

Friends In Low Places

Part 15

Farishta sifted through stone ruins with her padded fingertips. Debris and shattered bricks sifted through her furred fingers like individual grains of sand as she uncovered a survivor amid the tower's rubble.

“Found another one!” she said with her large and fluffy tail shooting up.

The survivor groaned as he returned to the land of the living, looking up to find the massive mergich staring down at him with her vibrant purple eyes. He immediately recoiled at the sight. After scanning his surroundings, he let out a sigh of relief once he saw some human soldiers approaching him. One soldier promptly extended a hand toward the survivor, allowing him to pull the battered and bruised man out of the remaining rubble surrounding his legs.

Kazem watched all this commotion occur on the sidelines. He went about the complicated process of reloading his pistol, utilizing a small ramming rod to shove a small lead bullet down the barrel. Once it was nice and snug, Kazem returned the ramming rod to its proper place and hid his handgun within his leather jacket again.

Eventually, Farishta left the other humans behind and took several steps toward Kazem. She leaned to the ground upon joining him. “And here I am thinking you didn't care about most other people, Kazem!”

He blinked a few times. “I don't.”

“But it was your idea to have me help look for survivors after the attack, no?” she said, smiling.

“You were probably going to do that anyway...” Kazem replied with a shrug. “Figured it'd make you happy.”

Farishta rolled her eyes. “Sure you did...”

He put his hands in his pockets. “Having others see you do that rescue stuff might make them less hostile towards us too. Good public relations or whatever.”

She simply sneered at his words. “Kazem, Kazem... I know when push comes to shove, you have a good heart. Don’t even pretend that you don’t! You comforted me when I was feeling down, you care about my safety, and now you’re helping me deal with the aftermath of this whole mess! I honestly had no clue what you were talking about when you said you thought you were a bad person!”

“That’s because I only care about you at this point.” Kazem said, giving her a blank stare.

“Oh, whatever you say!” Farishta replied, giggling.

He removed his hands from his pockets before crossing his arms. “I’m serious, Farishta. You’re the only decent person I’ve encountered so far that’s worth a damn. All these other shitty people can go pound sand for all I care.”

She shook her head. “Very funny! Surely you have other friends and family members that you care for too!”

“Nope.” Kazem said, looking away.

His response wiped the smile off Farishta’s face. “Wait, really?”

“I think that’s one thing we have in common by now.” he replied, spreading out his arms and raising his hands in the air. “At least from what you’ve told me about your past...”

Farishta’s ears folded down. “Not necessarily, Kazem! I have quite a few human friends... like you for instance!”

Kazem scratched his chin. “Eh. Fair enough. I’ve also had my fair share of friends...” He paused and made air quotes with his fingers for emphasis. “Or more like fair weather friends, but I’d rather not repeat myself. Happens almost every time.”

Her tail slumped to the ground. “What are you talking about? What’s a fair weather friend? I’ve never heard of that term before...”

“Ah, you know...” he said with a dismissive wave. “Some folks only wanna hang around when it benefits them somehow. If you ever find yourself in trouble or need help, they’re nowhere to be

found or want nothing to do with you. I've had several acquaintances go out of their way to screw me over too as soon as they had the chance, even if they got little to nothing out of it. Whatever relationships we had boiled down to nothing or dissolved over something stupid like some money.”

Farishta’s eyes went wide. “Oh... I’m sorry to hear that...”

Kazem scoffed. “It’s not your fault. Might be my own from the types of crowds I decided to hang out with. Strangers can be even worse though.”

“How so?” she asked, crouching to the ground.

He took a step back as her knee came into contact with the grass, making a light thump.

“Remember that encounter with the kobolds earlier? There’s more folks like them out there, so you got plenty of people more than happy to take advantage of your pity or shank you in the stomach if it meant taking all your shit for themselves. They tear you down to build themselves up.”

She frowned. “Not everyone is like that though!”

“Yeah?” he said, sneering. “In my experience, it’s always been that way. Doesn’t matter if it’s my own flesh and blood either. Everyone has always been looking out for themselves first and foremost. I learned that the hard way growing up as a street urchin. It wasn’t until I stopped giving a shit about most people that I stopped going hungry, then I stopped being a victim altogether...”

“By becoming a peddler?” Farishta asked with her ears perking up. “You’ve told me as much already, and I still think that’s an impressive achievement at such a young age!”

Kazem chuckled. “Right. Let’s just say I swindled quite a few people to make ends meet. Point is that I legitimately stopped caring about a majority of other folks the moment I realized no one gave a shit about me, so that’s why I don’t think I’m a good person anymore.”

Her tail swayed behind her. “That just sounds like an unhealthy mentality, really.”

“I... don’t think you understand.” he said, scratching the back of his head. “I’ve had time to dwell on it and I don’t think it’s... um... normal. Don’t know how else to phrase it.”

“To me, it just sounds like you have some trust issues after what you’ve gone through!” she replied, placing a hand on her heart. “I definitely understand it from that perspective. It’d make sense if you kept people at arm’s length if you kept needing to deal with that sort of stuff all the time!”

Kazem rubbed his eyes, sighing afterward. “How do I put this? Like... let's say that hypothetically I have to break a vase or a person to earn myself some coin... right?”

She nodded. “And the vase would be the obvious choice, of course.”

“That’s the thing...” he said before breaking eye contact. “It makes no difference to me since I get what I want either way. It’s not that I... want to hurt people per say... I’m not a sadist... but I feel zero remorse or guilt whenever I do it. No hesitation either. Especially if I get what I want out of it and face no real consequences. I’m not sure if that’s normal for me to think like that or if it somehow makes me fucked in the head, but that’s how most people seem to operate these days...”

