

Fugitives' Trust

Chapter 9: Recovery (Part 2 of 2)

Farnsbeck wanted to go with Magenta to get the groceries, but she insisted he stay put. "Clients pay for the shopping to be done, they don't go themselves," she'd warned.

He'd tried to be polite and not look through her things while she was gone. He'd managed to sit quietly for close to an hour, but it was his nature to gather information. He wasn't positive, but he was pretty sure she'd checked his pockets when she'd given him a hug earlier. That made his snooping a little better justified. The desk was completely empty. She apparently didn't keep pens or paper—a good habit in their profession—if one's memory was sufficient.

The sofa, though old, was clean. He found a tray stored under it that still had some crumbs. That explained where she ate her meals—he'd been wondering. One cushion was a little lower than the other, but other than that, nothing noteworthy—not even loose change.

Moving onto the dresser, he opened up the top drawer to find a pouch with twenty-five gold and miscellaneous practical underclothing. He felt a little embarrassed by that, so was about to close the drawer when a small necklace with a leather backing caught his eye. Dangling from it was a silver medallion—heavily tarnished. The two letters on it, T.R., were written in an older style of the vykati alphabet. It seemed a little odd, since that alphabet was no longer used.

He startled as he felt breath on the back of his neck but relaxed quickly when he recognized the voice that spoke. Magenta whispered to him in a sultry voice. "Hey there, handsome. I didn't realize you had a thing for women's underwear."

Some might have been embarrassed, but Farnsbeck was above that. "You never know where you might find useful information." He turned to see her smiling human face.

"You know," she said, "that comment opens up lots of others, but I think we'll stick mostly to business. Find anything you like?" She put her hands on the dresser to either side of him.

Farnsbeck handed her the necklace and took a moment to look carefully at her ears. "Hmmm," he said thoughtfully. "At a guess, I'd say you heard the drawer opening from outside the door. Or do you usually sneak in and out like that?"

She took the necklace from him and stepped away from the dresser—allowing him to move. Touching one of her earrings, she said, "Yes. Let's just say I know more than I should about my neighbors' habits." Once he'd stepped away from the dresser, she placed the necklace back in and closed the drawer. "The necklace was a gift from my father, when I turned sixteen."

He smiled warmly at her. "I wouldn't have guessed. I'd have thought the initials would start with an "M" for Magenta."

She laughed lightly. "Some of us keep our identity. Come to think of it, you're the only one of us I know that doesn't."

That was easy to counter. "Blade," he answered.

She dismissed his comment with a wave. "I'm not sure he counts as one of us." Taking a step towards him she glanced into his eyes and then up at his ears. A concerned look crossed her face and she asked, "Do you even have one anymore?"

"Yes," he lied, "but it's better if both of us keep our own secrets." The last part was true anyway.

She shrugged. "I hope you like dates," she told him.

He couldn't resist. "It's been years since I've been on one. Maybe dinner, but I doubt this place has a theatre."

She smiled. "When we're done here, I'd love to have a nice dinner with you." There was a surprising amount of sincerity to what she was saying—not her usual sly overtones. She removed her mask and threw it to the side. "I feel so ugly as a human. Am I an ugly human?" Her form shifted back to its natural state.

That got a laugh out of her fellow agent. "I'm not an expert on that particular part of Rhidayan culture," he said in his best Riteyai accent. A broad smile crossed his face. "The best indicator might be how convincing your cover is to the people here."

"You'd be surprised how easy it is to fool humans with that," she said with a laugh. "Anyway, the grocer says the regular shipment hasn't arrived yet, so he was down to dates, lettuce, oil, and vinegar." She jumped slightly and added, "Oh, that reminds me...I better get those bags from outside the door."

He was going to help her, but there were only two small ones. He could smell though, that she hadn't told him everything about their contents. "Baked chicken?" he asked.

She set the bags back down and stepped close to him. "Just for you, friend." Her arms went around his neck and she rubbed his cheek slowly. "Let's sit on the sofa and have a real meal together."



It'd been a pleasant meal and pleasant company, Farnsbeck had to admit. Magenta had talked almost non-stop with her usual enthusiasm and frequent flirting. When they'd finished, she asked about what was happening at home in Vharkylia. He told a little bit about the happenings there.

"Wait, what?" she asked him with surprise. "Benayle's personal secretary? Don't those have a higher turnover than his bodyguards?"

He smiled at her. "No, they don't. I mean, there's been a few that have only lasted a week or less, but usually if they're not up in his face at all, he doesn't care."

"How long were you at that job?" she asked suspiciously.

“Let’s see,” he began thoughtfully, “Counting the two days I spent waiting for that ancient transport to Bahadhra to get ready...”

“Five days?” she guessed.

“Three,” he said truthfully. Quickly he added, “I’m pretty sure he’ll have me back when I’m done, unless they’ve hired a replacement.”

