

MARC LAIDLAW

DANKDEN

He was a clumsy bard, inept at the complex fingerings that made eduldamer strings hum so sweetly in a master musician's hands. His musical deficiency owed much to the fact that his right hand was made entirely out of polished black stone, carved in perfect replication of a human hand, so detailed that one could see the slight reliefwork of veins and moles, the knolls of knuckles, even peeling cuticles captured in the hard glossy rock. Most of the fine hairs had snapped from the delicately rendered diamond-shaped pores, but you could feel where they had been, like adamantine stubble. His left hand was more dexterous than most, and his calloused fingers hammered the strings as best they could to make up for the other hand's disability; but his rock-solid right hand was good for nothing more than brutal strumming and whacking. He couldn't pinch a plectrum. The soundbox was scarred and showed the signs of much abuse, the thin wood having been patched many times over.

"It's a gargoyle affliction," he said to most who asked. "Comes and goes. I'm looking for the treacherous slab who did it to me and disappeared before he could undo it."

If you asked why he didn't learn to play a different instrument in the meantime, one more suited to his handicap, the bard's face went hard and dark and stony as his hand. "Once I was proficient enough," he'd say. "The eduldamer spoiled me for anything else. It still suits my voice. And besides, what else could I play one-handed? What bard accompanies himself on sticks or spoons? I can't exactly sing while I blow ullala pipes. . . ."

He was right about his voice. Though his stone thumb grated on the strings, his voice was strong. The conflict of these sounds -- one harsh and scarcely in control, the other pure and deliberate -- made the bard's performances more than merely bearable. Wherever he went, he was a curiosity. If asked why he didn't find a musical companion, one who could play an instrument while he sang accompaniment, the bard scoffed sadly. "I travel alone," he said. "I wouldn't wish my ill fortune on anyone else."

One gathered that this had not always been the case.

The name of this sulking, sarcastic, stone-fingered, honey-tongued loner was Gorlen Vizenfirth.

Gorlen stumbled into Dankden in a torrential rain, a phenomenon apparently so common in this climate that the mud-flooded streets of the mud-colored town were lined with patterned stepping stones of the sort usually found at stream crossings. Hand-pull rope-and-raft ferries operated at intersections, deep in the street canyons between the sagging, slouching shops and houses. Having

spied
an inn with a lamplit marquee across the street, during his customary search
of
the rooflines for anything resembling a gargoyle, Gorlen stepped onto the
slimy
planks of one such raft and began to pull himself against the muddy current.
He
had taken no more than three strong pulls -- a lurching mode of progress made
more difficult by the fact that he had but one hand to clench with -- when he
heard a cry from the sidewalk (or bank) he had just deserted. Turning, he saw
a
woman and a boy, both wrapped in shiny dark cloaks, only their white faces
visible. The woman beckoned for him to return.

Something more than courtesy compelled him to obey: his one flesh palm was
already blistering. At this rate, he would be unable to play the eduldamer by
the time he reached the far row of stepping stones, and thus unable to earn a
living. He stepped aside to let the pair aboard; the woman gave him a smile
and
her thanks. The rain and chill had brought a flush to her cheeks; her eyes
were
dark and gleaming reflecting some source of light invisible to him in the
gloomy
afternoon. She looked too young to be the boy's mother, for which, seeing her
beauty, he was suddenly glad.

As they crowded past him into a comer of the raft, Gorlen realized that he was
expected to haul them. His spirits felt as sodden as his underwear, the
strength
drenched out of him, but making a show of it, he grasped the rope once more
and
yanked them out into the mudflow, turning his face into his dripping sleeve to
hide the grimaces he made with every painful draw.

The short voyage must have gone more slowly than the Dankden woman was used
to.
Gorlen's palms were barely burning before he felt her beside him and saw her
gloved hands reaching up to grasp the rope. The palms of her gloves were
heavily
reinforced, and with good reason. She pulled with such strong and practiced
strokes that the rope was nearly tom from his hand. The raft scudded over the
street in a dozen pulls, to which Gorlen made only a token contribution.

