

Friends In Low Places

Part 22

Kazem remained in a frozen moment of time...

Somewhere soft, safe, and as snug as a bug. Away from the woes of the world. Only a sudden light encroaching on his otherwise familiar and comforting darkness made him slowly open his eyes, just for him to find Farishta's fluffy face staring down at him as he blinked several times.

"Wakey-wakey, Kazem!" she said in an upbeat tone.

Kazem groaned in response, yawning for a moment. "What... what is it?" he asked with weary eyes. "Need a break from walking or something?"

Farishta smiled, shaking her head. "No, silly! You told me to wake you up, remember?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Uh... what for? Don't recall saying that."

"You actually don't remember?" she asked, bringing a free hand to her mouth before giggling a little. "I hope you at least remember your promise for a dinner date and all sorts of other little things once we arrived here!"

Kazem's eyes went wide. "Hold on... we're at Valentia already?!"

Farishta stared off into the distance. "I definitely think this might be the place!" She paused and looked back at him with a toothy smirk. "It's a big human city along the coastline, right?"

"There's lots of those, Farishta..." he replied, rubbing his eyes. "Getting to Valentia from Riverside can take entire weeks on horseback, so unless you walked across the entire continent while I slept, I doubt we're there already."

She frowned at his words. "Then why did you tell me to wake you up once we got to Valentia?"

Kazem sighed, trying to stand up inside the satchel's pocket compartment. "It was a joke since I wanted to be left alone, but whatever. I forgot that I was telling that to Farishta."

She frowned a little. “Hey! That’s mean!”

He chuckled. “Just get me out of here and let me see this city for myself.”

Farishta nodded before gradually reaching inside the satchel. “Oh... very well!”

Her fingers carefully wrapped around Kazem to pick him up. Just as delicately, Farishta brought him out of the satchel before unfurling her fingers, allowing the disoriented man to stand on her padded palm instead. Once Kazem fully woke up, he leaned against her fluffy fingers like a rail to support himself, rising to his feet once more.

Kazem’s jaw almost went agape as he gazed upon the grand port city in the distance. “Oh... you... weren’t kidding.”

The free city of Valentia greeted his gaze like a sparkling crown jewel. Nestled along a natural harbor and a small strait leading to an inland sea, ships and vessels varying in size constantly sailed in and out of the grand port itself. The whole area bustled with commercial activity on land as well as the sea with many wagons nearby. Something about the northern climate with a boreal forest enveloping the vicinity and the scarlet skyline only served to dazzle the senses as sunlight glimmered against the seawater and countless lights illuminated the massive settlement itself.

Farishta smirked at Kazem’s stunned reaction, stroking his back with her thumb. “It’s a very pretty place, isn’t it?”

“How long have I been asleep?” Kazem asked, looking over his shoulder.

“Pretty much all day, really!” she replied with her tail swishing behind her. “Or at least whenever we left Riverside. By all means, you must have been super tired if you slept until the evening!”

He scratched the back of his head. “It has been... rough recently. Still find it hard to believe that you walked that much compared to the time it took us to travel around earlier...”

Farishta smiled and nodded. “My strides are much longer than humans or their horses, so I don’t have to slow myself down anymore if I can just carry you around in my satchel instead!”

“That still makes no sense.” Kazem said, shaking his head. “How does that math even work out? I mean... for the love of the gods, you traveled across half the continent in less than a day, Farishta!”

She simply snickered and stroked his backside with her thumb again. “You should worry less about that and more about what you’re going to feed me for dinner!”

Kazem’s shoulders slumped down. “Fine, fine... what do you want?”

Farishta’s facial expression became far more ponderous as she scratched her chin. “Actually, I don’t know. What kind of food do they have in a place like this anyway?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know. Wouldn’t hurt to have a look around.”

“On that note, have you ever been here before?” she asked, slowly strolling forward. “I for one definitely appreciate the cooler weather!”

Kazem shivered a little. “Nah. Born and raised in the south for almost my whole life. I’ve traveled far and wide, but I’ve rarely been this far to the north...”

Farishta cocked her head to the side. “That’s odd. I thought you said that you were a peddler?”

“I am...” he answered, averting eye contact. “Just used to plying my trade in the south I suppose.”

“Then why did you want to travel to this place specifically?” she asked with her face scrunching up. “You made it sound very important when we first met at my monastery!”

He looked back up to stare deep into her piercing, amethyst eyes. “I’ve been here before, actually, now that I think about it. It’s been years. From what I recall, Valentia is more of a huge trading center for a city. The place is large and powerful enough to remain independent from its neighbors, so it’s a great place to sell spices without getting taxed to high hell.”

