



The Guild of the Cowry Catchers

Book 1. Embers

Episode 8

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Chapter 22. A Local Guide

The Small Kingdoms of Wefrivain survive by being too distant and too unimportant for the Great Islands to want them. Their rulers know this and keep a careful distance from greater island politics. Even the Priestess often takes only a passing interest in the Small Kingdoms, allowing their own local deities to control events, meddling as much or as little as they wish.

--Gwain, *The Truth About Wyverns*

Gerard thought for a moment that he and Alsair would die before they even started looking for the buoys. The wind punched them back and forth like an unseen fist. Gerard had been riding Alsair without a saddle harness for years, but in this weather they should have had one. Alsair flipped once in spite of his best efforts, but he managed to right himself before Gerard lost his grip. Below them, the waves heaved like migrating mountains, lit by strobe lightning.

Gerard caught sight of the ship Alsair had mentioned—a boat about half the size of the Fang, its hull almost upside down now. It was caught on the reef, only visible in the troughs of the waves. It was definitely a fresh wreck. Gerard doubted any of it would be there by morning.

The way the hull was appearing and disappearing gave Gerard an idea. He leaned close to Alsair's ear and bellowed. "Get lower! Follow along in the troughs."

Gerard had not been seasick in years, but their unsteady dive brought the bile into his mouth. Almost, Alsair hit the water. He gained just enough height to escape the crest of the wave; then they were flying low along the trough. Gerard strained his eyes down the line of it. *There!*

He saw the yellow painted shape in a flash of lightning just before a wave swallowed it. "I saw it!" he shouted and Alsair nodded. The wave passed, and Gerard spotted it again. This time, he saw the other one further on. Gerard looked back towards the Fang. They weren't too far off course. There was still time to get it right.

Alsair screamed in his eagle's voice—a sound that cut through the storm and nearly deafened Gerard. *Silveo, please know what that means.*

He must have, because the next instant, the ship began to turn. Gerard could see the sailors trimming the sail, angling towards the place where Alsair was circling over the waves. He watched as the ship came on, her tattered sail straining. Below, in the waves, Gerard thought he saw something flash beside the buoy—an iridescent streak that glimmered and was gone. *I'll be watching you, Gerard.* He shut his eyes and hung onto Alsair, shivering in the cold rain.

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The storm blew itself out by morning. Gerard went off to bed just as light began to gleam across the water from under the clouds. He woke sometime later to a strangely level cabin. Alsair was sleeping against one wall, and Thessalyn had her head on his shoulder. *The way it should be,* thought Gerard. He didn't move for a while, enjoying the peace and quiet. They were still in Silveo's cabin, and he could see light shining from under the door of the inner office.

At last, he got up quietly, without waking Thessalyn. He threw on the driest of his clothes—damp and smelling faintly of mildew—and padded out the door into the inner office. Silveo was sitting on his map table, reading. He was wearing serviceable linen in bizarre shades of orange and lavender. Gerard laughed. He stopped immediately when Silveo looked up, one eyebrow raised. “Something amuses you?”

Gerard was thinking about the first time he’d walked in here and seen Silveo in ordinary sailcloth. “I just figured out why you dress like that.”

Silveo’s eyebrows rose even higher, and he shut his book. “It’s not complicated. I like shinies. As an added bonus, I get to make shelts like you uncomfortable.”

Gerard shook his head. “You never do anything for only one reason.”

“Well, that would be terribly inefficient.”

“Shelts who have never seen you before, never even seen a drawing—they all know what you look like. They at least know you dress like a—” Gerard decided to rephrase.

Silveo smiled sweetly. “Like a *what*, Gerard?”

Gerard tried not to squirm. “Flamboyantly.”

“Somehow I don’t think that’s what you were going to say.”

“What I mean is, when you do decide to wear ordinary clothes, you’re practically invisible. When you don’t want to be recognized, all you need is sailcloth and no kohl. It doesn’t even matter that you’re a rare panaun in an unusual color. Shelts don’t see that. They only see the shinies.”

