

# Friends In Low Places

## Part 4

An unlikely duo embarked on a journey to the north.

Kazem himself remained on his horse. He focused on the dirt road in front of him with the sun setting on the horizon. Occasionally, a familiar sound thumped behind him each time Farishta took a single step, maintaining a walking pace on par with his mount. Looking over his shoulder, Kazem found her glancing at the ground with her ears folding down.

“You alright?” he asked. “Figured you’d be happy about finally leaving things behind.”

Farishta sighed. “I’m fine. It’s just that... I don’t know. I said this already, but I’ve never been this far away from the monastery before, so I might be second guessing myself...”

“But you did a little song and dance when trying to convince me to let you tag along.” replied Kazem, smirking a little. “You twirled on your toes, swung your fighting stick around, and everything else to put on a big show!”

“You’re so mean!” she said, smiling and rolling her eyes. “But at least you’re actually treating me like a normal person already...”

He found himself at a loss of words for a while. “I am?”

She looked to the side. “Yeah. Usually smaller people act nervous around me.”

Kazem couldn’t help but dart his eyes between Farishta and her surroundings. She happened to be a living anomaly, all things considered. Although just one of her feet outsized Kazem and his horse combined, her footsteps still made minimal noise, barely leaving imprints anywhere she walked. They could still easily hear and talk to one another despite their massive size differences. Her voice lacked a deep pitch befitting for someone huge as she spoke in an oddly normal tone of voice like any other human woman, whether through magical or mundane means.

“Like... do you ever feel like you don’t really belong anywhere?” resumed Farishta, fluffy tail drooping downward. “As if you’re just some sort of freak?” She broke eye contact. “A big weirdo?”

“I guess I am the loner, drifter type.” answered Kazem in a stoic tone.

“That’s kind of what I’m trying to say,” she said, sighing, “But not quite!”

Kazem scratched his chin in contemplation. “You’re practically a frost giant as far as I’m concerned. I guess that’d make even the most normal crap hard to do in your day-to-day life.”

Farishta let out a huff. “Exactly! Because of that, humans have always treated me... differently.” She paused, allowing her smile to gradually disappear from her face. “I think most fear me. The monastery was one of the only places where I could actually feel normal since everything was actually around my size, and I even befriended some of the nearby locals with enough time, but now I’m leaving that all behind to venture into the unknown!”

“To find your father, right?” asked Kazem before focusing on the road once more. “Or just your people in general? Either way, I don’t really see what’s wrong with that when you can always come back.”

Farishta frowned. “That’s my dilemma. Something could happen to the monastery or Ashbourne while I’m gone. Worse yet, I don’t even know if my people are really out there anymore, so it could all be a complete waste of my time and energy. I waited and waited as my father instructed, but so much time has passed by, and now the world has changed so much!”

“Dennis did mention something about mergich mercenaries,” replied Kazem with a frown, “But I’ve never seen anything like that in the south. I also wasn’t really sure if mergich were a myth or a product of pure imperial propaganda when I originally showed up to the monastery.”

“Well...” she said, staring into the adjacent forest. “I’ve also noticed that mergich are somewhat rare in these lands. According to others, my kind haven’t been nearly as prominent on this continent ever since you humans invented those little... fire stick... things.”

Kazem reached for his pistol. “You mean blackpowder weapons?”

“I think so?” she said, twiddling her thumbs. “At one point my people were unrivaled regarding their martial prowess, then suddenly fire lances and cannons meant that tinier people could fight back so much more effectively!”

He promptly retrieved his handgun, holding it out for emphasis. “Humans usually call them firearms, Farishta.”

She squinted and stared at the pistol in question. “And that’s yours?”

Kazem shrugged as usual. “I snagged it off a noble.”

His wheel lock weapon had not one but two barrels. One remained rifled while the other stayed smoothbore in an over-under configuration. An attached ramming rod matched the decor, such as ivory grips, gold engravings, and mechanical mechanisms keeping the hand cannon locked and loaded.

