

Friends In Low Places

Part 20

Something fundamentally changed.

Any semblance of a purely platonic relationship vanished overnight. Farishta's body language told the story alone with the toothy smile on her face and her titanic tail swaying behind her. She clutched Kazem close to her chest in nothing but a loving embrace, pressing him against her huge heart with her furred fingers curling around his backside.

He shuddered a bit from hearing her powerful heartbeat. "Uh... I think that's enough..."

She finally relented, giving him room to stand on her palms once more. "Thank you so much for helping me get a brand new satchel, Kazem!"

The man in question glanced down at the ground. A familiar sight awaited him as an amused cordwainer and his assistant stared back up at him with smiles or smirks on their faces. "Technically you're the one who bought the damn thing..." Kazem said, looking over his shoulder. "I gave you some advice at best."

"And I would have passed up on this opportunity if it wasn't for your persistence!" Farishta replied, gesturing at a gigantic bag. "I mean... just look at it! It's perfect, just like my sandals!"

The satchel itself remained next to the wagon. It retained a mish-mash of materials ranging from wool, linen, and occasionally thin leather strips at crucial intersections. Not to mention a minimalistic metal clip. Although it outsized the wagon altogether, it was like a small yet crude purse from Farishta's perspective, outclassing her nearby bundle in both form and function.

Kazem scratched the back of his head as he gazed upon it. "How the hell did you lads get something so large outside Riverside's walls in the first place?"

The cordwainer laughed, covering his mouth with one hand. "It's a whole lot easier to transport and compress a bag whenever it's empty, you know? Nevermind its size! You should have seen it when we brought the whole thing out here and started preparing it for you two ahead of time!"

As Farishta admired the bag, she lowered Kazem to the ground. “Just give me a moment to transfer all my things, Kazem, then we’ll be ready for anything!”

He hopped off her hand accordingly, landing on the soft grass. Kazem then casually strolled toward the cordwainer as Farishta went about sorting through her bindle. “I’m still impressed that you managed this in a few days. How’d you do it?”

The cordwainer put his hands on his hips and chuckled. “They’re all trade secrets, I’m afraid!” He paused and placed a finger on his lips afterward. “I’m keeping my lips sealed for now, but my previous experience working with mergich and their commissions helped me to say the least. I will admit that I had to improvise a bit for cheap and easy solutions since you claim to be short on time, but I’m still really happy with the result since it’s perfectly functional for Farishta’s purposes!”

At these words, Kazem directed his attention to the new satchel again. The patchwork of materials made everything look ad-hoc as if the cordwainer utilized anything and everything he could get his hands on. “It does look a bit ugly...” he said, shrugging. “But I guess it works. Function over form.”

“Definitely better than your big old bindle, that’s for sure...” said the cordwainer, nodding. “I just wish I had more time to make things more... aesthetically pleasing.”

Farishta smiled. “I, for one, think it looks kind of cute! Its appearance is super unique!”

Kazem scoffed. “That’s one way to put it.”

Farishta sneered and shook her head. “Quiet, you.” Without another word, she transferred her prayer scroll and some black wraps to the satchel, and the extra space allowed her to pack everything together in a neat and orderly fashion. As she went about it, she found a small pocket near the top, which barely retained enough space to fit an entire person inside. Farishta’s eyes went wide as she used a clawed finger to spread it apart. “Oooo... what’s this little secret pocket for?”

The cordwainer placed his hands behind his back, looking proud of his handiwork. “I figured your companion would also appreciate some storage space for himself.”

“Oh, smart!” she said with a smile, disassembling her bindle. Anything remaining, whether it be her sparse provisions or the cloth composing the bindle itself, all went inside the new satchel. “Kazem has been needing a new home for quite a while now that I think about it! Hehe!”

Kazem perked his head up. "Say again?"

"I guess it could work for something like that..." said the cordwainer, scratching his chin. "But do whatever you see fit. I meant for it to be a nice place for him to store his personal possessions while keeping them separate from yours, but a person could theoretically fit inside that pocket!"

Kazem put his hands in his coat pockets. "I think my jacket is good enough for now. Would a person staying inside a space like that really be a good idea though?"

"We'll just have to find out in the future!" Farishta replied before picking up the colossal satchel. She dangled its single attached strap in the air with a few fingers before she slid it down her arm, holding it like a purse. "I just need to figure out how to carry it..." From there, Farishta grabbed her sizable tail. A few more maneuvers resulted in her sliding and tightening the strap around her tail until the satchel reached the base of it. A click from the minimalist metal clip, which was much like a belt buckle, marked the moment she sealed the deal. "And... there we go!" she said with her tail swishing. "I didn't know you designed it to be just like a tail pouch, but now it's super obvious!"

The cordwainer let out a nervous laugh. "Ahaha... ha... of course I did!"

