



The Guild of the Cowry Catchers

Book 1. Embers

Episode 10

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Chapter 28. A Picnic

Foxlings seem to have originated mostly on Maijha Major—at least, that’s where their largest populations are located. Quite a few can also be found in the pleasure districts of Sern, and although it is supposedly illegal to hunt them, they are occasionally kidnapped and turned loose on Maijha Minor for sport. Their cleverness, small size, and adaptability make them interesting quarry.

--Gwain, *The Non-grishnards of Wefrivain*

It was late morning when they got back to the ship. Silveo paused before climbing up the side. “How many holdings does Holovarus have?”

“Technically nine,” said Gerard, “but only four of them are inhabited year-round.”

“And which did Thessalyn come from? Is it within sailing distance in the Meerkat?”

“Number two.” Gerard thought about the wind and weather. “It’s not far. The Meerkat could be there in a half watch. Thess’s parents aren’t on the island, though. Her mother died when she was in school, and her father lived just long enough to see her installed on Holovarus as court minstrel. She does have some siblings living there.”

“Would she like to see them?”

Gerard shrugged. "Ask her."

As Gerard had suspected, Thessalyn was reticent about going to Holovarus-2. She'd had little contact with her siblings after leaving at a young age for school, and her education and lifestyle had put even more distance into the relationships. Her abduction, as they saw it, of the crown prince had rather lowered their opinion of her than raised it. Gerard had been a favorite with many of the peasants. He spent more time around them than Jaleel did, and they resented Thessalyn for disturbing the succession.

"You'd like to walk on the beach, though," said Silveo. "Lots of shells on the beach. Come, we'll bring food—get off the Fang for a while."

Thessalyn smiled slyly. "I'll come...if you tell me why you don't like griffins."

All the playfulness went out of Silveo's expression. He crossed his arms and drummed his fingers against his shoulder. "I don't know why you want to hear about that. It's just a sad story."

"Some sad stories are important," said Thessalyn.

For a moment, Gerard thought Silveo would tell her to have a good day aboard ship, but then he shrugged. "I'll think about it. Are you coming or not?"

Gerard had assumed they would take several of the sailors and make a small tour of Holovarus's holdings, perhaps buy provisions. He was surprised when he realized that Silveo did not intend to take anyone but Gerard and Thessalyn. Silveo didn't even comment when Alsair dropped lightly into his accustomed place in the rear of the boat.

The day was splendid, and Gerard was glad to be out of Port Holovarus. They skimmed along in a warm wind over a gently rolling sea. The water was a striking blue. Normally, they would have been able to see all the way to the bottom, but the storm had stirred things up. Still,

they could see a good bit of the reef and the brilliantly colored fish and coral. Flying fish skimmed along the surface, sometimes whirring over the boat. Alsair sat up and batted at them until Gerard told him to either fly or sit down before he capsized the vessel. It was an old argument and made them both smile. Thessalyn trailed a hand in the water, her face in the wind.

Silveo made no attempt to tell Gerard where to go or what to do. He sat in the bow, taking readings with a couple of small instruments. When they'd almost reached the island, Alsair half stood and carefully made his way to the front of the boat. "Gerard wants me to apologize for what I did on Sern," he said, laying his head on the bench beside Silveo.

Silveo glanced at him with distaste. "Gerard knows I don't value apologies. What you did on Sern was vicious and effective. It was exactly what I would have done." He gave a small, bitter smile. "But I'll kill you if you ever do anything like it again."

Alsair couldn't seem to decide whether he'd been complimented, insulted, or threatened. Finally he said, "I still don't trust you—"

"You hear that, Gerard?" called Silveo. "The griffin is smarter than you!"

"—but," continued Alsair, "I appreciate what you did on Holovarus, so thank you for that."

Silveo shook his head. "Your first idea was better."

Gerard had decided to take them to Holovarus-4, an uninhabited little gem of an island that could be crossed in a quarter watch on foot. It had a tiny cove where he'd loved to fish, as well as some small game that Alsair had used to hunt. They landed on the beach opposite the cove and hiked up into the dunes along a little ridge of cliff that gave a decent view of Holovarus-2, 5, 8, and 9. Silveo asked questions about everything he saw, but he still made no attempt to lead them. Gerard had spotted a nautilus shell on the beach and given it to Thessalyn.

