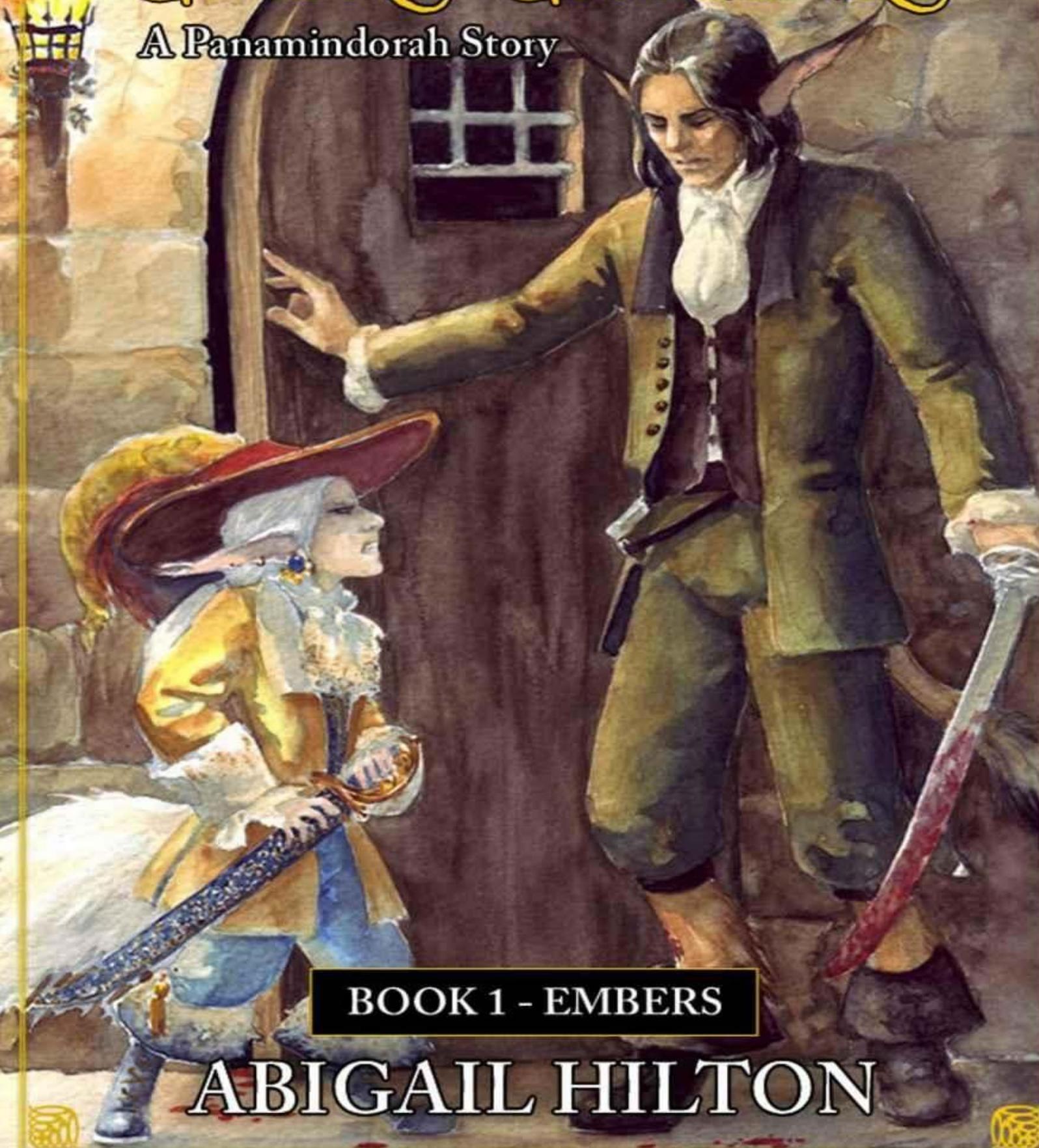


THE GUILD OF THE COWRY CATCHERS

A Panamindorah Story



BOOK 1 - EMBERS

ABIGAIL HILTON

The Guild of the Cowry Catchers

Book 1 Embers

Deluxe Illustrated Edition

By: Abigail Hilton



Smashwords Edition

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Special thanks to the people who read this book as I wrote it.