Farishta’s amethyst eyes beamed up as she gazed upon it. “Woah! I saw you pull that out earlier, but I didn’t realize it was so pretty!” She brought a clawed hand to her furred chin. “It almost looks like a priceless piece of art from what little I can see of it from here! It must have been quite expensive... unless you got a good deal on it, of course!”

“Oh yeah.” answered Kazem, rolling his eyes. “Five-finger discount. The previous owner wasn’t really using it anyway, so he won’t be missing it.”

Farishta’s tail swayed behind her. “I’m hoping that isn’t the case with my amulet...” She stopped speaking for several seconds to sigh at her own words. “Forgive me for the negative comment, but the gods can be twisted like that sometimes. Especially if my father is still alive and decides to show up to the monastery immediately after I decide to go looking for him!”

“I wouldn’t count on your deadbeat dad making a sudden appearance if he left to get milk or whatever, then didn’t return for centuries.”

She scoffed. “Oh, you.”

“But more seriously,” Kazem said, returning his pistol to a holster. “What’s up with that? Is there more to it than him just abandoning you at the monastery?”

Farishta’s eyes narrowed. “I wouldn’t use the word abandoned!”

He reeled from witnessing this slight hint of anger. “Maybe that’s not the right vocabulary, but he did leave you there by yourself, right?”

Farishta fiddled with her ouroboros necklace. “I... hardly remember, really. It was all so confusing. My father had an armed entourage, and he entrusted me with this amulet before leaving me at the monastery. He promised to return in the future.” She glared at the ground once more. “Another mergich woman living there raised me and taught me how to live off the land, but she decided to leave one day, claiming that our people originated from an island to the far north and that she intended to return to it rather than staying at what she referred to as a far-off outpost.”

“So you took over her responsibilities from there?” asked Kazem, cocking his head to the side. “Might need a recap.”

“Pretty much!” she said, nodding. “She wanted me to go with her, but I intended to keep waiting for my father. Then I just assisted pilgrims visiting holy sites for a few centuries before finally deciding to leave the monastery myself. If anything else, I’m hoping to find answers now... but I’m also a bit nervous. What if I cause you problems or other humans end up being terrified of me?”

He made a dismissive wave with one hand. “I’m sure it’ll all work out in the end.”

In response, Farishta tilted her head. “Really?”

“With my brains and your brawn, I really doubt anyone will give us too many issues.” Kazem said with some confidence. “As you said, your people were formidable for a reason. I’ve heard lots of old legends about one man mergich armies or others acting as living siege weapons if they could pick up and toss boulders at castles among other tall tales.”

Farishta’s tail shot up. “I... wouldn’t consider myself a one woman army, but I see your point!”

Kazem chuckled. “I’m not trying to get you riled up since I know you’re more of a gentle giant. You know, ignoring your taste for dragons. Just saying most will have second thoughts about starting something with a mergich.”

She laughed a little as well. “I guess you’re right! As long as we stick together, we’ll probably be able to solve any problem we stumble across!”

“Now you’re speaking my language!” he said with a smirk, which vanished upon spotting the glimmering gemstones of her golden necklace. His eyes averted her gaze as he looked at the scarlet skyline. “On that note, it is getting rather late...”

“Are we going to stop and make camp then?” asked Farishta, halting for a moment.

He made a circular motion with one hand. “Something like that.”

With time, the two came across a clearing adjacent to the road. Kazem directed his horse toward it. Once he went off the main path, Farishta dutifully followed him, where they found themselves surrounded by short grasses and some clustered trees acting as physical barriers from several sides.

“This is a decent place to set up camp if we...”

Kazem’s words were disrupted by Farishta promptly dropping her knapsack, causing a more heavy thump to fill the air as it flattened dry grass.

Farishta herself stood on the tips of her digitigrade toes and stretched, bringing an arm behind her back. “It’s about time! I haven’t walked this much in decades...” She wasted no time retrieving her staff from the knapsack, tossing it aside, and eventually sitting down in the center of the clearing. “What about you, Kazem?”