At the far bank, somewhat chastened, he tipped his hat, spilling a small flood
of rainwater down his front, and thanked the woman. He caught her staring at
his
right hand, embarrassed, she looked away.

"What happened to your hand?" the boy said sharply.

The woman turned on him with a cry -- "Jezze! Please don't mind my brother,
sir."

"That's all right," said Gorlen, offering his flesh hand to her as she stepped
onto the stone landing. "Children always say what's in their minds. When do we
lose that innocence, I wonder?"

"It's none of his business," she said, "that's all."

"I'll tell you, though," he said. "I got in trouble with the priests of

Nardath

a few years back. They laid a task on me -- and one of their pet gargoyles turned my pinky to stone as a reminder. Every time I dawdled on my errand, or deliberately headed in the wrong direction, the blackness spread. Finger by finger, it swallowed my hand. As you can see, I was reluctant to do exactly as the priests asked, even at the cost of my dexterity."

The boy rapped on Gorlen's hand and jerked back smarting knuckles. "I guess you did what they wanted, or you'd be rock all over."

"Lucky for you I did, too. In spite of myself, I saved the world. Some would even say, the universe."

Jezzle gazed at him coolly. "Wish I had one like that."

Gorlen smiled up at the woman, and was startled to see her expression. "You don't have to lie to him," she said as his grin died. "He's a child, not an idiot."

She seized the boy's hand and pulled him away before Gorlen could say another word, in his defense or otherwise.

That'll teach me, he thought as he watched them pick their way over the stones. Hauling out my heroic credentials to impress a lady. Of course she considers me a fool. Who wouldn't?

I'm going to start saying it's artificial.

Letting the pair precede him some distance into the murk, he finally followed in the same direction until he reached the inn he'd spotted from across the street.

The place was called the Drydock. Tilted signs, hand-lettered in bright orange paint and nailed to the facade, proclaimed the merits of the inn:

"Come in & dry off!" "A snug harbor!" "Completely dry inside!" "Boot-warmers available!" "Heat in every room!" "Dry beds & sheets!" "Your comfort cheerfully guaranteed!" A huge stone hearth was pictured on the wall; he could almost feel the heat of the painted flames.

Gorlen grinned and pushed open the door, expecting gusts of warm air. He was met instead by a clammy draft reeking of mildew. He couldn't be sure whether it was his soaked boots or the spongy mass of carpet that squelched underfoot as he stepped into a grotto dim and dank as a frog's den. Scattered lamps glowed with a weak, watery light, their chimneys all rippled with droplets. The interior echoed with a steady streaming drizzle; louder than the muffled sizzle of the rain, it was the sound of countless leaks, of water pouring into tin pails and teetering saucers. Makeshift gutters lined the walls, carrying run-off to a row of windows at the rear of the high-roofed room. Tiny cataracts cascaded from the

ceiling, vanishing through holes they had worn in the floor. Spray from the myriad fountains peppered his face and hands. Mossy stairs rose on either side to an opposing pair of lofts; above were rows of open doors, all so badly warped that probably they would never close again.

Across the room, behind a countertop, cloaked in the bright yellow skin of some no doubt toxic local amphibian, stood a man whom it would have been charitable (and an insult to toads) to dub "toadlike." Gray-cheeked, with bulging eyes in a lumpy face, he patiently mopped his countertop with alternate strokes of a rubber knife and a sponge. Water flew to the floor in sheets; he wrung the sponge into a bucket. The counter was instantly soaked again, and the bucket would soon need emptying. He interrupted this futile procedure for a moment when Gorlen entered, then went back to it.

Gorlen should have left immediately; there was no real point in staying or stoking the bartender's immediate, obvious hostility. But the blatant fraud, the howling misrepresentations of the lurid signs outside, spurred both his indignation and his sense of the absurd. He found the combination irresistible.

Striding across the soft planks, he called on the yellow-clad proprietor: "You, there! Sir -- if I may call you that? What is the meaning of your bold and boldly false inducements? I have never seen such a bare-faced bait and switch, which fools an eager customer for perhaps one hundredth of a second, and gains you nothing but their ill will in record time."