Amy

Anita

Hughes

Jeff

Mistie

Molly

Patsy

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~~This is an illustrated book. Many (though not all) of these illustrations are rich watercolors that do not display well in black and white. To enjoy this book fully, I urge you to open the document at least once in one of the numerous free eReaders or apps that have been created for computers, phones, and tablets. Although the illustrations are still beautiful in black and white, they are at their best on a color screen.~~

The Prophet of Panamindorah

Fauns and Filinians
Wolflings and Wizards
Fire and Flood
The Complete Trilogy

The Guild of the Cowry Catchers

Embers, Illustrated
Flames, Illustrated
Ashes, Illustrated
Out of the Ashes, Illustrated
Shores Beyond the World, Illustrated
The Complete Series (Not Illustrated)

Other Books

Crossroads: Short Stories from Panamindorah
Feeding Malachi, an Illustrated Children's Chapter Book

~~**An honorable prince. A jaded assassin. Can they work together to catch a pirate?**~~

****ILLUSTRATED VERSION****

Among the querulous island kingdoms of Wefrivain, the only unifying power is religion—wyvern cult, ruled by an eccentric High Priestess. The wyverns are under attack by a gang of pirates known as the Guild of the Cowry Catchers. The pirates are beginning to worry Priestess Morchella.

She thinks she's found an answer in the person of Gerard Holovar, the new captain of her Temple Police. However, upon his promotion, Gerard strikes up a quarrel with Silveo, the Admiral of Morchella's Temple ships. Silveo has a reputation for cruelty, cunning, and a biting wit. He's a foxling—a minority species—and rumors say that he was once an assassin, who clawed his way to power from a childhood of poverty and abuse. He cultivates serial affairs with persons ranging from his own lieutenants to dock prostitutes. On the surface, Silveo could not be more different from Gerard—a member of the dominant species class, born to money and power, adhering to strict codes of honor, and devoted to his wife.

In spite of their differences, Morchella orders them to work together. She believes that they can catch the pirates. Their survival may depend upon it.

Embers is the first book in the 5-part Cowry Catchers series. The books are:

Embers

Flames

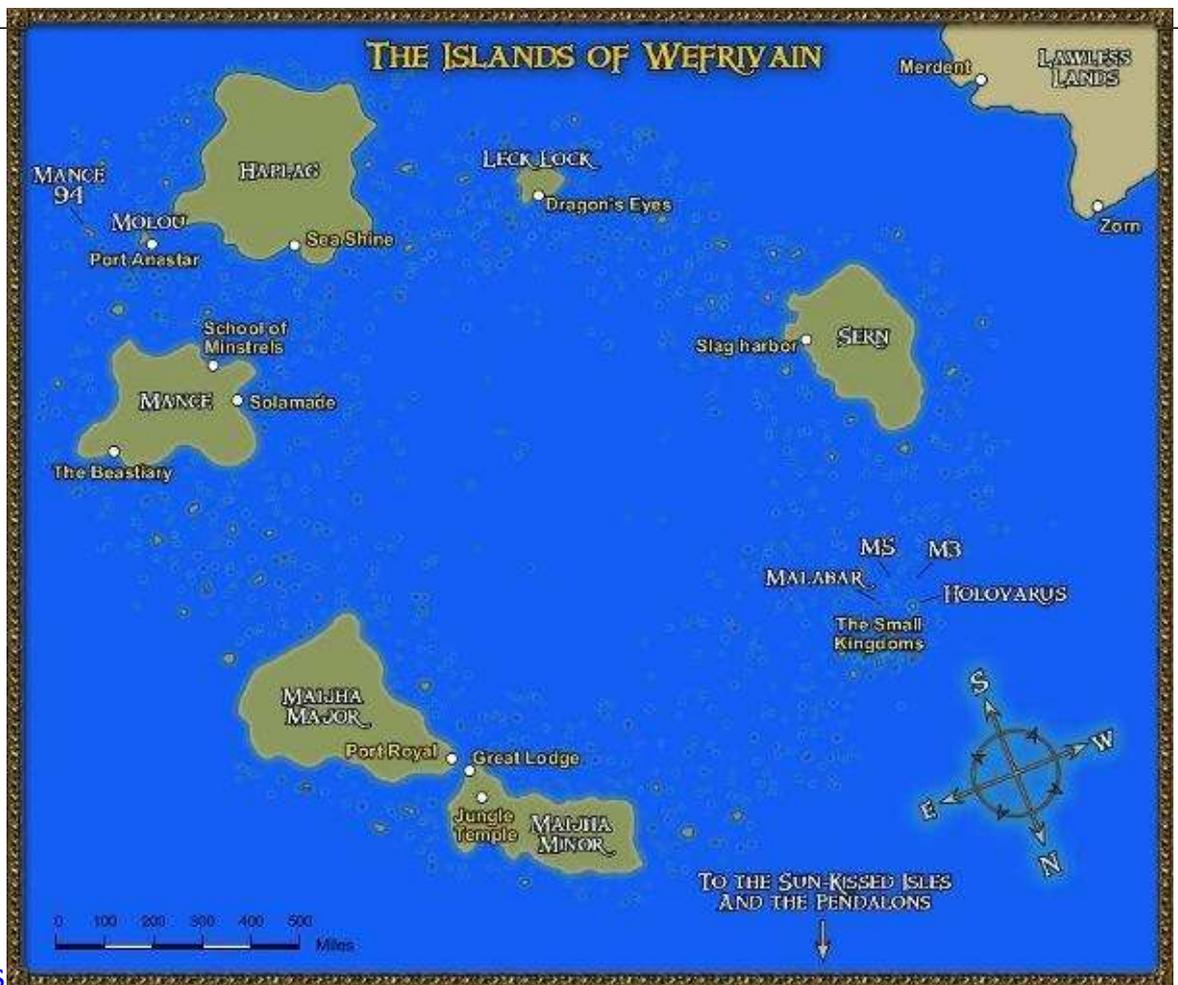
Ashes

Out of the Ashes

Shores Beyond the World

Warning: This is an illustrated series for grown-ups. It includes beautiful, whimsical artwork because adults deserve pretty pictures, too. However, the explicit elements of the story escalate as the series progresses. There are sexual scenes and situations in these books, as well as types of violence not usually found in children's books. These books are not intended for children or young teens.

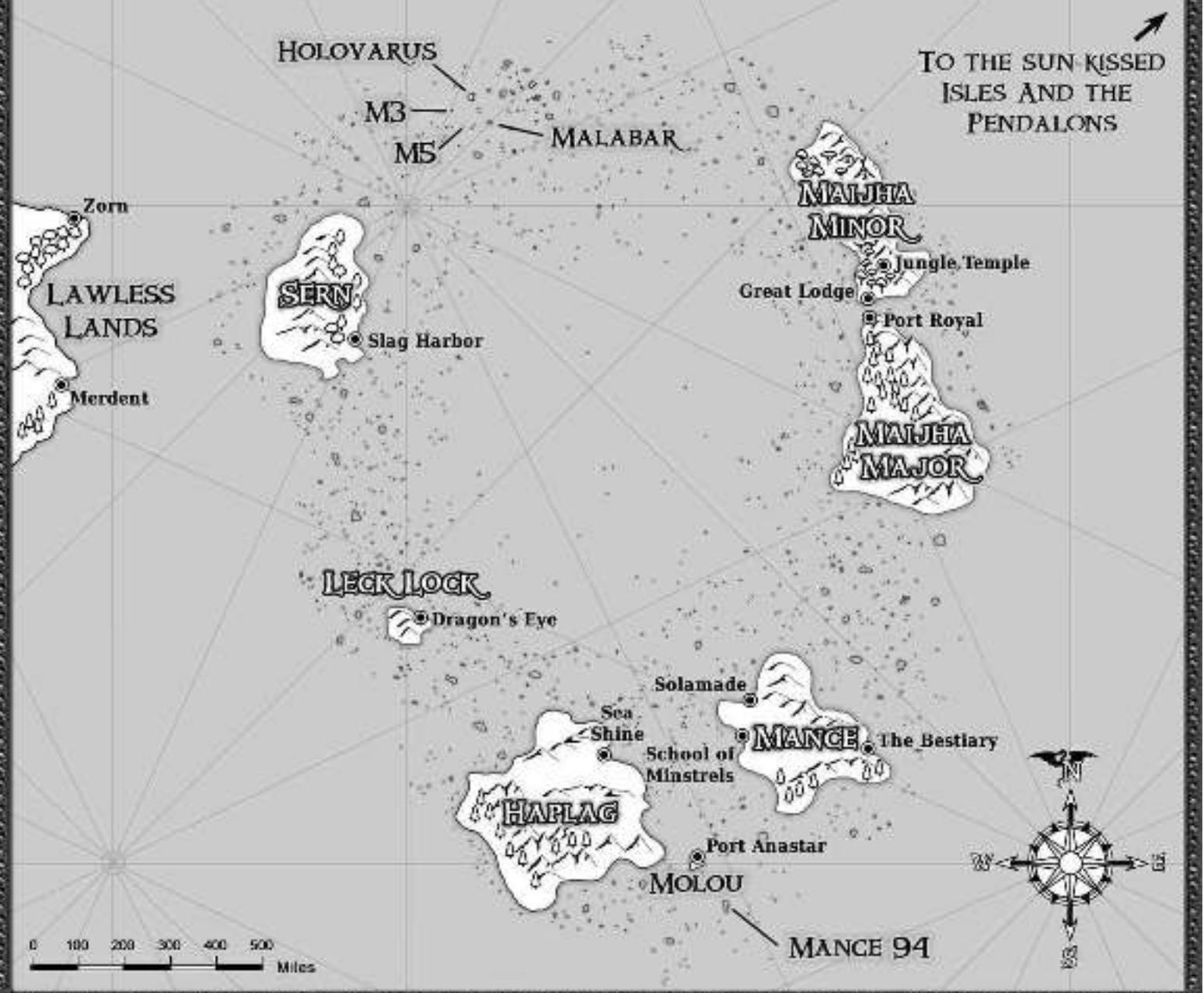
This 50,000-word book is DRM-free and carefully formatted. It includes 11 character portraits, full-page illustrations, and a map. Learn more at www.cowrycatchers.com.



