

Friends In Low Places

Part 12

Kazem awoke to a blanket of snow. It covered everything in his field of vision as he stood up and blinked several times. Dusting some from his pants before looking left to right, his eyes went wide upon finding Farishta nowhere in sight, all while white snowflakes gradually drifted to the ground.

“What the hell?” he asked no one in particular.

Kazem’s boots then started stomping through the area. Each one sank a foot or so into the snow, creating some notable tracks. Kazem himself ignored the cold as light winds caused trees to flutter all around him, obscuring his vision furthermore with anything in the distance becoming more white blurs. He only stopped in place upon spotting a familiar figure retaining a feline outline.

“Farishta?” Kazem said, glancing at the ground. A trail of pawprints reminiscent of a snow leopard led to the feline’s location, albeit they were slightly smaller than his own footprints, hardly making impressions in the snow. He grabbed the handle of his handgun accordingly. “Is that you?”

Soon, Kazem stumbled upon Farishta sitting on the ground. A toothy smile adorned her face as she stuck out her tongue, allowing snowflakes to drift onto it before melting. This rapidly transitioned to outright astonishment as the pupils in her amethyst eyes narrowed. “Oh my gods, Kazem!” she said, covering her face with both hands. “How... when did you get so big?!”

Once they were nearly face to face, it became crystal clear that Kazem stood about a head over Farishta. Her short and stocky form made the woman more like a walking and talking snow leopard rather than a giant. Even her amulet and robes scaled alongside her current size. She quickly rose from her position and pranced over to his location with a great degree of delicacy and grace, all thanks to her feet acting as natural snowshoes compared to Kazem’s clumsy movements.

“Now I’m even more confused.” he said, releasing his pistol. “You’re clearly a lot smaller than usual if the trees are bigger than you are. It’s baffling, ironically enough.”

Farishta almost bounced on the pads of her paws. “I don’t know how this happened either, but this is incredible! I’ve never seen a human this close-up before!”

He momentarily looked over his shoulder. “Uh... yeah. I know it’s potentially neat, but the last thing I remember is falling asleep on your neck before ending up here.”

She put her hands on her hips, scoffing. “I also recall you falling asleep in the middle of my little religious lecture. It was quite rude!”

“Oh, so it’s just a dream then?” Kazem said, rolling his shoulders. “Lovely.”

Farishta brought a hand to her chin. “Well, I fell asleep too since I didn’t want to disturb you, so I suppose you might be right if none of this is actually real!”

He raised an eyebrow. “So you’re a figment of my imagination then?”

“I’m the one having a sweet dream here, silly!” she said with a smile. “I’ve rarely had any where I was aware of being in one, but it’s hilarious how you’re acting exactly like the actual Kazem!”

“That’s probably because I am.” Kazem said, narrowing his eyes. “And you’re acting insufferably happy and upbeat like the real Farishta. Which is just great, really.”

She snickered at her words. “What’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t know...” he replied, rolling his eyes. Kazem froze altogether once Farishta grabbed his hand. “Now what are you doing?”

In response, Farishta removed Kazem’s leather glove, fully exposing his hand to the elements. “I know this might sound strange, but do you mind if I touch your hand? As I said, I’ve never been this up close and personal with a human before, so it’s surreal seeing small details like this...”

Kazem sighed. “Curious like a cat, aren’t you?” He sneered, resulting in his nostrils flaring amid the cold air. “I don’t see the harm, but you should have asked before taking off a glove for me.”

“Sorry for my enthusiasm then!” she said, grabbing his bare hand with both of her own. Padded fingertips then came into contact with his skin. Farishta used her thumbs to rub Kazem’s open palm and allowed her furred fingers to glide across the other side of his hand. “Mmm. You’re all meat and muscle, aren’t you? Like... your hand feels really calloused and leathery!”

“Yeah, and you’re just a big, white fluffball as usual.” he said, smirking. “Must be a lucid dream or something if you’re acting more weird than usual.”

Farishta slowly released his hand, giggling. “Maybe I am a big weirdo.” She then tugged on his sleeve. “With that in mind, can you take off your jacket too?”

He reeled at her words. “Are you crazy? The cold out here is killing me as it is! I also grew up next to a desert, so this is definitely a huge change of scenery to say the least...”

“But it’s all just a dream, right?” she asked, fluttering her eyes. “I for one find this weather absolutely wonderful!”

Kazem glanced at the ground. “I don’t even know anymore.”