The innkeeper, if such he was, looked sidelong at a collection of mushroom growths clustered at the far end of the counter, gray puffs rising on rust-colored stalks. Gorlen saw suddenly that they were customers, several blobby souls wrapped in wrinkled gray mold-colored cloaks, hunched on spindly iron stools and sipping liquor from tall glasses which they guarded with cupped hands from the more unpredictable leaks. Gorlen sensed that they had heard such objections before; although they made no sound, from the quivering of their oddly similar bulks he felt certain they were laughing.

"We're under new management," the toad-man croaked, and at that the laughter rang outright. "I can't be held responsible for the claims of the previous owner."

"Very good," Gorlen said, joining with them in laughter. "I see the merit of your argument. But what would you say if I were to bring your claims more in line with reality?"

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"I mean I would happily volunteer to remove the signs from your establishment, which surely serve only to bring unhappy and deluded customers through your door. The name itself, of course, must remain. I'm sure you paid plenty of auris for its ironic properties alone, which I cannot help but admire."

"Take down my signs?" the keeper said, Flowering at his customers to shut them

up.

"I thought you said they were the previous owner's signs, and not yours at all."

"I paid for 'em, that makes 'em mine."

"Then I'll bring them straight in, out of harm's way, and even suggest a few places where you might put them." Gorlen turned and walked out the way he had come in. The saturated air, which had seemed oppressive before, now tasted fresh

and invigorating; at least it was not thick with mold spores striving to establish green colonies in his nasal passages. On the porch outside the Drydock, he wrenched at the nearest of the ludicrous signs, finding that the swollen wood splintered and crumbled in his hands. He set what remained of it carefully beside the door, and was starting on a second when, in a flash of slick yellow, the innkeeper sprang upon him.

Gorlen had only an instant to brace himself; it was not enough. Broad fat hands grabbed and shoved him, first onto his butt and then across the scummy planks. He'd been carrying his eduldamer case slung over one shoulder, and he felt its strap catch on a porch post, along with his travelsack. He wished heartily that

he could have stayed there with them, but the upright toad had given him a good push, and did not neglect to follow through. Gorlen hit the edge of the porch and awkwardly tumbled between the stepping stones, sprawling into the muddy stream. Thrashing for purchase, he began to sink.

He kicked out, his eyes full of mud, mud in his mouth, and no bottom beneath him. This was no street -- it was a river!

Once he had been as fine a swimmer as he'd been a musician. The gargoyle had robbed him of both skills with one move. Nor had he ever swum in such a rich mixture of mud, which did nothing to buoy him up like friendly water. It was a miracle that he managed to stay afloat for more than a few seconds in the current; a miracle, also, that guided him toward another of the raft landings, where even now someone was moving out across the flooded street and shouting at him -- words he couldn't hear through the mud in his ears -- as they tried to pull the raft into his path.

He hit it hard and blind, throwing his arms over the deck, clambering aboard with assistance from his rescuer. He sprawled as if dead, then struggled to his knees, choking into the face of a woman.

"Well, well, if it isn't the savior of the universe," said his rescuer blithely, hauling the raft back toward the stone landing where her brother Jezzle waited.

"At your service," Gorlen replied, and promptly vomited copious quantities of dilute brown gritty muck at her feet.

Her name was Taian. She and Jezzle lived with their father, an amphibian hunter and dealer in phib hides, in a set of small but thoroughly dry rooms at the top

of a high-peaked house where the rain rang loud on every slanted ceiling, but leaked through nowhere. Phib skins hung drying in almost every room, which made an already cramped apartment feel impossibly crowded. From where Gorlen sat by the fire, nursing a mug of warm fermented plapioc, he could not make out all of Taian or Jezzle, though both sat near him in the parlor. They appeared only as fragments between the dangling curled hides. Accustomed now to the warm, somewhat swampy odor of the place, he was content to fill himself with the thick sweet white liquid and listen to the other two talk while his clothes -- freshly soaped and rinsed in rain -- dried on a rack by the fire.

Metal clattered in the hall; the door slammed and boots came stomping. Jezzle jumped up to greet his father, a tall, broad-shouldered, bearded man who stopped in the parlor doorway and went quite silent and suspicious when he saw Gorlen, dressed only in blankets, reclining in what must have been his own favorite chair.

