

# Friends In Low Places

By RetroInferno

A man went about the bloody business of a burglary.

With a muzzleloader on his hip, he scaled a stone wall with nothing but a rope. A weathered leather jacket and brown boots protected him from the cold. The forest far beneath his feet paled when compared to the titanic temple, which rivaled the mountains themselves. Even with a bandana fluttering against his face and the wind howling in his ears, the man managed to reach an exterior window sill, stepping on loose yet gargantuan bricks to vault himself onto it.

From there, the man spent several seconds catching his breath. He took a look through a huge window, providing some visibility into the structure itself. In stark contrast to the unkempt lower levels with plentiful overgrowth, the upper floor's interior appeared well-maintained. Clean. Something sparkled on the other side of the glass, catching his attention...

A necklace. The entire band resembled a snake devouring its own tail, much like an ouroboros with glowing gemstones for eyes. Its yellow metal sparkled amid the low lighting. Only a golden chain kept it suspended on a stand, and much like everything else associated with the temple, it happened to be gigantic.

"Finally." said the man under his breath, pressing both gloved hands against the glass.

Several seconds later, a lower pane gave way. The man ducked his head and pushed forward to reach the other side. As he left his previous position behind, the window closed, sealing him away from the outside world.

He wasted no time. With his emerald green eyes fixated on the main prize, the man jumped down onto a table. Stone tablets were strewn across its surface. This did little to nothing to impair the man's progress as he approached the dazzling ouroboros, ignoring everything else... up until a light and feminine voice suddenly stopped him in his tracks.

"Do I have a visitor?"

The man placed a hand on his pistol grip, looked to the side, and found a feline creature staring down at him. Her sheer size dwarfed his own to such a point that he could completely fit within one of her padded palms...

“And a human to boot!” she resumed, large and fluffy tail swishing behind her. “What brings you to my humble abode, traveler?”

He looked between her and the giant necklace. “How did you... where did you...” The blood drained from his face. “I just knew some horseshit like this was going to happen when I woke up this morning.”

The feline’s circular ears, which poked out from her hood, folded against her head. “What? Hey, there’s no need to be alarmed! You must clearly be a pilgrim if you traveled here to begin with...”

The man blinked several times before the feline continued.

“I rarely receive company these days since not everyone is willing to climb all the way to a mountain monastery! I’d already have tea and other accommodations prepared for the occasion, but I must have missed you earlier if you simply waltzed through the front door without announcing your presence!”

“I... yeah, I thought no one was home.” he said, scratching the back of his head.

Once more, the feline’s face scrunched up. Her hood hid almost everything besides her purple eyes, rendering her overall facial expressions hard to decipher. “Again, you have my sincerest apologies! You caught me by surprise. If you give me just a few moments, I should be able to have some basic rituals ready before we can properly introduce ourselves!”

Naturally, the man reacted with a dumbstruck look on his face. “Uh... okay. Sure. Go do that.”

Her eyes beamed up. “I’ll be right back!”

With that, the bipedal feline walked away. She did so with an abnormal degree of delicacy and grace, making little to no noise thanks to padded feet muffling her movements. What little white fur remaining outside her all-encompassing robes had a pattern and puffiness similar to a snow

leopard. As for the man, he remained in place until he could no longer hear her footsteps or humming, and a torrent of questions immediately assaulted his mind...

*Who the hell is this woman? Why is she here? How did they sneak up on me without making a single discernable noise?*

In the end, a shake of his head pushed these thoughts aside.

Only the ouroboros mattered.

The man fully focused on the jewelry in question. Its mesmerizing gemstones taunted him as they dazzled among the light, eyes still glowing magenta as the snake seemingly consumed itself. He approached the necklace, heart pounding in his chest, before he grabbed an attached chain and tugged on it. As a result, the entire thing slightly shifted in place.

Further efforts revolved around the man pulling on both chains. Although they moved the amulet itself as before, it wasn't enough to force the band off its wooden stand or mount of sorts. Worse yet, the whole thing happened to be the size of a small boulder. The man looked over his shoulder and up at the window, applying additional pressure before pausing altogether, but a crashing sound almost made him jump in the air.

