

Fugitives' Trust Chapter 8: The Long Road (Part 2 of 2)

The difficulty, Farnsbeck soon discovered, of heading straight towards East Oasis was two-fold. Not only did the terrain fail to cooperate, but it became pretty obvious that there was no way his quarry would have taken that route. The best course, for keeping enough water and avoiding treacherous areas, was to follow the river. He didn't want to pass them if at all possible.

It was getting near evening when he came across the waterfall. *Great*, he thought, *no way they went down that*. With any luck it'd slowed them as they found a way around. He still held to his theory that they'd stay close to the water. As much as he didn't want to, that mount being the last he could summon for the day, he dismissed his steed. The horse made of shadow dissolved away, almost like the mist from the fall was washing it out. It'd mean camping for the night. With a sigh, he reached down, touched his boots and then stepped right off the cliff.

It'd been a while since he'd used that spell, so there was a certain amount of puerile joy to watching himself float slowly down. The mist from the falls was soaking him, but in that heat it was a bonus. He did regret cutting ear holes in the hat now. The water was gathering on the brim and then running straight into his ears. Farnsbeck made a mental note to try and keep his head tilted forward if it rained.

There were a few ledges he had to step off before the spell ran out and he was safely on the ground below. He was just starting to walk off, looking for a dry place to make camp, when he saw a hint of dark blue out of the corner of his eye.

It was a shirt, or rather had been a shirt. It was pretty frayed now. The tears weren't consistent with the claws or teeth of a predator, so he assumed that someone had taken a fall. It was soaked. He took a deep sniff of it. *Might be a trace of blood*, he thought carefully, *but with how long it's been sitting here wet: hard to tell*.

He looked carefully over it and found a few strands of fur, all a deep reddish brown. The file on Gregor said he had brown fur, so that could be his. After a little more searching he found a piece of hair that could only come from a particular source. It was about five centimeters long and a very bright copper.



"Best three out of five?" Sajani challenged.

Gregor shrugged, "Alright."

The checker games were giving her a little hope. She'd won the first one and lost the next two. They'd drawn a board in the sand and were using pebbles as markers.

Her companion partially rose and moved his foot back into the water. "Might be able to start out today," he told her. "It's looking a lot better."

An extra day would be comforting. “Maybe try to put a little weight on it?”

He pulled his foot from the river and stood wobbling back and forth. “It’s a bit stiff,” he told her, “but it doesn’t hurt.”

It didn’t look swollen anymore either. “Let me beat you a couple more times at checkers and then we’ll see about stretching it out,” she said while smiling at him.

He returned the smile, “Aye, General.” He made a mock salute.

She laughed slightly. “Aye is something they say in the Navy. General is an Army rank...”

Gregor smiled, “And we both know the Navy uses rope, so no chance of you going there...” a look of concentration crossed his face. “If the Army doesn’t say ‘aye...’”

“Yes,” Sajani answered.

“Yes, what?”

“It’s what they say.”

Her companion laughed. “And your mother was in the Wolf Pack, so I guess I should...” he began.

It was a minor correction, but she felt like it was necessary. “My father was too.”

He looked at her with some concern. “Sorry. I can see this bothers you a little. I didn’t mean to dredge up bad memories.”

There wasn’t any outward sign of what she was feeling that she was aware of... She shrugged. “It’s okay to talk about my mother. Everyone does.” It wasn’t the discussion of her mother that bothered her, but she didn’t want to admit that. “My father gave up his career to raise me.”

There was a brief silence. “So,” he said cautiously, “I’m curious. If it’d been your mother that raised you, would your father have been at Altaza?”

It was an odd question and the possibility that she would have a mother and no father was evilly enjoyed briefly, but only briefly. Would she really wish death on her father if it meant keeping her mother? What would Gregor think if she told him that she did? He’d never wish death on anyone, she was sure of that. Her earlier wishful thinking now made her feel guilty—more condemned than when she learned of her conviction at home. There were many good memories of her father and they spanned past the death of her mother. What changed?

Those thoughts went very quickly through her mind. She decided to answer her friend’s question. “No. He was an infantry sergeant. She was an artillery officer. At best he’d have been in the 2-22nd that fought the remnants of the Rhidayans.” She realized her slip almost immediately.

Unfortunately, so did Gregor. “At *best*?” he asked. There was a sadness to his voice. “Oh, Sajani. You can’t possibly mean that. He’s your father.”

