ever so slightly. Undeterred, Kazem picked up and carried the more diminutive mage over his shoulder. He walked around Farishta, moving to an area near the base of her tail before grabbing some fur and sifting through it.

Her tail stopped moving altogether. “Uh... what are you doing back there?”

“Stay still and you’ll find out.” replied Kazem, who made complex maneuvers to place the mage on top of the tail. He then spread out a bundle of rope with a wicked grin spreading across his face.

Farishta herself scrunched up her fingers and toes. “Okay then. Please don’t make me regret this!”

Following a few minutes of near silence, Kazem stepped away from her. “And... finally done.”

With that accomplished, Farishta carefully got back on her feet. “What did you...” She looked at the base of her tail. “Oh.”

The mage remained gagged and bound by the restraints. However, even more ropes tied him to Farishta’s tail, only a short distance away from where it started. This resulted in him slightly swaying and moving alongside the tail, almost entirely immersed in her white fur with only his red robes and the ropes obviously sticking out.

“That’s just wrong.” Farishta said with a frown. “I don’t want to torture the poor man...”

Kazem crossed his arms. “He tried attacking you unprovoked. If we keep him near you, he won’t be able to use magic at all if you sap away all his mana. In a scenario where he tries to escape, it won’t end well for him if he falls to the ground, and keeping him constantly disoriented like that doesn’t hurt either.”

“What would other humans think if they saw this though?” she asked, poking the inert mage with a padded finger. “I don’t ever treat people like this...”

“Just think of him as a cute little tail ornament!” Kazem said with a smirk. “We can take him off once we reach a nearby town.”

Farishta fiddled with the ropes, making sure they were nice and tight. “I still don’t like this. Why can’t I just carry him in my knapsack, a pocket, or by hand?”

“Because he could pull some escape stunt and it’d be inconvenient for you to carry him around everywhere.” he answered, shaking his head. “Personally, I don’t get why you care about his well-being at all.”

Her tail slumped a bit. “I don’t know. He must have been really desperate if he wanted my amulet badly enough to try hurting me. Now we might have to be on the lookout for more people like him if this Grand Enchantress he mentioned wants it for whatever the reason.”

Kazem made a sly smile. “I’ll be sure to let you know if I spot anyone shady. Quite frankly, there’s easier ways to get gold than stealing jewelry from a giant.”

“It’s not that.” Farishta said, turning back to grab her wooden staff and knapsack. “My father said the amulet was important to our family, but I still don’t know what it does. Now I’m getting really worried thinking about what exactly just happened to me...”

At the same time, Kazem walked back to his horse and shouted back at her. “I’m sure everything will be fine.”

She let out yet another sigh. “I thought I was supposed to be the optimist here!”

“I’m not always so cynical,” he replied with a laugh, “But let’s get this show on the road!”

Within moments, Kazem hopped back on his horse. Farishta stepped back on the dirt road. They returned to their typical traveling arrangements with their new friend in tow, leaving the improvised camping site behind.