

Friends In Low Places

Part 19

Alice leaned against titanic fingers acting as her guardrail. “Where are we going, Vali?”

“North.” he said with a grunt.

Meanwhile, Alice took in the sights and sounds of the wilderness as if she was on a safari. “My word! Are we leaving my homeland behind already?”

Vali’s helmet hid every ounce of emotion as he spoke in a cold tone. “Depends. If my... negotiations with your father keep failing, I’m still not really sure what exactly I’m going to do with you.” He paused, glancing at the ground. “And considering recent events with my... acquisition of this absolutely cursed amulet...”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that!” she said with a dismissive wave and a light laugh. Alice then spread out her arms as Vali walked at a brisk pace, all while a light breeze fluttered her dress. “I’m having the time of my life!”

Suddenly, Vali curled his fingers to clutch the small human woman, holding her like a doll afterward. He let out a low growl. “Do I have to say it again? This isn’t all fun and games, Alice.”

Alice’s face scrunched up as she squirmed. “My, my, Vali... you have such big and strong hands...”

His tail slumped down. “Why, oh why do you always have to make it weird?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, tilting her head to the side.

“You are my hostage.” he replied in a stern tone. Vali also squeezed her a little tighter. “My captive! Nothing more, nothing less, and I am so sick of repeating that fact!”

Her face turned red. “I thought I was your pet.”

He practically facepalmed, covering the eyes of his helmet. “Do all human women your age act like this?”

Alice squeaked as he released his firm grip on her body. “Eee! Why do you ask?” She promptly walked across his open palm and put her hands on her mouth. “Did I do something wrong?”

Vali then stared at her, huffing and puffing to blow air from his nose guard like a raging bull. “I am warfare incarnate.” he said, raising his already powerful voice. “I’ve seen entire legions scatter before my feet. I’ve acted as a living siege weapon to dismantle earthworks surrounding grand castles. I’ve slain all sorts of great beasts plaguing humanity, whether it be griffins or dragons, yet you show absolutely no fear towards me.”

At these words, Alice frowned and crossed her arms. “You’ve done nothing but protect and care for me, Vali! I don’t feel scared of you anymore, even if you are so big and strong!”

He simply stared at her without saying a single word in return. “Hmph.”

Following a few moments of silence, Alice put her hands on her cheeks. Something seemed to sparkle in her eyes as she spoke once more. “If anything else, you’re like my own knight in shining armor!”

Vali let out a long and resigned sigh. “This isn’t a fairy tale or some fantasy of yours, Alice.”

Alice put her hands on her hips. “It might as well be! You just...” she said, pausing to raise her hands in the air. “Crashed down on my father’s estate and whisked me away from all my worries!”

Once more, Vali stayed silent and stationary like a statue.

In contrast, Alice let out a content sigh with a sly smile on her face. “But I digress...”

The silence only resumed with Vali’s overall emotions and thoughts remaining indecipherable. Something about his overall composure made their environment a little more cold and chilly with the winds sending a short-lived shiver down Alice’s spine.

“So... what are you thinking about, big guy?” she asked before blinking a few times. “You know, it’s always so hard to tell with that big old helmet and armor of yours. Like... at all!”

He sneered. “Good.”

“I’m serious!” Alice replied with a whine. After spending some brief time inside her own head, she scratched her chin. “Now that I think about it, I don’t believe I’ve ever actually seen you without your helmet on. Have you been sleeping while wearing it this entire time?!”

Vali growled a little. “Of course not.”

Alice looked to the side, fidgeting her hands and fingers. “In that case, can I... see what you look like without it?”

As before, Vali didn’t grace her with a response. He only cocked his head to the right.

“I’m just really curious!” she said, staring at him once more. “I’m not even sure if there’s a real person behind all that armor of yours! For all I know, this could all be a dream!”

“If you promise to behave yourself...” Vali said in a low tone. “I’ll take off my helmet for you.”

Alice beamed up at him, standing on the tips of her toes. “Really?”

“Just this once.” he said, lowering his voice.

She smiled at him. “Well... that’s better than nothing! If you do it, I promise to be a good girl for you!”

Vali sighed again. “Ugh. Okay, but I’m going to need both hands for this, so stay still.”

Alice raised her arms in the air. “Gotcha! I know the drill by now!”

Within moments, Vali gradually brought his other hand to Alice. His fingers wrapped around her tiny body. Everything about the way he picked up the small woman was firm, yet gentle before he slowly lowered her to the ground. She kicked her feet in the air for several seconds until her feet came into contact with the cold, hard ground with the grass cushioning her pricey shoes.

Vali then sat down near the side of the road, crossing his legs. He used his hands to grasp his helmet before ever so slowly removing it...

As this occurred, Alice watched on from her new vantage point with wide eyes. The first thing she saw was his bright, blue irises staring right back at her with his face fully exposed. Blonde fur reminiscent of an Amur leopard adorned most of his head with black rosettes on his forehead and ears. White fur underlying it highlighted the rest. Although some of his fur appeared generally unkempt, fluff around his throat stood out in particular regarding his disheveled appearance.