She wanted to lie but knew that lying was no longer a possibility for either of them. He’d see through her just as easily as she saw through him. “No,”

she mumbled. She put her arms around her knees and curled up. "It'd be wrong to wish death on anyone."

Apparently evasive answers counted as lying, because Gregor stayed silent, like he was waiting for her to say more.

"For the first few days after my mom died, he doted over me constantly. He wrote me letters and slid them under my door while I was sleeping. He took me to see plays and concerts, even a basketball game. I don't think he had a waking moment where he wasn't trying to do something for me." Her eyes moistened at the memory. There was no doubt that he'd shown love for her at one time. "As each day went by though, he seemed to be hurting more and more. To me at the time, it looked like he thought I was responsible for my mom's death. The letters became less frequent. The trips to the concerts and plays did as well. Within a year, it'd all stopped. We didn't even share meals together anymore. He'd just put out food for me and eat in his room. By the time I was thirteen, even that stopped. I was expected to just forage through the cupboards or use the money he'd put out for me."

Tears were flowing now. Gregor hobbled over and placed a hand gently on her shoulder, patted her once and then removed it. "I don't understand why," he said honestly, "but there had to be a reason."

Sajani answered with spite, "I don't think he could ever love," she told him. "I think it was all something he did to keep my mother happy and with her gone, there was no reason to keep up the act." Her spite turned to anger. "He never cried over her death, not even at the memorial. He's embarrassed to admit he even knew her. He didn't even argue with Mr. Ramisa about sending me away. I think he was glad to see me go."

There was a long silence as she got her emotions back under control. The tears stopped flowing. While all that was happening, Gregor stood there looking like he was arguing with himself. He'd start to bring himself to stand and then sit back down. A couple of times he moved his arm over close to her and then pulled it away.

Well, if he couldn't make up his mind, she could. Telling someone about that helped her feel better. It was a weight she'd borne for years and having someone to share it with, even briefly, was therapeutic. She leaned over and gave him a quick hug. It couldn't be a long hug, she knew, or Gregor wouldn't be able to speak for days. If she'd had a brother, she told herself, that was how she'd hug him. As she leaned back over to her original spot, she smiled at him and said, "Thank you. I know you didn't mean to have me unload all that, but I think I really needed it."

Her friend smiled shyly at her and said, "All this because I said 'aye' instead of 'yes?'"

She laughed and said, "aye."



Mishal took care of all the arrangements for the meeting with the Zenache envoy. She'd been very emphatic that the dignitary not be allowed to see the

inside of *his* office, so the meeting was held at Mishal's elaborate and impressive looking workplace. When the human woman was shown in, Benayle realized why people were calling her an envoy and not an ambassador: she was the inspector assigned to Vharkylia to make sure the treaty signed after Altaza (officially the Yasef Treaty) was kept. Benayle recognized her immediately.

"Miss Kirchen! This is a surprise."

The woman gave him a stern glare. "Mr. Benayle! Don't try that same congeniality you did last time. I was just beginning to trust you and then all *this* happens!"

Mishal interrupted and smiled at the inspector. "I can assure you, ma'am, that wolf isn't capable of deceit—mostly because it takes too much effort..."

The Alpha tried to give his Minister a stern look but ended up chuckling instead. "That makes me sound lazy, but 'there's no convincing by telling, only by showing,' as the saying goes."

The woman crossed her arms and frowned. She was short and stocky by her race's standards—tiny and thin boned by vykati standards. Her hair was blond and cut short. It allowed her very high collar to reach almost to her chin uninhibited. Gray eyes were boring at him and demanding some kind of satisfaction.

Benayle motioned to one of the two leather seats before Mishal's desk and said, "Perhaps you'd like to sit down, Miss Kirchen. I'm sure it's been a long and aggravating trip."

The Zenache native grasped her leather satchel to her chest and took a seat. Benayle and Mishal did likewise. After he was sure everyone was comfortable Benayle leaned forward and clasped his hands. "I was expecting someone to discuss the escalation of events in Rhidayar as a possible threat to both of our nations. Your presence implies that Rhidayar has already spoken with you."

The envoy seemed to sense that the vykati leader was truly ignorant of the purpose of her visit. She calmed noticeably and spoke politely. "They seem convinced that you're about to break the treaty and attack."

Benayle looked over at Mishal. "You said this office was checked recently?"