His apprentice raised an eyebrow. "Really? I thought she was supposed to sling the whole thing over her shoulder or..."

The cordwainer elbowed his apprentice, making the boy immediately shut up. "I figured having only one strap would be easier..." he said in short order. "Gives it some... versatility. So a tail pouch is definitely a possibility that I had in mind!"

Kazem let out a sigh. "Is a tail pouch exactly what it sounds like? Because I thought it was supposed to be a simple satchel or something."

Farishta twirled in place, swooshing her tail until she fully rotated. Her immense stature and the resulting force caused a brief gush of wind, making the three little humans wince. "Tail pouches are even better!" she said before patting it down with a free hand. "They're like satchels, but I can take advantage of my big tail to wear it all the time like clothing! Quite convenient if you ask me!"

“Whatever works.” Kazem replied, extending his arms to the sides to shrug again. “I wish we had something like that earlier.”

“We used to have one just like it at the monastery before my previous mentor left...” Farishta said, looking away. “But better late than never!”

The cordwainer clasped his hands together. “Then I suppose that concludes our business together... for now at least.” He only stopped speaking to look to his left, watching his apprentice pack the wagon back up. “As always, it’s been a pleasure working with you, Farishta!”

Farishta beamed up at his words. “Likewise!”

With a wave, the cordwainer walked away. “Get in touch with me again if you ever find yourself in Riverside and need a custom commission! I’ll gladly do another one, especially if you pay so generously!”

She waved in return, twiddling her fingers. “I definitely will!”

Kazem crossed his arms and grunted. “I had a feeling you overpaid him...”

Both the cordwainer and his apprentice began pushing the wagon from behind, making their way back to Riverside.

The other two wasted no time. Farishta gradually plucked Kazem off the ground with her fingers, returning to a position where she held him on her open palm. “So what’s the plan, little man?”

Kazem rubbed his eyes as he regained his balance and bearings. “You tell me.”

“Well...” Farishta said, thinking to herself for a few moments. “Did you find anything out about where my amulet might have gone?”

His eyes went wide. “Ah, right. That. I got in touch with one of my... business contacts...”

“When did you do that?” Farishta asked, cocking her head to the right.

“While you were still sleeping...” Kazem claimed. “They want me to either stay in Riverside or to move towards the free city of Valentia. Should be somewhere to the northeast from here.”

Farishta frowned. “I didn’t know you were going out to talk to people while I was still asleep...”

“Eh... sorry?” he said with a shrug. “Still, the point is that it might be for the best if we keep moving rather than staying here. I think the mergich monster hunter who stole your amulet is heading north too, and I’d rather not follow or confront someone like that without some backup. For whatever it’s worth, I got some buddies in Valentia that could be useful to us too.”

Something seemed to sparkle in Farishta’s amethyst-purple eyes. “Oh? Do I finally get to meet some of your friends?”

Kazem groaned. “Friends isn’t exactly the right term, but I think I mentioned that before....”

“Why is that?” she asked, fluttering her eyes.

“They’re... not good people.” he said under his breath. “Don’t know how to say it politely.”

“Oh, so they’re like you?” she said giggling.

Kazem gave her a blank stare. “Honestly? Sort of.”

Farishta sighed. “Well... if you’re friends with them, then they can’t be all bad. Everyone has redeeming qualities, after all!”

“That’s not saying much.” Kazem replied, slumping his shoulders. “Even literal shit has redeeming qualities since it can be used as fertilizer or something.”

She shook her head. “That’s exactly what I’m trying to say, silly!”

He made a smug smirk. “That we can use shitty people as fertilizer?”

Farishta’s face contorted. “No, no, not at all! I meant that there’s always a little good in everyone, no matter how far they’ve fallen!”

“Sure...” Kazem said, shrugging. “Ignoring that, I take it that you have no issues with heading towards Valentia?”

Farishta took several steps back. “Of course not!” From there, she spoke while moving away from Riverside. “Especially if your friends can help me recover my amulet! So many people seem intent on stealing it for themselves for whatever the reason and I’m really getting quite sick of it!”

His eyes averted her piercing gaze. “I can only imagine.”

“At the very least we took care of all our preparations in Riverside...” she said, staring down at him. “You don’t need anything else before we continue our journey together, right?”

Kazem rubbed his chin, feeling some facial hair. “Not immediately. I might need to shave at worst since I’m starting to grow a stubble...”

Farishta giggled and held him closer to her eyes. “Oh, you’re right! I just noticed that you’re starting to grow a little, tiny beard on your face! That’s so cute!”

He grunted. “Usually I’m clean-shaven, but sometimes that all goes out the window once I’m traveling outside all the southern cities..”

“Well, don’t you worry!” she said with a smile. “I like it when you’re a little more furry!”

