

# Friends In Low Places

## Part 11

Farishta slowly blinked, almost fluttering her eyes. “You... want me to sign this tiny thing?”

The cordwainer looked in both directions. On one side, a rough man with a leather jacket watched on and crossed his arms. A remarkably large mergich woman on the other loomed over them as she sat on the ground and stared at the piece of paper in his hands.

“Not necessarily, Ms. Farishta.” replied the cordwainer with a shake of his head. “I know that would be absurd given the circumstances! Despite that, I do need some kind of written agreement, so perhaps we can work something out if Kazem is willing to sign it on your behalf.”

She squinted her eyes. “But what does your document say, exactly? I can read things in your tongue, but the text is way too small for me to make out anything!”

“It’s just basic terms and conditions.” said the cordwainer, shrugging. “Proof that you paid for the commission, consented to the experimental nature of the project, and other things like that. Standard stuff.” He paused to hand the parchment to Kazem. “You can read it all if you want to, but I doubt you’d take issue with anything in the fine print. I only need a signature anyway!”

Kazem gave the paper a blank look for a moment. “Uh... alright.” he muttered, eventually grabbing the document before glancing over it.

“Well, what does it say?” asked Farishta, curious like a cat as she focused on Kazem.

“I... I don’t know.” he said, scratching the back of his head.

Farishta grimaced. “What do you mean you don’t know? Humans and mergich alike speak in the tongue of the divine, do we not?”

“It’s not that...” Kazem said before breaking eye contact. “I don’t know how to read or write. At all.”

She reeled in return, resulting in her large and fluffy tail sticking up. “What? I had no idea!”

The cordwainer shook his head and smiled. "Don't worry. It's not a big deal! Most folks don't."

"Actually, almost all mergich do!" interjected Farishta. "If what you say is true, how do a majority of humans learn about the gods or even entertain themselves when they're alone?"

Kazem raised an eyebrow. "In my experience, a pastor reads scriptures or other passages for the commoners. I'm not familiar with any weirdos that like to read for fun though."

Farishta's ears folded against her head. "Heyyy! You know I used to read in the monastery, like, all the time, right? It's one of my favorite pastimes!"

"My bad." Kazem said, shrugging. "Guess that means I know one big weirdo then."

She opened her mouth and scoffed. "Ugh. You're always so snarky! Don't make me smoosh you in front of my shoemaker!"

A grin spread across Kazem's face. "That'd be a sight to see."

"You'd probably like that, wouldn't you?" she said with a smirk of her own.

His only answer came in the form of a chuckle.

Meanwhile, the cordwainer rubbed his eyes. "I don't mean to interrupt, Farishta, but I still need Kazem to sign this document so that I can start working on these sandals of yours. We're burning daylight out here!"

Farishta's head perked up. "Oh, right!" She turned to face her traveling companion. "You have my permission to sign this agreement on my behalf, Kazem!"

He narrowed his eyes. "Okay, but do I need to say it again? Never wrote a single damn thing in my entire life. I don't see why a verbal agreement isn't already good enough as it is..."

The cordwainer rolled his eyes. "It's not hard." He handed a quill still dripping with ink to Kazem. "Just a few strokes to sign your name at the bottom of the paper. Even my apprentice can do it."

Kazem clenched his hands into fists. "Are you calling me stupid or something?"

“Absolutely not!” answered the cordwainer, raising a hand in the air. “I’m just saying it’s simple.”

“Whatever.” Following this, Kazem snatched the quill pen from the shoemaker. “I’ll sign this damned document if that’s what you want so badly.”

In response, the cordwainer winced. “I meant no offense, sir. If you’d like, I might be able to provide instructions if you’re... unfamiliar with these things.”

Kazem glanced at the bottom of a wooden board holding the paper in place. The parchment itself happened to be made of durable hide, held down by a crude clamp to create a rudimentary writing surface against the wood. “The hell is this?”

“Just a little something I cooked up...” answered the cordwainer, putting his hands on his hips. “I call it a clamp-board! It’s a relatively simple invention, but I think it has a ton of potential!”

“If you say so.” replied Kazem, rolling his shoulders. He grasped the pen and put the tip near the bottom of the document. “What was I supposed to do again?”

“Well... your name is Kazem, right?”

He nodded. “Uh-huh.”

“Then a simple K should suffice for a signature if it’s your first initial!” continued the cordwainer. “Just draw a straight line.”

As instructed, Kazem made a simple line as more wet ink adorned the parchment. “Alright...”

