

The illustration is at the end this time to avoid spoilers.

The Guild of the Cowry Catchers

Book 1. Embers

Episode 11

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Chapter 31. Missing

Selkies are seal shelts. There are several subspecies, but they are all secretive and have as little to do with fauns and panauns as possible. They avoid the wyvern-infested waters of Wefrivain, even though its islands and reefs make good habitat for them. Harbor masters love to enslave selkies. They can speak, and they are very intelligent, so they are more useful than cowry catchers. Panaun sailors say that selkies have tasty meat, and their skins make good waterproof clothing.

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

Silveo had left a few hours after Thessalyn and Gerard. He'd been dressed in blue and white linen with only one set of earrings—quiet by his standards. He'd exchanged a few comments with the sailors on deck. One had ventured to ask where he was going, and he'd been heard to respond, "Looking for trouble." He had not come back to the ship that night. It was now after dark of the second day, and he'd still not returned. No one, including Farell or his ship's boy, knew where he'd gone.

Gerard had served with Silveo long enough to know that this was highly unusual behavior. Silveo considered the Fang his home and never slept ashore unless some urgent need

required it. In spite of Silveo's take-no-prisoners policy, there were still many shelts in Wefrivain who had reason to hate him, and of course there was always the Resistance. It was the general opinion aboard ship that he was probably dead. He'd already survived far longer than most admirals of the Temple Sea Watch.

"Skipper's finally run into more trouble than he has knives," muttered a sailor on deck. "S'pity. He was a good skipper, for all he was a foxling and a dock rat."

The sailors had lit more torches on deck than was customary. They should have been in town enjoying themselves, but mostly they weren't. They weren't singing or dancing, either. They weren't playing flutes or fiddles or carving or scribbling letters. They were just waiting. Gerard paced the deck of the Fang as the night grew later. He felt as though he should be doing something, but he didn't know what. He could tell that Alsair wanted to say "good riddance," but Gerard's manner must have made him think better of it, because he went off to their cabin without saying anything.

Gerard racked his brain, trying to think of where Silveo might have gone looking for trouble. They had no reason to think Gwain was on Mance. As far as Gerard knew, Silveo did not know of any suspicious persons on Mance. *But Silveo knew all kinds of things he didn't tell me.*

There's nothing I can do, thought Gerard. *I should go to bed.* But he didn't. One by one, the sailors left the deck, all except the night watch. Around midnight Gerard climbed into the maintop and found Farell there alone, looking out over the lights of the city. Gerard leaned against the mast beside him.

They were quiet for a long time. Finally Gerard said, "Where would he go, Farell? You were his lover; surely you have some idea."

Farell laughed bitterly. “I’ll tell you a secret about our admiral, Gerard. I’ve been sailing with him since he came to the Watch. I’m not saying Silveo doesn’t have his frisky moments, but mostly what he wants from a ‘lover’ is a warm body to curl up against at night. He has horrific nightmares when he sleeps alone. Sometimes he just wants someone in the room—a nightlight, another set of ears to hear an assassin’s footfall. He’ll give what he thinks he needs to give to get that, but nothing more.”

Gerard remembered something Thessalyn had said. *It’s just the price he thinks he has to pay.*

“I don’t ask anything of him,” continued Farell. “I don’t even like boys, but I’ll keep him company. He’s gone away and come back to me several times. I have known shelts to leave him out of boredom, but that doesn’t usually happen because he takes good care of his bed warmers. I have a son on a merchant ship; Silveo got him an excellent position. I’d be a friend if he’d let me, but Silveo doesn’t want friends. He doesn’t like it when shelts get attached, and he fears being an nuisance. He changes his lovers like other shelts change bed linen, but he’s not nearly as busy as he likes the sailors to think.”

Farell paused. “If he comes back, please don’t tell him I said any of this. He’d kill me. I mean, he really might. Silveo values his legend; he guards it.”

“Why *are* you telling me?” asked Gerard.

