

Friends In Low Places

Part 2

Kazem moved along a dirt road. A thumping sound reverberated behind him every now and then.

“What a beautiful view!” Farishta said.

The aforementioned giant mirrored Kazem’s movements. She only stopped to gaze at her surroundings, occasionally taking a step or two forward to catch up with him. Although long strides with her titanic legs made this a trivial feat, the pathway hardly contained her colossal form.

“Beautiful?” Kazem said, scoffing. “It’s a poorly maintained dirt road leading to some chickenshit village in the middle of nowhere. I’d call it anything but pretty.”

Farishta laughed a little. “No! It’s not just that, silly! Can you see past the trees too?”

Kazem looked left to right, where flora or other foliage obscured both sides of the path. “Nah...” He flinched once another of Farishta’s footsteps made an audible thumping noise. “And this is starting to get ridiculous. Like are you a hundred feet tall or what?”

“About that much, yeah!” she replied, nodding her head. “It’s been a while since I’ve measured myself though.”

The man found himself at a loss for words. “Seriously?” He paused to rub his eyes and groan. “Your actual height aside, the point is that you’re huge, and it’s starting to complicate everything...”

“Do you want me to carry you again?” asked Farishta, glancing down at him.

“Not really, but that’s what I’m getting at...” Kazem said, rolling his shoulders. “I’m slowing you down. I’d rather not risk getting stepped on or something either.”

Farishta let out another light laugh. “Aw! Just relax. I’m not going to step on you! At least not intentionally...”

Her words aroused a snort from Kazem. “Right. But as I said, the way we’re currently traveling isn’t going to cut it for me. So I wanna try something else.”

“Oh?” she said, perking up her head.

Kazem then stopped in place, pivoting to face Farishta. They were on anything but an even eye level since the first thing he saw happened to be her digitigrade feet. Black foot wrappings on the upper halves contrasted against her snow-white fur, and her toes flexed as she kneeled to the ground.

“In that case,” she said while placing a hand down, “You really should just let me carry you. I know it probably makes you uncomfortable whenever I hold you, but that’s how we reached the bottom of the mountain so fast!”

He took a step back. “That was different...”

Farishta looked between him and her padded palm. “Don’t you trust me now?”

“I’m just not used to getting manhandled by mythical frost giants.” said Kazam with venom in his voice. “I also value my life. Falling to my death would end it a little sooner than I’d like.”

“Then your life will be in good hands!” she said, flashing a smile full of pearly white fangs. “I promise to be as gentle as possible!”

He sighed. “Just as long as we find a better arrangement than me standing around on your palms.”

Farishta looked over her shoulder. “Maybe my knapsack could work?” She fiddled with her wooden staff still sticking out of her improvised backpack held by a single strap. “With some modifications, maybe it could even be a mobile home!”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.” replied Kazem, rolling his eyes.

She carefully spread out her fingers on the ground directly in front of him, creating a platform. “Aw. Why not?”

He strolled forward following another moment of hesitation. “Um... maybe you can put me on your shoulder or whatever instead...”

Fluffy fingers curled around Kazem once he stepped onto the open palm. Black padding and white fur cushioned him from several sides as Farishta stood back up, gradually lifting him away. With his back against one of her thumbs, his view of the world transitioned to include everything beyond the treeline. Fields containing cereal crops and other grains remained next to windmills in the far distance, bringing life to the otherwise semi-arid shrublands.

“Isn’t it pretty?” asked Farishta, a smile spreading across her face.

Kazem recoiled a little when she pressed her thumb against his back. “This again? Also, what are you talking about, exactly?”

She scoffed. “The view, of course!”

He spent several moments taking in his surroundings, where the dry environment looked less virile than the plentiful wildlife closer to the mountainside. “Still don’t know what you find so great. It’s only a farm or two...”

“I mean the sights and sounds!” Farishta said, amethyst eyes beaming up. “It’s nothing but intoxicating seeing the sun shining in the sky, hearing the birds chirping, and all the little humans working in the fields. It makes me grateful towards the gods for their blessings!”

“Huh.” Kazem said, shrugging. “I guess I just don’t have your perspective on things, even all the way up here.” He bared his teeth and reeled once Farishta started making slow and circular movements with her thumb against his back. “What... are you doing?”

Farishta wiggled her fingers a little. This reduced Kazem to nothing but clay or putty as she shifted him around, smothering parts of his body with fluffy fur. “Sorry, but your jacket feels really nice!” she said with a slight purr. “I’ve never seen anything like it!”

He slumped down a bit as she resumed practically rubbing his back. “It’s just old leather.”