[Maps](#)

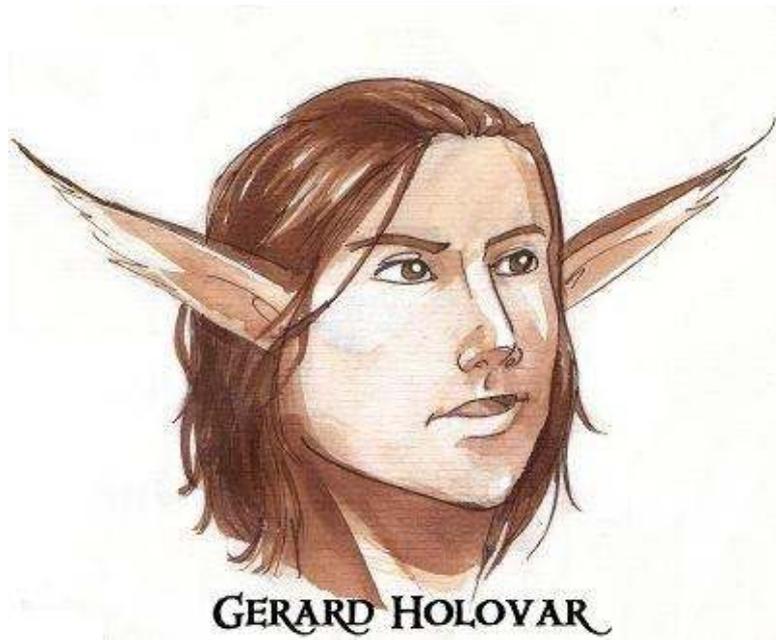
Map for color screens.

THE ISLANDS OF WEFRIYAIN



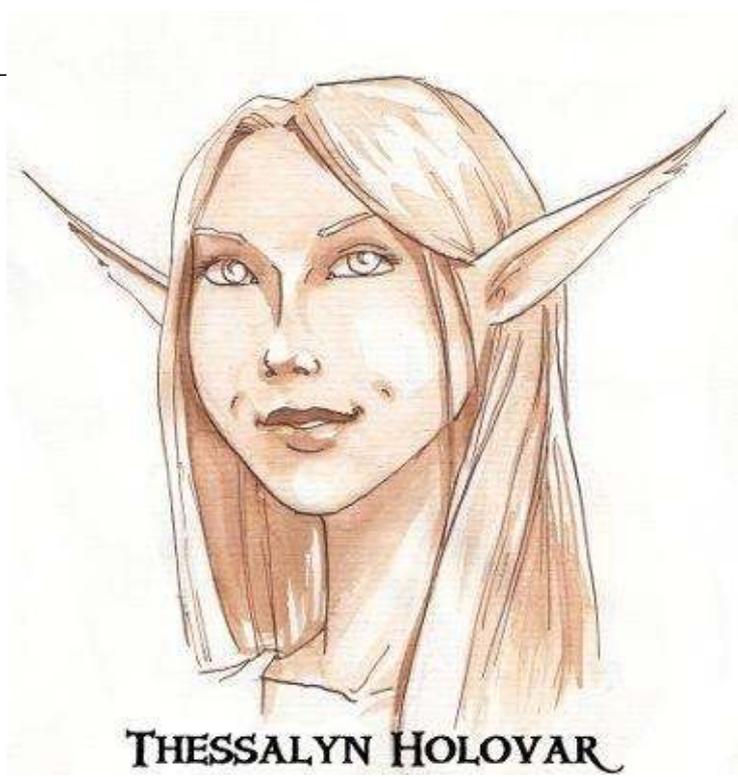
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[The Characters](#)