“Well, I won’t force you to do anything you’re not comfortable with.” replied Farishta, taking a step back. “I just want to see what you look like without it!”

“Why?” he asked, cocking his head to the side.

Her eyes averted his gaze. “Reasons.”

“Okay, fine.” Kazem said, unbuttoning his leather jacket. “But only because you asked nicely.”

In a matter of moments, Kazem removed the closest thing he had to a winter coat before setting it aside. Cold air immediately assaulted his caramel-colored skin. Nonetheless, this revealed a black shirt with the sleeves torn off and his mildly muscular physical form with a few scars on his arms. Although Kazem wasn’t necessarily buff, a lifetime of hardship rendered him relatively strong and in shape, much like any man near the prime of his life.

Farishta almost gawked at him afterward. “Oh my. Human forearms are quite the sight without any fur in the way...” She unsheathed her claws on one hand, letting them glide against a single one of his arms without breaking the skin. “Yours are especially nice.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, staying perfectly still.

"What does it sound like?" she asked in return, bringing a hand behind his back before leaning into him. "I like it when a guy has strong forearms. Quite the eye candy."

Kazem laughed. "Oh, so you're into me. Even though I'm a fraction of your actual size." He shook his head. "I knew it. Couldn't tell if you were just teasing or actually flirting with me before."

Farishta responded by wrapping her arms around his upper torso and closing her eyes. "I am."

This sent Kazem into silence as Farishta pressed her head against his upper chest, practically inhaling his scent. She refrained from saying a single word as well for a few long moments.

Eventually, Farishta barely opened her eyes. "Do you... feel the same way, Kazem?" She paused and looked away. "I know it might sound crazy since our time has been brief and we're different in so many ways. Then again, they say opposites attract. I feel like we might even have some sort of spiritual connection if we bonded together so fast, but these silly feelings could all just be a result of me being alone for so long..."

Meanwhile, Kazem brought a finger below Farishta's chin. He guided her to make direct eye contact once more. Upon doing so, Kazem pressed his nose and lips against Farishta's own, making her eyes go wide.

Finally, this culminated in a light kiss as time itself froze.

Farishta's tail shot straight in the air.

Hearts raced as they held one another for what felt like an eternity lasting for only several seconds.

It only ended once Kazem brought his head back, prompting Farishta to gradually blink. "What... was that?" she asked, circular ears folding against her head. "Did you just..."

"It's called a kiss." he answered in a low tone. "And yes. I did."

"Can you do that again?" asked Farishta with a rumbling purr. "That was... magical!"

He chuckled. "Certainly."

From there, Kazem leaned forward again, where a cold nose touched his own. Farishta fully embraced him. With their arms wrapped around one another, her thin lips became overwhelmed by his more plump ones. She purred like a motor while running her claws down his back. He placed a hand behind her head, sifting his fingers through her plentiful fur and discovering sharp teeth once he tried to delve beyond her black lips.

Farishta suddenly grabbed one of Kazem's hands planted on her back. Readjusting it, she lowered his hand to her butt, firmly pressing it against a single cheek before leaving it in place.

Following several practical smooches, Farishta ended their session by licking one of Kazem's cheeks with her broad tongue. She then smiled with her tail and ears fluttering. Leaning in once more, Farishta utilized her sharp teeth to nibble on Kazem's throat before transitioning to licking it as well. She only stopped these gleeful antics upon feeling something coursing through her fur, prompting her to perk up her head before whispering several words in a playful tone...

“What do you think you're doing? Are you taking my amulet, little man?”

Kazem answered this question by gently pushing Farishta away, ending their embrace of one another. He directed his gaze at the ouroboros necklace in his hands with the golden chains wrapped around his fingers. “That's exactly what I'm doing,” he replied in an ice-cold tone, placing it in one of his many coat pockets. “Ugh. Still not sure what's going on, but my mind feels muddled like I just had a bit too much to drink...”

Farishta looked up at him with watery eyes. “Wait... what? But you just told me that you loved me!”

He shrugged. “Eh. I do care about you since you're a nice girl, but that's exactly why we shouldn't get too attached to each other. No point in making this job too sentimental.”

“Excuse me?!” she hissed, unsheathing the claws on her hands. “Explain yourself! NOW!”

“I don't have to say anything!” he said with a snicker. “I just got what I wanted. That's all that really matters at the end of the day. You have no idea what kind of man I am or know anything about my history, so my apologies if I end up breaking that big old heart of yours.”

