

# Friends In Low Places

## Part 10

“You sure you still don’t need a hand?” asked Kazem, taking a step back.

The cordwainer thumped his wagon. “My apprentice and I should be able to handle things from here!” As he spoke, a teenage boy with a matching apron and cap placed a large tarp inside it. “We should return shortly. Would you mind keeping an eye on my workshop in the meantime?”

Kazem shrugged. “I guess not, but wouldn’t it make more sense for the boy to do that instead? Waste of my time otherwise if you only brought me here to help you get a wagon from a shed.”

“Oh, it’s more complicated than that!” said the cordwainer with a chuckle. “I need you here to finalize everything with documentation once we’re done securing the payment. Besides myself, my apprentice is the only person I trust to know the location of the ring once we move it to a far more discreet location away from any prying eyes.”

“So you don’t trust me?” replied Kazem, crossing his arms. “And there’s paperwork?”

The cordwainer waved a hand, practically dismissing his questions. “It’s nothing personal. I’m only taking precautions to protect myself, such as creating a paper trail. To be perfectly honest, I’m mostly making things up and improvising as I go along since this is an odd job to say the least!”

Kazem grunted. “Likewise.”

“Oh, and make sure no thieves steal from me while I’m gone!” said the cordwainer, hopping on his wagon. Two horses dragged it forward as they left the vicinity of the workshop. “Don’t pay the dust bunnies in my workshop any mind either. They’re nothing but trouble!”

“No promises.” Kazem said as he waved them off. The cordwainer let out another laugh before his wagon vanished from Kazem’s vision. Following a few moments of silence, Kazem mumbled under his breath. “Did you really just appoint a fox to guard a henhouse?”

Without further delay, Kazem entered the expansive workshop. A plethora of shoes filled almost every nook and cranny, while the scent of fresh leather immediately assaulted his nostrils. Some raw

materials remained amid a few workstations. Countless tools lined the walls, lanterns or candles illuminated the room, and even wooden shoes known as clogs joined the others.

Kazem moved to a dark and secluded area in the corner. Afterward, he leaned against a wall and procured an orb from a pocket. "Snake eyes."

With that, the orb gradually flashed to life. The all too familiar face of the Grand Enchantress and her golden mask quickly encapsulated the entire thing. "Back so soon?" she said with a hint of disdain. "I'm a busy woman and don't require daily updates!"

"There's been a recent development." Kazem said in a cold tone. "A man named Horace Black attacked the mergich I'm with, claiming that they're one of your agents and after the amulet as well."

An illusion of fire behind the enchantress simmered down. "I see. That explains the lack of communication on his end. Did this mergich annihilate him?"

"I wish..." he answered, scoffing. "But no. Instead, he got captured and restrained by me before escaping from us. If we're all on the same team here, I'd like to prevent any other crap like that because Horace might track us down and return with a vengeance."

"Then I'll simply contact him and instruct him to collaborate with you once our conversation concludes." she replied, all while a fire gradually rose behind her. "DO NOT... engage any of my other agents in the future. Please."

Kazem shook his head. "And here I am thinking I was the only one tracking down this freaking amulet. What gives?"

Thanks to her mask, the Grand Enchantress didn't show a single hint of emotion. "I'd rather not reveal too much information. Everything about this operation is on a need to know basis, but now you're unwittingly my most valuable asset on the scene, so I suppose you should have any of your questions or concerns addressed..."

"Alright. So, how many other agents or assets do you have out and about?" he asked, grunting.

“Only about two dozen.” she replied, fire highlighting her eyes. “If anything else, you’re the lucky one. The others failed to find the amulet or other items of interest at abandoned mergich structures. I see that you’re in Riverside, so I’ll likely inform them about that to either assist you if able or to await your arrival in the port city of Valentia.”

He gave her a death stare. “I’m not sure if I want their help if Horace is anything to go by. Are they all ex-prisoners like me if you made them the same offer?”

