

## Fugitives' Trust Chapter 10: Recovery Part 1 of 2

Farnsbeck reigned his summoned horse in after riding up the riverbank and onto the road. The fact that there was a bridge here was hopeful. Maybe the two wolves had found and hooked up with it. That'd make it easier for him (and anyone else) to find them. *Best to stay looking like a vykati*, he thought to himself. *They might try to hide from a human*. He'd nudged his mount onto the road and was about to start down it when something caught his eye.

Hopefully someone else had made that big stack of rocks. Hopefully they weren't advertising their presence *that* much. He brought his shadow horse down the river to get a better look. No way to know for sure if it'd been made by them, but no reason to take chances. He dismounted and pushed it over. As he was about to mount again, he saw the makeshift checkerboard. The sight of that made him roll his eyes. Leaving a shirt, a bright red piece of cloth that might have been an ankle wrapping, a huge stone monument, and now leaving something that obvious?

*They're children*, he reassured himself, *not agents*. At least with this area he couldn't be positive it was them, it just seemed very likely. No sooner was that thought out of his mind when he saw the sand drawing. It looked like Malita swinging an ax. Or—even though he'd never actually seen her before—Sajani.

He took a moment to wipe out the two sand drawings and then mounted back up. Once back to the road he willed his mount to move as fast as it could. Those summoned horses might only last two hours, but there was no way to tire them out.



It was early afternoon when Sajani awoke. She couldn't remember what she'd been dreaming, but whatever it was made it so that she woke disoriented and frightened. Where was Gregor? Was she alone? In her panic, she almost didn't see her friend leaning up against the tree next to her, still asleep. Calm returned and she took a deep breath. Inching over toward Gregor, she took a moment to examine his foot—no obvious swelling. She was just about to run her finger along his footpad when his eyes shot open and he said, "No."

She did it anyway and immediately regretted it when his left foot twitched straight into her face. It didn't hurt, instead it started her laughing.

Gregor was horrified. "I'm so very sorry," he said sincerely. "It was a kneejerk reaction...I didn't know..."

His comment made her laugh more. "You said it! Your knee definitely jerked. Your foot went straight into my face!"

That got a small chuckle from her friend, but he still sounded horrified. "Oh...you're not hurt are you? I didn't make your nose bleed or anything? I feel so bad."

“Don’t,” she told him happily, “the punishment definitely fit the crime.” That got him quieted and smiling.

“How’s your foot this morning?” she asked.

He pulled his foot up closer to him and absently began rubbing it. “Feels fine,” he told her. “A little stiff, but nothing a lot more walking won’t cure. I think it just needs to get used to moving again.”

“That’s good,” she told him. “Maybe we’ll see a road sign tonight and figure out how close we are to East Oasis. The good news is that those bags are definitely lighter.”

“The bad news,” he said cheerfully, “is that we have enough food to get to East Oasis.” He was still rubbing his foot.

Sajani laughed. “Yeah, I’m getting pretty tired of it too. Not sure what we’ll get to eat once we’re there, but if there was any nutrition in sand, I might be trying it by now.” She looked over at him. “Need your foot rubbed down one more time?”

“No,” he started and then, realizing what he was doing, he took his hands away from his foot and placed them behind his back. “Doing fine this morning, sir. No need...I mean...you don’t have to...”

She rolled her eyes. “You did great yesterday, so if you don’t want me to help, that’s fine.”

He looked very relieved.

“But if it improves anything, I’m happy to do that.”

More stammering and stuttering.

“Here,” she told him, taking up his foot and starting to rub along the tendons. “Just try to keep that left foot out of my face.”

As she did that, they talked. All small talk, nothing deep—things like the weather and the terrain. When she was done, the talk turned to stories about Mr. Ramisa and some of the wonderful things he’d said at formal events. (“I’m sorry, is that your nose? I honestly thought someone stuck an olive on your snout.”)

They were just discussing how to best approach dinner when they heard the sound—it was almost like hoofbeats, but as if the hooves had been padded by cloth or velvet. The pair moved quickly behind a couple trees.

She was curled up so that her tail was just beneath her shoulder and her head was close to the ground. It allowed her to peer just around the tree to see who was on the road.