Kazem narrowed his eyes. “Right.”

“I’m serious!” Farishta replied, forming a toothy smirk. “It’s a good look. I wouldn’t lie about that to my little boyfriend either!”

“I... still need to get used to you calling me that...” he said before blood flushed his face.

She giggled. “If anything else, I’m still wondering what our relationship is going to entail!”

Kazem rolled his shoulders and straightened his posture more. “Your guess is as good as mine.”

Eventually, Farishta walked down a northern road leading away from Riverside. “Maybe that’s something we should talk about...?”

His head perked up. "I don't think much has changed beyond making things a little more official."

Farishta broke eye contact. "I just had some questions."

"Shoot." Kazem said, looking directly into her eyes. "Go for it."

She imitated him with a light nod. "How... um..."

He blinked a few times as she stopped speaking and looked away from him. "How what?"

Farishta's tail shot up a little. "How intimate will things be between us?"

Kazem refrained from answering for several long moments. "Depends."

"Depends on what?" she asked, breaking eye contact once more. "I'd say that we're already close, but... you know..."

"I don't." he replied, crossing his arms. "And I don't really know how it all works between mergich couples or pairs or whatever. Much less humans and mergich..."

Her eyes glanced at the sky. "We could... experiment."

His face almost turned red. "I don't wanna dive too deep into this yet. It might not even work out."

"Then what are we then?" Farishta asked with her face scrunching up. "Are we not mates?"

"More like... dating." he said, sliding his hands into his coat pockets. "I said it already, but now it's a boyfriend, girlfriend sort of deal. We both have a casual interest in each other and all that. Admittedly I'm not too good at this sort of stuff, but I think it'd be better if we took things slow since the circumstances surrounding our relationship are... highly unusual."

She frowned before looking down at him. "Does that mean I'm not allowed to mark you as my mate?"

Kazem raised his eyebrows. "Uh... what?" He shook his head. "How would you do that, exactly?"

A single fang stuck out from the corner of her mouth as she smirked. “I’d just rub you against me really hard until you had my scent. I could use the fur on my neck, my cheeks, my tail, or even my paws... whatever you would prefer! Just as long as you smell like me, other mergich will know that we’re close to each other!”

“I think I smell like you already!” he replied, smiling. “Especially since I’ve been sleeping on your big, fluffy belly.”

Farishta giggled with her tail swishing more quickly like it had a mind of its own. “That was just the tip of the iceberg! It’s going to take a more concentrated effort to mark you as mine!”

He smiled and looked straight ahead, just for the smile to vanish from his face. “Wait... Farishta...”

Her ears perked up. “What?” She looked straight ahead and stopped in place. “Oh my!”

Wild canines feasted on a dead horse. They surrounded it from all sides as they dug in, tearing out bloody chunks with their shark teeth before swallowing them whole. Only the massive feline approaching their general position made the entire pack scatter before gradually disappearing back into the woods, leaving their fresh kill on the side of the road.

Farishta frowned as she walked up to the dead horse. “The poor creature... I hope it didn’t suffer...” She closed her eyes. “And even the animals are afraid of me and my size it seems!”

Kazem squinted and stared down at the bloody carcass. “Is that...” His eyes went wide upon spotting the reins and saddlebags. “Is that my fucking horse?”

“I... well...” she said, sniffing the air. “It kind of looks and smells like it, yeah! It must have been slain recently by the looks of it too!”

He groaned at her words. “Great. We probably missed it getting mauled by a few minutes. At least I can get my other stuff back now, but that’s also one mystery finally solved. The stupid horse pretty much just ran off and got itself killed apparently.”

Farishta’s mouth went agape as a huge smile formed on her face. “And now we have fresh food too!” She only closed her mouth to lick her thin, black lips. “The gods work in such mysterious ways, but

I suppose they have a grand plan to make everything work out in the end! Life's funny like that! I'll just... help myself and pack everything stored on the horse into my new satchel!"

Kazem looked up at Farishta with nothing but disbelief. "Please don't tell me that you're going to eat that fucking thing."

She looked at him, tilting her head to the side. "Why not?"

"Because it's a bloody dead horse on the side of the road?!" Kazem said, throwing his arms in the air. "That's disgusting!"

Farishta's ears folded against her head. "I'd rather not see perfectly good meat go to waste. Personally, I think it'd be disrespectful to the horse and the sacrifice it made today if the bugs and worms ate it instead!"

He rubbed his eyes. "Farishta..."

"And we need to conserve our rations too!" she resumed with her tail slumping down. "If I don't eat it, someone or something else will! What's the point in being picky about my prey?"

"Just don't." he said, sighing. "Leave it for the dogs and any other vermin."

Farishta practically pouted. "Okay, fine! I'd rather not make you uncomfortable..."