Gorlen jumped hastily to his feet, but Taian was already explaining. The hunter burst out laughing, and came forward to clap him on the shoulder. "So, young man! Five minutes in Dankden and you've already made an implacable enemy! Old Stoag and his cronies will be tracking you down, you've my word on it, now that you've impugner the comforts of his inn."

Gorlen wasn't completely sure the man was joking, although his smile was wide enough. He must have seen Gorlen's uncertainty, though.

"Ah, relax. That place will collapse under its own soggy weight soon enough, and carry Stoag back into the mire where he belongs. They keep those signs up for a laugh, to watch the faces on any stranger who comes in. You threatened to get between a phib and his amusement, that's why he pitched you into the tide-flood."

"A phib?" Gorlen said. "So he's not completely human, then?"

"Not by half, no; nor his customers. They crawl up from the swamps at high tide and try to lay claim to Dankden once more, with their usual pewling complaints that the town is rightfully theirs. A hopeless bunch, and utterly useless -- except for the good skins of their purebreed brethren. Ha!"

And here he thrust at Gorlen a fresh phib skin, still limp and wet with ichor, smelling far fishier than the dried hides hanging throughout the apartment. It was grayish green in color; there were others in similarly muted tones slung over the hunter's shoulder. He slipped them all off and handed them to Taian, who carried the hides down the hall.

"Take good care of them, girl," he called after her. "That's the best lot I've hauled in an age."

He looked toward the chair with scarcely disguised longing, and Gorlen leapt out of the way. "By all means, sit!"

"Ah, well, if you don't mind . . ." He sank down on the chair, groaning with relief, and pulled off his sopping boots. These and the rest of his clothes were quickly mounted before the fire; then he wrapped himself in a thick robe that had been warming on a hook beside the hearth. Jezzle appeared with a large goblet of plapioc. The big man sucked it down in a few swallows, then handed it back to the boy, wiping curds from his mustache. "Another like that one," he said with a laugh. Then he put out his hand to Gorlen. "I'm Clabbus."

"Pleased, sir. Gorlen Vizenfirth is the name."

Gorlen put out his right hand. Clabbus showed a moment's surprise, then a lingering curiosity. "Eh?" he said, touching it and then letting go.

"Mind if I have a closer look?"

"Not at all," said Gorlen.

Clabbus hunched toward the fire, and Gorlen turned the hand palm up, palm down, letting the old man inspect the perfectly rendered patterns. "Fate lines," he said after awhile. "I don't read them, but these look strangely symmetrical. You carved them yourself, I suppose?"

"In fact," said Gorlen, "those are the very lines I was born with. And you're not the first to notice their symmetry. Some say they herald great luck, others an evil destiny. So far both prophecies have proved equally true. Half the time good luck delivers me from some dreadful end into a pleasant one, much as your daughter rescued me today; the rest of the time, I seem pitched from relative comfort into darker adventures. Safe decisions lead me into awful trouble, and only the riskiest endeavors ever seem to deliver me to anything like a moment's peace."

"Peace?" said Clabbus. "Most of us are too busy making a living. I notice your instrument case. . . .?"

"That is my living." "Is it a good one?"

"Well, I have no house --"

"This shabby flat is rented, my boy! What do I own?"

"-- and no family."

"Ah. Well." Clabbus blinked sadly, in sympathy.

"And what friends I've made are scattered far and wide; some of them no doubt rue the day that brought me into their lives, and celebrate the day that carried me off again."

"Surely that won't be the case with us. Jezzle, another plap' for Gorlen Vizenfirth as well!"

The boy had anticipated his father's request. For a time they sat sipping together by the fire. Jezze brought a tray of spiced meat and pickles for his father, then sat by the chair and asked about the day's hunt. As Clabbus described events in the swampy reaches outside Dankden, Gorlen found his mind wandering to Taian, whom he could hear humming down the hall. He pulled on his warm, dry clothes and followed the sound of her voice until he reached a closed door; he rapped lightly and passed through.