Farishta blinked a few times. “So... that’s what you’re selling? Spices?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, yeah... it’s compact and easy to transport compared to other goods. Especially for the price.”

“Or... are you smuggling?” she asked, narrowing her eyes. “For all I know, spices could be a code word for something highly illegal! It’s quite fishy!”

Kazem rolled his eyes. “Don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ve seen me carrying salt and pepper before, yeah?”

“Ignoring that, you don’t look or act like any of the other human merchants I’ve met before...” she said, frowning. “I’ve hardly seen you trading either. And... well... sometimes you’re even contradicting yourself whenever I ask about your background!”

Once again, he faced away from her discerning gaze. “I prefer to keep my business... discreet.”

Farishta sighed. “I promise not to judge you if you’re actually a smuggler or something. I’ve had this weird gut feeling about it, but I haven’t really pressed you about it since I value your company!”

Kazem sighed and rolled his eyes. “Farishta... please...”

Her ears perked up. “What? I just want you to actually tell me the truth about yourself. That’s all!”

“Can’t we just enjoy ourselves?” he asked, spreading out his arms. “Do some sightseeing?”

Farishta’s tail slumped down. “I thought you trusted me...” She paused, bringing Kazem closer to her face. “Don’t you?”

He glanced away again. “Yeah, yeah... I do. I just don’t think this is the right time for this.”

She resumed walking toward Valentia with a look of concern. “Really? Why not?”

“I have something of a complicated background...” Kazem explained, balling one of his hands into a fist. “Did some things I’m not proud of. Plenty of regrets. I think you might hate me if I told you about the man I used to be... some of the things I’ve done... hell, maybe even the things I will do...”

Farishta let out another giggle. “I already know that you’re a handful, Kazem. I still love you anyway!”

He couldn't help but smirk at her subsequent smile with a few fangs visible. "Ugh. You know what? I promise to come clean to you about everything at some point. I just want to enjoy this brief moment of respite we seem to have together. So why don't we just relax for once and try not to stumble into any stupid excitement after everything we've gone through... you know?"

She sighed at his words. "As you wish. I'll pester you more about your colorful history later, but for now, I suppose we can finally start that little date you've been promising me!"

He shook his head. "Right, right... where to eat and all that. Way more important. Speaking of which, you're already acting like a previous girlfriend of mine if you can't decide on where we're gonna eat to begin with."

Farishta's face scrunched up a bit. "Oh... I'm not your first mate?"

"It's weird when you say it like that..." he replied, shaking his head. "But yeah. I've had a few girlfriends in the past, but it never really worked out. At least not in the long-term."

"Why is that?" she asked, frowning with her ears folding against her head. "Were you not... faithful to one another?"

He looked away. "It was way more complicated than that, actually. I'd rather not talk about it..." Kazem then made eye contact once more. "But personally? I just chalk it all up to my current occupation causing constant chaos since I gotta travel around so much, which makes it way harder to maintain long-term relationships I suppose."

"I like to think that won't be a problem for someone like me..." she said, glancing at the ground. "But I don't know. Now you have me worried!"

Kazem practically waved away her concerns with one hand. "Don't be. That's the whole point of this date. If things can't work out for one reason or another or we're too... incompatible, then so be it. How long did you think a relationship between a human and a mergich would last anyway?"

Farishta blinked a few times. "I don't know. I was hoping that it would last... well, forever!"

Something about the innocent look on her face made Kazem's cold heart flutter a little. "Ugh. Farishta... you poor thing..." he said, shaking his head again. "How long were you holed up in that monastery again? Centuries or something?"

Farishta finally approached the edge of the city, nodding. "Something like that! I've had plenty of time to think about things, so don't worry!"

He smirked. "And during all that time, did you ever have a mate or whatever?"

She froze in place. Meanwhile, some wagons on the adjacent road completely ignored or avoided her massive presence. "I... almost never encountered another member of my kind. So... I... never really had the chance to find a mate, unfortunately!"

Her reaction made him frown. "Oh. Sorry to hear that."

"It's fine!" Farishta said, letting out a nervous laugh. "It's not your fault. I just happened to be isolated from my people after they abandoned some random monastery so far to the south! Why apologize for something outside your control?"

"Eh. I just know that almost every adult has certain... needs." Kazem said, shrugging. "Physical, emotional... whatever. People eventually desire a partner for reasons along those lines."

Farishta momentarily looked at all the traffic from the people inhabiting the city. "It wasn't too bad since I'm more of an introvert as it is. I like being by myself for the most part, even if it gets lonely sometimes!" She paused to smile and shake her head. "It only got irritating whenever I was in heat!"

It took several moments for Kazem to process what she just said before his eyes went wide. "Did you really just say that out loud?"

She giggled. "It's only natural! You know women and their bodies work like that, right?"