In a somewhat default manner, he shrugged. “I’m no stranger to the roads.”

“But aren’t you tired though?” she asked, fluttering her eyes a little. “We both went through a lot today. I can sleep here, but I’m not so certain about your own arrangements!”

“Gotta scout the area a little first.” replied Kazem, looking away. “Make sure it’s safe. Won’t really be able to sleep peacefully otherwise.”

In return, Farishta sneered. “I have a pretty sharp sense of smell and hearing if you’re concerned about someone or something trying to bother us!”

Kazem brought his horse to a stray tree a decent distance from the others. “It’s not just that.” He hopped off the saddle, going up and over before grabbing the horse by the reins. “Figuring out what’s surrounding us might be useful to know in general.”

“Suit yourself!” she said, yawning a bit. “I’ll be getting some shut-eye if you need anything, though.”

From there, Farishta utilized her knapsack as a pillow. It cushioned her head as she slowly lowered herself to the ground, fully reclining against the grass, and she only tilted to the side to give her sizable tail some space as it resumed slightly swaying behind her.

As for Kazem, he went about tying his horse to the tree to keep it in place. A fresh apple retrieved from his jacket allowed him to feed the creature something for its hard work as he stroked its mane. Afterward, Kazem returned to the main road, putting some distance between himself and Farishta as he walked down it, sticking to the sidelines and immersing himself in shadows.

Dawn transitioned to nightfall.

Eventually, Kazem retrieved a familiar orb. He began poking and prodding the otherwise inert object. “What’s the magic sentence for this damned thing again?”

The orb proceeded to flash to life. A woman wearing a golden mask and an orange hood encapsulated the center. Whether it be an illusion or not, a fire rose from the top of her head before the Grand Enchantress spoke in a stern tone.

“The code phrase is snake eyes, imbecile.”

Kazem shrugged. “Whatever.”

“And I’m assuming communication is going to be complicated further by the presence of this mana absorbing mergich you’ve encountered. Please tell me that you’ve at least taken measures to secure the ouroboros artifact in the meantime...”

“I’m working on it!” he replied, looking over his shoulder. “I’ve convinced the mergich that I’m a traveling merchant, so she’s willingly accompanying me to see more of the world. If I can’t get her necklace myself, she’ll be bringing it directly to your agents in Valentia at this rate.”

The Grand Enchantress and her mask morphed to form a wicked smile. “EXCELLENT! I can inform them to prepare an ambush upon your arrival or on one of the routes leading to the city when the time is right!”

Kazem’s face contorted. “Woah, woah, let’s not do anything too rash! My goal is to get this necklace from her, not to harm her!”

“THEN TRY TO RETRIEVE THE OUROBOROS ARTIFACT BEFORE THAT POINT!” replied the enchantress with a fire rising behind her mask once more. “I don’t care what happens to the giant that owns it! Their sort might be practically immortal from never aging, but they’re just as susceptible to steel or poison like any other mortal. So either you’re going to find a way to steal this necklace from her, or another one of my agents will take it from her cold, dead hands in the event you fail in your task.”

His skin went a bit pale. “I understand what needs to be done...”

“Good. However, I also find it ABSOLUTELY HILARIOUS how a ruthless rogue such as yourself suddenly developed a consciousness or moral compass about this situation! Did life behind bars give you plenty of time to think about your past actions?”

“It made me decide I’d rather not be caged again.” answered Kazem, staring deep into the orb with a determined look in his emerald eyes.

The enchantress shook her head. “Well, keep in mind that the emperor himself will pardon you for your past crimes if you succeed in your goal, one way or another. It’s quite a generous offer combined with the bounty!”

“Why do you people want this necklace so much?” asked Kazem, raising an eyebrow. “If it’s a magical artifact of some sort, the mergich might be making it useless right now. Yet you’re apparently willing to kill her over it...”