He found himself standing on a covered balcony, above the rushing street. He habitually checked the rooftops across the way, some taller than this one, all of them lacking any but the commonest masonry and decorative plasters. There was nothing like a gargoyle anywhere in sight.

A huge stove burned in one corner of the balcony, smoke fuming from a perforated pipe that curled from the chimney. Taian was trimming the hides and hanging them in the gouts of smoke, which then escaped around the edges of the eaves. A heap of slimy globular vegetables filled a half-keg in the corner, and every now and then Taian reached over, plucked one up, and tossed it into the stove, where it exploded wetly, releasing a strong perfume that altered the color and consistency of the smoke for nearly a minute.

"Essential to curing the hides," she explained. "Otherwise they crack and crumble and smell terrible. They won't repel water for long, either."

"Fine rainwear your family makes," Gorlen said. "I wish I had such a cloak myself. My common clothes are soaked right through in a strong shower."

"Well," she said coyly, "perhaps something could be arranged."

"I don't wish to take advantage," he said, moving closer to her on the balcony.

"No more than you already have, you mean?" she said, whirling away from him to gather another batch of skins.

"Is this your livelihood?" he asked, letting his hands fall.

"For the moment. Curing hides, stitching cloaks, and looking after my brother. I wanted to be a hunter like my father, but until Jezze's old enough to care for himself . . . I'm stuck here. Father used to take me with him into the marshes, to watch the boat and help keep the lines clear while he dived; but since our mother died, I've had to stay home. With my luck, it will be Jezze who ends up the hunter; I'll have spent my youth and strength on domestic chores."

"I doubt that," Gorlen said. "You're young and strong enough to be a hunter when the time comes."

"You think so?"

"Well," he said, smiling, "when I remember how swiftly you got the raft to me this afternoon, and hauled me aboard -- I think you could do anything you like.

And Jezzele looks like a fast-growing lad. He'll be ready for the swamps before you know it."

"I hope you're right. But really you know nothing of our way of life. You're only guessing." She leaned against the balcony rail, gazing up at him, a wistful look in her eyes.

"At the particulars, yes," he said. "But I've traveled so widely that I think mine is an educated guess." He put his left hand on the rail beside her, leaning closer. She was warm from the stove; he was close enough to feel that much.

"Are you an educated man, then?"

"Only in the ways of the world," he said.

Her eyes closed. Now he could kiss her.

At that moment, shouts rose from the street -- a chorus of gravelly voices that sounded as rough as the rain. Gorlen was inclined to think it a random rabble, nothing to interrupt his pursuit of Taian's lips. But her eyes leapt open and she spun away with an angry cry: "No! Not again!"

She pushed through the door, calling for her father, leaving Gorlen nearly tipping over the railings into the rain. Saving himself from a headlong fall into sloshing streets, he stared down at a multicolored mob that had gathered on the landings and stepping stones across the street from Clabbus's high house. He couldn't quite hear what they were calling nor could he imagine why they were directing their energies at this particular balcony. Like Stoag and his ungainly customers, these were lumpy and misshapen folk, albeit many were brightly colored in orange and yellow and vivid green. Gorlen realized with some surprise that these brilliant vestments were their own skins.

Clabbus appeared at his side. "Where are they -- oh! Leave off pestering my family!" he hollered down at the crowd.

"What about our families?" one called back -- though it was hard to tell which.

"Mine's an honest living on land that's rightly ours!"

"Rightly yours? You come into our very dens -- trapping and killing!"

"Bah, nonsense! Go or I'll have the guards here in a moment!" He turned to the door, where Taian stood glaring at her father for no reason Gorlen understood. Jezzele tried to peer out past her, but Clabbus pushed them both back inside.

"What do they want now?" Taian asked.

"Never you mind. Let's go in, Gorlen. This will take care of itself." From the back of the crowd, hidden till that moment by an overhanging eave, came a

wailing woman, carrying in her arms a large bundle. In the dripping rain and evening murk, Gorlen could hardly see what it was, although she lifted it up for their inspection. "Look what you've done!" she cried. "In what way is this rightful?"