Magenta put her arm around him and pulled him close so they could rub cheeks. “It’s been fun having you here, plush fur,” she said as she released him and started to rise, “but we do have work to get done.”

“True,” he said, carefully picking up the remains of the dinner and looking around for a place to put them. There didn’t seem to be a place to put garbage, although that was probably a bonus in such a small place.

“Patio,” she said simply as she folded up the tray and put it back under the sofa. “There’re bars around it, so you should be okay in wolf shape.”

Since his hands were already full, he opted to not use his mask. Once he was out on the patio however, he wished he had. As he was putting the trash in the small bin, he noticed a person on a balcony across the street. It was a Jzianrhun woman wearing a black blouse with a red sash tied around her waist. She motioned to another woman from the same country that was standing on the street below. The second woman was wearing a plain white dress. *It might not be a good thing*, he thought. Then the first woman pointed directly at him. *Definitely not good*.

He ran into the apartment slamming the door behind him. “We’ve been discovered. Might be your Way of the Rose people. Time to show me this body hiding place of yours.”

“Aw,” Magenta whined. Farnsbeck couldn’t believe how serious she sounded. “I was really liking it here.” She didn’t pause as she was speaking and started immediately towards the dresser. She pulled out two large white bags and handed them to him. “Dump the groceries in these. We’ll bring them with us.”

No time for hesitation, he walked over near the entrance and followed her instructions. When he turned back around the bed was moved and blocking the glass door to the balcony. She’d somehow done that silently. Magenta had already put her mask back on and was busy lifting a trap door.

He brought the bags over and placed his mask. Once he saw what was under the floor, Farnsbeck had to admit that something like that would have been very helpful more than once in his job. “I’m impressed,” he told Magenta. “That wasn’t cheap to build.”

She didn’t respond to his comment. “You’ll be glad you’re in human form once we pass through. The scent’ll still be horrible, but not quite as bad. We can change back once we’re outside the walls.”

Farnsbeck nodded. “I’m not sure we’ll want to change back. The guards are looking for a couple of vykati and they’re not being specific.”

“True,” she said quickly. “Hold onto that food real tight. Those bags are really thin and if you drop it down there, they’ll be full of dust.”

He glanced down at the food and handed a bag to his companion. The bags were large enough to hold a body, so Farnsbeck didn't ask where she got them.

"I will," he reassured her. "I've had quite enough of that spoon food."

"You know they don't even issue those anymore. I think you're the only agent that still uses one."

Budget cuts. The Council and Lords were diverting money from anywhere they could to step up the military after Altaza. It wasn't that he liked the food, but it allowed him to travel very light if necessary. The spoon's other purpose, conjuring a suicide poison, wasn't something he needed. "It got me here. Since we've no idea how far out our marks are or how fast they're moving, we might end up relying on it."

Magenta shuddered. "Ug. I might try to figure out a way to get back here without drawing attention if it comes to that." She looked up at him, "Ready?"

He nodded and looked down. Past the trap door was a small drop ending with a wooden picture frame. The inside of the frame was black. She placed her feet in the opening and held onto the side with both hands. The frame seemed to absorb her as she lowered herself through it. Her head and shoulders were all that was left when she let go of the sides and turned towards him. "Be a dear and put the bed back before you go." She winked at him and dropped down into the shadows.

It didn't take him long to figure out she was joking. There was no way to move the bed that he could see. He dropped himself through the frame and was just pulling the trapdoor closed when the room above him grew darker. Okay, so she was only partially joking.

Once he finished crouching through, he was very glad he wasn't in vykati form. The smell of decay was like a slap in the face. It was so bad that he started to gag. Trying to control himself, he loosened his grip on the food and would have dropped it, if it hadn't been taken from him at the last moment.

Magenta's voice, with a noticeable nasal echo, came from right next to him. "Told ya."

He took her cue and pinched his nose. The smell weakened but was still there. "We might have to lose the masks for a moment anyway. I can't see a thing."

"Give me your hand," she whispered.

He reached it out and felt it touch her skin.

"Hey there plush fur, that's for after the work is done," she told him. Her hand grasped his and moved it onto her shoulder. "Try to step exactly where I do. I'll do my best to stay out of the messier places." While she was saying that, he felt her fist against his stomach. "Oh..." she said slyly. "I think we might be even now."

Farnsbeck sighed. The smell of the place was getting to him. "Can you stop flirting and get us out of here?"

“Settle down,” she told him calmly. “I was handing the food back. You can read into that whatever you want.”

To take the bag, he had to either let go of her shoulder or his nose. Given the mood the other agent was in, he opted for releasing his nose. He held his breath while he slung the food over his shoulder and again returned his hand to where it'd been.

“Aw,” she said with disappointment, “I was hoping for another game of ‘find the she-wolf’s shoulder.’”