He looked at her without expressing any emotions, staying stoic. "Happy now?"

Alice found herself in awe. "My gods... you look so... majestic..."

Vali narrowed his eyes. "How so?"

"You look exactly like a giant leopard!" she said with her eyes focused on his head. "But you know... more human-ish..."

He grunted, revealing a few fangs. "Right."

"Oh, and can you pick me back up?" Alice asked, clasping her hands together. "I'd love to speak face to face like this!"

"You're pushing your luck, little lady." Vali replied, rolling his eyes.

She scoffed. "Come on! This might be the only time I'll ever get to see you like this!"

Vali's tail started swooshing behind him as he refrained from speaking.

"I'll do whatever you want!" Alice said, frowning. "Please, Vali!"

"Alright, alright..." he muttered before reaching toward her with a clawed hand. "Just don't make me regret this. Okay?"

She smiled and nodded. "Anything for you, big guy!"

Her words inspired little confidence as he carefully picked her back up. As before, this culminated in Vali cupping Alice with the palm of his hand, creating a platform for her to sit or stand on.

“By the heavens...” Alice said, finding herself right in front of his muzzle. “You look even more striking up-close, Vali!” She stopped speaking to squint her eyes. “Is that a scar I see on your cheek?”

“Could be.” he said, sighing. “I rarely have the luxury of seeing my own reflection.”

His eyes went as wide as saucers once Alice started stroking one of his whiskers. Her gloved hands caressed individual strands, doing a mix of feeling and straightening them out.

“You’ve also been slacking on more of your personal grooming it seems!” she said with a coy smile.

Vali’s face scrunched up as his other whiskers tickled her head and limbs with every little movement they both made. “Perhaps... but then again...”

Alice suddenly grabbed his lower lip without any warning. “Is your oral hygiene good at least?” she asked without awaiting an answer. With that, Alice used both arms to pry apart his thin, black lips to reveal razor-sharp teeth befitting for a feline of his massive stature. His gums and tongue also gradually came into view as he slowly opened his mouth, allowing warm and meaty breath to waft over her. It all forced Alice to let go. As his jaw went ajar, Alice received a brief glimpse into the interior of his maw, finding herself more and more flustered with blood flushing her face at the overall sight.

His cavernous mouth could easily fit an entire person inside. White teeth outlined his tongue and dark throat with some saliva still clinging to the roof of his mouth. A simple exhale on his behalf slightly fluttered her hair and dress, making her shudder. Just as slowly, Vali closed his mouth before baring his fangs, letting out a low hiss during the process.

“Don’t just stick your arms in my mouth like that!” he said, licking his sharp chops for emphasis. “It’s... very, very dangerous. Only my prey is supposed to go in there.”

Once more, Alice’s face turned red. “Oops! Sorry about that, I just wanted to make sure your teeth were healthy too... I guess...”

Vali huffed. “No harm, no foul. But are you... okay? For some reason the skin on your face keeps randomly turning red.”

She looked away from him. "I'm fine, I'm fine... this is all just... so exciting, you know?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Sure. Sometimes I think I have too much patience for my own good."

"I'm not trying to annoy or make you uncomfortable though!" she said with a light laugh, scratching the back of her head. "I'd just like to help you out. Well, somehow. Surely all that fur on your head could use some tidying up... right?"

"I don't know..." he said, grumbling. "Does it matter? It doesn't impair me in a fight."

Alice shook her head. "Silly Vali. Don't you know that cleanliness is the closest that you can get to godliness?"

Vali let out another low and guttural growl. "Sounds like blasphemy."

She put her hands on her hips with a smug smile on her face. "No it's not! Why do you think I've always put such a big emphasis on personal grooming despite these dreadful conditions?"

"Because you're a woman?" he said with an unamused look in his eyes.

"Now that's just sexist!" Alice replied, raising her hands into the air. She then shook her head. "But no, that's not really it! Being clean just makes me feel good and it keeps me from feeling crazy at times." Alice only paused to lean forward and put her hands on her cheeks. "Don't you think you'd be happier if we always kept that snoot of yours tidy, handsome, and boopable?"

His ears folded down. "Boopable? I've never heard that term before."

She laughed. "It's a description for things especially good for some boops!"

"And I don't know what a boop is either..." he resumed, sighing.

Alice approached his nose once more before pressing a hand against it for a split second. "Boop!"

Vali reeled a little with his nostrils flaring a bit. He spent some time processing what just happened to him. "Excuse me?"

Meanwhile, Alice couldn't possibly be more pleased with herself as she brought a gloved hand to her mouth and giggled. "That's a boop, Vali! You have a very boopable snout and nose too!"

He stared at her with daggers in his eyes. "Oh. How cute."

"Hopefully I'm not annoying you too much..." she said with a more nervous laugh.

