



The Guild of the Cowry Catchers

Book 1. Embers

Episode 9

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Chapter 26. Thank You

The wyverns did something clever when they came to Wefrivain. They chose the largest, most aggressive shelt species in the islands and helped them subjugate all the other creatures. They made sure that the grishnards would control everyone else. Then all the wyverns had to do was control the grishnards.

--Gwain, *The Truth About Wyverns*

Servants had been sent to bring them up to the castle. Again, Gerard knew them all. They stared at him curiously, but when they saw Silveo, they almost forgot about Gerard. By the time they reached the end of the little harbor town and started up the castle hill, Gerard thought that half the population of Holovarus must have turned out to have a look.

“Embarrassed to be seen with me, Gerard?” asked Silveo, chiming with every step.

“No,” said Gerard and found that it was true. He didn’t belong on this island anymore.

The knowledge came as a shock and a relief.

Formally dressed servants met them at the castle entrance. They were too polite to stare, but they kept shooting little glances at Silveo out of the corners of their eyes. Lord Holovar was

waiting in the antechamber outside the dining hall. “Oh, look,” said Silveo softly, “it’s you in thirty years—if you live that long.”

Lord Holovar was slightly taller than Gerard. He had the hard profile of an active shelt, a face prematurely lined with sun and wind, and iron gray hair that had once been black. He was not the kind of person who smiled often. Gerard could feel his stomach knotting again. He felt as though he were twelve years old and being called in to account for mishandling of the island’s resources or neglect of some duty. Jaleel was standing slightly behind his father, looking sullen. He whispered something as they entered.

“Stop that,” snapped Silveo, and Gerard realized he’d been slapping Silveo on the back of the head with his own lashing tail. “Don’t fidget,” hissed Silveo. “Hold your head up, stay with me, and keep your mouth shut. If you must talk, remember that you are the captain of the Temple Police.”

He strode to the front of the group. “Mishael,” he said just as the king was opening his mouth to speak. “You have the honor of hosting the Temple Sea Watch and the Police this evening, and I’m sure you’re charmed. No doubt your little dining hall is delightful, but I have been on my ship for days and would like to stretch my legs first. May we have a tour of this...uh...fort...castle...whatever...first?” Silveo flipped his hand languidly as he spoke, jingling and glittering with every move.

Gerard watched his father, who was staring in open horror at Silveo. His mouth twitched. His teeth were fairly on edge as he said, “I take it you are admiral Lamire.”

Silveo yawned. “Yes, yes, my fame precedes me throughout the lesser kingdoms.”

Gerard forced himself not to smile. Silveo had hit a nerve. The lords of these little islands preferred “small kingdoms,” not “lesser,” and his father was prickly on the point.

Jaleel made a hiss, and the king's tail lashed once. "The food," said Mishael Holovar with studied calm, "will be cold if we do not proceed to dinner. I will be happy to take you on a tour after we have eaten. However, there is one point we must discuss first."

Silveo raised an eyebrow. "If the food congeals, I'm sure the servants can reheat it. They can probably re-poison it, too; I hope you didn't use anything expensive."

Jaleel made another little noise. "I can assure you that nothing you eat in my castle will be poisoned," said Lord Holovar.

"Good, good," said Silveo. "My Mistress takes a dim view of those who poison her servants. Now what was this point of yours?"

"My son," said Mishael Holovar, "is not welcome here unless he has come to apologize on his knees and make appropriate restitution. Otherwise, he is not to set foot on this island."

Gerard glanced sideways at Silveo. He remembered the advice Silveo had given him on the way to Sern. *Is this what you brought me here for, Silveo?*

Silveo twirled a bracelet. "It may be the practice of the lesser kingdoms to air family squabbles over dinner, but I find it very dull entertainment." He gestured at Jaleel. "If he has offended you, surely you can find another place to beat him into submission."

Lord Holovar's mouth hardened to a granite line. Gerard could tell he'd had just about enough. "I don't have to put up with his," he snarled. "Gerard, either get over here or get out. You were banished, and if you don't understand what that means, my guards will educate you." The castle guards dutifully stepped into view on either side of the room.

"Excuse me." Silveo's voice was still insipid, but Gerard saw that he was playing with a gold hilted throwing knife that had magically appeared in his hands. He was flipping it over and under his fingers. "I don't know what you're nattering on about, but let me assure you: if you

have another son besides that specimen behind you, he is not here. The Watch and the Police are here.” He jerked a finger at Gerard. “If you haven’t met our new captain of Police, then perhaps you should. I realize that news reaches these little forts rather slowly. Now I have a sudden, intense desire to see your library. Do take us there at once.”