Silveo smirked. He hopped down from the table. “Well, you’re starting to think, but you’re still mostly just pretty. I found three kids on griffins circling the ship this morning asking if we needed a local guide, but I’ve got one, don’t I?” He pointed to the table. “I have half a

dozen maps there, all of them significantly different. Pick the best one and meet me up on the quarterdeck after you've removed that creature from my bedchamber."

"Thessalyn?" asked Gerard innocently.

Silveo scowled. "You know what I mean. Keep it out of my sight and I'll try not to shoot it."

Gerard sighed. "Would it matter if he apologized?"

"What do you think?"

"He saved the ship last night."

"*You* saved the ship last night," said Silveo and stalked out the door.

An eighth watch later, Gerard was standing with Silveo and Farell on the quarterdeck, holding three maps. "Well, you're right that none of them are very good," he told Silveo. "It depends on where you want to go which you should use."

"We need a port," said Silveo. "We couldn't keep up with the leak last night, and all the slaves drowned. We've got no rowers and not enough spars left to hold up a decent set of sails."

Gerard winced. Normally he tried not to think about the slaves, because there was nothing he could do about them. "Did no one think of letting them out?"

"What, so they could kill us all?" asked Silveo. "Besides we were too busy trying to get over that reef. No one even knew they were underwater until they were dead. I'll be happy to give you an oar if you want to do penance."

Gerard decided it was too late to have this argument. "I suggest Malabar as a port." He spread a vellum map in his hands and pointed to one spot. "This one shows the area of our location fairly accurately."

Silveo studied it. "Looks to me like we're just as close to Holovarus as Malabar."

“Perhaps.” Gerard had been hoping he wouldn’t notice.

Silveo grinned up at him. “You want to lie, but you just can’t, can you?”

“I repeat,” said Gerard. “I think we should go to Malabar. I do not want to go to Holovarus.”

“I know,” said Silveo. “That’s probably why I do.”

Gerard’s tail lashed. He wanted to say a lot of things and didn’t know how to phrase them. “Silveo, please.”

Silveo’s pale eyes glittered through his kohl. “Oh, we are definitely going. Now stop looking wretched and make yourself useful. As long as that creature is here, you might as well use it to fly over to Malabar and get us some decent food. Everything in the hold is wet, and nearly all the jars are broken. I spent enough of my life eating bad food; I refuse to do it aboard my own ship. Be a good guide, Gerard, and go find us some local cuisine.”

Chapter 23. A Debate about Choices

Wyverns are poisonous. Curiously, first exposure causes only mild illness, while a second bite is nearly always fatal. A few old stories make reference to an antidote, but if such ever existed, its source has been carefully expunged from all records by the wyverns and their servants.

--Gwain, *The Truth About Wyverns*

Gerard left a quarter watch later. He had been wanting some time alone with Alsair, and this seemed as good an opportunity as any. Before he left, he took stock of his meager followers. Apparently, the oldest of his wardens had been swept overboard in the storm. No one was sure how or when. Three shelts from the Fang had vanished, two of them experienced sailors, so the loss of his ancient warden was no surprise, but it did make Gerard feel guilty. *I should never have brought them. Silveo was right; I should retire them all.* The drunk was turning out to be a very unsatisfactory sailor, and the youngster was hurt so badly that he wouldn't be able to use his arm for a red month. Marlo, on the other hand, appeared to be thriving. He had no expertise on ships, but he had learned quickly and he was amiable enough to make the sailors like him. Gerard intended to make him his permanent secretary as soon as he had anything worth keeping track of.

Alsair said very little as they left the ship. He was wearing a light harness that Gerard had made out of rope. When they passed the little knoll that was Malabar-3, Gerard told him to stop. Alsair circled reluctantly. "Why? There's nothing down there."

"I want to talk to you." *I don't want anyone else around, and I want to be able to look you in the face.*

"I shouldn't have done it," said Alsair. "I won't do it again. Can we forget about it?"