It was a vykati! He was riding a horse made of shadows. It’s feet barely touched the ground and it left a train of something like black smoke behind it. The wolf riding the horse had black fur and black hair left free and flying behind him. He was also dressed entirely in black. Sajani was about to jump from behind the tree and hail him when she noticed Gregor motioning her to stay still.

Once the rider was past, she looked at her friend quizzically. “Why? He might’ve been able to help.”

“Not sure we’d want help from someone like that.”

His reaction puzzled her. She’d seen shadow horses a few times before. Westa had a dwarf friend, and he’d mentioned that summoning them was something he might eventually learn to do. “He’s a vykati! If he can make one of those horses, he might be able to make two more.”

“The horse *is* the problem,” he told her. “I’m guessing that you’ve spent most of your time in Drithen. No one like him would dare summon a horse like that inside the city.”

What he was saying about where she lived was true. Once they’d moved from Adido her only times out of the city were to torment one of the local farmers that Gladdi didn’t like. “So? Mages and the like can summon them.”

“Yes,” he said patiently, “but they usually don’t. If they do, they might be mistaken for a con-artist.”

“Bah!” Sajani exclaimed. “You saw him for less than five seconds and now you’re convinced he’ll try to steal your horse right out from under you? We don’t have anything for him to steal! What’s the worst that he could’ve done?”

Gregor rolled his eyes at her. Had he ever done that to her before? “I don’t know, maybe report us to the nearest constable for a reward?”

She hadn’t thought of that. “But,” she told him, “any reward can’t be for much. Your servitude can be bought out for...”

“A person like that might sell his mother for 5 gold. We don’t know if we can trust him and riding that mount doesn’t make that hopeful.”

The copper wolf sighed. “Let’s get something to eat. Then we should probably get going. It’s cooled enough we might as well get an early start.”



Benayle was hoping that the shirt he’d bought earlier was in his office. It hadn’t made it back to his room. It wasn’t at the counter at the thrift store where he’d bought it or, if he actually believed Lord Gwant’s butler, at the noble’s estate. The only other place he’d been that day...Oh, maybe he’d left it at the palace cafeteria...he hadn’t checked there yet.

The shirt wasn’t in the outer office, but there was a gray male vykati. The gentleman was about the same height as the Alpha and dressed in a brown suit. Benayle remembered the long brown coat from a previous visit. “Ah, Representative Modette, how good to see you again. To what do I owe the pleasure?” The leader unlocked his office door and motioned for his guest to enter.

The politician gave a suspiciously wry smile and entered the office. “I’m a little better prepared for a visitor today,” Benayle said graciously. He motioned to a nearby chair and closed the door behind him.

The other wolf gladly took the seat and the Alpha sat loudly in his own chair.

“I understand,” Modette started slowly, “that your chair is a sort of general announcement of your presence?”

"It has become that, yes." Benayle said truthfully. "I'm out and about a good portion of the day and it's helpful to some people in the building if they know I'm here."

The representative got a broad smile. "While I've never quite been able to understand you, I must admit that I do have an admiration for your methods."

The vykati leader noticed that the shirt he'd been looking for was on his desk, draped like it was a piece of dirty laundry. He tried to figure out a subtle way to make it less noticeable. Without thinking much on the councilman's comment he said, "I don't expect understanding. I'm usually happy with just trust." *At least it's a shirt*, he thought. *It could have been something much more embarrassing. Although if it had been, it'd probably make it into that weekly column.*

The stately vykati continued. "Indeed," he said ponderously, "It's an issue of trust that I wish to discuss with you."

Considering the last meeting with this person, that wasn't too hopeful. "I'll be honest with you sir," Benayle said plainly. "There're a lot of things about my job that are best left to me and me alone. It's not that I lack trust for the people on the council..." The attempted façade was too much for him. It'd been a tiring day so far and he really didn't feel like pretending. He dropped his attempted decorum. "who am I kidding? I don't trust the Lords or the Council. I'm sorry Mr. Modette. I've been keeping up appearances for too long this past week and it's never been something I'm good at." He took that opportunity to pick the shirt up off his desk and fold it. He was horrible at folding clothes, so it didn't help much.

To the Alpha's surprise, the councilman reached out and offered to take the shirt from him. Not sure what that was about, he handed it over.

"I'm pretty sure that Yanebel never learned to fold his own laundry," he said with a chuckle. As that was being said, he expertly folded the shirt and handed it back to Benayle.