If it were possible for a vykati's face to go white, Mishal's would have. "Ben..." she began.

He motioned calmly to her. "The Rhidayar ambassador has given us official word that their movements are for training purposes only—not what they told her." He was still looking directly at Mishal. "We know why there's a discrepancy. We can tell her, but only if it's safe here."

"I wish I could guarantee that, but..." she was very hesitant.

The envoy demonstrated why she had the job she had. She spoke quickly and firmly. "You know why they think you're going to war?"

Benayle nodded. "We don't know specifics, but..."

Miss. Kirchen continued. “I know a little bit about how your government works, as complicated as it is to an outsider. I can think of a few reasons why you’d not want your own people to know what’s happening.”

Benayle smiled a toothy smile. “We *are* wolves. At the end of the day we don’t shed our fur and go back to being human like we were millennia ago.” The truth was that vykati were more human than wolf in many ways, but all felt like it was important to keep up appearances. His people’s response would be very wolf-like though: don’t wait to be cornered before attacking if you already know it’s coming.

The envoy nodded. “The treaty allows you to keep some information from us if it directly affects the safety of your people—provided you can give adequate proof that troop movements and ship routes are well within the proper guidelines.”

“We haven’t moved anyone.” Benayle said truthfully.

There was a long pause while Miss. Kirchen gathered her thoughts. “They haven’t moved anyone near your border? With all we’ve seen, we assumed that the south movements were towards you.”

How much did the envoy really know? Was she really ignorant of what was happening at their border, or was she trying to catch him in a lie? Benayle sat up and looked over at Mishal.

She gave a quick nod and reached across to the edge of her desk where a map was sitting. This she unrolled on the table before them. The unit numbers of all the Rhidayan forces were marked near their border.

Benayle pointed to several markings. “These engineer units here have been fortifying the area. It doesn’t look like forward movement is their objective.”

The map wasn’t welcomed by Miss Kirchen. Her face tightened and her skin turned a violent crimson. “They’re in direct violation of the treaty! I’ll make sure this information is independently verified, but in the meantime, if you’re sure this is what’s happening at your border, you’re well within the terms...”

Benayle rose and placed a hand calmly on the woman’s shoulder. “I said we haven’t moved anyone and that’s the truth. I intend to hold to that policy.”

“But,” the envoy began, “you have to defend yourselves. The treaty was never meant to limit your ability to protect your own people.”

Benayle took a step away from her. He walked past the huge desk in the office and turned his back to the others as he faced out the window. Mishal was used to him doing this when things got tense and he was sure Miss Kirchen had witnessed it a few times on her previous visits.

“Almost all paths before us,” he said quietly, “lead to war. I’m choosing not to walk down any of them.”

“You’ll sacrifice your people with your indecision!” the human nearly shouted. Benayle turned towards her and saw that she began to rise from her chair. Mishal reached over and placed a hand on her shoulder.

The Minister's voice was calm and firm. There was a reason he'd suggested her for this job. "If anyone can lead us safely through this," she began slowly.

Benayle laughed slightly. "You can't lead wolves. We're not Zenache sled dogs."

The Envoy dismissed his comment. "You *must* lead your people now. Someone needs to. Rhidayar is preparing for war. You should as well." There was empathy to her comment. When she'd first arrived five years ago, she'd held most of the usual prejudices against vykati. Her time working in the country hadn't really removed those biases, but it had increased her respect for the wolf folk.

Benayle continued to stare out the window for a moment before turning to face her and look sternly into her eyes. "Leading the way you're thinking of means I stand at the front and they follow. That doesn't work here. Even if I wanted to direct my people as you imply, it wouldn't work. They barely tolerate government."

Mishal was smiling at him. She knew. He'd had similar discussions with most of his Ministers, usually after they tried to lead the way the envoy was implying—and failed at it. The Riteyai Lords understood, so did the future Queen.

"I don't lead. No one 'leads' this people other than Kunterik and Ferocity. I stand in the middle. From there I can cheer on the ones before me and encourage the ones behind me. They don't *follow*, but they do respect enough to listen and sometimes heed."

Mishal kept her hand on the envoy's shoulder and stood to face Benayle. "Semantics aside, if anyone can get us through this without war, it's the wolf standing by the window there. If he says moving our troops will lead to war, I trust him."

Benayle smiled at her.

Miss Kirchen looked back and forth between the two wolves. "There's a lot you're not telling me," she insisted.