Kazem nodded. "Thank you. To compensate, I'll buy you something for dinner later on since we can do much better than some sort of roadkill."

Her tail and ears alike perked up. "Really? You'd do that for me?"

"We can call it a date." he said with a smile. "It might not be today... maybe we could do it when we reach Valentia, but we gotta start small I suppose. Especially if we wanna commit to some sort of deeper relationship later on."

She closed her eyes and made another wide smile. "Oh, that sounds absolutely wonderful, Kazem! I just hope the portions aren't small!"

He chuckled. "I'll definitely find a way to fill your belly, that's for sure."

Farishta giggled in return before crouching to the ground. "I can't wait to see how you'll manage that! Do you have a plan already?"

"I tend to figure things out as I go along," he said with a shrug. "You know that. Maybe more and more places will cater to mergich as we head north. Let's just call it all a big surprise for now."

"Then I can't wait to reach Valentia!" she said with a wry smile. "But for now, do you want me to put all those things hanging off the horse into my new satchel?"

Kazem nodded again. "Yeah, that'd work."

"Alrighty then," she said before looking at the horse, "But I'll need to put you down for a few seconds!"

"I have a better idea," he said, smirking. "Alternatively, why don't you try to put me in the small pocket the cordwainer made for me specifically?"

She opened her mouth in apparent surprise. "Oh? What did you have in mind?"

Kazem stretched out his arms, popping his back. "I figured it might be a nice place to take a nap. Don't know if it will work out just yet, but there's only one way to find out."

Farishta giggled, unintentionally revealing her fangs. "Indeed! Well... let's find out, shall we?"

He nodded. "After you."

With that, Farishta undid the metal clip on her new tail pouch. She simultaneously opened it with one hand and brought Kazem to the opening with her remaining one acting as a mobile platform. Afterward, she used her free hand to expand the small pocket so that Kazem could fit inside much more easily.

Kazem popped his knuckles against his palm as Farishta's fingers curled around his backside. "Huh. Looks like an enclosed hammock in there... all white too."

“Just like me!” she said, snickering. “Go on ahead and hop right in! I’ll keep you safe!”

With some hesitation, Kazem jumped off her open palm, eventually landing inside the small pocket. His fall was short-lived. The soft fabric broke it before he rolled across the interior for several seconds. He then spread out his arms once he stopped moving to fully recline on his back, looking back up at Farishta’s huge face peering down at him.

She giggled again. “So graceful, Kazem! Are you comfy in there?”

He looked to his sides, feeling the fabric with his fingers. “It’s a bit cramped, but there’s more than enough space. It’s actually kind of nice. Just needs some furnishings.”

She smirked and let go of the bag, allowing it to rest against her tail. “My belly is definitely a better place to rest though!”

Kazem reeled a bit as he shifted in place. “You’re probably right. Just don’t sit down while I’m inside here and there won’t be any problems. The damned bag is almost directly under your big butt and I’d rather not turn that into a life-threatening situation.”

“Don’t worry, my little mouse.” she said with a mischievous smirk. “I actually like it when you’re this close to my fluffy butt, so there definitely won’t be any issues!”

He shook his head, smiling. “Ah? You’re planning to do something like that?”

Farishta started sealing the small pocket. “Oh, you wish! Hmph.” She then closed it altogether, causing darkness to envelop Kazem’s new environment. “Is this fine, by the way?”

Kazem closed his eyes and let out a sigh. “Gives me more privacy, that’s for sure.”

“But you’re not uncomfortable?” she asked while still out of sight.

“Nope.” he said, relaxing a little. “This suits me just fine.”

Farishta began moving again. “Okay, good! I’m gonna put the saddle bags with the rest of my things for you to sort out later. Do you wanna come out now or do you just wanna rest in there?”

Kazem stayed silent for a time. “I think I might try taking a nap inside here, actually.”

She made some more noise as she tossed the saddlebags and any other miscellaneous items into the satchel’s primary compartment. A simple click mere moments later let Kazem know when she closed it altogether. “In that case, just holler if you need anything or if you want me to let you out!”

“Just wake me up when we reach Valentia.” he said, crossing his legs to kick back and relax.

Farishta let out yet another laugh. “Will do! I’ll try not to disturb you!”

Each subsequent step Farishta took moved the bag a bit. As a result, Kazem’s environment constantly shifted a little, much like being on a big boat. Although the bag remained mostly stationary near the base of Farishta’s tail, movements became an inevitability. Any little noise she made also became immediately apparent. Whether it be her humming or the constant sound of her new sandals constantly hitting the ground, Kazem heard it all from inside the small pocket.

Despite this, Kazem gradually dozed off. The constant rhythm of Farishta’s movements combined with the simple sounds of nature, such as the birds chirping outside, lulled him to sleep over time.