

Friends In Low Places

Part 7

Kazem followed Farishta's footprints embedded into the dirt. Unlike before, where Farishta had a seemingly supernatural ability to walk with minimal noise and other fanfare, the force and speed from her running resulted in occasional footprints. Each paw-shaped mark appeared slightly larger than an individual human, creating a clear trail for him to follow from the hills to open plains.

Eventually, the tracks led to nearby woodlands. Kazem transitioned from sprinting to strolling, huffing and puffing with a hand on his hip, scanning his surroundings. Soon, he spotted another footprint on the forest's edge. Although the track maintained an abnormal size with plenty of loose dirt and debris surrounding it, weaker and weaker imprints showed signs of Farishta slowing down.

"Thank the gods..." he said under his breath.

Soft sobs caught Kazem's attention. He immediately placed his back against an adjacent tree and utilized it to take a quick peek. Nestled deep within a forest grove, Farishta sat on the ground, hugging her legs as she stared at her own two feet. Tears flowed from her eyes. She only made the occasional snuffle or sob, all while stray rays of sunlight descending from the heavens highlighted her overall position, including surrounding patches of white flowers flourishing within the grove itself.

One sudden misstep on Kazem's behalf culminated in leaves crunching beneath his feet.

Consequently, Farishta's head perked up. "Kazem?" she said in a low tone, wiping her eyes and nose. "Is... is that you?"

He scratched the back of his head before casually moving out into the open. "Yeah. It's me."

Farishta covered her face with both hands. "I'm so sorry! I just knew something like this would happen..." Another sob escaped her lips. "It always does. I... I didn't mean to abandon you, but my mere presence only made the situation worse and worse the more I watched..."

Rather than saying anything else, Farishta returned to a restrained sort of crying. She completely covered her face, muffling but not entirely silencing the subsequent sounds of her weeping.

Something within Kazem's icy heart cracked for once as he frowned. "You didn't do anything wrong, Farishta."

She resumed burying her head in her arms. "But you saw the way they reacted to me, right?"

"Well, yeah." he replied, glancing over his shoulder. "They all overreacted, really. Apparently some other mergich has been giving them trouble if that's any reassurance. Once again, the whole ordeal happened to be a big misunderstanding, and I managed to clear things up by talking to them. The soldiers are also looking for my horse that ran off, so there's no need to worry about anything!"

Farishta finally revealed her face, which contained nothing but disdain. "You don't really understand, do you?"

Kazem raised his hands while moving toward her. "Evidently I don't. I'm not angry about you running away if that's what has you so riled up. It just kills me seeing you so upset all of a sudden... so... is there something else wrong?"

"What's wrong is simply... what I am." she said with a sigh. "My nature. It happens every time I encounter someone new. It doesn't matter if it's a lone hunter in the woods, an ignorant pilgrim, or a merchant caravan traveling to Ashbourne. Most always react like I'm some sort of monster whenever they see me. Even the residents of Ashbourne tense up and clutch their children if I decide to visit, and only a scarce few actually treat me like a normal person rather than some dangerous giant!"

"Once again, that's not your fault at all." Kazem said before stopping in place. "That's just how people are. You're allegedly pretty far to the south by mergich standards and almost everyone I've known in the Astranian Empire has never seen one of your kind before."

Her eyes averted his own. "That doesn't change anything, Kazem. Even other humans from the north will put me on a pedestal and treat me differently specifically because I'm a mergich."

He scratched his chin. "I mean... if they revere you instead, then being an immortal frost giant has to have its own perks, right?"

Farishta's face contorted, flashing a few fangs. "You think I enjoy being like this?!"

Kazem found himself at a loss for words, offering no response before Farishta resumed speaking.

“I can’t walk into a tavern like you. I can’t ride a horse. I can’t taste most human foods. Nearly every last thing you humans create is too tiny for me. I’ve heard most settlements forbid mergich from even entering. Everyone is either scared of me or treats me like a demigod. I outlive every human friend I make to such a point that I’ve lived long enough to see several generations in Ashbourne. For the love of the gods, I can’t even simply move anywhere without getting extremely anxious and worried about whether or not one wrong step will accidentally crush someone or something way smaller than me!”

Kazem stayed silent for several seconds. “I never thought of things from your perspective before.”

“Then my apologies...” she said, sighing again. “I didn’t mean to get angry! I just wish I was normal... maybe even a human like you. I’ve never fit in anywhere, always keeping to myself in the monastery by reading and meditating to avoid troubling others. Now I’m starting to think that leaving Ashbourne is another one of my endless mistakes if I’m looking for a home that might not even exist anymore, all while I’m the center of attention and treated like a freak by everyone else!”

Undeterred by her words, Kazem moved right next to her massive body. Only Farishta’s large and fluffy tail curled around herself impaired further progress. “Why don’t you pick me up real quick so that we can talk face to face?”

Farishta broke eye contact. “I don’t see the point in doing something like that. My sense of hearing is very sharp, so I can easily listen to you from all the way up here.” She looked back at him with her ears folding down. “Don’t you hate it when I hold you too if you’re afraid of me like the others?”