The surrounding snowfall turned into more of a flurry in the meantime. Winds howled in the air. Slurries of snowflakes made their combined vision dimmer and dimmer, much like a fog or mist closing in with their range of view becoming increasingly limited.

“You’ve been trying to take my amulet too?” she asked, getting on her knees. “This entire time? That’s what this is all about? It was all... fake?”

Kazem sighed and shook his head. “I’d call it more of a means to an end. I’m really sorry about all this since it wasn’t supposed to be this way.” He took advantage of the growing snowstorm to begin walking away, placing his hands in his pockets. “No hard feelings.”

Tears welled up in Farishta’s eyes. “I... I thought we might have been soulmates! I thought you cared about me!”

The man stared straight ahead before stomping his way through the snowfall. “It wasn’t all fake, Farishta, but this is how it has to be.”

“Kazem!” echoed her voice behind him. “KAZEM!”

The winds only served to drown out Farishta’s voice over time as the two drifted apart.

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Kazem awoke to surroundings composed of fluffy fur. It nearly encompassed his view before he rose to his feet, scratching his back. Only Farishta yawning made the man freeze in place as her breath wafted behind him, prompting him to turn around. For just a brief moment, he saw the eyes of the ouroboros glow a bright magenta before it rapidly dimmed down to more unremarkable light levels.

Farishta simultaneously licked her chops once she finished yawning. “My goodness!” she said, directing her attention to the man on her neck. “Did you just wake up too, Kazem? I had the weirdest dream... or perhaps it was a nightmare!”

“Yeah, I did.” he answered with groggy eyes. “The sounds you were making made it hard to sleep.”

Her ears folded against her head. “Oh, sorry!”

Kazem responded with a dismissive wave. “It’s fine. Kind of curious about whatever you were dreaming about though if it wasn’t particularly pleasant.”

She glanced at the sky. “Well, there was... snow.”

He waited for her to continue for several seconds. “And?”

“You were there too.” she continued, letting out a sigh. “For some reason you were around my height. Things were lovely until you tried to take my amulet, then a snow storm erupted out of nowhere. The dream ended shortly after that.”

Kazem gave her a blank stare. “Huh. Are you worried about your amulet thanks to Horace?”

Farishta frowned. “Somewhat. I do apologize, but maybe that has something to do with it. Dreams can be strange and fickle things if they just carelessly mix and match things!”

“There’s no need to say sorry.” he replied, scaling down the side of her neck. “You can’t help it. I don’t mind it either since we might need to rise and shine at the same time anyway. Probably safer that way too considering our... differences.”

She held her expansive tail, almost cuddling it like a blanket. “I still feel bad about waking you up, but if you say so!”

Kazem checked on his nearby campfire. It was nothing more than smoldering ashes, which he only confirmed by maneuvering or kicking some remnants with a leather boot. “Like I said, no worries. I’m probably gonna head into town today to check on the status of your shoes and to see if the idiots managed to find my horse by now.” He looked back at her. “You got a problem with that?”

“I do not!” replied Farishta, sitting back up. “I have some things I need to do too!”

He cocked his head at her. “Such as...?”

“Hunting. Cleaning. That sort of thing!”

Kazem crossed his arms. "I thought we had provisions already."

"It doesn't hurt to have more!" she said with a smile. "These woods are teeming with wild game, and I need a lot of food at times!"

"But how do you intend to hunt exactly?" he asked, gesturing at her body. "I don't see any weapons or tools besides that big, wooden stick of yours."

Farishta answered his question by flashing a toothy smile, curling her fingers and toes, then fully unsheathing her claws with their overall sizes rivaling some swords.

"Ah, right." Kazem said, smirking. "You're a big and bad mergich that doesn't need things puny humans require." He entered a forest clearing, looking away from her. "I'll leave you to it then."

"Stay safe!" she said, waving him away. "You do know where you're going though... right?"

"I won't get lost in the woods if I just follow the river." he shouted back in return. "Even if I do, you're easy enough to find as it is."

Farishta rolled her eyes and let out a huff. Rising to her full height, she towered over a vast majority of the surrounding trees with Riverside itself still barely visible a great distance away. Only the forest clearing she found herself in barely gave her enough room to commence a morning stretching routine.

As Kazem followed the nearby river, a troubling thought rattled throughout his skull...

*Did we just have the same dream together?*