Farishta stared at him as he continued to avoid her judgeful gaze. “Just because some people hurt you in the past doesn’t mean it’s okay to do the same thing to others, Kazem!”

He shrugged once more. “Yeah, yeah. I don’t know. Maybe I’m just... desensitized. Logically I think there’s something wrong with my... mentality... but... hmm. Another part of me fears it’s hardwired into my brain by now and I can’t do anything about it, whether I like it or not.”

Farishta’s face scrunched up. “What you’re saying about yourself is nothing short of evil! I can hardly believe my ears! You’re not serious... are you?”

Kazem covered his face with one hand. “Ugh. Forget it.”

“I’d probably cry if I ever accidentally hurt a human, Kazem, but you’re telling me that it wouldn’t be a problem for you?!”

“It depends...” he replied, groaning. “I... I feel like I don’t have a choice sometimes. That’s all. If they want to put up a fight when I just want their stuff without one, then... well...”

“If you give people a raw deal, of course they’re going to take issue with it!” she said with a scowl. “I might not be a merchant of some sort myself, but not even I would trust a wandering con artist!”

Kazem smirked. "I'm not so sure about that, but I guess that's the difference between you and I. You'd give someone the shirt off your back while I'd scheme on how to take it for myself."

Farishta sighed. "Why do you have to be like this, you shady little man?"

"I guess it's just within my nature." he said, shrugging.

"But it doesn't have to be that way anymore..." she said, extending a hand toward him. "We have each other now! I can understand your situation if you've had to take advantage of people or even hurt them to protect yourself in the past, but it's not like either of us is going to go hungry at this rate. It's just not necessary now! If we ever need coin, I can always simply sell another piece of my jewelry to cover our combined expenses!"

He raised an eyebrow. "What if you run out of jewelry you can't sell for a small fortune?"

"Then there's always more honest ways to make a living!" Farishta answered with a toothy smile. "It's not hard. Just promise me that you'll try to be a good person from this point forward, regardless of whatever you had to do to survive in the past!"

Kazem stayed silent for several moments before nodding. "Very well. I'll try for you, at least."

Her smile grew wider before she clasped her hands together. "Wonderful! However, you should be doing this for yourself more than anything else. Despite what you said, you must clearly feel some guilt or a desire to redeem yourself if you did some unsavory stuff before..."

"Perhaps." he said, looking away. "As I said, I've had plenty of time to think about myself and my actions. Lots of self-reflection. These last few days have felt like the longest in my life and I've come close to death enough times already throughout my life. So... I have something of a proposition..."

Her ears flickered a little. "I'm listening!"

Kazem stared deep into her eyes. "Why don't we just forget about this amulet of yours and focus on finding your people?"

Her ears and tail shot up. "Excuse me?"

He then glanced to the side. "I'm just thinking that this whole amulet business will bring nothing but trouble for both of us. I don't even know what it is. We can let the damn thing be someone else's problem and travel together somewhere far to the north for something of a fresh start. If the emperor himself or dangerous people like Horace and the mergich monster hunter are after it, we can be far away from it all and find some peace and quiet in the cold north..."

"Absolutely not!" Farishta replied, baring her fangs.

Kazem rolled his shoulders. "Why not?"

"That amulet is EXTREMELY important!" she said with a fire burning in her eyes. "I don't even know if it can be trusted with the man who took it from me. Before I even think about continuing our trek north, I need to either get it back or figure out why it's so important before I let anyone have the amulet at all!"

"Well, I still like my simple plan of just continuing our journey to some place north." he said, shaking his head. "Maybe find a nice pub there until this amulet crap blows over. Hell, if we found more of your kind or even another monastery, it'd probably be paradise if the mergich living there were anything like you!"

She let out a sigh and smirked. "Oh, you..."

Kazem leaned against a tree. "Still, I don't want to see that mergich monster hunter ever again. So I really don't think it's worth the trouble and that you should just let it go."

Farishta clasped the area where her necklace used to be. "It's the one thing my father trusted me with... and I failed him so far... so I can't just give up on it altogether!"

"Sometimes it's better to cut your losses." he said with a nod. "Trust me. I've learned that through extremely extensive experience over the years."

"But what if something catastrophic happens as a result?" she asked, covering her mouth with one hand. "I don't think I'd be able to live with myself if the amulet is as dangerous or powerful as my father said it was!"

Kazem's head perked up. "Did he ever elaborate?"

“He was very... vague.” she said with her tail slumping down. “All I know is that it’s important!”

Kazem rotated his head, popping his neck a little. “Mmm... so much for being a good person...”

Farishta reeled a bit. “What?”

“We’ll go after the amulet if that’s what you really want.” he replied, narrowing his eyes. “Just be warned that it’s against my better judgment and that there might be unforeseen consequences.”

Farishta rose to her feet with her tail rapidly swishing behind her. “Thank you, Kazem! I’m glad you understand and that you’re still supporting me, but I do want you to keep your promise too!”

He directed his attention to the nearby group of soldiers staring at him, gawking at the massive mergich, and whispering among themselves as they slowly departed the scene. “It’d be easy enough, Farishta. We can just fuck off to the north and run away from it all. I really hate the people here.”

“We can always do that after we get my amulet back!” she said, lowering her hand next to him. “Come on! I can carry you back to town!”

Kazem grunted but stepped onto her open palm nonetheless. He didn’t even react or flinch once her fingers curled around him as he ascended into the air. “We should at least finish our business here first and lick our wounds before going on a wild goose chase.”

“Of course!” she said, directing her attention to a few chipped claws on her other hand. “You still need to see if my sandals are done yet, after all!”

“Nice to see that you have your priorities in order now...” he said with a brief chuckle.

Farishta smiled and clutched Kazem close to her heart as she returned to Riverside nearby.