Lord Holovar made a slight and very stiff bow. “I will humor your request against my better judgment. This way.”

Gerard heard Jaleel mutter nastily behind his father, “We’d hate to leave any of his sudden and intense desires unsatisfied.”

“Oh, I know you would,” cooed Silveo loudly. “Come see me when you’re old enough.”

Gerard rolled his eyes to the ceiling. *Silveo, he really might kill you if you keep this up.*

As they proceeded along the hall, Silveo dropped back a little and murmured, “We’re looking for Thess’s books. You did say she left them here, didn’t you?”

So that’s what this is about. “Yes,” said Gerard.

Silveo nodded. “Just go around and start pulling them out. I’ll handle your delightful family.”

“You’re making them very angry,” whispered Gerard. “My father really might try to throw us in the dungeon, and Jaleel really might try to stab you.”

Silveo nodded. “Gods, I hope so!” He was practically skipping. “Oh, just give me an excuse...!”

“I take it you don’t want me to apologize and foreswear Thess anymore.”

Silveo shook a knife at him. “You apologize, and I’ll hamstring you. Just keep your mouth shut.”

They reached the library, and Gerard began scanning the shelves. He knew his father might have sold or burned Thessalyn's books, but he doubted it. Mishael was not the sort of king to waste resources, and books were rare and valuable. At first he thought he might not remember the titles, but soon he spotted one and then another. *I ought to know them*, thought Gerard. *I read most of them to her.*

Behind him, Silveo was keeping up a banal chatter to his father, his brother, and an assortment of castle guards who'd trooped in behind. Gerard stopped suddenly. He was looking at a book called *The Non-grishnards of Wefrivain*. The author's name was Flag.

Gerard plucked the book off the shelf and leafed through it. He was sure he'd never seen it before, and he'd read every book in this library. He rounded on Jaleel. "Where did this come from?"

Jaleel stepped back, his jaw working at something Silveo had said. "What?" he snarled.

Gerard shook the book in his face. "This book was not here before I left. Where did it come from?"

Jaleel snatched the book, glanced at the title, and tossed it down on the table. He'd never had much use for books. "I have no idea. Perhaps that storm crow left it. He spent a few hours in the library."

"Storm crow?" repeated Gerard. It was what they called the shelts who washed up from wrecks.

"Shavier faun. He was here two days ago. Probably stranded by the same storm that ripped apart your precious ship."

Silveo spoke before Gerard could. "Did he have lenses?"

"Lenses and an ugly pet," said Jaleel. "A winged wolf."

Gerard and Silveo looked at each other. “He was here!” exclaimed Gerard.

“I told you there was an animal in that teahouse,” said Silveo. “Winged wolf. That sounds about right.”

Lord Holovar did not seem interested in discussions about their previous guest. He had walked over to the table and examined the pile of books Gerard was pulling down. When he turned back, his eyes were murderous. “You ungrateful, dishonorable whelp,” he snarled at Gerard. “So you’ve come to rob me? You think that just because you’ve made friends with some two cowry dock rat from the Sea Watch, you can come home and plunder my library for your peasant wife?”

Silveo was strolling along looking at the shelves behind Gerard. “Do I hear a yapping?” he asked. “Or perhaps it’s a squeaking—some small vermin amongst the books.”

Lord Holovar’s face had turned purple. “You and this mountebank have tried my patience long enough!” he roared. “Do you think I can’t take that half-broken hulk in the harbor? Do you think I can’t execute this rabble? You’re not my son, and you’re not under my protection.”

“Excuse me,” came Silveo’s voice, still sweet, but Gerard detected something boiling underneath. Lord Holovar turned. Silveo had hopped onto one of the reading tables, so that Lord Holovar had to look up at him.

“Get off that, you wretched squirrel. I should give you to my guards and let them treat you as what you look like.”

Silveo’s smile solidified, and his eyes turned as cold as glass marbles. When he spoke again, his voice had razor blades in it. “Let me explain something to you, Mishael: you are nothing. If you think you own this island, you’re a fool. If your god thinks he owns it, then he’s a fool, too. I know who owns every island in Wefrivain, and she’s my Mistress.

“If she finds you’ve injured or even threatened her servants, let me explain what she can do to you. Your neighbors consult their local deities for omens, signs, advice. If those deities tell them to go to war with you, they will. If the wyverns tell them not to trade with you, they’ll do that, too. My Mistress can strangle your little island, and that’s only the beginning.”