“That information is on a need-to-know basis.” replied the enchantress with nothing but icy venom. “All you need to do is steal it before bringing it to us. So be a good little thief, just this once, and keep me updated on your mission whenever you have an opportunity. I will assume you’re incapacitated or have gone rogue otherwise if you are unable to provide bi-weekly updates at a bare minimum, potentially rendering our entire agreement null and void.”

Kazem nodded. “Got it. No need to repeat yourself.”

The enchantress slowly faded away from the orb. “I’m just hoping repetition conveys everything in a crystal clear manner in case something doesn’t get through that thick skull of yours. Regardless, I have bigger fish to fry, so contact me again at a more convenient time.”

More words proved unnecessary as the enchantress vanished, not even giving Kazem time to respond. The orb itself also stopped glowing. Kazem returned the magical communication device to a coat pocket, and without much else he could say or do, he started the short trek back to the nearby clearing. Sunlight finally vanished from the vicinity, rendering the relatively quick journey a bit more complicated than usual as his night vision trickled in.

Soon, Kazem found Farishta asleep at their campsite. She appeared far more peaceful and angelic amid her slumber. Only the sounds of her soft breathing disrupted the silence as Kazem made his approach with numerous theoretical schemes hatching in his mind.

“Farishta?” he whispered, testing her.

The colossal woman didn’t even react to his words.

Consequently, Kazem walked towards her body, stopping only to observe. Standing near Farishta’s foot rapidly put things into perspective regarding their physical differences. Although he stood around the same size as the base of her paw, toe beans still loomed over his head. Sheathed claws the size of swords could barely be seen. Rough, tough, and leathery black padding had some dried dirt or grass finding its way into various crevices, a natural result of her lack of footwear.

The man moved forward once more to reach the area around her midsection. Enormous robes still encompassed Farishta’s torso, but the black strap on her waist now happened to be unfastened. This resulted in parts of the robe spreading across the ground, and it revealed an odd combination of fluffy fur on her lower belly and some barely visible yet clearly muscular abs. Most importantly, the ouroboros necklace still remained on her neck, but a lack of her typical black hood completely exposed her feline face.

By all means, Farishta had oddly human biology despite her otherwise anthropomorphic form, to such a point that her resemblance to a walking and talking snow leopard could be a bit uncanny.

After rolling his shoulders and hesitating for a few moments, Kazem made his way to one of her arms. The muscles on her forearms were strong and amazonian despite her otherwise lithe physique. He grabbed a clump of fur. Farishta didn't even react in the middle of her sleep, prompting him to climb it. Once Kazem managed to reach a shoulder, he received a much better view of the necklace and the golden chain keeping it wrapped around Farishta's neck.

Kazem's mind immediately went to work...

*What would suffice for cutting the golden chain into two pieces?*

*A simple back saw? Perhaps a riveting tool from a blacksmith? Maybe something else purely mechanical with any magical contraptions completely out of the question?*

Suddenly, Farishta let out a wide yawn with her ears folding against her head. Kazem reeled. The sound of a deep breath filled the air as her tongue curled out of her mouth, allowing him to see her pearly white fangs from the sidelines, followed by a lighter exhale before she smacked her thin, black lips. Enormous amethyst purple eyes looked to the side once they opened, concentrating on the much tinier man standing on her forearm.

"Oh... Kazem?" she said, slowly blinking several times. "Sorry for dozing off so soon! Do you need something?"

He looked away for several seconds, trying to maintain his balance with even the slightest movements throwing it off for a while. "My bad. Didn't want to wake you up. Just needed to tell you that I got done looking around the area, and I think we need to move further away from the road. Preferably we find a nearby river too."

Farishta sighed. "Why? I think this is fine!"

"Sleeping next to a road is just asking for someone to rob you." replied Kazem, cocking his head. "It'd be much safer if we weren't in such a wide open position at the very least. Of course, we could also get a fire going, but that would be a gamble too if it gives away our location..."