The leader sighed but managed a well-intentioned "thank you" before placing the shirt on his desk. "Yanebel solved his problems with an ax. That doesn't work in my position."

Modette nodded a couple of times and then said slowly. "But you want to, don't you?"

Benayle glared at the other man, unsure of how to address the question.

The politician seemed unphased. "You don't need to answer aloud sir," he counseled, "I can see the need to address the current matters in a style more befitting who and what you are."

The Alpha glared at the other wolf, "Come to a point, sir. Even at my best I don't care for a game of 'cups and ball.'"

The councilman laughed. "And that more than proves my point." He became very serious. "I've come with a single question for you: *Why* are you not taking action on the situation near Altaza?"

"I'm sure that I have no idea what you mean. There is nothing on which to act. The situation is nothing to..."

"You're a poor liar, Mr. Benayle...or I'm an expert at knowing a load of chew toys when I see it. *Everything* you've done in your political career says that you *stand and fight*. What is it you're not telling us?"

Now the Alpha was getting upset. He nearly shouted, "I told you, there's nothing to fight—nothing to worry about. *Nothing!*"

The two exchanged glares for long while. It was the politician that backed down first. With a sigh he said, "I'm sorry." He did sound like he meant it. "This isn't at all how I wanted to address my concern. I've allowed my fear to get the best of me."

The Alpha continued his glare. The admission of fear intrigued him, but not enough to bring his guard down. His hackles were raised and he was leaning far forward.

"The other committee chairs insisted on that first visit. I didn't want to go with them, but they felt it was really important that Military Affairs be represented."

There wasn't much else for Benayle to do. He felt like he'd been issued a challenge.

Modette continued slowly and carefully. "I was barely old enough to be elected when you first 'came into power' as it were."

Benayle spat, "It was never something *I wanted*. It's what Vharkylia *needed*."

The politician nodded grimly. "And that, sir, is exactly why you're in your position. Most of our people couldn't care less what the Council or Lords decide. They're not even very keen on what *you* do politically..."

There wasn't a real response to what was being said. It was all true. Lord Riteyai himself wouldn't deny it. With nothing to say, Benayle kept his eyes on his opponent. He wouldn't back down—not in his den.

"They follow you because they trust you, something that neither body has been able to accomplish as universally."

Benayle kept his silence and his steady gaze. His words were a challenge. "Why're you here? You said you had business..."

"I do," Mr. Modette said hopefully, "but I'm afraid I didn't anticipate properly. It was never my intent to argue. My earnestness for answers got the better of me. Because of that, I'm not sure my business is really open to discussion at the moment."

"Try me," Benayle glared.

"Your inaction with the situation at the border isn't congruent with your normal behavior."

The leader offered a slight smile but kept his gaze steady. "Normal' isn't used often to describe me."

Modette chuckled. "While I have no idea what secret you're keeping from me and the others..." Benayle started to interrupt, but the councilman

continued unabated. "...let's just say that I've watched your career enough to know there's something about your decision that demonstrates a hidden knowledge. Can we leave it at that?"

Benayle nodded. "If you insist, but I categorically deny any secret from the Council or the Lords."

"Indeed," Modette said congenially, "I'd expect nothing less from you. But despite my misgivings, I wanted you to know that you have a friend in the Council. I trust you." With that said, the politician clapped his hands together and rose. "I won't disturb you any further. Again, my apologies for my lack of restraint." Patting the pockets on his coat a couple of times, he turned and started for the door.

Benayle rose to show his guest out. He was both relieved and reluctant to see the other wolf leave. There was plenty to think about, but there was one more thing he wanted to know. "Before you go Mr. Modette, may I ask a small favor?"

"Anything," the councilman said graciously and without hesitation.

'Can you show me how you folded that shirt? I've never been able fold that style quite right."



East Oasis. Farnsbeck could see the entry gates before him and the flat roofs of a few buildings showing over the wall. Its population was less than five hundred and would never be much more than that—the spring the village was based near wasn't large enough to support extra *and* the caravans that used it as a stop before starting across the Uvall Desert. It was a weeklong journey, but it was also the fastest way to get supplies from central Rhidayar to the port town of Nashtalli.