Silveo paced the length of the table. His tail had bristled until it was nearly as big as the rest of him. The bells had disappeared. “You may have heard what I did on Sern when I took over the Watch? She gave me that island like a newborn pegasus colt for the pots, and I took it to pieces. Eight years later, they’re still putting themselves back together. I happen to know she’s very pleased with her new captain of Police. If Gerard said, ‘Mistress, I’d like to burn Holovarus and sow it with salt,’ I’m sure she’d say, ‘Do you need any extra firewood, dear?’”

There was an echo of footfalls in the hall at that moment, and three frightened guards raced into the room. “Sire,” panted one, “four wyverns are circling the castle. What shall we do?”

Silveo’s eyes glittered. “I hear you’re fond of sacrificing royals around here. Perhaps the gods would like another. Shall we ask them, Mishael?”

Lord Holovar had gone gray. Gerard had never seen his father look like that before. Silveo slapped him hard across the face. Every guard in the room reached for his sword, but Lord Holovar reeled back and held up his hand. He did not raise his head or look at Silveo. He gave no order. The guards hesitated.

Silveo hissed. “Don’t you dare threaten me, you pathetic little king. I’ll take what I want when I want it. Now get out! I’ll ask for you if I want you. Get—out!”

Moments later, they were alone in the library. Silveo had sent Farell and his captains to eat. “No point wasting good food,” he told them. “Bring some back to the ship for us; I think we’ll be busy.”

Gerard cleared his throat. “Well, that was nasty.”

“Felt good, didn’t it?” Silveo was leafing through the book Gwain had left. He shook a finger at Gerard. “Don’t think I’m doing this for you.”

Gerard smiled and looked at the floor. “Of course you’re not.”

“I’m doing this because it amuses me.”

“And for Thessalyn.”

“Yes,” said Silveo, entirely willing to admit favors for Thessalyn. He gestured around the library. “Shall we take all of them? I suppose we could burn what we don’t want, but I’m not sure I can bear it. Burning books is just vile.”

Gerard shook his head. “Silveo, it’s so hard to get books out here. They’re at least two or three times more expensive than in the Great Islands. This collection is the work of at least six generations of Holovars. I don’t want to plunder his library. I really don’t. Let’s just take Thess’s books and go.”

Silveo shook his bells in annoyance. “Didn’t you hear what he said to you? What does it take to make you angry, Gerard?”

“Well, you’ve managed to do it a few times.”

“He killed your daughter.”

Gerard shut his eyes. He took a deep breath. “Hoepali—the local god—killed my daughter. My father did nothing to stop it, but it wasn’t his idea. I’m sure that no matter what he

says, he will feel guilty about it until the day he dies. This is enough, Silveo. I don't want to wreck Holovarus."

Silveo stared at him curiously. "What did you do to make the god so angry?"

Gerard shrugged. "He gave omens that I shouldn't marry Thess, and I defied him. I should never have asked for the omens, but she wanted me to." Gerard rubbed his eyes. *I don't want to talk about this, Silveo.*

For once, Silveo didn't press. "He was, mostly, a good father," said Gerard, trying to change the subject. "At least when I was young."

Silveo shrugged. "Well, he would have to be an improvement on my mother. Very well, then. We won't take all his books."

"Did you not have a father?" asked Gerard.

Silveo hopped down from the table. "I'm sure I did. Nearly everyone does."

Gerard smiled. "And your mother wasn't much of a mother?"

"Well, you said it before we left Lecklock."

Gerard took a second to process this. *You are a coward and a fool, still as much a dock rat as the day your mother sold you.* He groaned. "If I had believed for a moment—I am so sorry I said that, Silveo. I know words don't mean much to you, but—"

Silveo was grinning up at him. "It is so pathetically easy to make you squirm, Gerard. I keep thinking I'll get tired of it, but it's too much fun. Stop being sorry. Did Thess leave anything else she valued here?"

"Lots of pretty things that my father has probably sold." *And she loved shells and smooth stones and flower petals. I'm sure he dumped those out on the back step.* "Nearly all her clothes," said Gerard. "She had some glorious clothes."

“He made her leave her *clothes*?” exclaimed Silveo in horror. “Why didn’t you just take them?”

Gerard spread his hands. “We left in the middle of the night! I thought the god might ask for her next. We just scooped up what we could carry and ran.”

“And you ran to the *Temple Watch*.” Silveo shook his head.

Gerard shrugged. “It was the only honorable way out I could think of—the only thing that might put us beyond the reach of the gods.”