He scoffed. "Well, last time I checked, human women don't really do that..."

Farishta tilted her head to the side. "Oh?"

“Or at least it’s all year round for humans.” Kazem continued, giving her a blank stare. “It’s usually nonhumans that go into heat. That’s the only time I ever hear the term used... like... at all.”

Her ears perked up before folding down. “Oh. OH! I see...”

He rubbed his eyes. “Which is why it might be a bad idea for you to bring that up at all while we’re in public. I don’t know if mergich are more open or casual about that stuff or what since you’re the first one I’ve ever met, but my gods! Just the mental image alone...”

“Does the thought make you uncomfortable?” she asked, bringing him a little closer to her muzzle with a look of concern. “Or does it make you feel... something else?”

“No comment.” he said, looking back up at her with a smirk. “Ironically enough, it might be something we’ll have to talk about at some point. Preferably in private. That’s part of the reason why I’m not sure if this chemistry we got going on will be nothing more than a fling if I can’t satisfy those... needs of yours...”

Farishta smirked. “Aw. Afraid that you might be too small for me?”

His face turned red for a moment. “Nah, it’s just that when one wrong step on your part could crush me, it makes things far more risky or complicated to say the least.”

She curled her fingers around him once more, caressing his backside. “Not if I’m careful about it!”

“But we’re probably getting way too ahead of ourselves...” he said with a sigh. “Before we know it, a week will have passed by and we’ll already be diving into the deep end of things. Already said that I wanted to take things slow and experiment at most, but at this rate, you’ll want to tie the knot.”

Farishta started moving again, carefully walking around the city’s outskirts to take in the sights and sounds. “I like the sound of that...” she said, a sly smile spreading across her face. “But I’ll respect your wishes if you’re more reserved about this blossoming relationship of ours!”

“There’s multiple reasons.” he said, crossing his arms before gazing upon the free city from a new angle. “Beyond the fact things have already escalated so much in such a short timespan, I can’t help but feel as though I might be taking advantage of you as it is considering how... innocent you are.”

She feigned offense by putting a free hand on her chest. “I’m hundreds of years old, Kazem! If anything else, I’m the one taking advantage of you since I’m the bigger and more mature person! Literally! Why... if you think about it, I’m actually old enough to be your grandmother!”

He laughed in return. “That’s a funny thought, but I’d rather not think about it. Which reminds me. I think being stuck in that monastery for so long would explain why you’re so eager for company and so nonchalant about more... intimate things.”

“Like what?” Farishta asked, giggling.

Kazem rolled his shoulders. “Like being so aggressive about those big old paws on your feet...”

She sneered. “What’s wrong with that? It’s not my fault that it feels nice whenever you’re under one!”

“Just proving my point...” he replied, chuckling before sighing. “You seem to like it whenever people touch your paws. You’ve also been way, way more forward about it ever since we got you those sandals. Still not sure if that’s your thing or if that’s just you being playful.”

As Farishta stepped onto a cobblestone road, one of her sandals created a light thud. She made a wry, catlike smile at the thought as her tail swished in the air. “I’ll admit, I do enjoy it! My paw pads and toe beans can be really sensitive, so it can be pure bliss sometimes whenever someone touches or even caresses them!”

Kazem rolled his eyes. “Knew it.”

“What?” she said, flexing her furred toes for a moment. “Is there something wrong with that? They’re just feet!”

“Feet that are big enough to kill someone if you aren’t careful...” he said, sighing again.

Farishta shook her head. “No, no... these are soft, gentle, fluffy paws!” She paused and unsheathed the claws on her toes for a moment. “They’re only dangerous if I want them to be!”

He rubbed his eyes, blushing a bit. “Farishta...”

She giggled. “Hehe! Don’t worry, they don’t squish any humans... unless they want me to, of course!”

Kazem faced forward with his face still turning red, finding a church in his immediate view. “Quite the thing to say on holy ground.”

“Holy ground?” she parroted back to him, glancing at her new surroundings. “Oh! Is that building a human monastery of some sort?”

“I figured you’d know...” he replied, raising an eyebrow. “But nah. They’re kind of different. Humans call them churches or temples instead.”

Farishta approached the church, staring at a prominent glass window. A large and colored glass pane near the top had separate sections overall resembling a bowl of apples. “Oh my! I’ve never seen human art like this before!”

Kazem nodded. “Yeah, lots of modern churches have stuff like that. I personally don’t get why they chose to do fruit of all things rather than the gods, but whatever.”

“Don’t you know?” Farishta asked, glancing down at him with a sly smile. “The goddess of death, decay, and change absolutely loves apples!” Her tail flicked behind her. “Oh, and the season of autumn!”