“It’s not that.” he said, shaking his head. “You were just really touchy feely when we first met and it made me uncomfortable. Despite that, I trust you now. I just wanna speak face to face to prove a point for the most part.”

“Ah...” she replied, tilting her head to the side. Farishta then lowered one of her hands to the ground to create a flat platform. “In that case, I’ll indulge you.”

Kazem nodded. “Thank you.”

With that, the man stepped onto an open palm, grabbing a thumb to maintain support.

Farishta gradually brought Kazem to her upper chest. She combined both hands to provide more room for him to stand right next to her plentiful neck fur. “Did you want to talk more privately or something? I don’t really understand.”

“Nah.” he answered before reaching out a hand. “You’re extremely considerate of others, but I think you care way too much about what other people think about you. You really shouldn’t. You’ll never be happy if you’re depending on validation from others, and I only wanted to demonstrate that you’re a gentle giant who I don’t really have anything to fear from!”

She sneered. “Oh, so not even fear of an accident or...”

Farishta stopped speaking once Kazem started rubbing her neck. His hand sifted and coursed through her fluffy fur as he did a combination of petting and stroking her throat.

“I’ll admit, I can usually be quite the nihilistic and cynical bastard.” he said, smiling as he resumed his work. “I grew up in a crowded urban environment. Very poor and desolate. Lots of snakes who’d outright sell their mother for a quick buck and gangs more or less controlling the streets. Bluebloods would chop off someone’s hand for stealing an apple from the marketplace just to set an example, so not a great place for me growing up since I was a street urchin.”

As this occurred, Farishta raised her head and closed her eyes. “Hmm... okay... but what does that have to do with anything we were just discussing?”

He started scratching her chin. “I’ll get there. Just explaining my background and perspective on things.”

“Like how you became a peddler?” she asked, slowly blinking several times.

“Sort of.” Kazem said, rolling his shoulders. “Short version is that I found myself talented at finding value in things people might overlook before taking them for myself and selling them for a hefty profit. Naturally, I got good at it. I eventually caught the attention of certain locals for my antics, then after some tutelage, they made sure I would never go hungry again.”

Farishta smiled. “In that case, it’s great that you found something you’re good at. Maybe even a purpose in life! Did flipping goods for a profit become your passion from that point?”

“In a sense...” answered Kazem, scoffing. “It happened to be the only thing I was naturally really good at, and I didn’t exactly have many financial opportunities growing up. Enough about me though.”

“Can you use both hands, by the way?” she asked with a slight purr. “This is surprisingly pleasant!”

Kazem shrugged. “Sure.” Following this, he used both hands to massage her neck and began putting his back into it, causing Farishta’s ears to fold against her head. “But anyway... I hope that explains a few things about my behavior. When I first met you, it was less of me being scared of you and more of me automatically assuming the worst, but you proved me wrong. You also undervalue yourself. You’re easily the nicest person I’ve ever met since you provided me with hospitality without expecting anything in return, helping me with anything I asked for, and you seem to have a really good heart if you even care about the assholes who did something to slight you!”

Farishta’s only response came in the form of purring. It reverberated through her fur and shot into Kazem’s fingertips, shaking him to his core as chills descended down his spine.

“But yeah.” he said while the overpowering purring overwhelmed him. “I know you might not care for some of your more unique quirks from being a mergich, but thank the gods someone as sweet and considerate as you happened to be born as one rather than some other malicious prick...”

Before Kazem continued, he took a step back. Farishta promptly tilted her palms upwards. As a result, he fell face-first into her neck fur, vibrating his entire body as she continued to purr. His world became one of white fluff that cushioned him like a cloud, somehow softer than the fur on her lower torso as he almost vanished within it entirely.

Kazem’s upper body emerged several moments later, unfazed by the situation. “Real cute stunt.”

Farishta only interrupted her own purring to laugh at his words. “Well, maybe you shouldn’t have stopped, silly! Just keep doing what you’re doing!”

“If I can...” he replied, getting on his hands and knees. A sweeping motion to the left caused him to happen upon the golden chain to the ouroboros necklace. “But now I’ve lost my train of thought. Huh. I think I was also gonna say that even though I’ve only known you for a few days, I do think you’re a genuinely good person and far more clever than whatever you give yourself credit for.”

“Aw. Are you saying all this sweet stuff to make me feel better?” she asked as a wry smile spread across her face. “This is easily the nicest you’ve ever been to me so far!”

Kazem retreated from the neck fur, returning to standing on Farishta’s palms. “Don’t say it like that or I’ll start making sarcastic remarks instead. Just trying to help you with my words is all.”

Farishta lowered her palms to provide a more level platform before giggling. “Funnily enough, I do love your gruff personality since I’ve never had a human talk back to me so much before! It just means you’re already treating me as an equal if you’re not afraid to speak your mind!”

“I’d consider it more of stupidity or apathy.” he replied, crossing his arms. “Not that much gets under my skin anymore.”