“No,” said Gerard. “Please land.”

Sea grass was whipping in the salt breeze. Fluffy clouds raced overhead. It was a day like Gerard remembered from his childhood—the kind of day he’d spent exploring these little islands with Alsair. Gerard got down and walked around in front of the griffin. “Alsair, how could you?”

Alsair met his eyes with a hint of defiance. He didn’t look sorry, only sullen. “How could I catch a street brat? Easier than catching rabbits, actually.”

Gerard couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “He was a *child*, Alsair!”

“Things like *that* turn into things like *him*, Gerard.”

“Only when they have encounters with things like *you!*” Gerard fairly bellowed.

“I wish I’d saved the tail,” said Alsair nastily.

Gerard cuffed his ear. “Are you even listening to me? I find your behavior horrific and unacceptable!”

“I’m not an extension of you!” shot Alsair. He was actually bristling now and nearly screaming. “I’m not bound by your honor, Gerard!”

Gerard stepped back. “I should never have brought you from Holovarus. I wonder if father would take you back.”

“Silveo is still saying he intends to kill you, isn’t he?” snarled Alsair. “Has he retracted that threat? Tell me he has, Gerard, and I’ll take back everything I just said. I’ll apologize in public.”

Gerard said nothing.

“No,” said Alsair, “he hasn’t. He’s told you over and over again that he’s going to stab you in the back. If you don’t believe me, believe him! I have never scrupled to kill for you, Gerard, but I will not stand by and watch you die. Please—” His voice broke. “You are too

trusting. You and Thessalyn both—you think any shelt can be made into a friend and ally. It's just not true."

Gerard shut his eyes. "Alsair—"

"I won't go back to Holovarus! I belong with you, Gerard. I belong *to* you. Either forgive me or kill me. You'll never stop me from following you, and I won't stop trying to protect you."

Gerard could feel tears stinging his eyes. He pulled Alsair towards him and cradled the griffin's head in his arms. *What am I going to do with you?* "I forgive you. I already forgave you. It's just—" He was not satisfied, but he didn't know what else to say. They stood like that for a long time, and Gerard thought of all the days that he'd spent on these islands with this friend. *He and I were closer than Jaleel and I ever could be.*

At last, he let go. "Will you trust me enough to let me make my own decisions? Unless you see me in actual physical danger?"

"I'll try," whispered Alsair. They lay in the sea grass for a while and watched the clouds. Then they flew on to Malabar.

Silveo had not overstated the damage to the Fang. They were limping so badly that it took three days to make what should have been a half day journey to Holovarus. Thessalyn sat on deck every evening and played her harp in the sweet, clear air, and they feasted on indigo duck and jackfruit and plum wine from the Small Kingdoms.

Gerard could not tell what Thessalyn thought about returning to the place where she'd lost a baby. She was quiet, and he did not press. Gerard wondered what would happen if Thessalyn herself begged Silveo not to go to Holovarus. He almost asked her to, but decided it wasn't his business. Silveo talked to Thessalyn often during meals and in the afternoons. If she wanted to ask him such a thing, she would do it on her own.

Gerard didn't know whether Silveo and Farell had had a fight or whether Silveo had just gotten bored, but he'd clearly taken up with one of the ship's boys. Gerard came in on the morning of the third day after the storm to discuss navigation of the reef around Holovarus and caught the youngster slinking out.

Silveo came out of his bedroom yawning, still in his nightshirt. "Is he flavor of the month?" asked Gerard as the door closed behind the boy.

"Mm-hmm."

Gerard frowned.

Silveo opened his coat closet—a huge affair intended to hold much more than coats. He went in and started to get dressed. "Did you have a point, or were you just making noise to hear yourself echo?"

Gerard was lost for words. "He doesn't have a choice. Doesn't that bother you?"

Silveo made an indignant huff. "Have you noticed I'm a foxling? You think he can't fend me off?"

"You're his admiral," said Gerard. "He's got to be all of fourteen, Silveo."