Vali grunted. "Eh. I'm only putting up with it because your antics amuse me sometimes."

Something seemed to surge into Alice as if she just got struck by lightning, renewing her energy as she bounced on the balls of her feet. "Aww! So you do like me!"

"I didn't say that..." he replied almost immediately.

"And you still haven't given me a yes or no about grooming all that fur on your big, fluffy head!" she said in a more mocking tone. "So how about it? I can already see that I'm going to have my hands full with it! What... with all those clumps sticking up as if you just got out of bed..."

As usual, Vali took his sweet time contemplating her words before speaking at all. "Fine..." he said before a long pause. "Against my better judgment, I'll allow you to take a look. This is usually not something I can deal with by myself, so your help could actually be somewhat useful I suppose."

Alice approached his muzzle once more with a pep in her step. "See? I knew that I'd find a way to make a big guy like you happy somehow! Now I just need to get on top of your head!"

Before Vali could speak again, Alice attempted to climb onto his muzzle. He was anything but amused as he watched her lean against his cold nose and try to vault herself onto it while kicking her feet in the air. Each attempt failed. Consequently, he brought his hand behind her to assist her ascent, holding her just long enough to bring her to the top of his head before letting go.

"Woah!" she said, blinking once. Alice then looked in all directions with the fur on his head nearly enveloping her feet. Although Vali's circular ears were proportionally small compared to the rest of his body, they still easily outsized her altogether. "Thanks, Vali!"

"Just don't slip and fall." he said, leaning back against several trees. "I'll try to stay still, but I might not be able to catch you if that happens."

Even though Vali was sitting on the ground, glancing downward gave Alice a quick reminder about her perilous position dozens of feet in the air. “Oh! Alright then... I’ll try to keep my balance then!”

Vali didn’t move a muscle and allowed a familiar silence to fill the air. “Well?” he eventually said. “I’m waiting.”

Alice leaned against one of his ears. “Um... I didn’t actually bring any of my brushes or combs up here... so...” She shuddered once his ear wiggled from her weight pressing against it. “Eeep!”

He winced. “Be careful... that’s a sensitive area you’re dealing with.”

After regaining her composure, Alice raised an eyebrow. “Your ear?”

“Yeah.” he said, shifting in place to make himself more comfortable. “I don’t know what you’re doing or what your grand plan is, but if you can straighten things out up there or untangle any knots, that’d be great.”

At his words, Alice ran her fingers across his ear. They glided across a mix of thin fur and soft cartilage, making Vali’s ear wiggle slightly.

He let out yet another growl. “Really? I told you that...” Vali stopped speaking as Alice rubbed behind his ear, making his tail shoot up. “Oh. That’s... huh.”

“Do you like it?” Alice asked, resuming her efforts. She made circular movements with her hands and other gentle motions to effectively rub behind his ear. “I can stop if you don’t.”

Vali closed his eyes. “Hmph. Keep going.”

Alice did her best to contain her sheer glee at these mere words, culminating in a wide smile. She continued to give his ear special attention, making it more like a loving massage in all but name. Although she occasionally had to stand on the very tips of her toes as time passed by, the ear’s size compared to her own body allowed her to reach and rub almost every part of it.

Vali simply kept his eyes closed and relished the sensation. His ears perked up for a moment once Alice switched to focusing on the other one, then she gave it an equal amount of tender, loving

care. Her small and delicate hands worked wonders on their own. Something about the soothing texture of her gloves and her finely manicured fingernails made them perfect for rubbing and scratching behind each ear. She also hummed as she went about the massage, making the experience even more soothing for the otherwise large and gruff man mesmerized by a tender touch from such a small and fragile creature...

Minutes seemed to pass by in an instant. What started as an unconscious growl from Vali quickly turned into a low and rumbling purr that only grew deeper over time.

“Oh my gods...” Alice whispered, hardly containing a giggle. “You’re purring!”

Vali’s sapphire eyes shot right back open as he stopped purring altogether.

Alice also froze.

“I think that’s enough of that...” he said in a monotone voice.

She frowned. “Aw. We can just pretend I didn’t say anything about the purring if you’re enjoying this so much!”

Vali stared off into the distance. “It’s not that. As much as I’d like to continue, I think we might be having company soon.”

She took a step back away from his ear. “Wait... really?”

“Look straight forward.” he said, staring at some dust clouds further down the road. “It looks like there’s a bunch of horses or something coming towards us. Probably a large human force.”

Alice took the chance to peek around his ear, recoiling once she saw it all. “Oh my!” she said, looking down at Vali’s muzzle. “What are we going to do?”

“We’re gonna get you somewhere safe for starters.” Vali said with a low growl. “I’ll try to outpace them at least. If not...” He paused and looked at his titanic mace and shield next to his helmet on the ground. Vali then grabbed his helmet by the eye sockets, staring at its icy glass shimmering in the sunlight. “I’ll scatter them like seeds in the wind.”