“Most of them.” she said in a neutral tone

“But... why?” he asked, reeling a little. “Surely the empire has more than enough resources to secure the amulet rather than some rogues...”

“Ah. Well, that’s the thing, Kazem. Most of our neighbors forbade our inquisitors from even entering their territory, despite being former imperial provinces. So we had to get creative. Rather than risking a deterioration of relations or outright wars, we sent exceptionally talented or dangerous individuals with no official affiliation to the Astranian Empire to scour the entire continent for the ouroboros artifact on our behalf!”

Kazem practically facepalmed. “Ah, so your most deadly ex-convicts, mercenaries, and bounty hunters are potentially tracking me down right now?” He let out a sigh. “It just gets better and better, doesn’t it?”

The Grand Enchantress sneered. “They likely won’t harm you if that’s what you’re so worried about. I gave them strict orders. There have been a few that went rogue or missing already, but they rarely last for long in hostile territory with our assassins chasing after them. Not that it matters since they’re all far away from imperial borders by this point.”

He scratched the back of his head. “Is there anyone from my old gang on this wild goose chase too?”

She stayed silent for several seconds. “There is one.”

“Who?” asked Kazem immediately.

“Just an old flame of yours.” answered the Grand Enchantress. “But to be blunt, it matters not. I really don’t care who brings me the amulet, whether it be you or a combined warband of collaborating ex-prisoners. As long as the emperor’s will is fulfilled, I shall be satisfied.”

“Okay, but let’s say I successfully get the amulet to Valentia by myself...” he said, glancing at the wooden ceiling. “Then how do I know you’re going to fulfill your end of the deal? What happens to the others?”

The enchantress didn’t initially say a word in return. “You don’t really have a choice in the matter anymore, Kazem.”

He narrowed his eyes at her words. “I’m no fool. If you’re sending out a bunch of prisoners to act as cannon fodder against mergich, I wouldn’t put it beneath you to dispose of me like a tool once you get what you want. I’d be a liability or a loose end either way.”

Her mask made it look like she could stare at him without blinking. “I suppose a thief has to be at least somewhat clever to get as far as you did. Too bad I found out about your audacious plans to rob the imperial treasury of all places, so I assumed you weren’t particularly intelligent. Quite disappointing considering your reputation.”

His eyes went wide like saucers. “Wait, you-!”

“But as for your more pressing concerns...” said the enchantress, cutting him off. “You’re correct in that you’re not important enough for me to care about your ultimate fate once the amulet is ours. That’s also why I don’t intend to harm you. A pardon and a hefty sum is a small price to pay for a priceless mergich relic, but you also won’t be welcome within the Astranian Empire for your previous nonsense once everything is said and done.”

“That... still sounds too good to be true.” Kazem said, lowering his voice. “But that’s it? I’ll truly be a free man? I won’t have to look over my shoulder for assassins and bounty hunters for the rest of my days?”

The enchantress let out a rare laugh. “Not from me, at least! I’m also personally not very keen on throwing away perfectly good tools when you could be causing havoc and stealing from rival nations instead.”

A sigh of relief escaped his lips. "Alright. Alright... I think that's all I needed to know. I'll update you if anything changes."

"And I'll make sure Horace knows that you're a friend rather than an enemy." she said, nodding. "Until next time."

Within a split second, the enchantress vanished. The orb slowly stopped glowing. Kazem remained stationary as he felt something vibrating in one of his coat pockets. He exchanged his communication device for yet another luminescent orb, albeit this one happened to be crimson red.

Naturally, the Grand Enchantress appeared within the red orb. She then slumped over upon seeing him. "Ugh. Really? Is Horace somehow still with you?"

Kazem shook his head. "Nope."

An inferno almost erupted from her face. "YOU TOOK HIS CONTACT ORB?"

"I think so?" he said, breaking eye contact. "I thought you were tracking us and would have known."