Silveo stuck his head out of the closet abruptly. "And I was all of six," he spat. Gerard realized he'd inadvertently crossed a line. Silveo stalked out of the closet glaring. "He's old enough to say yes, and I'm not hurting him. Besides, you seem to be suffering from your perennial illusion that I'm a nice person. I'm not! Now get over there and draw me some reef lines."

Gerard obeyed. Silveo still seemed miffed. "How old was Thessalyn the first time you 'got lost' on a walk, oh honorable one? How much choice do you think she had? You were her boss's eldest! You were her prince!"

Seventeen, thought Gerard. *She was seventeen, but that was different. I actually cared about her. I gave up everything for her.* “I love Thess,” said Gerard aloud. “She’s my friend. I think to you, sex and friendship are mutually exclusive.”

Silveo’s ears flicked back. “Wyverns preserve us,” he said with as much sarcasm as he could cram into a sentence. “I’m all upside down and backwards. Poor Silveo. Are you volunteering to fix me, Gerard? No? Then shut up; I’m tired of this conversation.”

Gerard mentioned the episode to Thessalyn that night.

She nodded. “I don’t think sex means anything at all to Silveo.”

“Well, that’s obvious,” muttered Gerard.

Thessalyn shook her head. “Not in the way you think. I mean that to him, sex is just the price he has to pay for...I’m not sure—comfort, security, reassurance. Silveo wants more than anything to feel safe, and he *never* feels safe, Gerard. I think the closest he comes is when he’s with us.”

That made Gerard laugh. “Thess, you see good in everyone, even when it’s not there.”

“Not true. I just think it’s never too late for anyone.”

“Doesn’t it bother you that he’s cruel to all kinds of shelts?”

“Cruelty always bothers me, Gerard. Pain always bothers me. I fix it whenever I can reach it.”

He stroked her head. “You’re better at picking your battles than I am.”

“Comes of being blind and female,” she said.

That made him think of something else. “Thess, did you feel like you had a choice when you made love to me the first time? Or when you married me?”

“Hmm.” He could feel her frown against his neck. “Did I have a choice? I suppose it would be easier to answer that question if I hadn’t been madly in love with you.”

Her response didn’t make Gerard feel any better. It occurred to him that Silveo and Thessalyn had both grown up in the lower echelons of society—a place that was foreign to him.

Thessalyn broke into his thoughts. “Silveo doesn’t think anyone has any real choices—or not many, at least. He thinks maybe shelts like you have a few choices, although he’s skeptical.”

“But you don’t think that, do you?” persisted Gerard. “I mean, I didn’t make you feel that way...did I?”

“You make me feel alive,” said Thessalyn, hugging him tight. “You make me feel like I can fly, like I can see, like I can walk on water. Please don’t be sorry for loving me, Gerard.”

Chapter 24. Port Holovarus

The so-called winged wolves of Maijha Minor are not wolves, nor are they quadropedavia—creatures with four legs and two wings. They are sometimes called blood bats, and this is perhaps a more accurate, as they do live exclusively on blood. The creatures can grow nearly as tall as a shelt's waist, and they have a long fifth toe, which folds upwards when they are running along the ground. A thick flap of skin connects this toe to a point near their hips, forming a "wing." Although they prefer to glide for short distances, they are capable of true flight, via a double-jointed shoulder that allows them to lock the wing in place. They can speak, but have no shelts as far back as history and their own legends record. They are shy and secretive and usually live in large colonies in the cliffs of Maijha Minor.

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

They arrived in Port Holovarus on the fourth morning after the storm. The little bay looked smaller than Gerard remembered it—the castle, just visible on the hilltop, grayer. He doubted that the port had ever seen a ship the size of the Fang. Peasants in their fishing boats stood to gawk as Farell maneuvered in around the reef. Gerard knew almost all of them. He doubted he could avoid being recognized, so he didn't try.