The cordwainer brought a hand to his chin. “Now you need to make two more lines. I’m not exactly sure how to explain that whole maneuver, however.”

Kazem grunted. “That wasn’t a K?”

“Well, right now it’s just an L, but we’ll remedy that soon!”

Once more, Kazem nearly growled at the cordwainer's words. "I thought you were telling me how to make a K, not an L."

The cordwainer gestured with a free hand. "We're getting there." He turned his gaze toward the colossal feline watching the ongoing commotion. "Since I'm drawing a blank, how would you describe the process from here, Farishta?"

She made a wry smile, also bringing a clawed finger to her furred chin. "Hmm. I'd phrase it by saying he should make another two lines starting from the center of the one he just created. Each one should extend to the top and bottom right a bit, creating a K!"

Following these words to the letter, Kazem made another two strokes with his pen. The resulting K appeared disjointed. Instead of making lines from the exact center, a few separate points on the first line resulted in a far more crooked appearance.

"Good enough." said the cordwainer, shrugging and holding out his hands in exasperation.

On the contrary, Farishta beamed up, placing her hands on her cheeks. "Oh, you did it! I'm so proud of you!"

Kazem grimaced. "Is that all or do you have more hoops for me to jump through?"

The cordwainer gestured at the so-called clamp-board. "No, no. That'll be all! Sorry for the trouble, it's just how I go about doing my business these days..."

With that, Kazem gave the document back to the man. "Two days, right?"

"I'll try!" said the cordwainer. "It'll be a lot of work, but I'll give my full attention to the project! I might have made progress by tomorrow in case you have an interest in checking on things in the middle of the day."

"I'll keep that in mind." replied Kazem, nodding.

The cordwainer waved with his clamp-board while walking away. "But until then!"

As before, Kazem waved the man off, then faced Farishta. "Glad that's over with..."

“I hope you’re not angry.” Farishta said under her breath.

He sneered. “I’m always angry.”

She frowned at his words. “Really? Either way I didn’t mean to put you in an uncomfortable position!”

Kazem moved next to her, shaking his head. “It’s not your fault. Sorry if I got worked up, I just get frustrated whenever I struggle with things like that.”

“It’s fine!” she said, glancing at the sky. “All fine! I only wish you were nicer to people sometimes...”

He let out another grunt. “Hmph.”

Farishta gradually stood up. “But ignoring that, I’d be more than happy to teach you how to read!” She began carrying her bundle containing various goods. “I still have my prayer scroll, actually, so I could teach you all about the gods. Maybe we could even pray and meditate together if you think that would be fun to do together in our spare time!”

Kazem’s gaze fixated on her ouroboros amulet. “That reminds me. What’s the plan from here?”

“I don’t know...” she said, stretching and standing on the tips of her toes. She spent several seconds yawning. “Then again, it is getting late. Maybe we should set up a camp like last time?”

“We could.” he replied, gazing at the scarlet sky. “The town has an inn though. I’ve been meaning to sleep in a proper bed, have a stiff drink, and get my clothes cleaned at some point.”

Farishta’s ears perked up. “Are you sure? We can use the river to wash our things, and there’s plenty of water to drink from it if you’re thirsty!”

Kazem looked away. “That’s not exactly what I meant.”

“It’d also save you some money!” she said, twiddling her thumbs. “You could finally show me how you make a fire too... or... ooo, I could read my prayer scroll to you instead!”

Rather than responding, Kazem gave her an empty stare.

In return, Farishta let out a long and resigned sigh. “I just don’t want to be alone again.”

“Alright, alright...” he replied in a low tone. “We’ll figure out an arrangement like last time. Get ourselves far away from this town and find a quiet place somewhere far more private.”

Farishta closed her eyes and smiled. “Ah, thank goodness!” She took one step back and lowered her hand next to Kazem. “Let’s get going then!”

He climbed onto her palm. “Never took you for a clingy cat until now either.”

She raised him in the air and snickered. “Oh, shush, you!”

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Vali emerged from a treeline, stepping onto a stone road. His imposing physical form towered over virtually everything within his surroundings. His lightweight yet durable armor revealed little to none of his fur, which included digitigrade boots thumping against the cobblestones. A much smaller human woman sitting in the open palm of his hand had a wide smile on her face, kicking her leather shoes in the air as she admired the view.

“This is so much better!” she said, patting her hand against the gauntlet. “I got your grubby hands all nice and clean. You have such big paws, Vali, so it wasn’t easy by any means!”

His only response came in the form of a grunt, huffing from within his helmet.