Farell turned to look at him in the moonlight, his expression almost envious. “He *trusts* you. Silveo doesn’t trust anyone. I mean, no one, Gerard. He has followers and audiences and the occasional real lover; he does not have friends. But the way he behaves with you and your wife—that’s the closest I’ve ever seen him. You probably know him better than I do, and if anyone can figure out where he’s gone, it’s you.”

Gerard felt sad and ill. *This is not helping me, Farell.*

He went off to bed in the last watch of the night. Alsair stirred and yawned as he came in.

“Has he come back?”

Gerard shook his head. He lay down on the bed fully clothed. Alsair sighed. He hopped up on the bed, making it creak dangerously. He rested his head and one paw on Gerard’s chest. “He was a mean, unscrupulous, dishonorable tyrant who only kept you around because you were useful and hard to kill. You’re making him into something he wasn’t, Gerard, because you’re lonely, and you’re already missing Thess.”

Gerard shook his head.

Alsair nuzzled his cheek. “Alright, so disagree with me. Say something. Talk to me.”

“I’m thinking.”

“About what?”

“Where would he go?”

“A brothel?” suggested Alsair.

Gerard shook his head. “Silveo doesn’t patronize brothels.” He’d never thought about it, but it was true. After what Farell had said and knowing Silveo’s background, Gerard doubted that any of Silveo’s relationships were actually coercive, at least as Silveo saw them.

“Looking for trouble,” muttered Gerard. “What does that mean?”

Alsair snorted. “From Silveo? Not much.”

Gerard sat up and looked at him. “You’re right.”

Alsair seemed confused. “What—?”

Gerard drew a deep breath. “What if he wasn’t looking for trouble? What if he just said that to be silly?” The more Gerard thought about it, the more he knew he was right. It was

exactly the sort of thing Silveo would say when it wasn't true. It was the kind of thing that he would *not* have said if it was true. Gerard lay back down. *Where would Silveo go if he was just out to stretch his legs, out for amusement?*

Chapter 32. Final Warning

We are told that wyverns protect us from wizards and shape shifters, but where are these monsters? They appear as nothing but legends in old ballads. No living person has seen such a creature, because they do not exist.

--Gwain, *The Truth About Wyverns*

Gerard woke with the answer. He sat straight up, knocking his chin against Alsair's beak. "Clothes or books!"

Alsair growled and pricked Gerard with his claws, but Gerard shoved the paw off his chest and got up. "Mance is famous for books. Gwain and Silveo both like books. I don't know why I didn't see it earlier."

He strode out of the cabin rubbing his eyes and running his fingers through his hair. The sun had just risen, and the harbor was a sea of mist. Gerard had been on Mance several times briefly when he was a Watch master. He'd been here a little longer on his coming-of-age tour, and he had a vague memory of Scrivener's Way—the area of Solamade best known for books. It was on the far side of town, a long walk from the docks. He had to ask several shelts how to get there, but he did arrive about midmorning. The district was large, full of book shops and items related to the making and maintenance of books.

Gerard bought some food from a street vendor, consumed it in a few bites, and started looking through the shops. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, only that he would know when he found it. About noon, he stepped into a shop that specialized in old books. Gerard walked along the shelves, scanning the authors and titles. When he came to the back of the store, he turned and saw something in a chink between the wall and a bookcase. It was just a glimmer

of metal, but Gerard had sharp eyes. After glancing around to make sure no one was watching, he unsheathed his sword and used it to lever the item out of its crevice.

It was a throwing knife—a very plain specimen. Gerard had no way of proving that it belonged to Silveo, except that his gut told him it did. Silveo owned every conceivable kind of throwing knife, and he lost and replaced them regularly. He had a few “shiny” knives, but he only pulled them out when he was seeking to impress. Gerard re-sheathed his sword and tucked the knife into his boot sheath.

