

Friends In Low Places

Part 17

Several soldiers struggled to move a cannon along a stone wall. It joined far more primitive ballistae mounted on the many towers encircling the central keep, where its position on a hill provided a clear overview of the plains surrounding the castle itself.

Two men watched the soldiers work from a far more comfortable position somewhere above them.

“Those cannons cost just as much if not more than the bounty itself, father...”

“Then what else would you have me do?” replied the baron, rubbing his forehead. “Pay the giant who kidnapped my only daughter? The one terrorizing my lands and people? I think we’re far past the point of any peaceful or diplomatic solutions, my boy.”

The younger man crossed his arms. “Actually, that’s exactly what I had in mind. The mergich might leave us alone and return Alice if we just give him what he wants.”

The baron sighed and glanced at the ground. “Even if you’re right, I would look weak or foolish for caving into his demands, would I not? That’s not even considering the possibility that he might not honor a new agreement if he runs off with my daughter anyway!”

“Ignoring that, I still don’t understand why you didn’t just pay him to begin with...” said the younger man, frowning. “You could have easily avoided this whole mess.”

In response, the baron groaned. “It’s always obvious in hindsight, son. The timing was... unfortunate.”

“Because of Alice’s marriage?” asked the younger man.

The baron nodded in turn. “Indeed. The wedding would have solved so many problems for our family since the duke is an old and sickly man desperate to produce any heirs. He has no direct descendents. If he married Alice, it would have cemented an alliance between our houses and prevented a succession crisis, but now it might all be for naught!”

The younger man looked to the side. “That still doesn’t answer my question, father. Why didn’t you simply pay this mergich in the first place?”

“Edward, Edward, Edward...” said the baron, shaking his head. “You don’t understand. Yes, the hydra needed to be slain, but I never intended to attract the attention of any mergich romping around the area by putting a bounty on its head! Well, heads... but I digress. The duke himself hates mergich since one slaughtered his family decades ago, so I didn’t want word to get out that I worked with a mergich mercenary mere weeks before the wedding took place. However, I wasn’t expecting the mergich to kidnap my daughter and terrorize my demesne in direct retaliation!”

Edward frowned. “I’m starting to get a more clear picture at least.”

The baron sighed. “Now I feel like I have no choice but to muster my men and kill this damned giant. Although the duke might be more than happy to help, I’m not so sure about the other lords. I’m a smallfry in comparison. They might even take advantage of the situation!”

“Let’s not do anything too rash then...” Edward said, holding up a hand. “I recently got word that this monster hunter attacked Riverside again. We might be able to parley and negotiate with this mergich, but a second one has also been spotted in the general area...”

The baron's eyes practically bulged out of his head. “A second mergich?! The last thing we need is more of them!” He paused, facepalming in all but name. “Ugh. I can only imagine the trouble this second mergich is already causing for any poor man they stumble across...”

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Farishta’s massive tail swayed in her lap as Kazem gazed upon it in all of its fluffy glory.

He saw nothing but soft, white fur. Not to mention black rosettes scattered across the entire tail. The whole thing was thick enough that Farishta’s fingertips vanished into the fur as she stroked it.

“This is easily the most favorite part of my body...” she said with a coy smile. “Just be warned that it has a mind of its own at times!”

Kazem nodded. "Right, right..."

Farishta then carefully moved her tail next to him. The sheer abundance of fur puffed up for a brief moment, spreading out across the grass shortly afterward. She simultaneously reclined on the ground, propping her head up with an arm as she smiled and stared down at him. As for Kazem, he backed away for several seconds, then approached the tail again, spotting a plethora of individual fur strands thanks to her sheer size.

"Would you happen to have a comb or something?" he asked, fixated on the large and fluffy tail.

She giggled. "Not for your size!"

Kazem rolled his shoulders and grunted. "Then I'm not sure how I'm supposed to help you groom that big tail of yours. Like... at all."

