

# Friends In Low Places

## Part 26

Vali's vitrum armor sparkled under the setting sun. A combination of his sheer stature and icy armor caught plenty of human attention as he approached a major coastal city...

Some merchants moved their wagons out of his way. Other peasants looked up at Vali with wide eyes as his huge body loomed over them, creating a shadow over their positions. He paid them little to no mind, nearly trampling over some carts and horses as others scrambled away from his feet.

Alice let out a gasp. "Ugh! Vali... there's people on the roads! Be more careful, please!"

Vali grunted. "Then they should move."

"They are moving!" she replied, putting a free hand on her hip. "Like... you almost stepped on someone already, and I think the rest are freaking out!"

"Not my problem." he said with a hiss, closing the distance between himself and the human city.

Alice sighed and shook her head. "Ah. You can really be a bully when you wanna be, Vali. Who hurt you? I mean... why are you so mean to people?"

Vali let out another grunt, rolling his eyes. "Do I need to remind you that I've technically kidnapped you? You're my hostage."

"Well, that's no excuse for being a big meanie!" she said before throwing her hands in the air.

He rolled his eyes before curling his fingers around her. "And you're just a spoiled little princess."

Alice squirmed in his grasp, moving against his thumb and fingers. "That... what does that have to do with anything, Vali? You're just avoiding my questions now!"

Vali's thumb pressed against her back, making her let out a little gasp. "It means you're lucky that I put up with you and your little antics. If anything else, I've been too nice so far."

“As if!” she said, playfully pouting a bit. “I’ve been pampering you and your fluffy butt this entire time, yet you’re still just a big and grumpy cat!”

“Pah. I don’t see what that has to do with anything.” he replied, narrowing his eyes.

Alice looked away. “I just thought if you had a more...” She paused and used a gloved hand to caress his thumb. “Soft and delicate touch from a little lady, you might be nicer to humans! I don’t know.”

Vali sighed. “You’ve been something else, woman. I’ll say that much.”

“But where are we?” she asked, perking her head up. “Wait... is this Valentia?!”

He approached the city's perimeter, making some guards stiffen up or ready their weapons. Others also stared or gawked at his massive presence. “That’d be right...” Vali replied, circling the edge of the city. “I have some business to attend to here.”

Alice blinked. “But how? Traveling all the way out here takes multiple days by horse and carriage!”

“You’ve been here before?” he asked, allowing the question to linger in the air. “I guess it doesn’t matter. You see, I’m not a little human like you. I’m a mergich. We’ve never had a need for horses and carts. We can just walk anywhere we need to go in a fraction of the time it’d take for a human to get somewhere.”

She spent a moment glancing at the ground, watching him walk. Just a single step covered a vast distance with each one he took. “I... I see. Are we here about the amulet or whatever?”

As they spoke, Vali made his way to the mergich quarter. “Yeah. I also need someone to take a look at my armor after some... recent scuffles.” He paused with his free hand idly plucking away a crossbow bolt, freeing it from the armor covering his lower torso. “It shouldn’t take too long. Just some basic maintenance and gathering some info is all we’re here for.”

Alice beamed up at his words. “Oh, oh! Can I go shopping while you do all of that?!”

“What?” he said, stopping in place altogether. “Are you out of your mind?”

“What kind of question is that?” she asked in return, letting out a huff. “I haven’t been shopping since you abducted me, and this is one of the richest cities in all the lands! I need to buy some new clothes and stuff, so what’s the harm in letting me do some window shopping while you’re busy?”

He muttered under his breath. “Are girls from every species like this?”

Her face scrunched up before she put her hands on her hips. “I’ll have you know that I’m a young lady! It’s one thing if you mock me for being small, but now you’re going too far!”

Vali looked to the side. “That’s not what I meant. Your behavior just reminds me of mergich kittens at times...”

She scoffed. “Oh? So I’m like a kitten to you? Is that what you’re saying?”

He shook his head. “That’s not what I... ugh. It just feels like it at most if you’re high maintenance.”

“I’m your little kitten then?” Alice asked, giving him a sly smile. “That’s a silly way to say it, Vali!”