Her comment almost made Benayle laugh, but he kept it to himself. "Honestly Miss Kirchen," he said plainly. "I've told you all I know. Perhaps some of it less directly than others, I don't really have a clear picture of what's happening and until I do, I'm going to move ahead cautiously, as if any action on my part can lead to war."

"And inaction," the envoy began kurtly.

Benayle looked at her sternly and raised his voice slightly. "...is completely against the nature of *any* vykati," he interrupted. "So in this case I fight with everything at my disposal, even teeth and claws if necessary, to continue to do nothing. Any move on our part could justify their fears. I'll move right to the brink of war if I have to, but I won't be responsible for starting one."



The next checker game was won by Gregor and he ignored her pleas to play best four out of seven. "Let's see how this foot of mine is doing," he told her. After adjusting how he was sitting, he crossed his hurt leg over his other knee and began rubbing his foot.

Sajani felt, once again, the need to help him take care of it. Without thinking she offered, "I can rub that down for you if you want."

He began stuttering.

That made Sajani laugh. "One of my friends was going to school to be a masseuse. I probably shouldn't tell you..."

That led to stuttering *and* stammering.

Sajani smiled to herself. *He can't be for real*, she thought. *But somehow he is*. "If you don't want my help, just say so," she teased.

"Icangetit," he said, slurring the words together. At that point he pulled his hand away and started sucking on one of his fingers.

The copper wolf laughed at him. "Did you just cut a finger on your claw?"

"Nobe," he said with his mouth full. "Ib fibe"

That nearly left Sajani in hysterics. She managed to get control of herself quickly. "Here," she told him as she came towards him, "Just let me help."

His finger came immediately out of his mouth and he started quickly rubbing his foot again. "I can do this," he told her.

With his fur as dark as it was, the blood was barely visible, but the scent was pretty strong. "You're bleeding. At least let me..."

"No blood. You must be seeing things." He started humming to himself.

"I'd believe you if it wasn't for the scent..."

"You're smelling things too." The humming went up in tempo.

Does that even make sense? She walked up to him and pushed him off the rock. It didn't take much effort because he wasn't expecting it. His feet were up in the air and she grasped the injured one. "Just lay back and let me help."

He started to sit up, so she let go of his foot and forced him back down. She was pretty sure he could have put up more resistance, but he might have just been tired. The stuttering and stammering during all this were constant.

"You're reading way too much into this," she told him. "You've been hurt for days. I've gotten used to helping my friend." He calmed noticeably when she said that, like she knew he would. Taking his injured foot in her hand, she began massaging the tendons that ran from his toes to his ankle. That made his left leg twitch slightly. "Are you a dog or a vykati?" she teased.

His answer came out very calm and relaxed, "I'm whatever you want me to be."

Once his tendons were good and relaxed, she had him trying to walk. That worked better than she'd hoped. There was a slight limp, but he assured it didn't hurt, just needed more time to stretch out. So as evening was falling, they gathered their packs and started down the road.

Sajani found herself constantly worrying about her friend. If he showed even a little delay in movement or the slightest bit of a stagger, she found herself rushing to his side to make sure he wasn't hurting. About the fifth time that she caught herself doing that, she decided that not only was it making Gregor very uncomfortable, she wasn't exactly on terms with the feeling either. That left her with only one outlet.

"So," she asked him slyly, "Was Westa your first crush?"

He smiled at her and gave her a look that seemed to say he knew exactly what she was up to. That made her squirm internally. "I don't know if 'crush' is the right word..." he started, "admired is closer."

She did have an answer for that. "You admire Benayle, but don't keep his picture anywhere."

"Ouch," he gasped. "When this kind of mood hits you, just about everything is fair..."

Yes, she thought, *yes it is*. "Which brings us back to the original question."

Gregor smiled. "For what you're talking about, I suppose she was." His limp was barely noticeable, and he was managing to keep a very good pace.

"You make it sound like there was someone else."

He smirked at her. He did that like he actually knew something about how what he was going to say would affect her. "There was a girl at the orphanage..."

"I thought you said there were no other vykati there..." she began.

"Pretty sure I never said that, but if bothers you to think that there were, I'm happy to say now: there weren't."

"A human girl?" she found the possibility revolting, especially since it would have been a Rhidayan girl. *Focus*, she thought to herself, *there's plenty more to tease him about*. "Was she pretty?" she asked.