While looking directly at Kazem, Farishta yawned once again. Minty breath with a scent reminiscent of the tea they had earlier wafted over his face again. He received an unintentional view

of a massive maw as her jaw went agape, rendering him almost bite-sized in comparison, and making him flinch a little as primitive flight or fight instincts kicked in. This feeling quickly dissipated as the allegedly ferocious predator closed her mouth and slightly stuck out her tongue.

“There’s no need to be so paranoid, Kazem!” she said, smiling with sharp teeth. “I know you have a tendency to assume worst case scenarios, but I’m the near opposite, so I doubt we need to worry about anything!”

He scratched the back of his head, breaking eye contact. “I guess we paired up due to our differences, but still...”

Farishta’s face scrunched up. “Are you feeling scared or something? I don’t have any problems seeing in the dark, but I know humans can struggle with that!”

“I guess?” he answered, glancing at his horse restricted by a long rope. “I’m not worried about you, but I’m more vulnerable out here. Don’t exactly have a tent or anything either since I’ve been sleeping in inns or taverns for the most part, but now I don’t exactly have that luxury.”

She extended her other hand towards him, accidentally shifting him around as her other muscles moved. “Would you mind stretching out your arms so that I can pick you up?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

Farishta formed a coy, more catlike smirk. “I have an idea!”

With a roll of his eyes and a sigh, Kazem held out his arms. He almost made a T-pose. Farishta made quick work of carefully grabbing him with one hand, then she placed him on her lower belly at an angle, forcing him to lie down on it.

“That should do it!” she said, giggling a bit. “I’ll keep you nice, safe, and warm if you wanna sleep together tonight!”

Each word and laugh bellowed below Kazem. Every breath Farishta took caused her chest to ever so slightly rise and fall, making him move along with it. Additionally, he could faintly hear her heartbeat. Fluffy fur cushioning his body from the back immersed him in soft belly floor, but powerful abs proved to be firm like a mattress.

“Is this... safe?” asked Kazem, face turning slightly red. “Or even appropriate for near strangers?”

Farishta recoiled as if offended. “Strangers? I know we’ve only known each other for a day or so, but now we’re anything but strangers!”

“Yeah, but this is kind of intimate for lack of a better term, Farishta.”

“Maybe by human standards,” she replied, “But I don’t mind! You’ve been such a blessing so far, and this is actually more practical if you think about it! If I’m careful, this arrangement lets you have something along the lines of a bed and gives you a safe vantage point in case something happens!”

“That... actually makes logical sense.” he said, sinking further into warm fur. “And this is surprisingly comfortable, I’ll admit.”

Farishta momentarily closed her eyes and smiled. “Precisely!” She gently touched his head with a padded finger, feeling his short hair. “Besides, some big and bad dude like you isn’t too good for some snuggles if we’re gonna get cozy with one another on our journey together!”

Kazem refrained from replying. He found the parted robe partially blocking his view from both sides, looking left to right. However, his new location let him sense everything Farishta did, whether it be her simple breathing or scrunching up her toes in front of him. Her tail also hardly moved, staying flat and extending between her legs before curling in one constantly changing direction.

“But really...” continued Farishta, “If you feel uncomfortable at any point, I can put you down. Just ask! I’ll take plenty of precautions and wake you up if I need to move otherwise!”

“This could work well, really.” finally answered Kazem. “It’s just unorthodox.”

She snickered at his words. “Ha! This might end up becoming your new normal if no problems arise!”

“Right.” Kazem said, scoffing.

“But I’ll be passing out for now,” replied Farishta with a smug smirk. “So good night and sleep tight!”

He nearly snorted. “Likewise.”

Once more, Farishta unleashed a contagious yawn and flexed her limbs. She then settled down and slowly drifted to sleep. On the contrary, Kazem stayed awake and alert within his new and unusual environment.

Farishta’s breathing and heartbeat acted as a strange sort of lullaby. A gnawing sense of dread rattling inside Kazem’s skull barely kept him awake, just by being alone with his thoughts. Only soft fur smothering his exposed skin soothed his mind. As a result, he soon joined Farishta in a deep slumber, temporarily finding inner peace next to her titanic heart.