She was exploring its surfaces like a child admiring a beautiful new trinket. Alsair flew off to look for rabbits and mice in the dunes.

“So this is where you should be,” commented Silveo after Gerard had pointed out the distant spike of Holvarus-9 and explained its political relationship to the other holdings.

“Pardon?”

“I mean, this is where you fit and what you were trained to do, as opposed to wandering around Wefrivain taking orders from a foxling who dresses like ‘a flamboyantly.’”

Gerard shrugged. He glanced at Thessalyn a little way down the slope, who was alternatively examining her nautilus and unpacking their lunch. “She’s worth it.” He sighed. “No matter how I try to speak to you, I seem to say things that in retrospect appear ungracious and unkind.”

Silveo laughed. He seemed truly amused. “‘Ungracious.’ Gerard, you are so very far from the right job.”

He started down the hill. “Did you hear what happened at the castle last night, Thess?”

She raised her head from the nautilus shell and gave a hesitant smile. “I heard you made Lord Holovar extremely uncomfortable.”

“Oh, yes,” purred Silveo. “He’d never had to be polite to something like me before.”

Thessalyn frowned. “You’re not a something, Silveo.”

“Oh, I am a something,” he said cheerfully. “I’ve gotten along very well as a something.”

“You haven’t,” said Thessalyn. “You’ve survived.”

“That’s getting along well, at least where I come from. What was Holovar-2 like when you lived there? I hope you didn’t have any siblings as charming as Jaleel.”

So Thessalyn talked about her girlhood while they ate roasted fish brought from the Fang and nibbled on pastries left over from last night's feast. Gerard felt a mixture of strangeness at Silveo's presence and profound peace. He was with Thessalyn and Alsair on islands that he knew and loved with his own boat on the sandy beach. When the meal was finished, he stretched out in the sun in a nest of sea grass with Thessalyn absently running her fingers through his hair. He never knew quite when he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 29. A Sad Story

Non-grishnard panauns such as foxlings and ocelons are in some ways the most powerless group of creatures in Wefrivain. The Resistance does not trust them because they are panauns, and they do not have the monetary and physical clout to force their way into the Resistance by being needed as some sympathetic grishnards do. For better or for worse, non-grishnard panauns like foxlings and ocelons are usually stuck trying to make the best of what grishnards will give them.

--Gwain, *The Non-grishnards of Wefrivain*

Gerard woke by degrees. Thessalyn and Silveo were talking, and their voices drifted in and out of his dreams.

“My mother,” said Silveo, “loved sweat leaf a good deal more than she loved me. But at least I was pretty, so I wasn’t totally useless.”

Gerard felt Thessalyn shift. “Oh, Silveo—”

“Oh, no. No, ‘oh, Silveo’s.’ You asked for the story; now I’m telling it. Be quiet and listen or I’ll stop.”

Thessalyn was immediately quiet.

“She disappeared when I was eight,” continued Silveo. “The brothel where she’d been selling me promptly claimed me, and for the next five years I was essentially their prisoner. They had a griffin who watched the grounds—mean, mangy thing. We were all terrified of it. The master told us it would kill us if we tried to leave.”

“Did anyone try?” asked Thessalyn.

“No, we weren’t that stupid. There were about a dozen of us kids—mostly ocelons. You would think that being in the same wretched situation, we’d have a lot of sympathy for each

other, but they thought they were better than us foxlings. They looked more like grishnards, and when they grew big enough, the master might sell them to a ship, and they'd get out. Foxlings, though, he'd keep indefinitely, because we just don't get very big. There weren't many of us, and customers thought we were exotic.

"There was one other white foxling, a girl named Nix. We used to pretend we had the same father. Maybe we did, too—no way of knowing. She and I both had sharp tongues. We used to make up nasty nicknames for the customers. We'd joke about them, about each other, about everything. We made the others laugh, and it kept us all sane.

"The master, though—he didn't like it, especially since we didn't exempt him from the sport. One of the ocelons snitched about some of the stuff we said, and he didn't feed either of us for three days. He didn't want to kill us or beat us too badly, though, because we were valuable."

Silveo paused, and this time Thessalyn did not attempt to say anything. "You sure you want to hear this, Thess? It's not very...*nice*."