He looked again at the chink. In order to have landed there, the knife had to have been thrown from the very back wall. *Did someone corner you here, Silveo?*

He stalked around the bookshop several times. He thought he saw scratches on one wall that could have come from a knife glancing off, and he found stains on the stone in one place that could have been blood. Of course, the scratches could have come from a piece of furniture, and the stains could have come from almost anything. *I wish I had your nose, Silveo.*

A grishnard clerk sat at the desk near the bookstore’s entrance, reading. She looked up as Gerard leaned over the desk. “Was there a foxling in here any time in the last few days?”

The clerk shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve only been here today.”

“Who was here yesterday? And the day before?”

She inched away from him. “Just another girl. We don’t own the bookstore. We just work here.”

“Who owns it?” asked Gerard. He realized he was being menacing, and he didn’t care.

“Marsh and Fin,” said the clerk. “They own all the stores on this block.” She stood and took a step back. “Now I have to close for the afternoon. Please leave.”

Gerard leaned over the desk and collared her with one hand. “What have you done with him?” he snarled.

The girl looked truly frightened. “I-I-I don’t know what you’re talking about, sir. Please let go of me. I’ll scream.”

Gerard released her in disgust and stalked out of the bookstore. None of the others were closing. He proceeded down the entire block, asking every clerk whether they’d seen a foxling. One admitted that he might have seen him two days ago. “He has silver-white fur and hair,” said Gerard in annoyance. “How many silver foxlings do you get through these shops?” Several shop owners on other streets positively admitted to having seen Silveo. One said he’d sold Silveo a book—something about Maijha Minor.

Gerard stopped in the late afternoon to eat. *Silveo is probably dead. They’ve probably dumped him in the harbor by now. I’ll be lucky to even find his body.*

A half watch later, most of the shops started closing. Lanterns were lit in the streets. Gerard had noticed a few urchins and vagrants during the day, but with nightfall, he began to see more. *This is not a good part of town after dark. I should go back to the ship. Maybe he’s even there.*

But he kept walking up and down the streets. Once or twice, he thought someone was following him, but when he turned to confront the culprits, they disappeared. Gerard wished he’d brought Alsair. He was just thinking that he *really* should go back to the ship when he saw a shadow drop from the roof of a building and duck into a stairwell. The shape had been black without a hint of white, but the profile had seemed familiar. Gerard picked up his pace and almost ran to the spot where the shadow had vanished.

Gerard peered into the recess of the alcove. At first he saw nothing but then he thought he saw a shape huddled in the far corner. “Silveo?”

Nothing. Gerard wondered whether his straining eyes had deceived him. He also thought that if it really was Silveo and he was frightened, he might try to kill any intruder. Gerard would make an easy target, outlined against the lantern light from the street.

Still, he came on into the small space. He crouched down a few paces from whatever was huddled in the corner. The creature opened its eyes, and Gerard saw the light reflected off them—pale blue. He gave a sigh of relief. “Silveo. What happened to you?”

Silveo coughed. “Gerard,” he grated with every sign of annoyance. “I would have thought you’d have taken over the Fang and sailed for Maijha Minor by now.”

Surely you know me better than that. Watching him, Gerard guessed two things: he was unarmed and hurt. Gerard doubted that Silveo trusted anyone under those circumstances.

“I’ve been looking through these shops all day,” said Gerard. “I thought my friend might have gotten himself into trouble.”

Silveo closed his eyes. “Then you’d better go find him.”

“Can you walk?”

“Of course, I can walk,” said Silveo without moving.

“What can I do to help?”

“You can shut up and go back to the Fang,” snarled Silveo, pulling himself up against the wall.

Gerard said nothing.

“The correct answer, Gerard, is ‘yes, sir.’”

“Yes, sir,” said Gerard and waited.

Silveo stood there for a moment and caught his breath. Finally, he turned a little unsteadily and made his way out of the alcove, one hand on the wall. Gerard stood to let him pass and then came out behind him. He realized then why Silveo was black. He was covered in soot.

“Were you up a chimney?” asked Gerard.

“No,” he snapped, “I thought if a little kohl is good, why not bathe in it?”

They proceeded for a distance in silence. Periodically Silveo would stop and crouch down against the side of a building. Gerard watched to make sure they were not attacked. The third time it happened, he heard a soft whimper.