The entire stand, necklace and all, toppled over.

Consequently, the man's heart skipped a beat. Time itself froze. Only a few faint thumping sounds disturbed the scene as a colossal feline returned to the table.

"Are you ready for..."

She stopped speaking for several seconds and stared at the desecrated jewelry.

"What happened?"

The man gave the feline a blank stare as he processed the scene. Everything about the sound of her angelic voice came across as an abnormality considering her colossal stature and the general situation. By all means, every word coming out of her mouth should have been deep, overwhelming, and deafening. Instead, she sounded almost like a young human woman.

“Did you accidentally knock that over?” she asked, picking up the necklace in question. The feline carefully placed it around her neck, which matched the golden piercings on each of her ears. “It’s okay, but please don’t touch my personal possessions without my permission!” She placed an open palm on the table, gesturing towards the man. “Otherwise, I have some refreshments already prepared if you’d like me to save you a trip by carrying you all the way to the dining room!”

The man took a step back. “My bad about that.” His gaze turned to the window. “But I suppose I can stick around for tea or something... assuming this isn’t some sort of trick.”

The feline’s tail slumped to the ground. “I’m not going to hurt you. As I said, no worries! I have experience handling and holding humans if that helps ease your concerns...”

“If you say so.” he replied, shrugging his shoulders. “No need to fight it if I’m already at your mercy.”

With a grumble, the man stepped onto her open palm. She curled her fingers and gradually lifted him away, eventually holding him against her chest with both hands. From there, he hovered dozens of feet above the ground, backing into her robed torso after looking down.

“There we go!” said the feline, who slowly started walking across the room. “But I think you’re still scared or nervous for some reason. Like... I can hear your heart beating really fast. Am I the first mergich you’ve ever seen or something?”

Meanwhile, the man’s skin turned pale. “Yeah.”

“In that case, my name is Farishta!” she said, ears and tail perking up. “My main job is to maintain this monastery, make sure travelers are accounted for, and to honor the gods!”

“By yourself?” asked the man all of a sudden.

Farishta nodded. “Unfortunately. But enough about me!” She glanced down at him. “What’s your name?”

He stayed silent for several seconds. “Kazem.”

“Then it’s an absolute delight to accompany you, Kazem!” she said, turning to enter a hallway. “I’d imagine that you’re a caravan guard coming to pay your respects to the gods, or...?”

“What would make you think that?” he asked, failing to answer her question.

She looked away. “Well, you’re wearing leather armor and stuff. And you have weapons.”

Kazem glanced at his dagger and pistol. “I’m a peddler.”

“A peddler dressed like some sort of mercenary or rogue?” asked Farishta with a snicker.

“The roads can be dangerous.” he said, nervously laughing afterward. “Sometimes I have to carry tools to remove the occasional occupational hazard or obstacle. That’s all.”

Farishta frowned. “I see...”

As they spoke, Farishta finally entered the grand dining room. It happened to be located within the center of the predominantly stone temple, allowing for a splendid view of the outside world thanks to an adjacent patio. Sunlight shone through the windows, and scented candles illuminated the area. Empty stone thrones accompanied by dusty dishes and other utensils adorned an extremely long table, except for one seat at the very end, where a pot of tea awaited them.

Kazem looked at all the chairs, counting about a dozen in total. “Did you prepare a feast for all your friends or what?”

Farishta shook her head. “No. I only...”

“It almost looks ancient.” interrupted the man. “What gives?”

She closed her eyes. “There used to be... others. My people rarely travel this far south, and this place is more of an outpost, really. However, I’ll make a mental note to finally clean the rest of the dining room since those other plates haven’t been used in years!”

“Did you just say years?” Kazem asked, looking around in all directions. “How long have you been holed up here?”

Farishta went about lowering him to the table. “Ever since I was a little girl.”

He stepped off her hand, and his body stopped tensing up once his feet came into contact with solid ground. “Ah... seriously? You’ve been living like a monk your whole life?”