“This conversation is over.” he said, letting out a low growl. “Beyond that, I doubt it’s a good idea to let you wander around the city alone.”

Alice crossed her arms. “Why not? I thought you didn’t care about trying to ransom me anymore...”

He let out a sigh. “It’s not that. It’s just that it might be dangerous. I don’t need you getting lost or robbed or kidnapped or... something. If you stay with me, I can at least protect you.”

She put a hand on her head with her palm facing outwards, lifting a foot in the air behind her to make a dramatic pose. “Oh, yes... imagine if some big dastard abducted a little lady like me...”

Vali curled his fingers around her some more to prevent her from falling. “You’re just proving my point. The fact that you’re the daughter of a nobleman will just make you a target too.”

“So that means I’m still your prisoner?” she asked, watching Vali as he finally entered the mergich quarter. “I’m a grown woman! If I wanna go shopping, you should let me go shopping! Come on, Vali! Do you want me to start screaming bloody murder?”

“I’m just trying to protect you.” he said, closing his eyes before letting out another sigh. “You don’t have to actually act like a spoiled kitten.”

Alice leaned back, looking at the sky with half-lidded eyes. “Help! HELP! This big, evil furry man is holding me against my will!”

Her words immediately caught the attention of the few other mergich present. They gave Vali odd looks with a fairly buff fisherman rising to his full height, not fazed by Vali’s weapons and armor.

Vali’s tail drooped down in embarrassment. “Okay, okay... fine! If you wanna run off by yourself, don’t say I didn’t warn you.” With that, he slowly lowered her to the ground. “Just be back here before the sun fully sets. Understood?”

Alice kicked her boots in the air before they came into contact with the ground. She took a few steps with a skip in her step, turning around to face Vali with a wide smile on her face. “Gotcha!” she said, clasping her hands together. “Thank you, Vali! You’re so big and bad that it shouldn’t be terribly hard to find you later on!”

He scratched an area behind his tail and grunted. “Just don’t make me regret this.”

Alice winked and blew Vali a kiss before walking away with a skip in her step.

It aroused another low growl from the man before he focused on the other mergich and their merchant stalls. Many sold crafts and goods originating from mergich monasteries if they didn’t produce them themselves. Larger-than-life cheese wheels, entire barrels of fine wine, and decadent glass wares that could outsize individual humans altogether.

Vali’s blue eyes sparkled once he saw some vitrum sparkling at one familiar booth.

Meanwhile, a visibly infuriated Mina continued closing up shop with her tail swishing behind her.

“You closed?” he asked, crossing his arms.

Mina looked up at him with her tail shooting up. Afterward, she relaxed and let out a sigh. “Ah. I haven’t seen you in months, Vali. I guess when it rains, it pours if trouble keeps showing up to my front door...”

His head perked up. “What happened?”

She let out a low hiss. “I don’t know where I should start. First one of the exalted shows up out of nowhere to pay a visit, then some idiot humans and a stupid kobold tried to steal from my stall of all places. It might have even been the plan from the very start if I was distracted!”

Vali cocked his head to the side. “Exalted? You mean one of the monks?”

“Not just any monk!” Mina replied, letting out a sigh. “She has purple eyes... the mark of Rugen. Poor woman got taken advantage of by some human thief and his friends, and now she’s bawling her eyes out in my house! I don’t have much of a choice but to close early today...”

“Sounds familiar...” he said, scratching the back of his head. “Regardless, I was hoping you could take a look at my vitrum plates to repair or replace them. You know I’m always good for the gold.”

Mina shook her head. “I moved those to my house first after dealing with the human thief and his antics. Just follow me and I’ll see what I can do to touch up your gear from there.”

He stopped in place. “I... don’t know if that’s a good idea...”

“Do you want your vitrum armor fixed or not?” she asked, putting her hands on her hips. “Because the gods know I’m one of the only people that can do it! Otherwise you’ll have to ask Mother Meridith for help.”

His ears perked up, but his reaction remained indecipherable with his helmet covering his face. “That woman... scares me.”

Mina sneered. “Especially after she banned you from her monastery.” She paused to gesture at him. “But come on. Follow me! I don’t mind serving one of my best customers after hours.”