He nudged her slightly to let her know he was ready to start walking. “What is this place anyway?” he asked.

“Crypt,” she told him happily.

Farnsbeck thought it was amusing that she seemed happy about that. “You make it sound like a very cheerful place.”

“There’s a lot of great history down here,” she said. “The town is built on the site of an old temple to Sajah.”

“Desert seems like an odd place for a temple to the Aspect of rain,” he admitted.

“Before the Rift, this was a forest,” she said. “The temple was abandoned after everything dried up. Legend says the spring here was a gift from Sajah back before all that.”

What she was saying was interesting, but it did beg an unrelated question. “I didn’t know,” he told her, “that you took such an interest in this place.”

She laughed, “Handsome, if the world had an armpit, it’d be right above us. I don’t take much interest in this place specifically, but my degree is in Rhidayan history.”

Surprising. That meant she had as much education as he did. “I didn’t know that was offered anywhere in our country. Most of our universities seem a little xenophobic when it comes to other nation’s histories.”

“My degree is from Malsoct University,” she answered.

That was very impressive. “How’d you manage that? I wouldn’t think any Rhidayan school would take a wolf?”

His comment put Magenta into hysterics. “Oh, there you go...” she stopped speaking and laughed some more. It sounded like she was having trouble getting air. Should he be worried? After a moment, she continued while still laughing. “Did you not even read your mission brief?” she asked him. “Where’d you think Sajani was before all this?”

In hindsight he realized his question wasn’t worded very well. “First,” he said in his Riteyai accent. “there was no mission brief. Benayle just told me to go find her before the Rhidayans did. Secondly,” he continued, “Benayle was paying that school a small fortune to get their reassurance she’d be treated well. She was supposed to have a small staff to help take care of her.”

His partner got control of herself. “Well, from the reports I’ve gotten, he put too much trust in them. He should have at least had some people checking on her.”

They were still moving slowly along and there was nothing better to do than find out more about the she-wolf—before she decided she wanted to know more about him. “So how’d you manage?” he asked.

There was a long pause. When her answer came it was in a surprisingly depressed tone. “I didn’t so much manage, as endure.” A little of her normal perkiness began to surface again, “I really wanted that degree. Our history is tied right into theirs and I was sure that if I could finish up, I’d be able to get a teaching post at Drtithen...”

That didn’t seem likely for a couple of reasons. He stopped himself. Maybe one of those reasons wasn’t the problem. “They require a doctorate to teach don’t they?”

“Yep,” she said happily. Her mood seemed to be back to normal already. “And let me tell you something, friend, Malsoct wasn’t happy at all giving a twenty-four-year-old wolf a doctorate.”

Her last comment made him decide she was just fetching from the deep current. That young? There was no way. It’d been a funny joke while it lasted. “Oh,” he laughed, ‘you really had me going for a while there. I thought you were serious!’

He did feel her stop and turn suddenly, but since his human eyes couldn’t see, the slap across his muzzle was a surprise.

She didn’t say anything, just turned back and started walking again. He followed for awhile before he dared speak again. “Okay,” he started slowly, “I suppose an apology is in order. In our game, stories are common, but I shouldn’t have assumed...”

She patted his hand a couple of times. “No worries.” Her voice was as serious as he’d ever heard her. “After the university turned me down, Lady Mishal herself contacted me. Gave me a job. I get so used to playing down sometimes, I almost stop believing it myself.”

That much knowledge about an enemy country? He wouldn’t be surprised if the Minister had arranged for her to be turned down. There was no way he’d mention that.

“Are we nearly out? I had no idea the town was this big,” he told her. His nose was starting to hurt.

She laughed. The nasal echo was now gone. “You can unplug your nose. Some of the prior apartment owner’s work is right near that one-way door we came through. I don’t dare move it. I try to be a little more subtle with my placement.”

He removed his hand from his nose finally. The scent seemed to linger. Whether that was just the memory of it or it could still be smelled from there, he didn’t know. It was a weak enough scent he didn’t bother worrying about it anymore. “I’m a little curious,” he asked, “How do you know your way through here so well?”

“Well,” she answered, “I got these earrings from a human and they’re very useful to someone with a job like ours.”

So she'd been able to see the whole time. That meant she'd been flirting even more than he'd thought. "And how'd you learn the path so well?"

Another laugh. "You can be pretty trusting for someone in our profession. You have no idea where we've been? Here I thought you were just enjoying my company as much as I was enjoying yours."

"Circles," he concluded. "You've been walking us in circles? We're in a hurry you know."

"Silly," she said. "It wasn't a pointless circle. I was checking to make sure no one else was down here recently. Once I was sure, I started for the opening out. There'll be a little light after the next corner."