Farishta broke eye contact. “Not originally. My father brought me here to begin with...” She clenched her necklace and held up the ouroboros. “He gave me this jewelry and told me to protect it at all costs in case it fell into the wrong hands. Well... at least until he returned. That’s why I got mildly annoyed when you messed with it earlier.”

“That’s just... great.” Kazem said, giving the golden ouroboros a death stare.

“But anyway...” Farishta said, sitting down in her seat. “It’s been decades since that point. The old caretaker of the monastery sort of retired and left once I became a teenager. Plus my father still hasn’t returned. So I’m starting to get concerned since I’m more or less isolated with supply shipments becoming more and more rare, but at least I get to talk to pilgrims sometimes!”

Kazem straightened his posture. “You’re being very open about all this, even though we’re practically strangers.”

“Is that a problem somehow?” she asked with her tail shooting up. “I’m just telling you about myself, and part of me hoped you would have some relevant news.”

He rolled his eyes. “No, it’s just potentially dumb with someone you just met.”

Farishta removed part of her hood to reveal a smile rife with sharp fangs. “In that case, would tea help us get more acquainted with one another?”

“Sure,” he said with another shrug. “Why not? I’ve only heard stories about you giants and now I’m finally seeing one in the flesh. Why not drink freaking tea with one?”

“I don’t know why you’re so surprised!” she said, laughing at his words. Farishta then retrieved an almost comically small tea glass with her clawed fingertips, handing it to Kazem. “I’m well acquainted with some of the locals, actually. They tell others about me.”

“Yeah, but I got told this place was abandoned.” he replied while hesitantly grabbing the tiny cup. “I probably wouldn’t have bothered coming here to begin with if someone told me a mergich lived here.”

She tilted her head a little. “By the locals?”

“No, no...” he said, holding up his hands. “By my business associates.”

Farishta grabbed the teapot and spent some time filling her own cup to the brim. “So you’re actually a peddler? I’m still not sure if you’re being completely honest in that regard.”

Kazem gave her a look of disdain. “I’ll just come clean if you’re toying with me.”

She perked her head up. “Oh?”

“I am actually a peddler of sorts, Farishta, but I scavenge abandoned ruins sometimes. I got told the mergich abandoned a nearby monastery. Originally, I planned on coming here to take anything valuable not nailed to the ground, but I legitimately had no idea someone still lived here.”

Farishta scratched her chin. “That makes sense. I’m not angry or anything if that’s what you’re so worried about.”

“So... is the tea poisoned or something?” he asked, staring into his empty cup. “Or have you been genuine about this entire pilgrim and ceremony thing?”

“Pardon me?” she said, recoiling as if offended. “I would never do such a thing! Such deception would be disrespectful to the gods if I didn’t provide proper hospitality!”

Kazem crossed his arms. “Oh, come on! I’ve heard the stories as a kid.”

She cocked her head. “The what?”

“The tall tales, Farishta. Some mergich trickster deceives some stupid little human like me before punishing them for trespassing in their territory. It doesn’t matter if the mergich is actually a giant or a spirit, but the story never ends well for the trespasser. With that in mind, can you just get whatever you’re planning over with already?”

In response, Farishta clutched the teapot against her chest with her ears and tail drooping down. “I... I just wanted to drink tea. What did you think I wanted to do?”

Once again, he shrugged. “I don’t know. Turn me into a toad? Eat me? Both?”

Her purple eyes narrowed. “Um... no. Like any other mergich, I can’t use magic... assuming I even wanted to do any of those things!”

Kazem looked away. “Then this is awkward. I guess this is what happens when I always assume a worst case scenario.”

“If anything else,” Farishta said, raising her pot. “It makes me concerned about how wicked the outside world has become if you’re so skeptical about the kindness of a stranger. Would you allow me to pour you some tea at the very least?”

“Why not?” he asked, extending the cup towards her. “I guess I got my guard up for no good reason...”