They anchored well out from the shallow edges of the bay and waited. Several of the fishing boats came up cautiously to learn the identity of their visitor. It didn't take long for an official sloop to put off from the pier and come gliding over the water towards them. Gerard could feel a knot in his belly. He'd never wanted to come back here. He glanced at Silveo up on the quarterdeck. *This is a fine way to repay me for saving the ship!*

The knot in his belly turned to ice when he saw the first shelt over the side. *Jaleel.*

“Gerard!” cried the other. “Come home at last, have you? With your tail between your legs, I hope.”

Gerard said nothing. His hand was itching for his sword.

“I hope you didn’t bring that whore with you,” continued Jaleel. He was a little shorter than Gerard with the same large dark eyes, but lighter hair.

Silveo came strolling down from the quarterdeck at that moment, wearing his most dangerous smile. “I don’t usually let shelts call me that on my own ship,” he said cheerfully. “In fact, come to think of it, I use shelts who call me that as fishing weights.”

Gerard glanced at him. For Silveo to willingly own an insult intended for Thessalyn made him feel absurdly grateful.

Jaleel blanched. “S-sir,” he stammered, “I didn’t mean— I meant—”

“You doubtless have confused us with another ship,” continued Silveo. “As anxious as you may be for whores, we are not that kind of merchant. In fact, we’re not a merchant at all. As any fool who didn’t grow up in a wyvern-forsaken backwater could see, this is the Fang of the Temple Sea Watch, and we are in need of supplies. Please go tell your harbor master that my quartermaster will wait upon him shortly, and if your king isn’t a complete fool he might think of inviting us to dinner. Now get off my ship.”

Jaleel tried again to apologize, but Silveo had already turned and stalked away. “Is he still talking?” he said loudly to Farell. “Someone go toss him overboard.”

The sloop departed in some haste, and Gerard watched them sail away. Silveo was grinning from ear to ear. “Your brother?” he asked Gerard.

“My brother,” said Gerard with a faint smile.

“Charming.” Silveo was positively gleeful. “Did you see the color he turned when I came down on deck?”

“I saw,” said Gerard, who was beginning to realize that Silveo’s purpose in coming here might not have been to torment him after all.

“Is your father anything like you at all, Gerard?”

Gerard thought for a moment. “He looks like me.”

Alsair piped up behind him. “Yeah, but *you’re* not a total bastard.”

“A good point,” said Silveo.

It was all Gerard could do to keep from gaping. *You just said something to Alsair! You never say anything to Alsair!* Gerard licked his lips. “My father only thinks in terms of what’s good for Holovarus. Usually that means cowries, but sometimes other things. Public relations, appearances—”

“Marriages,” supplied Silveo.

Gerard nodded.

“Good enough. He’ll invite us to dinner. He’ll have to. It would look terrible otherwise.”

Silveo walked off to his cabin humming.

Chapter 25. Shinies and Lord Holovar

Zeds are zebra shelts, and evidence suggests that they are not long-time residents of Wefrivain at all, but were imported from the Lawless Lands for hunting on Maijha Minor. They have some traits in common with the hunti, including a female-dominated warrior culture. Of all the creatures living on Maijha Minor, the zeds seem to embrace their predicament most readily. They regard themselves as hunters of grishnards, rather than game animals.

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

Silveo reappeared half a watch later dressed in his zed-skin pants and frilly, white silk shirt. He wore a red felt hat with a monstrous canary yellow plume, a pegasus-skin cape of brilliant purple and gold feathers, and his bright yellow boots. He had three earrings in one ear and five in the other, in a variety of shapes and colors. He'd braided tiny golden bells on golden thread into his tail and re-kohled his eyes so that the pale blue irises flashed in the fading light.

Gerard stared at him. Silveo grinned back. "Do I look like a more expensive version of something from the pleasure districts of Sern?"

"I wouldn't have said it that way."

"No, of course you wouldn't. You would have just grimaced and given me that *look*."

"What look?" asked Gerard, but Silveo only sniffed and flipped his tail.