The enchantress both literally and metaphorically fumed with flames emitting from her hood. "I don't appreciate the sarcasm! IT MAKES ME WANT TO SCREAM."

He shrugged. "My bad. I took almost everything he had. Quite frankly, I'm not exactly sure where Horace is or if he's even alive anymore. He might ambush me the next time we meet too."

"In that case, do whatever is necessary to defend yourself!" she said, fading away from the orb itself. "That pyromaniac won't be missed after being disowned by his own family for all the arson he committed. Despite that, he's a talented mage. I'd prefer to speak to him personally, so try to approach him peacefully whenever you find him if you actually want some assistance for a change of pace."

"Understood," he said with a nod, "But I can't guarantee anything."

As before, words proved to be unnecessary as the enchantress vanished once more.

Naturally, Kazem pocketed the crimson orb. With the other one in an opposing pocket, he equally distributed the weight throughout his jacket. From there, he could do nothing but wait for the cordwainer to return, so he helped himself to a tour of the workshop in all but name.

Inner demons tempted the man to snatch any small and valuable items scattered around the area.

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Horace stumbled throughout the woodlands. His once pristine robes were sullied, stained with dirt and debris. Outright holes diminished them even more. He trembled as he finally removed the last of his restraints, mumbling to himself all the while.

“Damned mergich!” he said to no one in particular. “I’ll set the next one I see ablaze...”

As Horace wandered through the forest, he came across a peculiar sight. A lone human woman wearing an expensive dress went about cleaning and polishing a ginormous pair of armored gauntlets. They adjoined a similarly sized shield leaning against several trees, and a few crucial details stuck out to Horace amid the entire scene.

Firstly, the enormous armor had a bizarre design. Rather than being made of steel, it resembled something far more exotic composed of a crystalline material similar to ice. Griffin fur and leather kept everything bound together for the gauntlets. As for the shield, a similar arrangement sufficed besides some metallic tidbits, but it showed signs of extensive damage with ballista bolts embedded into it and outright crystalline chunks missing with a few holes the size of cannonballs.

The young woman also appeared to be around the age of eighteen. Everything about her appearance screamed nobility. This included the silk ribbons adorning her twin ponytails, embroidered boots, and predominantly pale skin. A smile graced her face as she hummed to herself, diligently scrubbing down gaps between the individual fingers of the gauntlets, ridding them of any grime with a delicate touch.

Horace advanced upon the woman in his delirious state. “HEY!” he shouted at her.

Her head perked up like a deer caught in headlights.

“Who else do you think I’m talking to?!” Horace said. A flick of his fingers let him cast a simple spell, allowing him to conjure a constant fireball like a handheld torch. “All your possessions. On the ground. NOW!”

“Vali!” said the woman, dropping her cleaning supplies as she trembled. “VALI! There’s someone else here! VALI!”

Horace balled his other hand into a fist. “Shut up! Are you going to make me repeat myself?”

She shivered and put her hands in the air. “Okay, okay... sorry!”

Following this, the woman put a bag similar to a purse on the ground. Other unorthodox possessions such as a hairbrush encrusted with gemstones and an ornate pen soon joined it.

As for Horace, he simply gave her a fierce stare. “That’s it?”

The woman brought a hand to her mouth. “Um... I keep most things in my handbag...”

“Whatever. Are you with that damned mergich heading toward Riverside?”

She froze upon hearing these words. “We were trying to stay away from Riverside, actually.”

“So that’s a yes?” he asked, taking a step forward. The woman backed away as well, but almost tripped on herself as she stumbled a bit. “Where’s that damnable ouroboros amulet then?!”

“The... the what?” she said in a faint tone.

Horace almost growled. “Stop playing dumb. It’s the necklace the mergich is wearing around her neck. I know she’s nearby if she left her shield and gloves behind!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, sir!”