Silveo had started to sneer at the word honorable, but he stopped when Gerard finished. “Well, you’re not wrong there. If Morchella values you, no wyvern will touch you. You just might not like the price.”

Gerard felt suddenly cold. “How *did* you get those wyverns here?”

“A messenger came to the ship this morning. He wanted to know if we needed anything. I asked for a demonstration this evening.”

Gerard could feel himself bristling uncomfortably. He didn’t want to owe Morchella anything.

Chapter 27. The Meerkat

Maijha Minor is a strange place for all kinds of reasons. The keepers of the island claim to make the hunt fair by limiting the quality and type of weapons hunters can carry. Of course, this is mainly to limit the kinds of weapons the fauns get hold of. Their best weapon, however, is the island itself. A more dangerous place for the unwary does not exist in Wefrivain.

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

As Gerard had suspected, none of Thessalyn's other possessions remained to be claimed. He managed to corner the butler, who confirmed that her clothes had been sold. Gerard also questioned him about the shavier faun who'd been there two days ago. The butler had noted that his feathers below the hem of his pants were "sort of a grayish color." He'd also worn lenses while reading. He had a winged wolf. "Well trained," the butler added. "It heeled perfectly and never said a word."

The faun claimed to be a merchant's bookkeeper whose ship had been damaged in the storm. His master—a wealthy grishnard—was in Malabar procuring a new vessel. In the meantime, he'd sent his bookkeeper to have a look at the local libraries. The merchant was thinking of bringing in a shipload of books, and he wanted to know what titles were held and valued in the region. The guest had met briefly with the king and prince, exchanged news items, and then been given the run of the library for half a day.

Gerard asked whether it was possible he was still on the island, but the butler shook his head. "I heard he stayed one night in town and left yesterday for Malabar on a pegasus."

"And if that's what he told them," said Silveo, "you can bet it's not where he went."

"Why would he come here?" muttered Gerard as they were walking back to the ship.

Silveo shrugged. “He could have left Sern about the same time we did, headed in the same direction. He got blown by the same storm to the same place. That could have been the wreck of his ship you saw on the reef.”

“Even if that’s true, it’s unlikely he was the only survivor. If he survived, then there should have been others. If he came straight here from the wreck, he should not have been dressed in decent clothes with cowries to spend in town. He had to have landed somewhere else after the storm and then chosen to come here. Why?”

“I have an idea,” said Silveo.

“Which is?”

Silveo shook his head. “I’ll tell you tomorrow if I’m right.”

They returned to the ship with Farell and company, who were in high spirits. Any prestige Silveo had lost on Sern had been completely restored by his victory over Lord Holovar. Many of the sailors came from humble backgrounds, and they’d suffered at the hands of such shelts in the past. They liked nothing better than to see one brought low. The whole ship was babbling with the story for half the night, and Silveo let them talk. He’d also let Farell’s party bring back every scrap of food from the dinner table. They’d plundered the kitchens as well, and the entire ship made merry.

Alsair made Gerard repeat the story twice, and then he went around asking the sailors more questions. He was perfectly giddy with the news that Silveo had slapped Mishael Holovar and seemed almost willing to forgive all past offenses.

Gerard wasn’t so pleased about it. “Although,” he said to Thessalyn in their cabin, “I’m sure it was Silveo’s idea of saying thank you.”

The next morning, everyone got down to the serious business of repairing the ship. Silveo visited the harbor master in person and explained what they needed. “Do we have enough cowries on hand to pay for it all?” asked Gerard when he returned.

“Pay for it?” echoed Silveo. “My dear captain of Police, we do not *pay* for things intended for the service of our Mistress. Any shelt who does not make an offering of anything you need to perform your function is asking for trouble with the gods.”

Gerard shook his head. “You may have to introduce my father to this concept.”

“I suspect he was called to the temple last night and frightened out of his wits,” said Silveo. “The Harbor Master more-or-less said so. In any case, they will give us whatever we want so long as we leave as quickly as possible.”

Below them in the water, a team of trained cowry catchers was already scraping the hull and beginning repairs to the leak. Gerard could see their fat manatee tails flip above the surface periodically. Their overseer stood a little way off in his flat barge with tools and supplies. Another boat was putting off from the wharf, heavy with sailcloth, rope, and planking.

Silveo watched it. “Did *you* leave anything here, Gerard?”

My childhood? My identity? Gerard shook his head. “The only thing I wanted off this island was Thess.”

Alsair gave an indignant little sputter behind them. “The Meerkat,” he said with a cough.