Realizing his current appearance and mount would raise suspicion, he dismounted and dismissed his shadow horse. The mask was out of his pocket and resting on his muzzle only a moment later. Back to human form. He was looking forward to being in a town again. Oh, it would be nice to get some real food. What his spoon could summon was edible, but not necessarily palatable.

Approaching the gate guards, he pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and vigorously wiped his forehead. The soldiers eyed him suspiciously. They were a man and woman, dressed in the brown and red uniforms of the Rhidayan Militia. That was odd. Where were the guards from the Rhidayan Army? Both sentries eyed him suspiciously. The man spoke first, "seem in pretty good shape for someone coming in with no food and water." The soldier was very old, probably about the same age as Benayle, but for a human that was getting along in years.

"Forward scout, for the caravan of Rajah Tilantra Ka-heeb," he said formally. "They're a day out and I'm supposed to get things ready for the noble's arrival."

The woman, who was much younger than her comrade, spoke harshly, “Why would a distinguished Rajah of that House send someone from Zenache ahead?”

Farnsbeck smiled. “I was born here in Rhidayar, although I know I don’t look it. My parents immigrated from Falstein and took up work as gardeners for the esteemed Ka-heeb family. When I was old enough, I took this job.”

The woman nodded slowly and was about to let him pass when her partner put out his arm and snatched the hat off his head. “Ear holes?” he asked.

“My, my,” the faux human said with admiration, “you’re much more astute than the normal guards. Perhaps they should have the militia do this more often.”

The woman wasn’t impressed, “Flattery won’t get you a single step further. We’ve been warned that some fugitive curs might be heading this way and that hat looks like something a mangy dog would wear. How do we know you are what you say you are?”

They hadn’t had a way to suppress his mask on his previous trip here. He’d have to bank on them still not having one. “Oh that? Sorry, I didn’t even think twice of putting that on this morning. We caught one of those awful wolffmen trying to steal food from one of our tents. His hat matched and mostly fit, so I took it. He *won’t* be needing it anymore.” Farnsbeck smiled knowingly at the soldiers.

The sentries backed away a bit and held a whispered conversation. Had he been still in vykati form, he’d have heard the whole thing, instead all he heard was the last comment: “Do you want to explain that to the Rajah when he gets here?” the woman had raised her voice and was eyeing her partner aggressively.

The agent cleared his throat and both looked over at him. “I’m sure you’ve heard about the patience of the Rajah. There shouldn’t be any problem with a small delay when he arrives. I’d hate to be a bother.”

That was enough. They parted and allowed him to enter.

Xxxlengthen

He’d just made his first mark when a subdued female voice behind him said, “Cyan.”

Turning to face the speaker, Farnsbeck smiled, “Magenta! I didn’t expect to see a familiar face here. I thought you’d have been transferred by now.” He took her hand in his and kissed it gently. The woman was wearing a yellow choli that was tight and cut off near the top of her stomach. Her royal blue salwar was modified so that it ended in tight bands about halfway down her calves. A yellow dupatta was draped over her head loosely enough to show off the set of topaz earrings she was wearing. Those and her gold sandals

made her almost look like someone important. Most would guess her to be in her mid-twenties, but Farnsbeck knew better.

Taking back her hand, Magenta gave the faux human a quick hug that allowed their cheeks to touch. “A more proper greeting for my friend,” she said as she pulled back from him. “Follow me, I know a place we can talk.”

Xxxlengthen

That place turned out to be her apartment. The black vykati wasn't happy about that. “Coming here together isn't the best way to keep a low profile,” he hissed as she was unlocking her door.

She smiled at him and winked, “A handsome man from Zenache coming into my apartment in the middle of the day? The neighbors *will* be talking, but it won't be about what we're really doing here.”

Farnsbeck had never been comfortable with Magenta's methods. The two entered a sparse apartment. An unmade bed with yellow satin sheets was in one corner with a worn dresser across from it. There was a decrepit orange sofa. Between that and the bed was a sliding glass door leading out to a small patio. A pine desk with its lacquer peeling and a single chair before it was opposite the sofa. The male wolf spun the chair around and sat down. Magenta took a seat on the sofa.

Both people reached before their eyes and made a motion similar to removing glasses. Immediately dark shadows gathered around both until they were completely obscured. When the shadows departed, there were two vykati sitting in the room dressed almost exactly as the two humans had been.