From there, Farishta tilted her teapot. Some started pouring down the side of the metal container rather than in the right direction. Naturally, due to the container’s absurd size, almost none got inside Kazem’s cup as it made a huge fucking mess with tea splashing and arriving everywhere but its destination. Farishta herself reeled after spilling it on the table. On the contrary, a more stoic Kazem looked down at some liquid now soaking his shoes and the lower half of his body.

“I don’t know what else I was expecting.” he said, patting his pants down.

“My goodness!” she said, covering her mouth. “And my apologies! I’ll clean that immediately before finding a way to give you a full glass of fresh tea!”

Kazem flicked some tea from his fingertips. “No thanks. I’m good!” He raised an eyebrow. “Wait... how the hell are you getting tea and other food anyway?”

Farishta placed her teapot on the table with a light thump. “I brewed it. It’s not any different from how humans do it...”

He practically facepalmed and shook his head. “No, I mean... how are you getting enough food and water to even survive up here? I’d imagine someone like you would need way more than most.”

She retrieved a rag and used it to soak up the spill on the table. “Well, there’s a food stockpile in the monastery, but I ate most of it, then I had to improvise from that point forward. So sometimes I make snares to catch deer in the woods. A nearby river has been providing me with clean water. Oh, and I hunted a few dragons before, so some human villagers started bringing me some food each month to show their gratitude!”

“You... ate dragons.” he said without a hint of emotion.

“Only sometimes.” answered Farishta, smirking. “They taste like chicken!”

“And how would you know what chicken tastes like?” asked Kazem.

She made quick work of cleaning the spill. “I ate some before, obviously.”

Kazem just stared at her without saying a word in return.

“A lot of chicken.” continued Farishta, discarding the rag. “I had to eat dozens at the same time just to taste anything now that I think about it!”

“Good to know.” he said before facing the other direction. “I guess that concludes my business here. Would you mind putting me on the ground or getting me out of here?”

“But what about your tea?” she asked with a grimace spreading across her face. “Oh, and the rituals!”

He made a dismissive gesture with a free hand. “I’m not a pilgrim.”

Farishta made a slight nod. “Of course! You’re a peddler, but that’s exactly why I want to keep talking to you!”

“About what?” asked Kazem, scoffing.

“I have a... business proposition?” she said, glancing at the ground. “But it depends on where you plan on traveling next.”

Kazem clasped his hands together. “Uh... north? Yeah, north. I plan on buying goods from some villages and cities along the way before flipping them for a profit. Why?”

“That’s perfect!” Farishta said, beaming up alongside her fluffy tail. “I’ve been thinking about trying to travel back home recently. I haven’t left the monastery for most of my life though. It would be a long journey, but if you happen to be heading in the same direction, I’d be willing to provide you with free security until we need to part ways for whatever the reason!”

He blinked a few times. “What would you get out of that arrangement, exactly?”

“Information.” she answered in a low tone. “Directions. Maybe even help if you have some friends?”

“I’m not sure if I’d call them all friends, but I know some people.” Kazem replied, reaching into a pocket. “Ignoring that, I don’t think I could afford to feed or shelter you in the first place.”

Farishta’s facial expression became far more stern. “I’ll take care of my own needs! I’m no stranger to sleeping under the stars or finding my own food!”

“For the love of...” he said, rolling his eyes. “Look, I got nothing against you, but it might also be a big problem if I’m being followed by a literal giant everywhere I go.”

She raised a clawed finger. “I could carry you!”

Kazem sighed. “Just... let me think about it first.”

Farishta stood up and strolled towards the nearest doorway. “Let me take care of this dirty rag and grab something that could change your tune!” Her voice grew fainter over time until she disappeared from Kazem’s view. “I’ll be right back!”

In the meantime, Kazem rolled his shoulders and looked up at the ceiling. “If only we could somehow make this more complicated.”

Granting his wish, an orb in his pocket jolted in his leg and glowed green. “KAZEM!” screamed an old woman on the other end.

The man in question quickly grabbed the orb from his pocket, finding an angry human woman wearing a fiery orange hood staring right back at him. “Grand Enchantress.” he muttered.