"Yes," she said solemnly. "Silveo, I'm not unaware of what goes on in the world beyond the common rooms and courts where I sing. I grew up in poverty, and there were shelts who counseled my father that there was only one way to make use of a pretty, blind daughter. Thank the Firebird, he didn't listen."

"Yes," said Silveo thoughtfully, "we could thank him for that, I suppose. Anyway, what I'm trying unsuccessfully to think of a nice way to say: there are plenty of things an adult grishnard cannot do to a little foxling if he wants to do anything to him tomorrow. The customers had rules they were supposed to follow, and for the most part, they did. However, we'd get one periodically who thought that once the door was closed, the rules didn't apply to him. If the

money was good enough, the master didn't want to turn those shelts away. However, he also didn't want to lose valuable merchandise—us.

“He discovered fairly early that I was good at handling these customers. I could talk them down, make them laugh, convince them not to hurt me.”

“So you got the dangerous ones,” said Thessalyn.

“Yes,” Silveo's voice carried an acid hint of mock pride. “Silvy got to handle the crazies. I was good at it, too, but I did depend on the master to use some measure of common sense. A grishnard came in one day—fellow about Gerard's size. His idea of a good time was beating one of us senseless. We'd had problems with him before, and he'd killed a kid from a place down the street earlier that year, but he laid down a few speckled cowries, and the master let him in. I'd gotten in trouble earlier that evening for saying something snippy, and the master was angry at me.

“He shoved me into a room with that brute, and nothing I said or did made any difference. He nearly killed me. For anyone else, the master would have stopped it, but not for me. Afterward, when the bastard had fallen into a drunken sleep, Nix crept in and smothered him with a pillow. I told her not to. I told her the worst was over, but she was so angry. She'd listened to me getting knocked around for a quarter watch, and the master doing nothing. She wouldn't listen.

“When our master found the body, he was livid. I told him I'd done it, but I could barely crawl, so he didn't believe me. He staked her out in the yard and let that griffin at her. He made me watch.” Silveo bit off the last word.

“Silveo—” whispered Thessalyn.

“I said none of that!” he snapped. “You asked me. I told you. The end. If there’s one thing I cannot abide, it’s pity. And quit pretending to be asleep, Gerard. I know perfectly well that you’re not.”

Gerard sat up, feeling a little guilty. Silveo had his knees pulled up to his chin, his tail wrapped tightly around his body. Thessalyn leaned over suddenly and hugged him. Silveo gave a startled hiss like a scolded cat, and Gerard leapt up in alarm. “Thess, he’ll—!”

“Lady,” growled Silveo against her shoulder, “it is extremely unwise to seize me unexpectedly.” Gerard saw, though, that his hand had stopped halfway inside his pocket. “Let go of me,” said Silveo.

“Let go of him,” agreed Gerard.

Thessalyn released him with a sigh. “Well, you won’t let me *say* what I want to say.”

“Maddening, isn’t it? Let’s see if I can tell you some things that will make you feel less like throwing your arms around me. The priestess got me out of that place—turned up when I was twelve and asked me to kill someone for her. I still don’t know whether she picked me at random or whether she knew something about me. She gave me a knife—first good weapon I ever had. I killed a lot of shelts for her over the next few years—mostly political assassinations. You wouldn’t believe how much she likes to meddle. One day, she said, ‘You’re good at surviving Silveo. How would you like to survive my Sea Watch?’

“I thought she meant as a regular sailor, but she put me in as a lieutenant. I have no idea what she said to admiral Mornay to make him do it; he certainly didn’t like me, but two years later the Resistance shot him, and she made me admiral.”

“Did you really try to guild the Fang silver?” asked Gerard.

Silveo snorted. “I was nineteen and giddy. I knew I needed a legend, needed to keep everybody guessing. They’d never serve under a foxling unless I stayed so far ahead of them they never knew what I was going to do next.”

Silveo leaned back in the grass. “The Priestess gave me Sern, too. I declared the island a nest of Resistance traitors and went through it like a scythe. Even the king was nervous by the time I was finished. My old master—” He stopped. “You don’t even want to know what I did to him. Or to that griffin. I hunted down every one of our regular patrons, killed the ocelons, too.”

“Even the ones who weren’t cruel to you?” asked Thessalyn.