She slightly stuck out her tongue. “But you have a soft spot beneath that rough exterior, don’t you? Like a piece of candy.”

“You’ve tasted candy before?” asked Kazem, raising an eyebrow. “Color me surprised.”

Farishta’s response came in the form of fully sticking out her tongue. Before Kazem could comprehend what was happening, it enveloped his lower body as she went about licking him. Her tongue, fortunately, lacked barbs or a sandpaper texture typical of most felines. Instead, the soft and warm muscle gradually moved upward to smother his torso before flicking his face, leaving behind saliva as individual taste buds slid across his exposed skin.

Following this, Farishta licked her thin lips. “I don’t know what candy tastes like, admittedly. However...” She paused to flutter her eyes. “In Ashbourne, they made these lollipops in the fall. They had a sour or bitter outer shell, but if you licked them enough, you’d get to savor their sweet and fruity cores!” Another quick lick peppered Kazem with a light kiss. “Sometimes even the kids would count how many licks it took to get to the center...”

Kazem’s face turned a bit red as he wiped off his face. “Is this...”

“You don’t have to say anything.” replied Farishta, pressing her cold and wet nose against him. Individual whiskers also brushed against his body. An additional lick, albeit a slow and steady one,

undid Kazem's efforts as the smooth muscle briefly enveloped his face and upper body once more. "Three!" she said with a giggle, purring like a motor afterward.

In response, Kazem grunted and backed away from her nose.

Farishta opened her eyes and frowned. "Are you not enjoying this? Because I definitely am!"

"It's not that," he said, covering his face with one hand as he facepalmed. "This is... really nice. Very intimate. It's just that we've only known one another for two days at most, so we might be getting too sentimental already when I still have a job to do..."

She flicked her tongue before it retreated back into her mouth. "What's wrong with that?"

He gazed at the golden chain connected to her amulet. "I don't know if it'd be better to keep our relationship more professional or not. It's all been really... odd. Might hurt more when the time comes to go our separate ways later on."

"That's just how life is, Kazem!" replied Farishta, sighing. "I used to be the same way. You might be afraid of forming connections with people because it'll hurt more when you lose them. I've definitely lost people I've cared about over the centuries, but that doesn't stop me from bonding with people." She paused to practically nuzzle him again. "Instead, I treasure the short amount of time I do have with them!"

"That's... an interesting perspective, Farishta. Still not sure what to make of all this, but it might be best for us to take things slower or something. Unless this behavior is a normal mergich... thing."

"So I'm not allowed to nuzzle you for a few weeks?" asked Farishta, rolling her eyes.

Kazem looked away. "I just need time to think. We got bigger fish to fry anyway if that nonsense back at the watchtower is anything to go by."

"Actually, Kazem... I was considering returning to Ashbourne, but I don't know..."

He made eye contact with Farishta again. "What about Horace though?"

Her ears and tail perked up. "Oh, right! We should probably make sure he's okay first!"

“I don’t care about his well-being, Farishta. As I have said many times already, he threatened you and claimed more colorful individuals similar to himself were on the way. You might be putting both yourself and Ashbourne in danger if you just decided to call it quits before returning there, and I still intend to travel north with or without you.”

“Oh my!” she said with her eyes going wide. “I didn’t even consider that!”

Kazem made a dismissive wave with one hand. “Then let’s go. We can talk about our feelings and shit later.”

Farishta carefully got back on her feet while holding him with both hands. “But what if Ashbourne needs my protection?”

“They’re apparently after you and the amulet.” he replied with a shake of his head. “Not Ashbourne. Horace himself is also still a potential problem... and I’m gonna be pissed if he somehow escaped during all this excitement since you also left him behind with your bag.”

Her tail slumped to the ground. “I guess you’re right. I’ll have to finish what I started before I even consider going back to the monastery, but I still have no clue why certain nefarious individuals might want my amulet to begin with!”

“I’ll have to talk to my contacts.” Kazem said, reaching into a coat pocket. He grabbed an inert magical orb and confirmed its location before his hand retreated back outside without it. “It might take me some time, but I’ll try to figure out what’s going on and get some stuff sorted out.”

Meanwhile, Farishta’s upper body ascended past the treeline. This granted Kazem a bird’s-eye view of his surroundings with his back facing her. A coy smirk formed on her face...

Kazem turned to face her. “What do you-”

Farishta’s tongue cut him off as she licked him yet again, making him react with revulsion before he tried pushing both her tongue and face away.

He gave her a blank stare as she momentarily stuck out her tongue at him. “Really?”

“Thanks for the pep talk!” she replied, smiling. “Just consider that a token of my affection whenever I do it. It’s really nice to know that deep down, you really do care!”

He crossed his arms and sneered. “No good deed goes unpunished, does it?”

To answer his question, Farishta simply laughed. She then exited the forest, walking with her tail swaying side to side. They returned to their original traveling arrangements with Farishta beaming up as she marveled at the world and its wonders while Kazem appeared disinterested and grumpy.