Magenta had blue silver fur and a large look of relief on her face. She tossed her pink mask aside. “Oh. Nice to get away from that in the middle of the day. It's a little cooler in human form, but the muscles...”

Farnsbeck nodded sympathetically.

“I haven't had any word from home in weeks,” she started, “but all my contacts are alive and popping over this whole Sajani business,” she paused. “You *are* here about that, I assume?”

Farnsbeck nodded. He wasn't exactly comfortable with his surroundings. The door to the patio particularly worried him. “How safe is it to talk here?”

“Pashaw!” Magenta said. “Completely sealed from scrying and that door is a one-way mirror. It keeps up the appearance of what the locals think is my *real* profession.” She gave the other vykati a sly wink. “Didn't we meet here last time you came through?”

“It was just a trade off before I hopped on the next caravan,” he said glibly.

“Right,” she responded. “There's a vykati caravan set to leave tomorrow. How close is Sajani? Maybe she can catch it.”

That wasn't what Farnsbeck wanted to hear. "I'm not sure exactly. I'd hoped they made it here already. Last place I can be sure they were at was where the east road meets the bridge over the Yanames."

"Cyan," Magenta said sternly, "You should count yourself lucky you passed them and arrived first. What were you doing? Messing around?"

Farnsbeck completely missed what she was saying. "I'm sure they weren't following the road. Some of the things they did would make them easy to track, but..."

"Listen to me," she raised her voice slightly and got his attention. "If you'd met up with them and brought them here, were you ready for a fight?"

"I'm always ready..." he began.

She threw her hands over her head in frustration. "While protecting two young pups?"

He shrugged. "Sure. Most of what I do disables people right off. I should have..."

"That'll work while taking on two or three. You've no idea what's been happening here do you?" She'd put one arm down and was making a chopping motion at him with the other. "You landed in Bahadhra? I think Orange was there. Didn't he tell you what was happening here?"

The male wolf got defensive. "I had no idea they were heading here until I met up with Blade. I thought they'd..."

That brought the conversation to a grinding halt. "Wait! Blade's here? In Rhidayar?"

"Yes. It was a bit of surprise to see him, but it makes sense Lady Mishil would have him here listening. Anyway..." he continued, "given that I saw no one pursuing them from Blade's until here, I think the assumption is that those two would stick to the towns while traveling."

"Well, you're right," Magenta said quickly. "They're assuming those two were going through the towns, but here was definitely one of the prospects."

"I was worried a few would figure it out," Farnsbeck told her. He let out a sigh.

The disbelief in Magenta's voice was heavy. "A few? You still have no idea. How far out did you say they are? I thought with how casual you were out there, we had some time."

Farnsbeck had no trouble picking up her urgency. "I don't know," he insisted. "I think one of them is hurt, probably the male. If they happened to leave the same day I found their camp, it could still be weeks, depending on if he's healed or not."

"I'll assume the soonest is any time now," she said quickly.

"Unlikely," he responded. "I think if they were traveling during the day, I'd have seen them."

"Ok," she said lightly, "I'll risk getting some food then. It'll make it look like you're staying awhile and keep the neighbors from asking too many questions."

The black wolf could feel a rising worry in his stomach. “What’s happening here, Magenta?” Farnsbeck said. “You’re not usually this vague.”

“I don’t have numbers, but I can say it’s more than seven and less than twenty—the foreign bounty hunters aren’t too much of a worry.”

“Twenty?” Farnsbeck gasped. “That leaves a little too much open to luck, but most bounty hunters aren’t that well trained.”

Magenta gave him a wry smile. “Yeah, well about that training...the Way of the Rose assassins *are* trained. There’s at least three of those.”

“I better be making my way back out there,” he told her, getting ready to stand.

She rose from the sofa, walked over to him and pushed him back into the seat. “Wait until I get back. I can take you out the way I go to dump the bodies. It’ll draw a lot less attention.”

His eyes got a little bigger.

“Well,” she said discreetly, “the person that owned this place before me had...” she licked her lips and winked at him. “...similar needs.”

“One of our own?” Farnsbeck asked.

“Nah,” the she-wolf said cheerfully, “But she died happy. It was a real risk in her profession. I just helped.”

The male rolled his eyes. “Do I want to...”

She lightly gripped his muzzle. “No. You don’t,” she said quickly.