“Even those,” said Silveo. “It certainly felt therapeutic, but I also knew I couldn’t have shelts running around talking about things that happened back then. It doesn’t do for an admiral of the Sea Watch to have anyone able to say— Well, it just doesn’t do. If there’s anyone left in Wefrivain who knew me back then, they certainly aren’t talking about it.”

There was a moment’s uncomfortable silence. Then Thessalyn said, “Did Nix sing?”

Silveo smiled. “Yes, she sang—not like you, she hadn’t had the training. She might have been terrible; I don’t know. I was only a kid. She could make me sleep, though. Not much else could make me sleep back then, except exhaustion.”

He hesitated. “They used to carry us around sometimes by the scruff. It’s difficult for a little foxling to fight when he’s being carried that way. There’s a powerful instinct that tells your body to curl up and submit.”

“But you didn’t,” said Thessalyn.

Silveo gave a little huff. “Oh, some days I did. You can’t fight the system—not if you want to win. You have to find a way to work from inside of it.”

“Even if the system is wrong?” asked Thessalyn.

Silveo rolled his eyes. “Everyone’s wrong. Everyone cheats. Everyone will sell you for the right price. There are no real choices. That’s the world according to Silveo Lamire. I realize that the world according to Thessalyn Holovar is quite a bit different. You’re a sweet fool.” He got up and dusted himself off. “Story time’s over, little lambs. I need to get back to my ship.”

Chapter 30. Mance

Traffic on and off of Maijha Minor is closely monitored. Supposedly it is a closed system, but everyone knows that smuggling does occur. Shavier slaves sometimes escape to the island, judging the risks of constant hunting worth the benefits of relative freedom among their own kind. Even some grishnard smugglers are willing to trade rare items from the island for the weapons and steel that the inhabitants desperately need.

--Gwain, *The Non-grishnards of Wefrivain*

They left Holovarus three days later, bound for Mance. Gerard didn't think he'd ever seen a ship repaired so quickly. Neither his father nor Jaleel put in another appearance, for which he was grateful. The Fang still needed a number of small things that Holovarus's dockyard could not provide on short notice. Silveo opted to pick them up on the way, rather than waiting.

During those three days, Gerard spent a considerable amount of time walking around town, confirming what Silveo had said about Gwain. Their resistance pirate had certainly asked a lot of questions, most of them about Gerard. *Why would he have left a book in the library?*

Even Silveo didn't seem to have an answer to that, although Gerard suspected he'd read the book in its entirety the night they got back to the Fang. But whenever Gerard asked about it, he said, "Give me a few more days."

Gerard also decided to do a little recruiting. He had no trouble finding a dozen shelts on Holovarus and its holdings whom he'd known for a long time and were able and willing to leave with him. Gerard suspected that if he put out a public announcement, he could in one stroke staff the Police with trustworthy shelts and take the cream of his father's military. He didn't dare mention the idea to Silveo for fear he'd do it.

They were a day out of Holovarus when Silveo finally handed him Gwain's book. "You won't be able to read it," he said. "It's written in the phonetic, and it's on some kind of very durable paper. I was hoping I could figure out where it was made, but I've never seen anything like it. The content seems to be an encyclopedia of the non-grishnard species of Wefrivain. It's informative and has some details that are not common knowledge. There's a whole chapter on Maijha Minor."

"Why do you think he left it?" asked Gerard.

Silveo hesitated. "A mistake? I really don't know."

Silveo did not seem to object to Gerard's recruiting, although he did talk to each of the new Police himself and had Farell assess their maritime abilities. He made jokes about pulling the better sailors out of the Police into the Watch, but Gerard didn't think he'd really do it. Restocking the galley slaves turned out to be more of a problem. Mishael Holovar kept very few slaves and no rowers. Even the larger port in Malabar only had a slave auction every other red month. Gerard doubted they would find a decent compliment of rowers before returning to the Great Islands.

Still, they were not badly off as they sailed toward Mance. Their sails, rigging, and masts were in excellent condition, and they continued to make small, nonessential repairs as they went. Most days the Fang echoed with the pounding of hammers and the scrape of saws. Silveo even insisted on retouching the paint work, and he found gold leaf for the figurehead and trim.