With a final pat against his back, Farishta brought Kazem to her shoulder. “Still! Now that I think about it, they probably don’t make anything leather for my size...”

“And I’m really curious as to how the hell anyone made your clothes to begin with.” he replied, inching his way to the edge of her hand. “Not to mention that huge wooden staff.”

She blinked a few times, glancing down at her robes. “I think it’s made of lots of... flax? I forgot. Oh, but I did make the staff myself by carving up the tallest tree I could find!”

Kazem nearly growled. “How wonderful.”

With some assistance from Farishta, Kazem climbed onto her shoulder. He immediately grasped fabric from her clothes. Much like a parrot perched on a pirate, the human found himself in a precarious position as he tried to maintain his balance, eyes going wide once he saw the dirt road dozens of feet beneath him. Farishta kept her hand in front of him as she took a single step forward. As a result, Kazem slipped before falling, blood draining from his face as he landed on his back, just to end up right where he started with a soft palm breaking his fall and cushioning his backside.

He stared at the sky and sighed afterward. “So much for that.”

“Are you alright?” she asked, eyes full of concern.

Kazem scoffed. “I’m fine. Should have warned me first.”

Farishta nodded. “Agreed! That could have been really bad! You would have...” A far-off yelping sound made her ears perk up as the scream echoed around the area. “Wait. Did you hear that?”

Another audible cry for help filled the air...

“HELP!” shouted someone in the distance.

Naturally, Farishta pinpointed its origin. She turned to face a thicket of the woods adjoining another path behind them. “Does that sound like a cry of help to you, Kazem, or do you think it’s just the farmers shouting at each other?”

“It sounds like absolutely none of our business.” he answered, sneering.

“SOMEONE! ANYONE! PLEASE!”

Upon hearing these words, Farishta began backtracking with a determined look in her eyes.

Meanwhile, Kazem sat back up. "Please don't tell me you're going to get yourself involved."

"Well, of course!" she said with a grimace forming on her face. "Why wouldn't I?"

He gestured at his holstered pistol and a sheathed dagger. "Do you think I carry these weapons for show? As a... uh... adventure capitalist, there's certain unavoidable occupational hazards in my profession, and I've found that playing hero is an excellent way to get yourself hurt."

Farishta finally frowned. "I don't understand..."

"Just saying sometimes it's better not to get yourself involved in other people's business."

She almost hissed at his words. "Really, Kazem? I thought you were a better person than that! I'm sure I'll be able to handle whatever we find, and as a guardian and steward of this world, I don't have much of a choice in the matter! If someone needs my help, then I will gladly assist them!"

Kazem didn't grace her words with a response as he grumbled, kneeling against her hand and scanning his surroundings.

Eventually, the duo came across a few broken carriages and a lone kobold about half the size of a human. Visible dirt and grime covered their scaly body. They remained propped up against a wooden wagon, pressing a dirty rag against their arm while reeling and hissing. Only the sight of Farishta approaching brought them back to reality as their entire body jolted upward.

"What the blazes?!" exclaimed the kobold. The light and feminine tone of their voice matched the one from earlier. She backed away, lifting the rag away to reveal a complete lack of injuries or bleeding. "EVERYONE SCRAM!"

Farishta's ears folded against her head. "What's going on?"

She looked to the side, finding several more kobolds with knives and shortbows hiding amid the bushes. One turned tail and ran. This prompted the others to vanish into the woodlands, scurrying and darting in several different directions before she could even react.

"Wait!" Farishta said, "I'm not going to hurt you!"

Her words failed to stop the kobolds from fleeing, one of which even tripped and yipped as they scrambled away, soon leaving the two by themselves.

Farishta then looked down at Kazem. “What just happened?”

He crossed his arms. “They were probably bandits or escaped slaves trying to lure some poor fool into an ambush.”

“My goodness!” she said, returning her attention to the abandoned wagons. “Are you absolutely sure? There must have been a misunderstanding if they saw me and ran away...”

“It’s a common tactic.” replied Kazem. “Fake distress. Earn someone’s pity. Take advantage of them. If you were a human like me, odds are they would have shanked us and left us dead in a ditch without a second thought. Complete scum of the Earth.”

Farishta used her foot to try nudging one of the wagons forward, albeit to no avail. “Then why are these wagons here? They look old.”

“Don’t know.” he said with another shrug. “Could have been the result of multiple ambushes or people abandoning them. Pure speculation on my part though.”

“And did you just say those reptilian creatures were escaped slaves?” she asked, tail slumping down.

Kazem raised an eyebrow. “What? You’ve never seen a kobold before?”