Silveo looked at Gerard. “What’s the Meerkat?”

Gerard glared around at Alsair. “A little boat,” he said. “Nothing I need to go looking for.”

“Oh, Gerard!” exclaimed Alsair. “You loved that little boat! We went all over the Small Kingdoms in it.” He turned to Silveo. “He built it when he was thirteen.”

“And fourteen and fifteen,” said Gerard.

“And then we practically lived in it for another three years,” said Alsair happily.

“Well,” said Silveo, “one of our small boats was damaged in the storm, so obviously we are in need of another.”

“It’s a little big for a jolly boat,” said Gerard doubtfully.

“I’ll be the judge of that. Where is it?”

It was in dry dock in the royal boathouse. Gerard saw with relief that Jaleel hadn’t done anything nasty to it. When it came to hobbies, Jaleel had always preferred hunting to sailing. He liked being a prince and had never wanted the responsibilities of kingship. He and Gerard had fought occasionally as children, but mostly they were just different and rarely together after the age of eight. Gerard doubted anyone had touched the Meerkat since he left it, except to put her in storage.

Silveo walked around the vessel. It was over twice the length of Alsair, with a mainsail and a jib. Gerard had designed her himself and put her together as carefully as Thessalyn constructed her ballads. Silveo whistled. “I bet this boat can sail as close to the wind for its size as anything in Wefrivain.”

Gerard smiled. “She is very maneuverable.”

“She’s beautiful,” said Silveo. “And as we’ve established, I like pretty things. We’re definitely taking her.”

An eighth watch later, they were slipping through the doors of the dock house into the breeze and sunshine. Gerard could have sailed the Meerkat in his sleep, and Silveo didn’t try to do anything—just climbed up on the gunnel with his face in the wind and wrapped his tail around him. He was wearing sailcloth today and only a trace of kohl. He hadn’t even bothered

with boots. About halfway to the Fang, he stood up and walked back to where Gerard sat with his hand on the boom. “Do you want to sail her?” asked Gerard. He was proud of the way the Meerkat handled. She was a responsive little skiff.

Silveo shook his head. “I’m not that good with small boats—never needed to learn about them. I was going to tell you: when I went to see the harbor master, I asked some questions in town. Gwain was there for one night. He stayed in an inn, but he seems to have been busy about town. He asked a lot of questions about you.”

“Me?” Gerard was surprised.

Silveo nodded. “It’s what I suspected. He found himself in this vicinity and thought he might do some research on the new captain of Police—maybe figures you’ll be harder to kill than the last dozen (although I can’t think why). Maybe you made him curious in that teahouse.”

“I tried to recruit him,” said Gerard.

Silveo laughed out loud. “For the Police?”

“Well, yes. He was obviously bright. He speaks a little of every language in common use if he told the truth, including Maijhan. I need someone who speaks Maijhan. I want to investigate Maijha Minor.”

“I speak Maijhan,” said Silveo mildly.

“Well, you weren’t exactly volunteering.”

“I’m still not. Every captain of Police wants to investigate Maijha Minor, and I think it’s a dumb idea.”

“Why?”

“Let’s think about this,” said Silveo with mock patience. “What is the Resistance anyway? Fauns killing panauns. We don’t like it, and we make it illegal. Now, what is Maijha

Minor? Fauns *legally* killing panauns. They are at a disadvantage, but if they manage to kill hunters, it's perfectly alright. The way I see it, the Maijhan king has made the Resistance legal on Maijha Minor, and until that changes, you're never going to be able to do anything about the island. Sure, Pirates use it. They'd be stupid not to, although the controls in place make it difficult."

"But if they're basing themselves there—" began Gerard.

Silveo shook his head. "Gerard, the Resistance is *not* organized. We talk about them as one entity, but that is misleading. They are a group of factions, often in disagreement, and that's part of what keeps them from being successful."

He sat down on a bench. "Panauns have the advantage because they are mostly one species. There are a few odd ones like me tossed in, but mostly, grishnards are in charge. They're just one type of creature who wants more or less the same sorts of things. The Resistance is heterogeneous—many kinds of fauns, some nauns like selkies, various talking beasts, and some sympathetic grishnards. They disagree on their goals and how to achieve them. This is why they will never be more than a nuisance to grishnards."

"They've been more than a nuisance to the Police," said Gerard.

Silveo nodded. "As I said before, I think you have a spy. He's probably working for one particular Resistance cell. They can be highly organized on a small basis. I think Gwain is their leader."

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