She slipped on the stones and went down weakly, dropping her bundle. As it flopped to the hard surface, it sprawled out in full form. Gorlen saw a raw, oozing figure, about the size of a child, but mottled and marbled with streaks of gray and blue and yellow. Gorlen heard Taian gasp; she had come up next to him at the rail.

"I know not what you mean," Clabbus called, "nor do I care to see another rotting phib carcass after the day I've had."

The woman was unable to answer; her neighbors helped her to her feet, and rescued her bundle. One of them turned his face up to the balcony.

"Another carcass? This was her only child."

"Father!" Taian said.

Clabbus turned quickly and grabbed his daughter's arm, pushing her toward the door. Jezzle jumped back as they rushed through it. "Liars," he said. "That's a common phib. If it's mine at all, I caught it in the swamps. They're trying to start a riot, that's all."

"You rob our very clutches!" came a cry behind them, cut off as Clabbus slammed the door.

"I've had enough of them," Clabbus swore as he stormed down the hall, urging his children ahead of him. "Every week they're noisier, more insistent. As if things haven't been hard on everyone."

"Far harder on the phibs," Taian said, pushing aside hides as they returned to the parlor.

Clabbus dropped down in his chair and swept his thumb across his dinner plate to wipe up the last bits of grease. "True enough. The hunting's nothing like it used to be out there in the swamps, not like when I was a boy. All Dankden is hurting. Those halfbreeds blame their hardship on us hunters, when we're the only ones who ever brought a damn thing to this sodden place."

"There was nothing here before we came," said Jezzle sternly, echoing his father's tone. "Nothing but swamps and marsh and knuckleroot trees, and dumb phibs everywhere."

"Don't speak badly of the phibs, boy. They're your only honest living."

"But pa, what they call us in the streets --"

"That's the halfbreeds -- it's the human in them saying that. A phib is but an animal, neither good nor evil apart from the quality of its skin. And everything you have you owe to their hides."

This settled, Clabbus sat himself down and crossed his hands, scowling into the fire. Taian and Jezzle retreated, and Gorlen thought it best to follow. "Well, that's another evening spoiled," Taian said as they went into the kitchen.

"I'm going to look and see if they're still in the street," Jezzle said mischievously.

"Don't make things worse," Taian warned him. "Father wouldn't like it."

"He'll never know. Someone needs to keep an eye on them, make sure they don't try setting fire to the house or something wicked like that."

"Watch them from the balcony if you must," she said. "But don't go near them -- especially not now!"

When the boy was gone, Gorlen watched Taian cleaning up the dinner plates, rinsing them under a stream of water that ran through pipes from the roof.

"What brought you to Dankden?" she asked.

"I'm looking for a gargoyle," he said, nervously stroking his stone hand. "Where does your father hunt?"

"Far out in the marshes. The phibs make their homes in underwater caves beneath the knuckleroots. It's dirty, dangerous work -- diving in the mud flows, feeling your way to an entrance, then climbing up inside to face them down in their own dens."

"And are they savage fighters?"

She shrugged. "As to that, you will have to ask my father to show you his bum-scars. The slightest touch of their skin is enough to sear holes in human flesh. My father has writhed for weeks, in agony from an amphibian's caustic hug."

"And yet you wear these skins with no discomfort. How is that?"

"Only the strong, mature phibs manifest the poison coat. Those bright colors you sometimes see in halfbreeds are about all they retain from their full phib ancestors. We stay away from mature hides -- they're worthless for the trade. Only immature or senile hides are really suitable. It takes several years for a phib to come into full poison, and toward the end of their life, well -- I guess nature no longer cares whether they survive."

"So in other words, the ones you hunt are defenseless."

"You wouldn't say that were you to come up in one of their dens in full darkness, not knowing where you stood or how many surrounded you, or the color of those that waited"

Gorlen shuddered. "It must take a brave hunter."

"Yes, especially now that the phibs are so few. Once the swamps were hopping with them. Now the ones that remain are more clever than ever, and must be tracked diligently, often deep into the knuckleroot groves. My father has been weeks on the trail of the hides he brought home today."

"Must be quite an art to it."

"And a science, yes. Now excuse me -- I can't leave the new hides hanging outside any longer."