Her response aroused further wrath from Horace as the fireball in his palm intensified. “Oh, sure! Sure you don’t...” He cocked his head. “Is that nice little outfit of yours mostly made of silk too?”

She didn't reply, simply staring at him like a puppy before blinking several times.

"Take it off." he muttered, almost coming face to face. "Unless you want me to incinerate them instead, which would be a waste since they'll fetch a fine price otherwise. I really need the coin!"

Her face scrunched up. "You're... asking me to take off my clothes?" She put her hands on her hips with her face contorting. "Oh, just you wait until Vali gets here!"

Horace raised an eyebrow. "Who the hell is Vali? That pathetic mergich woman on my personal hit list? Because I don't see anyone else here!"

A resounding thud against the ground shook the trees, almost like an earthquake.

Consequently, Horace staggered. The flame in his hand flickered until it vanished altogether. Looking over his shoulder with a few more thuds reverberating behind him, an immense feline figure soon loomed over his position. Clad head to toe in yet more crystalline armor with only a distinct lack of hand protection, a male mergich wearing a helmet fashioned like a roaring tiger glared at him.

The young woman promptly turned on the waterworks. Tears formed in her eyes as she covered most of her face with both hands. "Thank the gods that you're finally here, Vali!"

Horace reacted with a look of complete bewilderment as the young woman cried.

She stopped only to point at him as stray tears streamed down her cheeks. "This man tried to rob me! Even after I gave him what he wanted, he threatened to set me on fire if I..." She paused to snuffle. "If I didn't strip down everything I'm wearing for him!"

As the woman spoke, Vali crouched to the ground, remaining almost completely silent.

"It was nothing like that!" Horace said, blood draining from his face. "I'm not a pervert or a thief. I'm simply looking for an ouroboros necklace!"

Vali let out a huff. He swooped down with one hand, quickly grabbing Horace, shocking even the woman to such a point that he disrupted her crocodile tears. Within moments, Vali stood back up.



He walked away with the shocked and dazed mage in his grasp as he put some distance between himself and the river until he vanished into the forest once more.

By the time Horace regained his bearings, Vali decided to dangle him in the air by a single leg.

“Gah!” blurted Horace, swinging his arms around and kicking his remaining free leg.

Meanwhile, Vali let out a low growl. “Who... are you?”

His voice almost sounded like a rumbling purr. Firm and masculine. Lukewarm breath simultaneously wafted over Horace every time Vali said a single word.

“Count... no, HORACE BLACK!” said the aforementioned man. “Do you have any idea who I am?!”

“Horace Black, son of the count of Reviale.” said Vali in return. “I wasn’t expecting such an infamous noble man to disrupt my hunting.”

In response, Horace’s body locked up. “How did you...”

Vali hissed, disrupting him. “There was quite the bounty on your head after what you did at that orphanage. Someone else claimed it first. Yet... now you’re here, looking for an ouroboros necklace in your own words.”

“YES!” stammered Horace before he stopped resisting. “That’s exactly it! I have no quarrel with you, good sir, I’m just trying to reach Riverside to claim this amulet for the emperor himself...”

Vali allowed these words to linger in the air for a while. “How troublesome.” He used his other hand to drum his fingers against his helmet’s chin guard. “By the way, if you intended to reach Riverside, you went in the exact opposite direction.”

“I got lost!” Horace said, grimacing.

“Even the young lady accompanying me knows that you need to simply follow the river to reach it.” replied Vali with complete stoicism. “So that’s just pure foolishness on your part. Ignoring that, could you provide a physical description of this alleged ouroboros necklace?”

“It’s simply a large, golden band resembling a snake eating itself!” answered Horace, shifting his other leg. “The amulet itself had amethyst gemstones for eyes. Are you familiar with it?”

“Unfortunately,” said Vali without a hint of hesitation. “My kind made the mistake of making those things with the assistance of your people.”

Horace sighed. “The emperor will only pardon me if I can retrieve one from some mergich woman on his behalf, so it puts me in a desperate situation!”