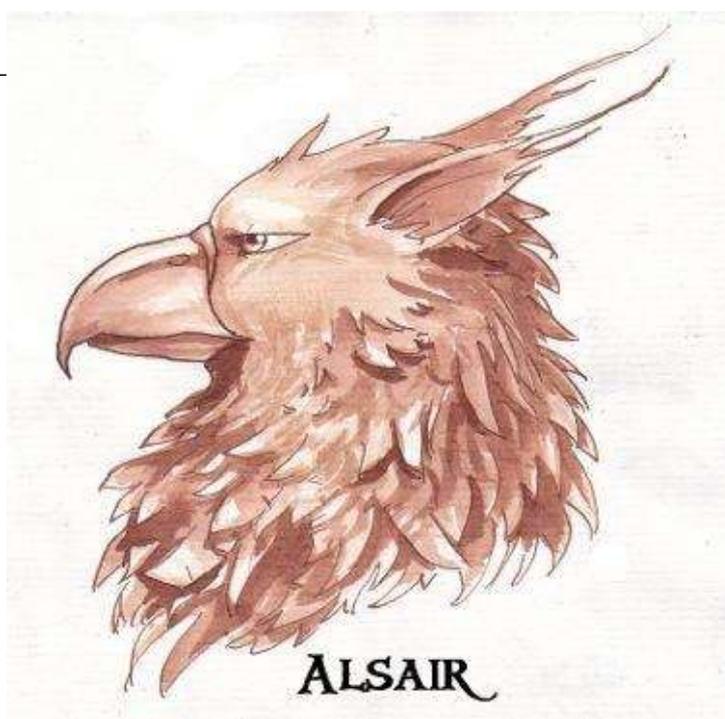


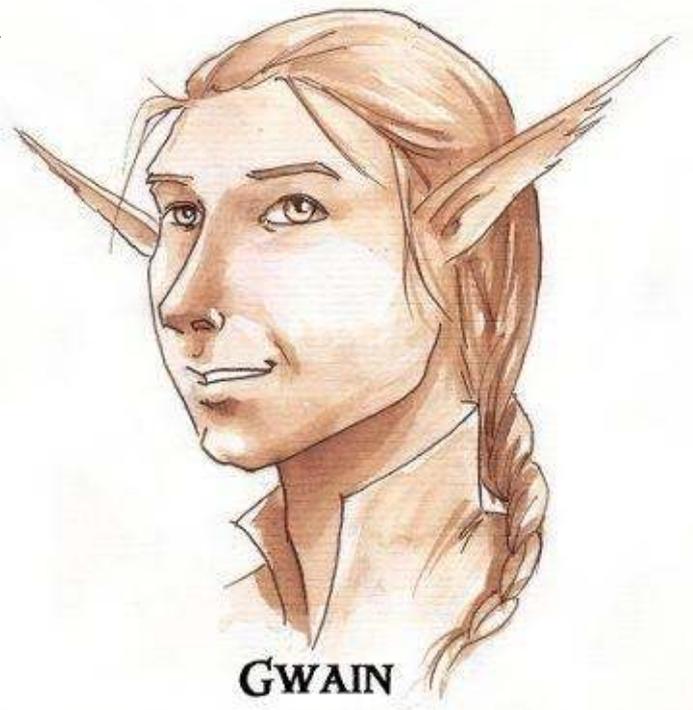


SILVEO LAMIRE

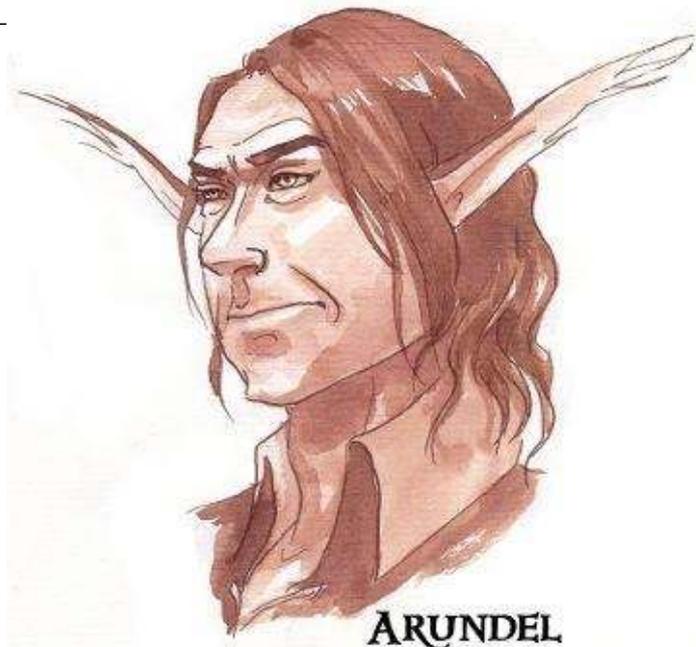




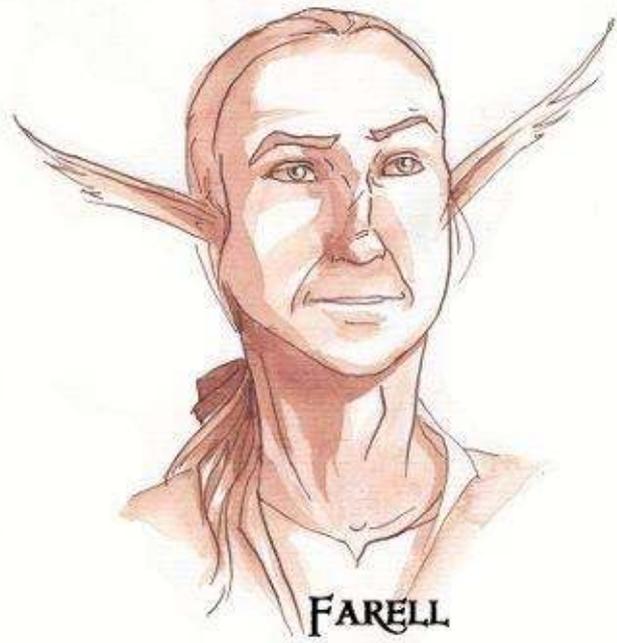