"I'll come with you," Gorlen said. "In case the mob is there."

The rain had let up when they emerged. The cloud cover was full of ragged holes through which starshine and the glow of the deep blue sky bled down on the black-running streets. There was no sound except the isolated drip-drop of things drying out, and the steady wash of the current. That, and Clabbus snoring in the parlor. Gorlen looked over the railing and was astonished to find that the gathering across the way had grown in size, though not in volume. In the clearing night, the vigil was eerily still. The halfbreed phibs crouched down to watch the house -- this very balcony. While Gorlen spied upon them, a little candle sprang to life and was used to light a second wick; each of this pair touched two more, and the starry flames spread until there were dozens down there, and that many again flickering on the turbulent face of the watercourse.

Gorlen saw a shadow pass across the reflected flames, towing ripples behind it. It was a very small boat, unlit, with one small figure paddling. It glided near the edge of the gathering, and suddenly he heard a voice he knew -- "Phibby vermin! Stay in your dens!" At the same time, the rower flung something wet into the crowd. With the splatter, numerous flames were extinguished, and many voices began to swear and shout.

"I hope I'm wrong," Gorlen said to Taian, who was gathering the smoky cloaks, "but isn't that Jezzle down there?"

Taian gasped and flung herself to the rail. "No!"

The waterway was suddenly boiling around the small craft, as mourners dropped their candles and leapt into the street. New cries joined the curses -- the shrieks of a boy in trouble. The boat rocked and tipped, rolling completely over and up again. Jezzle coughed out a bubbling yell, but his boat rolled again, silencing him. This time when it righted itself, the compartment was empty. Gorlen saw the paddle sucked away, spinning slowly down the street.

"Jezzle!" Taian screamed.

She ran back into the hall and crashed into Clabbus who was coming up from shallow sleep. He grabbed her by the shoulders -- "What is it? Where is he?"

"In the street," she answered. "They're drowning him!"

Father and daughter, utterly familiar with the stairs leading from their flat, left Gorlen behind; he picked his way cautiously down through mold-smelling dark, clinging to the smooth stairrails with his flesh hand. By the time he reached the street, the commotion had spread to both sides of the avenue. The candles across the way were scattered and far fewer; those who carried them stood uncertainly at the water's edge, outnumbered by many clearly human shapes, rushing back and forth. Lamps were lit and hoisted on poles above the water, and swept back and forth to light the surging street. One lamp lit a phib-skin coracle sculling about in the middle of the avenue. In it, Clabbus stood shouting while Taian paddled and poled, moving swiftly here and there. Finally their boat touched the far bank, and Clabbus leapt out. Of what ensued, Goren could make out only the very tips of raggedly shouted sentences. Several other boats were quickly dispatched downstream; people ran from stone to stone, calling and casting their lights over the water. It had all happened so quickly.

. . .

Gorlen could find no place for himself in all this. He noticed that those of amphibian ancestry soon vanished completely, which seemed wise now that the decks around Clabbus's building were crowded with a collection of strong, scabby characters dressed almost exclusively in heavy-duty phibwear. From the crinkled bummarks on their faces and arms, which they wore like the emblem of their guild, he guessed these were hide hunters, Clabbus's peers. They seemed to speak a secret language, and more than one eyed him suspiciously where he leaned against a post in a shaded corner. It was not until Taian and Clabbus returned in the coracle, towing the boy's empty craft behind them, that they raised their voices.

The hunter looked shaken and weary -- aged by years in the space of an hour. As he stepped onto the bank, supported by a white-faced, grim-mouthed Taian, the other hunters surrounded him. Gorlen heard them offer both sympathy and the promise of vengeance. Neither evoked any response from Clabbus. Taian led him to a bench against the wall, seated him, and turned to look back blankly at the water.

"What can I do, Taian?" Gorlen asked.

It took a long time for her eyes to focus on him. "Nothing. There's nothing anyone can do."