She laughed at his response. “Hehe! But why are we heading back to Riverside again?”

“To bring you back to your father, Alice.”

Alice recoiled at his words. “You’re joking, right?”

“I’m afraid not.” replied Vali without a hint of emotion. “He still owes me. There’s also the matter of that amulet the mage mentioned, but that probably doesn’t concern you.”

In stark contrast, the smile immediately vanished from Alice’s face. “Please don’t do this! I... I don’t want to go back...”

Vali stopped in place. Something in the air became far more palpable as he stood still like a statue. “Why not, Alice?”

She crossed her arms and looked down. “My dad wants to marry me off to a sixty something year old man I’ve never even spoken to before. Meanwhile, I’m like... nineteen. I don’t feel ready to become a mother either. I was considering running away from home altogether before you came along and saved me from that fate!”

He craned his neck. “I kidnapped you to serve as collateral. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Alice turned around, getting on her hands and knees. “PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE take me with you, Vali!” Her eyes watered up as she shivered a little, looking all the more pitiful on his comparatively huge palm. “I... I’ll do anything you want. I promise that I won’t get in your way either! Please!”

“This is for your own safety too.” Vali said in a stoic tone. “Trust me. A life of luxury with servants in a palace is probably preferable compared to the dirty business I regularly find myself involved in. If anything else, I’ve been psyched out by how well you’ve been taking everything so far.”

She looked up at him, almost on the verge of tears. “Vali. I’ve never felt more... alive. Just by being with you. They almost never let me leave the castle because they were afraid of something happening to me, so I don’t want to return to that, much less marry some old creep!”

“So that means you want me to keep you around like some kind of pet?” he asked with a sneer.

“That’d be better than whatever my father forces me to do!” replied Alice, clasping her hands together. “I can be useful too! If you give me a chance, I can do much more than just tidying up your gauntlets. I’m begging you!”

“Fine.” Vali said, hissing. He sidestepped the road, slowly sitting on the grass next to it. “You want to be with some dangerous man like me? Then let’s give you a taste of what that might entail if you want to know what my life is like.”

Alice cocked her head to the side as Vali lowered her to the dirt. “Oh? What do you mean?”

Vali waited until she hopped off his hand, curling his fingers into a fist afterward. “I hunt monsters, Alice. Dragons. I also do odd jobs. It doesn’t matter if it’s collecting a bounty or more simple mercenary work, because I’ll do whatever it takes to make ends meet. I’m always finding myself in danger and getting my hands dirty, just to provide for myself. Sometimes I barely break even to maintain my weapons and armor, and I’m pretty sure my days are numbered.”

She stared at the shield on his back and the weapon on his hip. “That sounds... super exciting!”

He made a low growl. “Perhaps it’s thrilling to someone young and dumb.” Vali paused and unfastened some straps on one foot, removing a single boot. “If you’re so intent on offering yourself to me as some sort of servant or maid, then let’s see how exhausted you get cleaning just one of my boots.”

From there, Vali lightly tossed the boot next to Alice, where it crashed against the ground. A simultaneous stomp with his bare paw resulted in the young woman falling on her behind, simultaneously letting out a squeak like a mouse.

“Eep!”

He let out another hiss afterward. “Not so fun when I could accidentally kill or crush you at any moment either, is it?”

Once Alice stood back up, blood flushed her face as she blushed. “Oh, Vali... you’re so big and strong!” She struggled to stand on her feet, practically swooning. “I’ll clean your boots if that’s exactly what you want me to do! While I’m at it, do you want me to manicure your toes too? You’d look so much more handsome if we put some more effort into grooming your claws and fur!”

Her words completely deflated his menacing pose before his tail slumped down. “My gods, woman. That was supposed to frighten you, not whatever nonsense this is...”



She brought a hand to her mouth and giggled at his overall reaction.

“Well, we don’t have all day.” he said, sighing. “I can wait. Take however long you need to scrub all the mud off, even if it takes literal hours.”

Alice put her bag on the ground before sifting through it. “Certainly, sir! Do I need to grab my nail file too?”

Vali facepalmed rather than saying anything at all.

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Kazem struck a steel blade against a piece of flint several times. Subsequent sparks set kindling alight. Over time, these embers grew more numerous, culminating in a small but growing fire.

“Simple enough.” he said, shrugging.

Farishta watched in amazement as the flames dazzled in her eyes. “Oh, wow! Is it really that easy?”