Kazem crossed his arms. “Huh.”

Farishta used her thumb to gently rub his back again. “Still, this art has me quite captivated, despite its simplicity! I wonder if it tastes like apples too... hehe!”

He shrugged. “Well, it’s technically lickable.”

Her head cocked to the side. “It is?”

“Yeah.” he answered with a nod. “You can actually lick the glass if you really want to.”

Farishta’s ears and tail shot up. “That sounds really cool! I wouldn’t mind trying that to see what it tastes like if you’re actually serious about that!”

Kazem chuckled. "Be my guest."

With that, Farishta leaned toward the church and its glass mural. Her whiskers brushed against the building as she brought her muzzle next to it. After sniffing it a few times with her pink nose flaring a little, she slightly stuck out her tongue before slowly licking the window. As her taste buds graced the glass, the lick gradually turned into a very broad and thorough one that absolutely smothered the portrayed bowl of fruit and its many sections, leaving behind a thin trail of saliva.

Only a sudden scream from a human woman inside the church made Farishta stop. She backed away from the window with a slight frown and her face contorting. "Ugh, yuck! That didn't taste like apples at all, Kazem! Just... glass and dust!"

He shrugged once more. "I never said it tasted like apples."

"You said it was lickable!" she retorted, pouting a little.

"I did." he said, shaking his head and smirking. "But I never said it tasted like fruit or apples or anything."

Farishta's jaw went ajar for a moment. "Oh, you little...!" Her facial expression rapidly went from a fierce gaze to a more sly or mischievous smile. "You know what? By that logic, you're lickable too!"

He scratched the back of his head and smiled. "Hah! You're not technically wrong... but as I said, we're in public right now."

"Then it's only fair that I get to embarrass you too!" she said with a smug look on her face. Farishta then approached a nearby road with plenty of people in clear view of Kazem before bringing him to her muzzle, licking her thin lips in front of him.

Kazem held up his hands. "To be fair, I didn't embarrass you, you sort of did that on your own..."

With a low growl, Farishta started licking Kazem's chest and face rather than trying to argue. He spread out his arms, trying to hold the tongue back. However, the powerful tongue effortlessly pried his arms apart before peppering him with licks and kisses between smothering him.

Humans previously ignoring or avoiding the two watched on with bewilderment or bemusement at this public display of affection between a giant mergich and a small human.

After several long moments, Farishta eventually pulled her head back and giggled. “There we go! I hope you learned your lesson for tricking me like that!”

Kazem wiped some stray saliva from his face with some blood flushing it again. “You sure did. And here I am thinking that you’d be anxious about something like that...”

“Why would I be?” she asked, bringing him to her muzzle to nuzzle him a little. “Isn’t that what mates are for?”

“From what I remember...” he said, patting down his leather coat. “You get nervous or anxious whenever a bunch of humans are watching everything you do.”

Farishta resumed walking around the outskirts of the settlement. “I guess I’m getting more used to it now! Plus people here in the north have been far more friendly and accommodating towards me compared to all those fearful humans in the south! Like... some even gave me directions to Valentia while you were sleeping!”

His head perked up. “Really? Huh. Maybe that’s because there’s way more mergich up here and most people are more used to them or something. Speaking of which, I’m surprised we haven’t encountered more mergich beyond that one asshole.”

As Kazem spoke, Farishta reached the other side of the settlement, revealing a small northern section that was upscaled to be more around her size. Tents and small buildings the size of a mergich remained next to similarly sized human buildings, albeit the human ones had multiple floors compared to the mergich structures only retaining a ground floor. Several mergich were also present. One processed outright sharks at a station closest to the sea, another carefully shaped some glass at a stall, and another sat on a massive rug with their legs crossed while surrounded by various wares if they didn’t carry them on their person.

Farishta’s heart skipped a beat at the sight. “OH MY GODS! Kazem, are you seeing this?!”

He stared at some signs marking the city section as a mixed-sized or mergich inclusive area. It even included a wooden warning sign saying to ‘Watch your step!’ with a giant, black paw painted on it. “I like how this always happens whenever I say it out loud.”

“But we did it!” she said, clutching him against her chest. “I’ve finally found more of my people!”

Kazem wasn’t in a position to share her enthusiasm as he found himself tightly pressed against her bosom, barely able to move. He stumbled back onto her open palm once she let him go. “I... guess we just did? Hmph. Funny how that works.”

“I can’t wait to greet them!” she said, strolling forward with her tail swaying high in the air.

Although Farishta approached the other mergich with beaming enthusiasm, they didn’t share her excitement as one mergich gave her a look of confusion as the others stopped what they were doing...

Something about Farishta’s purple eyes also made a few mergich outright reel or recoil at the sight.