That was a relief. The light was barely noticeable at first, but pretty soon, even his weak human eyes could see enough that he took his hand off her shoulder. Magenta took a step back when he did that and put her arm around his waist. He took that to mean that his prior disbelief was forgiven. "Now that my cover is blown, I might as well get used to you," she told him.

"Your fault," he said defensively. "You said going out as a vykati was fine."

His companion laughed. "Nothing like a good game of 'shift the blame.'" After a moment she continued. "The bars are close enough together that it's hard to see clearly through them at a distance. I'm guessing someone on a balcony saw you."

He nodded. They continued on in silence. He had no way of knowing of course, but he guessed that took a supreme effort on Magenta's part.



They'd positioned themselves just south of the road and about a kilometer out from the city. There was a possibility of Sajani and Gregor passing, but Magenta reassured him that her earrings would be enough to hear them from a distance. With time on their hands, they decided to dig a hole in the sand to protect their human skin from burning. Magenta had removed her dupatta and loosened her choli a little. She also removed her sandals. Her mask gave her much darker skin than his and she wasn't as worried about burning as he was. She gave him a hard time for leaving his shirt on, saying that even the National Alpha didn't always bother with one. The heat did eventually get to him enough that he unbuttoned it all the way and just made sure that he was leaning forward often. Sharing his spoon back and forth gave them the water they needed. He had to hide the two of them with spells at one point, when a caravan came through. It wasn't traveling on the road, which wasn't uncommon given how often the roads were buried.

Considering that they were working without tools, it ended up being a pretty deep hole, about two meters square. The sand was soft and deep. They finished just as it was getting dark.

"We'll both keep watch at night," he suggested, "and take turns sleeping during the day." He handed his spoon over to her. She took a long drink and handed it back.

“How much water can you get out of those? I’ve only heard of them being used for one person, will it have enough for both?” she asked.

Farnsbeck shrugged. “I’d heard it was enough for two people, but it’s been awhile since they gave it to me. If we run out of water, we’ll know.”

“Way to encourage a girl,” she chided him. “We can’t go back in there for water...or anything else. At least money isn’t a problem.” She sighed deeply and tossed him a bag of coins. It was heavy.

“Where...” he started.

Magenta shrugged. “I took advantage of that spell and picked it off that fat man on the middle camel.”

Farnsworth smiled. “I have a bit still of what Benayle paid.” That made him remember the money he’d been offered. He told his partner about it.

“And here I was proud of myself for leaving a new outfit and my bag behind. What you left would pay my rent for a few years at least. How much did you bring?”

“Two fifty,” he told her.

She gave him a look of total disbelief. “I’d have taken it to the bank and cashed it in for later,” she said truthfully. “That’s very honest of you there, plush fur. Most people in our line of work would have taken what they could.”

He’d wanted to do exactly that. His voice was quiet and distant when he answered. “I would too,” he admitted. “The old wolf probably makes that in a month and I wouldn’t make it two years.”

That earned a shy smile from his companion. Considering her normal temperament, he guessed that was her equivalent of an honest smile. “So why didn’t you?”

The memory came back and it almost made him cry, in part from how tired he was after digging in the heat. “It was like he was a father begging me to save his drowning daughter. I could tell he’d have given me more than ten times that if I’d asked.”

Magenta let out a cynical laugh, “It’s not like the government can’t afford it.”

Farnsbeck nodded. “I don’t need to tell you how jaded this line of work makes you. You’ve been talking about dumping dead bodies in the same breath as buying groceries. But I just...”

She gave him a very sympathetic look but didn’t say anything.

“I’d have felt bad taking money from someone that desperate. Like robbing a pup of candy. I’d have felt even worse when he told me that it wasn’t the government’s money.”

“Well, plush fur,” she said resolutely, “I’d love to tell you that I’d have been as noble about it as you, but Magenta here’s been a little too tread on to ignore a windfall like that.” She leaned forward and rubbed her cheek against his gently a couple of times then returned to her place opposite him.

There was silence for a long while again. He didn’t really feel like saying anymore, but it didn’t surprise him that his companion felt a need to fill the

silence. “I’d heard that you took on this career a little later than most,” she hinted.

He refused to take the bait.

“What did you do before you worked for the Ministry?”

“That’s a pretty personal question. Should I be asking you what the TR on that necklace stood for?” It wasn’t a very nice thing to say, but it hadn’t been a very professional question to ask either.

She looked very ashamed. “I’m sorry there, plush fur. I didn’t mean to pry. I’m just intrigued by what you said about that money. It doesn’t take someone that’s become as calloused as our equals to run off with that much gold.”

The fact that her own secret meant something to her reassured him. If she’d volunteered her name, it’d mean that she was either lying or easy to topple. Both ways, her answer would have been disturbing. It wasn’t like she’d ever know if he was telling the truth, since the truth was pretty unbelievable.

“I was a banker,” he said honestly.