With some hesitance, Vali began to trail behind her. “Just don’t want any trouble with more monks, because that’s what always happens whenever I stumble upon those self-righteous pricks.”

“She’s super nice!” Mina said, sighing. “Don’t worry. I doubt she’d start a fight, much less harm a fly!”

With those bold words, Mina opened the door to her shabby shack. This revealed Farishta slumped down at the dinner table with tears still dribbling from her watery eyes. However, Farishta’s entire demeanor changed upon spotting Vali. It started with her looking at Vali before her eyes dilated. She immediately stopped sobbing... slowly rising from her chair with her ears folding against her head, then let out a hiss before she said a single word...

“You!”

Vali remained unfazed. “Why is it always the monks?”

On the contrary, Mina stiffened up. “Oh! Do you two... uh... know each other?”

Farishta gave them both a cold glare. “That... that is the man who stole my amulet. The one my father entrusted me to protect with my life. And now... now he shows up again during one of the lowest points in my life.”

“Well... maybe you should have minded your own business.” he said, giving her a cold stare in return. “Then maybe I wouldn’t have felt the need to take a dangerous artifact off your hands if you weren’t such an airhead. Why would anyone ever entrust one with you to begin with?”

Farishta balled her hands into fists, letting out a low growl. “Where is it?”

Vali rolled his shoulders. “Mmm. That’s only for me to know and you to-”

“WHERE’S MY AMULET?!”

Her sudden shouting caught him by surprise. Other mergich immediately took notice with a few approaching the scene, including a mergich guard and Mina’s husband.

Mehrak scratched behind one of his ears. “What’s going on, Mina?”

Farishta pointed a clawed finger at Vali. “That man stole from me!” Her tail slumped to the ground behind her. “He... he assaulted me...!”

Her composure broke once more before she continued to cry, rubbing her eyes.

Everyone else surrounding Vali, Mina included, gave him a death stare.

“You attacked the exalted one?!” Mina asked, her jaw going ajar.

“She attacked me first...” he said, arousing a few gasps from the others.

A green kobold watching from a distance darted away once other mergich slowly surrounded Vali.

Vali let out a throaty growl. “Fuck.”

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Kazem let brandy burn down his throat before he slammed the empty glass on the bar counter.

“I just don’t see the big deal...” Amir said, smiling and shaking his head. “I mean... I never took you for a mergich fetishist, you know? Even then, there’s plenty of other fish in the sea!”

Kazem gave him a dirty look. “You’re a bastard, you know that?”

Amir chuckled, flashing a wide smile. “I’ll have you know that I come from a long line of reputable and prestigious bastards! Besides, what did I do wrong?”

“All you had to do was keep your damn mouth shut...” Kazem said, looking away. “But you couldn’t. You wouldn’t. That tongue of yours is just as bad as a dagger in my back!”

Amir held his hands up. “Relax, Kazem! I bought you a drink to make peace!”

Kazem shook his head. “You ruined a relationship I had with the sweetest woman I’ve ever met in my life.”

“I don’t see how it’s all my fault!” Amir replied, holding a hand over his heart. “The lass would have found out the truth sooner or later. You’re just lucky she took the news well. I didn’t know if you were going to come back to us alive after she hauled you off to the beach or something...”

Kazem raised an eyebrow. “What did you think she was going to do?”

Amir shrugged. “I don’t know. Toss you into the ocean? Crush your heart?”

Kazem grunted. “Ugh. She’d never do any of that, and I still remember what happened last time I saw you...”

“Oh, what now?” Amir asked, rolling his eyes. “I buy you brandy with my own precious money, and you want me to sit here and listen to you ramble about how I’m the villain?”

“You bailed on us.” Kazem said, staring him down. “Once the heist went to hell, you left everyone else to fend for themselves before we all ended up in the imperial dungeons!”

Amir looked left to right as other patrons eavesdropped. He held a finger to his lips. “Keep it down, Kazem. I know you’re angry... and maybe a bit tipsy... but what’s done is done. We had to scatter when the heist went wrong, and I accidentally spilled the beans with your mergich girl. But that’s all in the past! The entire gang is nearly reunited, and I’m sure I can make it up to you somehow!”