In return, Farishta smirked and grabbed her lower legs. Her subsequent positioning gave Kazem a clear view of her haunches, paws, and of course her sizable tail. "It's not hard, silly! Just try using your tiny hands to pluck out any stray debris or anything else you can see!"

Following her instructions to the letter, Kazem leaned into her tail to take a closer look. Almost everything about it remained pristine. Clean. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't see any obvious dirt or rubble from any of their recent experiences.

"I don't see anything..." he said, shaking his head before looking up at her. "Wait... is this really necessary? You took a dip in the river this morning to clean yourself."

Farishta fluttered her eyes at his words. "Oh, Kazem! I already told you that I didn't have time to brush it! Much less give my tail all the attention and love it deserves... but now I have someone so compassionate here to help me out!"

"Was that sarcasm?" Kazem asked, smirking. "I didn't know you were actually capable of that."

She scoffed. "Maybe, but I do know that you're probably a good person under that rough and sour exterior of yours..."

He shrugged. "Either that or I'm rubbing off on you."

“I think that goes both ways!” Farishta said, snickering. “Especially once you finally start helping me groom my tail rather than just standing there...”

Kazem held his hands up for a brief moment, surrendering in a sense. “Alright, alright... I’ll try my best.”

Her toes scrunched up as she smiled. “I expect nothing less!”

With that, Kazem moved directly toward the tail. The fur almost immediately engulfed him. Although it started simple enough with stray strands and patches of fur wrapping around his body, he disappeared similarly to someone face-planting into several feet of deep yet soft snowfall. Afterward, he could see nothing but fur for several moments as he struggled against the surface of the tail, eventually popping his head and arms out.

Farishta covered her mouth with one hand and giggled at the subsequent sight. “Oh my! It looks like my tail might be a bit too much for a tough guy like you to handle...” She stopped speaking for a second to slightly stick out her tongue and grab the tip of her tail, picking up Kazem as she lifted her tail into the air. “I’ve finally found your greatest weakness!”

“Nah...” he said, getting on his hands and knees. “That would be greed. Still, I don’t want your tail accidentally flinging me into the forest or anything along those lines.”

From there, Farishta reached a free hand into her nearby bundle, retrieving a golden comb. It retained a light hue that glittered under the scarlet sun setting on the horizon. “As I said, you just need to help me with the finer details. Stay right there!”

Kazem could barely see anything beyond a few feet in most directions, all thanks to being immersed in her tail fluff. “I think you’re just messing with me at this point.”

She made another wry smile. “Well, I do like playing with my little mouse...”

These words made blood rush to Kazem’s face. Nonetheless, Farishta went about combing her tail, carefully avoiding his position somewhere on it. The comb’s teeth straightened her fur out while catching some stray strands. She hummed to herself during the process, lowering her tail to the

ground before letting it go. Kazem almost rolled down it, just to find himself sliding to its very tip before finding solid ground beneath his feet once more.

He then looked down and saw several abnormally large clumps of white fur adorning his leather jacket. “Mmm... yeah. I think I’m done helping you groom your tail for today.”

Farishta pouted a bit with her ears folding against her head. “Aw. Already? But we just got started!”

Kazem took several steps back. He tried wiping down his jacket initially, just to resort to taking it off and shaking it repeatedly to free it from her fur. “Gods. This wasn’t too much of a problem every other time I got lost in your fur, but combined with your brushing...”

Her face scrunched up. “Hey! Don’t use the name of the gods in vain!”

“Sorry...” he said, putting on his jacket again. “Either way, I still need to fetch firewood and tinder before the sun goes down. You can have your fun with me later.”

“Oh... oh, I will!” she replied, forming another toothy smile.

With a nod, Kazem walked away. “I’ll be back soon!”

Farishta wiggled her toes and kept brushing her tail. “Don’t keep me waiting for too long, Kazem. I’m starting to really enjoy your company!”

Once more, Kazem found himself a bit flustered. He shook his head upon vanishing from Farishta’s immediate view a minute or so later. “So much for keeping things strictly professional...”