“Silveo, what’s wrong? Please, let me help.”

Silveo shook his head. He got to his feet again, carefully, as though he were treading on shards of glass. “Thirsty,” he said softly.

Gerard handed him his half empty water skin. Silveo drank it as though he’d never seen water before and then sat down on a doorstep. He buried his face in his arms and rocked back and forth. Finally, he raised his head, his pale eyes almost white in the moonlight. “Gerard, you should not have come looking for me.”

Gerard sat down beside him. “You’re probably right. You usually are. Do you want me to find some more water?”

Silveo shook his head. “I’m going to say this slowly so that you can follow along: don’t trust me. Please.”

“Are we back to this again?”

“Yes!” Silveo seemed to be searching for words. “I have been living with myself for quite a while, and I know me better than you do.”

Gerard flicked his tail—an impatient, cat-like gesture. “Oh, so you have some plan to dispose of me? Been working on it, have you?”

“No! I don’t. But I’ve killed shelts before whom I liked because they were in my way or I thought they jeopardized my survival. I *survive*, Gerard; that’s what I do.”

“And you’re doing such a good job of it this evening.”

Silveo ignored that. “You are just not vicious enough to do the job you’ve been hired for. The Priestess is...” He bit back whatever he’d been going to say. “There is still time. Take Thessalyn and get out of here. Go anywhere—out of Wefrivain, to the Lawless Lands, to the Pentalons—away from her, away from me.”

Gerard crouched down in front of him. “Silveo, you’re tired. You’re hungry. And no matter what you say, I think you’re hurt. You’re babbling, and that’s really not like you.”

Silveo looked at him, then gave a great sigh. He started to say something else and then didn’t.

“At this pace, we’ll be all night getting back to the ship,” continued Gerard. “I think whoever tried to kill you may still be looking. If you would let me carry you, we could cover ground a lot faster.”

The idea was practical, and Silveo was pragmatic if he was anything. Still, he had a collection of very impractical phobias. On impulse, Gerard reached into his boot and pulled out the throwing knife. He handed it to Silveo. “There. You’re armed. You’re not helpless. You can stab me if you need to. Now will you let me pick you up?”

Silveo looked at the knife. For one second, Gerard thought he might actually cry. “I’ll ruin your coat,” he said faintly.

You would think of the coat! Gerard bent forward and scooped him up. Silveo trembled once and then he was still. Gerard shifted him so that Silveo's head was against his shoulder. It was like carrying Alsair as a cub; he weighed less than Thessalyn. Gerard had to loop his tail over one arm to keep it from dragging. Then he started off at a brisk pace.

"Don't carry me onto the ship," whispered Silveo.

"I won't." Silveo might lose respect with the sailors if they thought Gerard had gone out and rescued him. *It wouldn't even be true. I'm almost sure he would have made it back without me.*

"Poisoned," said Silveo after a moment. "Muscles keep cramping."

"I figured. You're not bleeding, though?"

Silveo shook his head.

They walked for a long time in silence, and at last Gerard realized that he'd gone to sleep. *Do you feel safe now, Silveo?* Every now and then, he'd twitch and whimper, but he never really woke until they were back to the docks. Gerard considered wrapping Silveo in his coat and carrying him onto the ship that way, but he knew the sailors would figure that out unless he was very lucky about who was on duty.

While he was trying to decide, Silveo stirred and raised his head. He sniffed the air. "Put me down, Gerard."

Gerard did, but he thought for a moment Silveo wouldn't let go of him. Then Silveo straightened up and walked away. Gerard peered around the side of the building. Silveo didn't flinch or crouch as he approached the Fang, and he called a greeting in a normal voice to the sailor on watch. He must have made a joke as he came up the gangplank, because Gerard heard the sailor laugh—a relieved sound.

Gerard waited a quarter watch. He took his coat off so that no one would see the soot on it and then went aboard just before dawn. Later, he would remember the incident as the last time Silveo tried to warn him, and he wished bitterly that he had listened.

END BOOK 1

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