Kazem rubbed his eyes. “I... almost want to believe you, but I don’t wanna fall for your crap again.”

“I’m not trying to trick you!” Amir replied, letting out a sigh. “I’m just telling you that it’s not the end of the world. Heck, maybe you can even salvage things with Farishta!”

Kazem stayed silent for a time, glancing at the ground. “We’ll see. What’s the plan, exactly?”

Amir made a wide grin, clasping his hands together. “Glad you asked! You see, there’s an abandoned fort to the east. It’s more or less in ruins on the border, but it’s our new base of operations. The Grand Enchantress herself is awaiting us there, and she’s formed an alliance with Intermarian nobles and their knights to track down the mergich bounty hunter who kidnapped a baron’s daughter!”



Kazem's eyes went wide. "Wait... the Grand Enchantress is right by Valentia?"

Amir nodded. "But of course! She was waiting for you, apparently. I just wish she told us the mergich woman had the amulet, but you know how enchantress is. She likes to keep everyone in the dark and information is on a need to know basis... plain paranoia if you ask me."

Kazem gave him a blank stare. "Yeah, I can only imagine why she won't tell you sensitive information."

Amir smirked before rolling his eyes. "Touché. Anyway, the mergich bounty hunter apparently has the amulet now... at least based on what the enchantress told me so far. The plan is for a joint effort between the Astranian Empire and the Kingdom of Intermaria to put down this monster of a man for good, then the emperor will officially pardon us once this is all said and done!"

"I'd imagine that a mergich shouldn't be too hard to track down..." Kazem said, watching a bartender take his empty glass away.

Amir nodded once more. "Yeah. Last I heard, others spotted him heading somewhere to the north, but he could be anywhere by now! Apparently he's still holding a baron's daughter for ransom, so finding or identifying her might help."

Kazem scratched his chin. "Do we know anything about her?"

"Her name is Alice Autumnfall..." Amir replied, taking a sip of his brandy. "She's got pigtails. Blonde. Blue eyes. Silk clothes and other pricey garments. Allegedly she was supposed to be married off to a count before the bounty hunter outright kidnapped her over a lack of payment."

"So I've heard..." Kazem said, clenching a free hand into a fist. "Already had an encounter with the man. He roughed up Farishta before taking her amulet, so I know all about him."

Amir's head perked up. "Oh? Sounds... personal."

Kazem looked at him with a fire in his eyes. "Very."

"I suppose it's only a matter of time then!" Amir said, checking the watch on his wrist. "It might take us a while since the man could be anywhere by now, but I'm certain we'll find out where he's

heading. My guess is that he's going to one of the mergich monasteries if he didn't sell the ouroboros amulet off or something already."

Suddenly, Andry scrambled into the room. She almost knocked a chair over as she darted toward the two. A combination of her swift speed and carelessness nearly made several patrons spill their drinks as they walked around or conversed at the various wooden tables.

"AMIR!" she said, panting with her serpentine tongue sticking out.

Amir stiffened up a bit, blinking a few times. "Goodness, gracious! What's gotten into you, Andry?!"

"The mergich bounty hunter..." she said, hissing. "He's here!"

Kazem's eyes went wide. "What?"

Amir rapidly gulped down whatever remained of his brandy. "Ah... by the gods, where?!"

Andry made a gesture with a clawed hand. "In the mergich quarter! Some fancy-smancy human lady he carried is also frolicking down the streets now..."

Both Amir and Kazem promptly rose from their seats. Amir stared at David, who awaited them at the entrance with his arms crossed like a bouncer or bodyguard. Amir just had to nod before David nodded in return, joining the group as they all made their way outside.

Kazem lowered his head a little. "You said he was carrying someone, Andry?"

Andry's tail twitched behind her. "Yeah, yeah! She looked all proper and fancy and stuff!"

Soon the group found themselves in the middle of a wide street. Buildings flanked it from both sides with many people and their carriages occasionally moving up and down it.

One young woman stood out amid the crowd. She had a pair of blonde pigtails, bright blue eyes, and fingerless silk gloves. Only leather boots stood out from her other silky attire.

Amir approached her first. He took off his hat, kneeling to the ground like a noble knight. “Miss Autumnfall! Is that truly you in the flesh?”