He occasionally took the Meerkat and sailed with Farell and a few officers to nearby islands. He came back from one with a collection of gaudy mother of pearl earrings, necklaces, and bangles, with which he was absurdly pleased. He brought Thessalyn so many beautiful shells that their cabin soon grew cluttered with them.

Gerard worked with his new recruits in the mornings, read to Thessalyn in the afternoons, and listened to her play in the evenings. His arm healed where Silveo had cut him during the storm, and the bruises around his ribs faded. Sometimes he flew with Alsair to nearby islands and brought back interesting edibles—specialties of various regions. Alsair was no longer trying to hide aboard ship, although he often went off alone to hunt or stretch his wings. Silveo usually ignored him, but twice Gerard overheard him ask Alsair to fly ahead and look for something.

Gerard had not attempted to tell Alsair the story Silveo had told them on Holovarus-4. He didn't think it would change Alsair's opinion. Also, although Silveo had never said so, Gerard felt that the story had been related in confidence and he had no right to share it. Silveo had worked hard to kill everyone who knew that story, and Gerard doubted that anything other than Thessalyn's magic could have drawn it out of him.

She mentioned the picnic from time to time in reference to other things. One day she said thoughtfully, "Silveo can't stand to be touched, can he?"

Gerard would not have thought of it, but as soon as she said it, he knew she was right. For all Silveo's vaunted promiscuity, Gerard couldn't remember ever seeing anyone lay a hand on him in public. He remembered how the admiral had recoiled the first time Thess tried to hug him and how he'd nearly stabbed her the second time. Gerard's attempt to pick him up in order to save his life had ended in blood.

"He's afraid of so many things," said Thessalyn, "but he's so good at hiding them, no one ever knows."

"Shinies," said Gerard. "Make it flashy enough, and no one will look too closely."

As they neared Mance, Gerard spent more and more time with Thessalyn. He'd grown accustomed to having her nearby, and he was dreading her imminent departure. She seemed to

understand this, while at the same time feeling excited about revisiting her school. She had many friends there and Gerard doubted she would miss him as much as he would miss her. Their days slipped away in sun and salt and sweet, and then they were back among the holdings of the Great Islands.

They stopped in Mage—a holding of Mance—and procured what Silveo described as “a splendid team of wave beaters”—about half of them leons and the other half big shavier. They arrived in Mance’s largest harbor town, Solamade, in fine form with even the minor damage from the storm repaired and the ship sanded and gleaming. Mance was the premiere island for learning in Wefrivain, with eight different schools. It was also the banking capital, with more cowries stamped there than anywhere else. One could trade a variety of other currencies for cowry coins in Mance, including the flat cocoa bean from the Lawless Lands and the strange velum currency of the Sunkissed Isles.

Thessalyn’s school was on the far side of the island, and Gerard took her there himself early on the second day after their arrival. Silveo handed her a large package before they left. “Open it later,” he said and turned away before Thessalyn could even try to hug him good-bye.

Alsair was small for carrying two, although he could do it in an emergency. Gerard hired a big pegasus for Thessalyn and himself and put her belongings on Alsair, who grumbled about being treated as a pack animal. As Gerard expected, Thessalyn’s friends and teachers welcomed her with excitement. They had not been on the school grounds for a quarter watch before she’d received half a dozen invitations to stay at various homes. Several of her younger classmates admired Gerard as though he were a new and attractive accessory, which made Alsair snicker and Thessalyn blush.

They stayed the night in the home of a favorite instructor. Thessalyn remembered the school grounds and surrounding town well enough to walk them almost as though she could see. She took Gerard to several favorite spots and introduced him to so many enthusiastic scholars that departure the next morning was almost a relief. He kissed her good-bye, told her to enjoy herself and he would see her again soon. Then he started a leisurely journey back to the Fang with Alsair. Gerard did a little recruiting in one of Mance's small towns. He thought he'd managed to generate some interest with a number of educated shelts and encouraged them to visit the docks the next day or to apply in Lecklock within the next few months.

He got back to the Fang late on the second day after he'd left and went to ask Silveo how long they would be in port, so that he would know what to tell the shelts he was recruiting. Silveo, however, was not in his cabin, and Gerard noticed that the ship was unusually quiet and tense. Upon questioning Farell, he learned that Silveo, who never spent the night ashore, had disappeared two days ago.

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