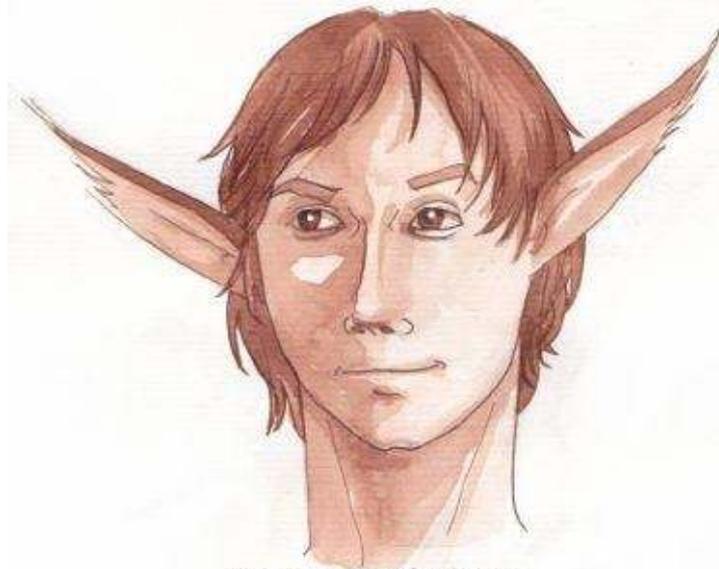


GWAIN



ARUNDEL

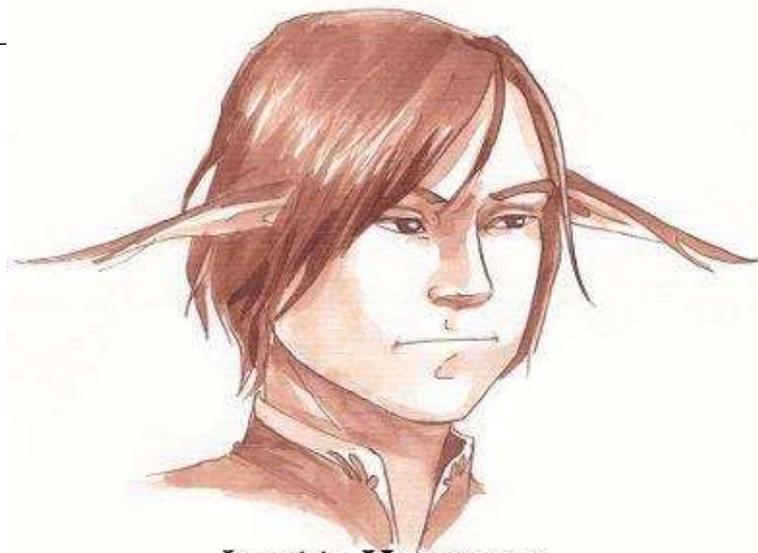




MARLO SNALE



MISHAEL HOLOVAR



JALEEL HOLOYAR

Chapter 1. The Captain of Police

Beauty is goodness.