“It can be hard if you’ve never done it before or don’t have the right tools.” Kazem said before stepping away. “But yeah. A simple campfire is good for cooking, staying warm, and actually seeing your surroundings at night. Kind of surprised you mergich don’t make bonfires at least.”

“There’s no need!” replied Farishta, bringing her fluffy tail around herself. She set it in her lap and sifted her hands through her fur. “As I said, I like my food raw, my fur provides plenty of warmth, and I can see in the dark!”

Kazem nodded his head. “Good point.”

“The same might apply to you with me around.” she said, smirking. “We both have complementary strengths and weaknesses, after all. So why don’t you lie down with me? I want to teach you all about the pantheon of the gods before the sun goes down!”

“I’m not really that religious.” he said with a dismissive wave.

Farishta's nose twitched, making her whiskers flutter. "You're... not a heretic or a nonbeliever... right, Kazem?"

The cold and emotionless tone of her voice made chills descend down his spine. "No, no, I'm just not as devout as you I suppose..."

"Oh, thank heavens!" she said before placing a hand on her heart. A smile adorned her face once more. "You had me worried for a moment!"

Before he could react, Farishta scooped up Kazem with a free hand. A quick maneuver plopped him directly into the fur on her neck. As he vanished into the floss around her throat, Farishta went about retrieving a scroll from her adjacent bindle. She spread it out by the time he emerged with his upper body poking out and an unamused look on his face.

"Real hilarious whenever you do that." Kazem said, rolling his eyes.

Farishta stuck out her tongue to form a blep. "I know, right?" She adjusted her position, reclining against some of the many trees surrounding their somewhat isolated location. "Anyway, here's a written passage providing a quick overview of the four major gods and goddesses!"

Kazem squinted as he stared at the expansive scroll. Text covered most of the parchment, but a few had crude illustrations above specific paragraphs. "I didn't know your kind used paper too."

"We usually use stone tablets for writing," she purred, rumbling the man on her neck. "However, any paper made from mammoth or griffin hide is surprisingly durable. Oh, and more lightweight! Hence why I brought a scroll with me."

"I see." Kazem said, lying against her neck. He barely had enough room combined with her upper torso. "I'd imagine illustrations would be harder to do on stone compared to paper as well."

Farishta made a toothy smile. "It's not impossible per say... but you're right! Colors are much easier to do on any sort of parchment. Did any of the major gods catch your eye by any chance?"

He looked at the first of four simple illustrations. It appeared to be a bipedal black cat with cyan eyes and wearing a white mask. "Why do you keep calling them major gods?"

She shifted her head to account for Kazem. “Well, there’s also the more minor deities. Like river gods and such. In comparison, the main four are by far the most powerful since they can control aspects of life and even reality itself!”

His eyes shifted to the second image. It resembled another feline, albeit with white fur, bright eyes bordering on magenta, and golden armor and accessories. “That one kind of looks like you, Farishta.”

“That’s a keen observation!” Farishta said, laughing a little. “That’s Rugen. He’s the god of blood, abundance, and luck. Rugen also created the mergich in his own image if you’re wondering why we look so similar!”

Kazem looked at each illustration one at a time. “So let me get this straight... all the gods are felines? Because the ones I’m familiar with looked more human.”

She held the scroll at another angle, allowing them both to see it more easily. “Technically, the gods can take on any physical form. They usually prefer more feline ones, but some like to argue and debate about that. Mergich tend to depict them accordingly.”

“Do you have a preference for one?” he asked, closing his eyes.

“Oh, good question!” Farishta said, smiling. “I actually devoted myself to Rugen, like most mergich. Despite that, I still respect all four, but I try to adhere to Rugen’s values first and foremost! I like to think that my appearance with rare purple eyes and my lucky amulet makes me closer to him than most, but I’m not so certain that my necklace is so lucky anymore...”

The way Farishta’s angelic voice sounded combined with the purring and rumbling against his back made Kazem increasingly dreary. “Funny how that works. What’s Rugen’s role in the grand scheme of things?”

Her voice increased in pitch as her ears perked up. “I could talk about him for hours and hours! Where do I even begin?”

“Maybe just like what he represents...” Kazem said, gradually dozing off. “Like abundance or whatever.”

“It can really just depend on your interpretation!” replied Farishta with her tail cushioning her body. “Some say it’s hedonism. Others say abundance means wealth or prosperity. A vocal minority insists it’s more literal if he made mergich so big! Personally, I think it’s a combination of those three things, but the gods can be complicated and mysterious at times!”

Each word Farishta uttered acted as a lullaby for Kazem before he drifted into a deep sleep.