Gregor laughed. "While I don't find humans particularly ugly, I'm not really sure I'd describe any of them as pretty. She may or may not have been by human standards."

"So why did you have a crush on her?"

Her friend looked over at her and gave a slightly condescending (at least by Gregor's standards) smile. "I didn't have a crush on her. Not like what you're thinking... She just happened to be nice to me when many of the others weren't. When she found out I could draw, she'd sneak spare paper from her classes to me. Since I wasn't allowed any kind of schooling, it was the only paper I could get."

The desire to tease almost left when he mentioned that he wasn't allowed to go to school. "So you could draw pictures of her?"

"I drew whatever she wanted. She never asked for a picture of herself."

A human that didn't think badly of vykati, was generous and kind and wasn't vain? That hadn't been her experience with humans on any level so far. Maybe someone like that deserved someone like Gregor—more than she

did at any rate. Now she felt guilty for teasing him. “Where is she now?” Sajani asked, hoping he’d say he didn’t know.

She felt a little sadness when he said, “Probably still at the orphanage.” Her self-pity didn’t allow her to notice the regret in his voice. “A little before I left, some of the other kids found out that she’d been helping me out. They teased her for weeks and she denied having anything to do with me. When that didn’t satisfy the bullies, she called me a stupid dog and kicked me.” Gregor swallowed hard. “I tried to let her know a few times that I understood and that I forgave her, but she never said another word to me.”

“You forgave her?” Sajani said with disbelief. “She treated you worse than any vykati would dare treat a dog! She didn’t *deserve* your forgiveness.” *She didn’t deserve your friendship either.*

“I didn’t forgive Viotal because she deserved it, although I think what she’d done before more than qualified. I did it because in the long run it was better for me.”

“Selfish forgiveness?”

“Forgiving you allows me to continue to help a convicted criminal with a clear conscience.” He laughed.

She paused for a long moment and looked down at her feet. “I think I might have deserved that.”

“The forgiveness? Of course. All the help the last few days...”

“I meant the comment in general,” she said tartly.

“You’re still walking with me,” he said cheerfully, “And that alone qualifies for a lot of forgiveness.”

What he said did give her a lot to think about, but she didn’t want to ponder things like that at the moment, “Then rubbing your foot earlier must qualify for forgiving almost anything up to murder?”

“Well, I suppose...If you really...I could...You didn’t need to...”

She smiled to herself. Now the world was back to normal.



As the east sky began to start its pre-dawn glow behind them, they turned off the road and started looking for a place to sit and eat. Lunch had been taken while they walked. They’d eaten the last of the rehydrated food, which left them eating some of the dried venison. Not far from where they were sitting, they could see the end of the tree line and the start of the desert.

The first order of business for Sajani was making sure that Gregor’s foot was examined carefully. She didn’t trust him when he told her it wasn’t hurting, even though he’d spoken at a normal cadence. He was still walking with a limp and the she-wolf saw it as her duty to make sure he wasn’t hurting himself. There was a lot of protesting and stammering while she carefully checked for any sign of swelling and made sure his footpads weren’t scuffed from dragging his foot while limping.

The stammering started up again when she tried to rub his foot, but stopped when she snapped at him, “Let your friend help you!” His tail joined

his left foot at twitching this time, something that gave her more to tease him about.

When she was done she carefully set his foot down and told him, “There. Hopefully you won’t need that again.”

“I *can* rub my own foot,” he told her sarcastically.

She smiled at him, “I’m not complaining, I’m simply saying that hopefully your foot is healed enough...” the familiar warmth around her mouth and nose told her it was time change the topic. “Do you think we’re far enough from the road?” she asked. “I don’t want some random traveler finding us while we’re sleeping.”

“I think so,” he told her, “but if you want to move further away we can. It’s not like we’ll have trouble finding the road again.”

“No, that’s okay,” she said dismissively. “We can sleep behind a tree or something. Haven’t seen anyone along this road so far. I’m guessing there are other ways to get there. Maybe we’ll get lucky and find a caravan heading to Vharkylia.”

“We’ll have to take whatever we can find—hope someone is willing to take us in exchange for work,” Gregor said hopefully, “but with you along, we’ll probably find some rich vykati merchant that has nothing better to do than take two lost teenagers home.”

“Phhtt!” Sajani exclaimed. “You must have fallen asleep quickly because you’re obviously dreaming.”