The young woman in question stopped walking, momentarily tilting her head to the side. “Huh? Who are you?” She paused and put her hands over her face. “How do you know my name?”

Andry flashed a menacing grin full of sharp fangs in an attempt to smile.

“We’re here to rescue you!” Amir said, watching David move behind the woman. “Or more like... we were supposed to. Did the mergich let you go?”

Alice let out a sigh of relief. “Oh... there’s no need to worry about that anymore!”

Kazem blinked. “Why not? Word has spread far and wide that he kidnapped you...”

Alice scratched her head. “Are you all... together?” She stopped speaking to shake her head. “Nevermind that! I’m no longer in any real danger. Vali lets me come and go as I please, so he’s not holding me against my will or anything!”

Amir’s noble demeanor completely collapsed as his shoulders slumped down. “Excuse me?”

“Yeah!” Alice said, smiling and nodding. “He’s a very nice guy once you get to know him!”

Amir rose back to his feet, dusting off his coat. “Well then... it’s truly a relief that you’re safe, Miss Autumnfall, but you need to come with us. Your family has been worried sick about you!”

Alice took a step back. “Oh, thank you... but there’s no real need! I’m... happy. So just tell my father that I’m fine, and that there’s no need to send more people looking for me!”

Kazem and Amir just glanced at each other for a moment.

“Now what?” Kazem asked, frowning.

Amir looked at him with half-lidded eyes. “Plan B.”

Alice took another step back, just to bump into David, who dwarfed her altogether.

Amir snapped his fingers. “David! Seize that woman... for her own safety of course! She has been bewitched by the mergich!”

Alice’s jaw went ajar. “What? No, no... I’m fine!”

David promptly grabbed her with both hands, holding her down.

Alice started to scream. “AHHHHH!”

From there, Amir casually handed Andry a bundle of rope. “Here, go tie her up.”

Andry chortled as she snagged the rope with her clawed hands. “Ohoho... gladly!”

Kazem just watched on in disbelief as Andry wrapped a rope around Alice’s hands and legs. “Did we really have to do this in broad daylight?”

Amir laughed. “It’s Valentia, Kazem! Folks here mind their own business.”

True to his word, everyone else actively avoided them on the side of the road.

Soon David slung Alice over his shoulder, and she could do nothing but struggle and squirm.

“Let me go!” she said, wincing. “SOMEONE! Anyone! Help me!” Alice paused, and the light left her eyes as everyone else within the proximity ignored the ongoing commotion. “Vali! VALI!”

“Good gods, can someone gag her too?” Amir asked, casually pulling out a handkerchief. “Kazem! Be a dear, would you?”

Kazem gave him a bewildered look before he took it without thinking too much about it. “Uh... would you mind telling me why we’re kidnapping her again?”

Amir gestured at an alley. “She’s with the mergich man of her own free will and volition it seems. That gives me an idea! If he’s in the mergich quarter, maybe he’ll come looking for her!”

Kazem’s face scrunched up. “And... have you thought about what to do if he shows up to kill us?!”

“Honestly, I’m just making it up as I go along...” Amir said, scratching his rear end. “But onwards! We must return to the Grand Enchantress with haste!”

As they spoke, David and Andry made off like bandits as they moved into the alleyway. Alice continued to scream her head off...

“VALI!” she said with her face scrunching up. “Ugh... not this again!”

Kazem hesitantly followed Amir into the alley as well. “I just hope you know what you’re doing. I don’t think even the enchantress herself can protect us from the bounty hunter... I’ve seen him in action for myself.”

Amir made a dismissive wave. “It’ll be fine! Don’t worry. This isn’t all of us!”

With that, the thieves made their exit. Kazem awkwardly held the handkerchief with one hand as others stopped in place, expecting him to bind and gag the poor woman with it.

Kazem eventually tossed the handkerchief onto Andry’s muzzle. “Let the kobold do it.”

Andry snapped at it with her jaws, holding it with her mouth. Something flickered in her golden eyes as her tail wagged behind her like a dog. “Yay!”

Alice could only look on in horror as Andry approached her with the handkerchief in one hand and another rope in the other... all while David firmly held her down during the process.