“WHY DID YOU SEVER YOUR LINK WITH ME?”

Kazem recoiled before transitioning to holding the orb with both hands. “I did?”

“DO NOT MAKE ME REPEAT MYSELF!” she said, eyes turning white. “If you violate the terms of your release, our arrangement will be null and void. Do not sever our communication link under any circumstances since I need to know your location at all times. If you are unable or unwilling to retrieve the ouroboros artifact and return it to us within the next four months, bounty hunters will either kill or capture you so that we can imprison you for the rest of your miserable life.”

“Grand Enchantress, it wasn’t intentional, I just think the reception up here sucks or something...”

The orb glowed brighter as the enchantress shouted louder and louder. “THEN WHY HAVE YOU NOT FOUND THE ARTIFACT? ARE YOU NOT AT THE MONASTERY?”

“I am, I am!” he said, placing a free hand on his chest. “I found it! It just turned out a mergich owns and wears the damned thing!”

“Are you not a master class thief?!” she said, shaking her head. “Stealing from a colossi should be a trivial concern considering your other infamous exploits!”

“It’s not that simple!” he explained. “You never said a mergich lived here, much less anything about this snake necklace being about as big as me!”

“At least the mergich lets me know the recent connection severance wasn’t a pure result of your incompetence!” she said like a strict school teacher. “Those giants absorb mana like a sponge. If one gets too close, they can and will disable any weapons or tools dependent on it to function!”

Kazem looked over his shoulder. “Can you be a bit more quiet? I think the mergich might be able to hear us...”

“CAN?” shouted the enchantress even louder than before. “CAN YOU DO WHAT WE AGREED UPON? We did not release a man with your reputation from our dungeons for you to run away. If you want to be a free man with a small fortune to start life anew, find that ouroboros and bring it to our agents in the port city of Valentia, directly to your north!”

“With all due respect, great enchantress, it’s practically a fucking golden boulder. I’d need a horse drawn cart, a boat, or dozens of men just to drag it around.”

“FIND A WAY!” she shouted back. “STEAL A HORSE! I don’t care. By any means necessary, bring the artifact to-”

A few faint thumping sounds marked when the magical device abruptly cut off as a mergich returned to the room.

“Were you talking to yourself?” asked Farishta, brandishing a wooden staff as she approached her seat. “I could have sworn I heard you or another human in the distance.”

Kazem stayed silent for several seconds and discreetly placed the orb in a coat pocket. “I’m just weird. Sometimes I talk or mumble to myself, don’t think anything of it...”

She extended her staff towards him. “Oh, I do the same thing sometimes!” A simple swing upward resulted in audible swooshing sounds. “Regardless, I can use this to protect you in case you’re concerned about my more martial abilities! I train with it every day!”

He rubbed the back of his head as she swung or twirled it around several more times. “It’s a stick, Farishta.”

“A fighting staff, to be more precise.” she said before resting it against her shoulder. “A very big one. No one will give a peddler any problems if I accompany them, plus I could help you transport your merchandise!”

“It just... sounds too good to be true...” Kazem said, exhausting his last excuse.

“Do I have to beg?” she asked, sighing with a look of defeat. “I could probably leave the monastery by myself, but I’d be completely lost. At the very least the closest village could give me directions...”

He balled his hands into fists. “Fine.”

“Fine?” repeated Farishta like a parrot. “Does this mean you’re accepting my offer to travel together?”

Kazem nodded. “Yeah. I’m hesitant though, so if it’s a problem for any reason, we might just split up as soon as we reach that nearby village you keep talking about.”

Farishta practically burst with excitement as she closed her eyes, smiled, and performed an odd maneuver where she repeatedly swooshed her tail and stood on the tips of her toes. “Thank you so much for giving me a chance! I’ll need time to grab my things and prepare for the journey, but I assure you that you won’t regret this!”

Kazem stared into the eyes of the golden ouroboros. “God, I hope so.”

Elaborate plans then hatched in his mind to make the necklace his own.