Vali growled, unsheathing claws on his free hand. “If what you say is true, then your emperor is a madman. What’s left of those amulets need to be completely destroyed rather than abused for his own grand designs and ambitions.”

“Then what are they?” asked Horace as he remained paralyzed.

“Weapons capable of mass destruction.” said Vali, tilting his head to the side. “A failed experiment. The consequences could be catastrophic if a mergich isn’t present to keep one inert and harmless. Worse yet, you’re claiming that we have a conflict of interest if a mergich woman possessing such an amulet is heading toward Riverside, which is currently swarming with hostile human forces.”

Horace couldn’t look any more meek and weak. “That would be correct.” He fell silent and awaited a response from Vali, but failing to receive one forced him to break the silence. “So... what happens now?”

“I’m going to kill you.” said Vali with a venomous hiss.

Within the blink of an eye, Vali grabbed the man with his other clawed hand. Horace screamed. Sickening snaps and pops erupted from Vali’s hands in short order, marking the sudden and gruesome end of a human life.

In the distance, a young human woman sat on one of the armored gauntlets. She kicked her legs in the air. Waiting. The gauntlet’s palm provided an odd sort of seat, elevating her off the ground.

Vali then returned to the scene without Horace in tow.

“Vali!” said the woman as she threw her arms in the air, smiling. She then wiped any remaining tears from her eyes. “Where’s the other gentleman?”

“That evil man won’t be harming anyone from this point forward.” replied Vali, slowly sitting on the ground next to her. “My apologies for not arriving earlier.”

“It’s fine...” she said, glancing at the ground. “He didn’t hurt me or anything. That entire encounter just scared the living daylights out of me!”

Vali stretched by placing one of his arms behind his back. “What were you doing to my gauntlets? I saw you touching them shortly after I left.”

She beamed up a bit. “Oh! I wanted it to be a surprise, but I decided to tidy them up for you!”

He grunted. “You don’t need to do anything like that.”

“Why not?” she asked, rubbing a hand against the gauntlet’s smooth material. “It wouldn’t hurt anyone! You get clean armor, and I don’t have to contend with that filth whenever you’re carrying me around!”

“You’re technically my hostage.” said Vali as he leaned back. “Now it’s just getting ridiculous. I don’t intend you any harm and I want you to be comfortable since you’re innocent in all of this, but I’m starting to get the impression that you’re happy about being kidnapped.”

She laughed, extending a hand wrapped in a fingerless lace glove. “It’s a nice change of scenery compared to sitting around in a castle all day! But really, I’m more worried about you and your apparent lack of proper grooming!”

He adjusted a light brown fur collar cushioning his neck and armor. “Not true.”

“Let me see your hand then, liar!”

Vali chuckled. “Fine.” He gradually lowered one hand toward the woman, unsheathing his claws. “You have quite the little mouth, don’t you?”

She looked at him and put her hands on her hips. “Can you blame me? Just look at this mess! There’s clearly dirt beneath your claw tips and it looks like you haven’t brushed your fur since... like... forever!”

He faced forward. “I blame a lack of free time recently.”

“That’s possibly the most despicable excuse imaginable!” replied the woman, hopping off the gauntlet. “Would you allow me to give you a quick manicure now that we finally have some precious free time? Once again, it’s more for myself with the way you hold me!”

“I’d like to see you try.” said Vali, curling his fingers. “It’d be cute to watch you struggle.”

The woman made an odd facial expression where she bit her tongue. “Just you wait!” Grabbing her handbag, she sifted through its contents to procure a small knife and a nail file. “I’ll make you look spiffy in no time at all!”

“There’s just one thing.” said Vali before raising a finger.

The woman gazed up at him. “What?”

“We might need to start heading back toward Riverside soon.” he said, sighing. “Besides working out a ransom payment for you, I’ve learned about something serious that might require me to personally intervene.”