Thessalyn had come cautiously up on deck to stand in the late afternoon sunlight. "Let me see," she said. Silveo let her fingers dance over his attire. Thessalyn giggled when she got to his earrings. "Silveo, this is a lot even for you."

"I know," he said. "I jingle every time I turn my head." He demonstrated. "And you didn't 'see' my tail. Listen." He waved it, and the bells rang merrily.

“Are you trying to annoy Lord Holovar?” asked Thessalyn.

“The lady is brilliant. I am trying to be completely shocking and offensive.”

“I think you’ll succeed,” said Gerard.

“Are you coming with us, Thess?” asked Silveo.

Thessalyn hesitated. “I—I’d rather not. Unless you really want me to.”

Silveo shook his head, earrings tinkling. “No, stay here. I will order something edible brought to your cabin and someone to read to you while you eat it. Or you can play and sing. Whatever suits. You don’t have to touch this island if you don’t want to.”

Alsair wanted to come, but Gerard shook his head. “Father will regard you as a weapon. I might as well walk in there with a drawn sword.”

“I *am* a weapon,” growled Alsair. “Weapons keep you safe.”

“Not when they’re seen as a threat. You’ll only end up in a fight with some of the other house griffins. There are lots of them and only one of you. Please honor what I told you earlier.”

A quarter watch later, a lantern-lit boat put out from the pier and glided towards them. Farell and his ten captains were all dressed in quieter clothes, ready for a formal dinner. “I’ll tell you something else about shinies,” said Silveo to Gerard while they waited. “I’m not just invisible when I’m *not* wearing them. I’m invisible even when I *am*.”

Gerard thought about that.

“I poisoned a shelt one time while he was looking right at me,” continued Silveo. “I was wearing these earrings, in fact, and he just couldn’t get his eyes off them. I reached over and dumped felbain in his glass, and he didn’t even notice.”

“You’re not planning on poisoning my father?” asked Gerard in some alarm.

“Probably not,” said Silveo. “What’s his name anyway?”

“Mishael. But no one ever calls him—”

He saw Silveo’s grin and shook his head. “He has a temper, Silveo. Be careful.”

“Does he have a wife?”

“Not unless a lot has changed. Mother died when we were young, and he never remarried.”

Something in Gerard’s voice must have betrayed him, because Silveo turned to look at him. There was a long pause, and then Silveo thumped his bells against the side of the ship.

“Very occasionally I am slow, but I do catch on in the end.”

You’re never slow, thought Gerard. You are annoyingly not slow.

“He wanted Thess, didn’t he?”

Gerard said nothing.

“Yes, yes,” Silveo continued. “No wonder he paid for her schooling—pretty, talented girl. He probably thought he’d bought her.”

Gerard scowled. He drew a deep breath. “Most minstrels are sons or daughters of great houses, and they marry well. Females of humble birth are in a tough position and often end up as court mistresses to some great lord.”

Silveo shrugged. “One could do worse than Lord Holovar.”

Gerard looked up at the night sky. *I loved her, and he didn’t. But you really don’t know what that means, do you?* “One day, I remember we were walking on the beach—he and Jaleel and I and several of his councilors. Thess had come, and she was trailing behind, feeling with her paws for shells, the way she likes to do. She was wearing an expensive gown, and it would trail in the sand every time she bent over to pick one up. My father saw her, told her to stop; the gown was too expensive to be doing that. She protested, and he hit her—casually across the face, the

way you might slap a dumb animal that was misbehaving.” *She looked so surprised, so lost, so hurt.*

Silveo’s eyes had narrowed to slits. Gerard couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Finally, he said, “Did he ever hit you?”

Gerard was taken a little off guard. “Sometimes—not often and never to wound. He would never have married Thess. That might have confused the succession. He would have cared for her children, of course, and for some girls that would have been enough. But Thess...symbols mean a lot to her, and being hit—”

“I know all about being hit,” snapped Silveo. He said nothing else for the rest of the ride to the peer.

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