—Morchella, sacred text

The Priestess entered her temple through the inner sanctum and paused for a moment at the edge of her sacred pool. A smear of blood from last night's sacrifice had discolored the white marble at the pool's edge, and she polished it clean before turning away. Layers of crystal and colored glass in the roof admitted diffuse sunlight that dappled and swam on the walls. The Priestess drew a deep breath and opened a silver inlaid door, the only visible exit from the room. She passed through a curtain of colored beads and bells, down a short passage, unlit and filled with incense smoke, through two more curtains, one opaque and gauzy, the last light and sheer.

She stepped into the outer sanctum—an octagon, with pools all around the edges. Pillars with clear crystal overlay and pavonine cores supported a vaulted roof, capped with a dome of tinted glass. Colors reflected from the pillars and roof onto the milk white walls, broken by rippling cords of light reflected from the water. Silver incense stands, twice the height of a shelt and wrought like coiled dragons, stood in pairs around the throne. The seat of black coral rose above them, inlaid with mother-of-pearl in intricate scenes of conflict and triumph. White-clad harpers sat at either side of the throne. Their instruments were fashioned of turquoise gemstone, the strings flashing silver.

The Priestess had ordered sweet incense in her outer sanctum a quarter watch earlier, and at the sound of the curtain bells, the harpers began a soft melody. She entered to this music and ascended to her seat. The Priestess gathered her sleeveless ivory robes, shimmering with faint color, and sat down. She put her bare elbows on the arms of the throne, folded her hands, and fixed her eyes on the sheikh whom she'd called to audience.

“Gerard Holovar.”

“Your Highness.” He bowed deeply, eyes respectfully downcast.

Gerard was taller than she had expected. Like the Priestess, he was a grishnard. He had a human upper body with fur below his waist and the two legs and tail of a griffin. Gerard looked to be in his twenties, powerfully built and tastefully dressed, with hair as black as her coral throne and large, dark eyes. He was one of her watch masters, the lowest ranking of her officers.

The Priestess changed what she'd planned to say. “Have you ever been in my temple, Gerard?”

“Highness, you know I have not.” His soft, low voice resonated in the chamber.

“How do you find it?”

“I have never seen a temple that was not beautiful. Yours is surpassing so.”

The Priestess inclined her head. “A good answer. Do you know why you are here now?”

“Because I exercised successfully the command that fell to me in an unexpected situation.”

The Priestess laughed. “A clumsy way of saying you killed over fifty pirates with only a half dozen subordinates for aid.”

Gerard nodded.

“And you brought back prisoners.”

“Admiral Lamire did that, Your Highness.”

“Only because you threw them into his lap.”

“Watch masters cannot technically transport prisoners, Your Highness.”

“An excellent point, but I do not often have princes as watch masters.”

Gerard's black tufted tail flicked behind him. “Nor do you now, Your Highness.”

She waited a moment, but he did not continue. “Holovarus is a small but respected kingdom,” said the Priestess. “As the heir to your father's holdings, you could have started as a lieutenant, if you really wanted a career in the Temple Sea Watch.” She spoke gently. “Why start at the bottom, Gerard?”

His tail flicked again. "Surely you know, Lady."

"I want to hear it from you."

"I have been disinherited, because my choice of mates was not to my father's liking. My young brother will inherit."

She could detect no emotion in his voice, no hint of what he thought about it. "Look at me, Gerard."

He raised his head. To look directly at the Priestess was irreverent and impious unless she expressly gave leave. Their eyes met. She saw him swallow. The High Priestess of Wefrivain rose and came down from her dais. Her robes, like pale dragon scales, fell around her, tracing her long curves. Her mahogany hair shone glossy where it tumbled from its silver clasp onto her shoulders.

Gerard fell back a pace as she approached, a little below his height now that she stood on the floor. "Have I offended, Mistress?"

"Not at all. My name is Morchella. You have permission to use it. My captain of Police has been missing for a red month. It is time to consider him dead, and I have decided that you will replace him. In that role, you answer only to me. Not to anyone else, including Silveo Lamire. Is that understood?"

Gerard nodded, his expression suddenly wooden.

"I'm putting you in charge of interrogating those prisoners," she continued. "Find me Sky Tower, Gerard."