His eyes went wide the moment he felt a vibration within his leather jacket. As he reached into a coat pocket, he grabbed the responsible orb, which emitted far more light than usual. It was almost blinding. The magical contraption activated on its own as he held it in his hand, gazing into it.

The grand enchantress soon appeared with her usual fiery visage blazing within the orb itself. “THERE YOU ARE! I’ve been meaning to contact you for the last few hours!”

“Really?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder. Kazem started speed-walking away to put some more distance between himself and Farishta. “There has to be an easier way to do this during emergencies...”

“It’s not necessarily an emergency.” she replied, albeit her mask continued to conceal her true emotions. “Just an urgent matter. Approximately half a dozen of my agents will be converging on Riverside tomorrow to help you, then I will contact the local ability to see if they can be swayed to assist us. Is that mergich accompanying you still somehow in possession of the ouroboros artifact?”

Kazem bared his teeth. “About that...”

The flames behind the grand enchantress flickered. “Please don’t tell me she ran off without you.”

“She’s... no longer in possession of the amulet...”

“Excellent!” said the enchantress, cutting him off. The flames behind her calmed down to be more like a soothing campfire in the background. “Please do tell me the finer details. If you can keep the artifact secure for the next twelve hours, it should be simple enough to retrieve and extract it!”

Although he initially broke eye contact, Kazem returned to staring directly at her. “I don’t have it either. Another mergich roughed up my companion and took it from her.”

“WHAT?!” shouted the enchantress. A raging inferno suddenly emerged behind her fiery image as she spoke. “How? Why? Do you have any idea who this other mergich even is?!”

He nodded with his face contorting a bit. “Yeah. He goes by Vali. Dude is a mergich monster hunter or something. He’s already caused a bunch of trouble around the area...”

The enchantress stayed silent with the flames behind her dying down. “I’m... familiar with that particular man, for lack of a better term. He’s a bounty hunter and mercenary I’ve had to hire several times before. My spies claim that he’s currently causing issues for the local baron after he failed to compensate him for his services, so perhaps I should have anticipated this. Needless to say, this is now a far more serious ordeal if a man like him is getting himself involved...”

“What do you know about him?” Kazem asked, bringing a free hand to his chin.

The grand enchantress gave him a blank stare with her mask enhancing her cold gaze. “Little to nothing, I’m afraid. Not even my spymaster has been able to find anything about his past or previous history beyond his work experience over the years... or some more harrowing tales.”

He nodded. “The man is certainly dangerous from what I’ve seen and heard. I’ll say that much.”

“What I do know is that he doesn’t seem to care about whether he lives or dies.” continued the enchantress in a low tone. “Only his payday. He’s also absolutely ruthless. Even if I told him to kill or capture someone on the other side of the continent, even if it took him many months, he always managed to track them down and succeed somehow.”

“Wonderful.” Kazem replied, sighing. “Any suggestions then?”

She stayed silent for several long moments. “Stay in Riverside. Wait for my agents. Is your mergich companion still accompanying you?”

“Her name is Fari...” he said with a nod. “But yeah. She’s still with me.”

“Regardless, I do need time to manipulate this increasingly convoluted web forming before my eyes.” said the grand enchantress, the fire rising behind her completely dying down. “I don’t know what Vali wants or why he’s getting involved. Maybe he can be reasoned with. If he’s not cooperative, it’s going to take a small army or a big group of talented individuals to stand a chance of bringing him to heel. Perhaps even both...”

Without warning, the grand enchantress cut contact. The orb in Kazem’s hand became blank and inert as it stopped emitting any light. Something about that and the sun going down made his surroundings appear much darker than they really were. Kazem himself rolled his eyes. He returned the orb to a coat pocket and looked around the area, finding nothing but trees in almost every direction. It became a simple matter of resuming his previous task, gathering firewood and grabbing anything else he could use as kindling before nightfall washed over the forest.