She looked to the side and scrunched up her toes. “I’ve... heard of them. Poor things...”

“I wouldn’t feel too sorry for them.” he said with a blank stare. “Odds are they would have stolen everything you had if they could, but you’re not theirs to rob blind as far as I’m concerned since you’re anything but an easy victim.”

“Maybe they just don’t know any better!” Farishta said, eyes glaring at the ground. “It’s nothing short of terrible if they were desperate enough to resort to that in order to survive!”

“Right.” replied Kazem, rolling his eyes. “They could have killed someone, Farishta.”

She let out a sigh. "I know. It's just that sometimes people become criminals because they don't have an honest way to make a living. It makes me feel sorry for them. Like... I understand it on some fundamental level since I'm a carnivore myself."

He raised an eyebrow. "You what?"

With nothing of notice by the broken wagons, Farishta started returning to the original road. "I... how do I put this?" She looked up at the sky. "I can technically eat some other things, but I need meat to survive. It's unfortunate. I've said this before, but I'd set up snares around the mountains and woods to catch things like deer. I'd do my best to make sure the poor things didn't suffer, but... well, I needed to eat and the cycle of life meant I didn't have much of a choice in the matter!"

Kazem scratched the back of his head. "At least you were... ethical?"

"I suppose." she said with her ears folding against her head. "For better or worse, I don't get as upset anymore since that's just mother nature. I'd make sure nothing went to waste, and I'd say a prayer to thank the animal for their sacrifice before they moved on to the next life!"

An amused smirk spread across his face. "How sweet. I'm human, so I've never really encountered that issue before."

Farishta's tail shot up. "Oh yeah, you're an omnivore! That's cool! Does that mean you're a vegetarian or a vegan? I know some humans adopt that type of diet for a myriad of reasons!"

"Fuck no." he replied, narrowing his eyes. "Wait, I mean... sorry. What does myriad mean?"

Her smile also vanished from her face. "It means variety. I used that word since I've read books claiming humans might refrain from consuming meat for moral or health related reasons. Meanwhile, I don't really have the same option!"

"There's books about humans in your monastery?"

She nodded at his words. "Yeah! It's how I learned a little about the world alongside expanding my vocabulary a bit when I had nothing else to do, so forgive me for that. The gods might have gifted their children and creations with the tongue of the divine to communicate with one another, but

sometimes language can be odd like that with the more unique or complicated words. Speaking of which, I have a question for you!”

Kazem’s head perked up. “Go for it.”

Farishta looked down at him. “What does the word ‘fuck’ mean?”

For a moment, Kazem didn’t react. Then he slowly laughed while covering his face with one hand, effectively facepalming altogether. “Oh god...”

“What?” she said with her face contorting. “I’m serious!”

He eventually relented in his laughter. “My bad. I shouldn’t use terms like that so casually since it’s a swear word. Maybe I’ll explain the meaning later.”

“I see.” Farishta said, momentarily breaking eye contact.

“You really have been holed up in that monastery for god knows long, haven’t you?”

She resumed traveling along the dirt road, glancing at the occasional windmill or stray building. “The farthest I’ve ever been away from the monastery is the nearby village, so I suppose I still have much to learn about the world!”

Kazem pressed against the black padding on her hand, now serving as his front-row seat. “Don’t we all? I know it’s rude in my culture to ask a woman for her age, but roughly how old are you again? Because that could explain a lot.”

Farishta brought a free hand to her chin. “I’m only about four hundred and eighteen years old.” Her gaze turned toward the human sitting on her open palm. “What about you?”

“Only four hundred?!” he said in turn. “If I hadn’t known better, I would have thought you were around my age...”

She blinked a few times. “Which is?”

He stayed silent for several seconds. “Let’s just say I’m in my late twenties and leave it at that.”

“Aw, no fair!” she replied, practically pouting. “I mean... I told you mine!”

“I don’t believe it.” Kazem said with a shake of his head. “Plus we got more important matters to focus on rather than chit-chat. What made you so fixated on reaching this village anyway if the goal is just to go north?”

Farishta’s tail started swaying behind her. “Well, I have to say farewell and prepare a little more for the journey of course! I wouldn’t want people to think something happened to me or anything.”

His rough demeanor didn’t reveal another hint of emotion. “Fair enough.”

“Oh, and it looks like we’re almost there!” she said, smiling and revealing a few fangs.

At long last, the dirt road leading directly to the distant village split into several new paths. Although Kazem could barely see it, an old and tattered imperial banner still adorned a post far from the settlement itself. Chills went down his spine upon seeing its purple drapery and a golden circle in the center reminiscent of a snake, another mere reminder of why others sent him here...