When he had gone, Morchella went thoughtfully back into her inner sanctum. She found a wyvern, a sea dragon, gliding around her sacred pool. The animal had a serpentine body, with webbed, clawed feet, and scales that glistened an iridescent aquamarine. He kept his leathery wings folded as he swam, but raised them a little when he spotted Morchella. The wyvern put his clawed front feet on the edge of the pool and raised his slender snout. "You sent for me, Mistress?" His words rasped around long teeth.

"Yes." Morchella raised her robes about her and sat down on the edge of the pool to dangle her bare legs in the water. She had pearl-white fur below her navel and pink pads on her creamy paws. "Hoepali, isn't it? You're the deity at my temple on Holovarus."

"Yes, Mistress."

"I've just spoken with Gerard, the heir."

Hoepali gave a toothy sneer. "Not anymore. He's been disinherited."

Morchella nodded. "Your loss; my gain. He's done me a great service in the Sea Watch—killed about fifty Resistance pirates after being cut off from his ship in a rowboat. With only the rowers, he boarded the enemy ship while it was busy with the *Fang* and attacked the pirates. Those on deck died to the last shelt, but he caught some in the hold and took them prisoner. By the time Admiral Lamire managed to board, Gerard was able to hand the prisoners over to him without a struggle."

The wyvern laid his head on the pool's edge with a bored expression. "Sounds like something I would do."

"Does it?" Morchella leaned back on her hands and stared at the ceiling. "Such a thing from Thessalyn's lover—I would not have expected it." She glanced at the wyvern sharply. "Do you know why he married her?"

"He got her with child," said the wyvern lazily.

Morchella shrugged. "If Holovarus is like the other island kingdoms, then it is swarming with court bastards. Two or three would never stain a royal heir, and they're certainly no reason for a brilliant young grishnard to throw away his kingship."

Hoepali heaved a sigh. "You don't know Gerard, Highness. He's in love with his honor. He didn't have two or three bastards. He had only one, and that was with Thessalyn. He was determined to marry her."

Morchella caught at one word. “‘Had’?”

Hoepali looked up meaningfully through his long eyelashes. “~~I asked for the child.~~” He licked his lips, delicate as a cat.

Morchella’s eyebrows rose. “I see.”

“It pleased the king, as you can imagine—confirmed to him that Gerard had committed a grievous crime to marry outside his wishes.”

Morchella looked at Hoepali narrowly. “It pleased you, too, I can see.”

The wyvern curled his lip. “I gave direct omens that Gerard should not marry Thessalyn. He asked at my temple, and I gave my answer. He defied me.”

“How did Thessalyn and Gerard take the death of the baby?”

“Oh, you know something of her, I expect. She could think no ill of us. I really don’t know how he took it. Hard, I hope.”

Morchella watched the wyvern for a moment. “You may have to give up your grudge. I’ve made him my new captain of Police.”

Hoepali raised his head out of the water and looked her full in the face. Then he sank back down and lashed his tail beneath the surface. “You’re a female.”

Morchella laughed. “You think I promote every handsome sailor to my inner circle?”

“If you really want to keep him about you, put him in your *private* guard. He’s simple, Mistress. He won’t last outside.”

“I can tell from one interview that he’s not stupid. He’s resourceful, and he’s a survivor. I need someone like that over the Police.”

Hoepali shook his head. “I don’t mean he’s stupid. He’s just...all of a piece. He doesn’t bend. He’ll never survive among your officers.”

“He’ll bend to me,” said Morchella. “Nothing else matters.”

Hoepali shrugged with his wings. “Do as you wish. Collar him and keep him on a chain in your inner sanctum for all I care.”

Morchella frowned. “You presume too much on my good humor, Hoepali.”

He bowed his glistening head. “A fault of mine, Mistress. I apologize for my impertinence.”

“Goodnight, Hoepali.”

When he was gone, she went to the other end of the sanctum and rapped twice on the floor. The wyvern no longer than her forearm shot from beneath into the pool and vaulted out of the water with one beat of its leathery wings. It landed with a soft, wet plop in front of Morchella. Its voice came with an exited yap. “Yes, Mistress?”

“That order I gave earlier about Thessalyn—is there still time to reverse it?”

The messenger glanced about nervously. “Yes. If I go immediately, Mistress.”

“Go.”

Morchella lingered a moment, staring into the empty pool. Outside, the sun was setting, playing streamers of soft, colored light across the gently undulating water. “Thessalyn... Gerard, you do not know it, but you have saved her life tonight.”

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