Someone, at that instant, brushed up behind Gorlen from the dark edge of the river -- someone dripping wet, yet burning. Gorlen pulled his arm away with a hiss, the skin searing, and turned to see a face of incredible virulence passing him, pushing into lamplight. It was more phib than man, by far: orange mottling on a blue face, vivid streaks and yellow stripes with points of inky, glistening blackness. Every hunter stared at the phib, and he saw on their faces everything from terror and rage to frustrated lust. No doubt they wished they could have

harvested and worn the bright mature colors. The creature stopped before Clabbus and stood looking down at him from a proud height. When it spoke, its words were clear human speech, though somewhat frothy with mucus or mud.

"If you want your boy," it said, "you must come to the place where you murdered my own."

Clabbus leapt to his feet. "I take my hides from the swamp!"

The phib put out one lethal hand, held it inches from Clabbus's mouth. The hunter did not shrink away, but he kept his silence.

"Your son is not in the swamp," the creature said. "I repeat, you will find him where you took your last haul."

Clabbus and the phib stared eye to eye for several seconds, and then the phib turned and strode toward the street. At the edge of the deck, he leapt; the mud swallowed him.

"Oh, Destroyer," Clabbus swore. "What now? The phib's insane. The whole damned race of them --"

"But Father, Jezzle's alive!" Taian's face was bright again. "Somewhere, they have him!"

"Yes, girl, yes, yes -- but he could be anywhere."

The other hunters, tearing their eyes from the mud, moved closer to where Clabbus and Taian stood. They were full of advice. "It's a trap!" "They'll lure you into the swamp! . . . I know that phib -- let me hunt him down!"

"It makes no sense," Clabbus said. "None at all."

"Father," Taian whispered. But he ignored her, swallowed up by his associates, each of them presenting a plan. She moved toward Gorlen. "Let's get him inside -- this is not what he needs."

Gorlen took one of Clabbus's arms and Taian took the other. "Good people," Gorlen said, "fine hunters, I am sure Clabbus appreciates all your wisdom and warnings." He and Taian began to draw her father toward the door. "And he will no doubt call on all your talents to assist him when a course of action has been decided. But for the moment, please, leave a father to his grief. I thank you."

With that, they drew him backward through the door into the building;

Gorlen slammed it quickly, cutting off the expected quizzical cries of, "Who the hell are you?"

The landlord stood in the hall, eager to keep all others out. He latched the door and Taian thanked him. They headed toward the stairs.

"Insane," Clabbus kept saying. "He's dooming my son through his madness -- my son! I did nothing to him! He's not a pure phib! He's not what I hunt!"

"Father," Taian said, "please be quiet and listen. Listen to me now, and you'll hear what you know to be true, though I have never yet heard you admit it. But tonight you will admit it -- or else lose your son. Father?"

"I'm listening," he growled. They had reached their landing, and reentered the apartments through the open door. It was cold in the house, for a wind blew down the hall from the balcony. Drying hides fluttered and the smoke of the curing stove curled in the corners. Gorlen went to close the balcony door. Returning to the parlor, he found Taian stroking her father's hair, kneeling before him while he sat in his chair by the fire.

"You know it is true," she said.

"I know no such thing. Those are rumors the halfbreeds spread to cause riots and discontent. They want only chaos and bloodshed and the wreck of Dankden."

"Father, I'm telling you, friends of mine have witnessed certain hunters at this evil work -- men you know, men you grew up with, men you call your brothers. That's why you refuse to face the truth."

"Lies!"

"Don't be so stubborn! I've tried to open your eyes, but . . ."

"They're right! It's a trap! If I were to go where that phib implies, it would only be a trap!"

"Maybe they want you to see with your own eyes, father. See what some of us have known for years now."

"I won't hear it," he said.

She rose in a fury and turned to Gorlen. "He will hear it. He's heard it before. There are hunters he knows quite well, men I once called uncle, men who disgrace their calling -- who mock the art and science of it alike. Men too lazy or ignorant to track the phibs in the swamps, or trap them in their dens. Since the phibs have thinned away, and the living has become a hard one, there are men spoiled by so many fat years in Dankden that they no longer bother to venture into the knuckleroot groves."

"Don't listen to my daughter," Clabbus said, but his heart was not in his voice.

"It's madness."

She lowered her voice, clenching tight to Gorlen's black hand. "Yes, it is madness. These men hunt in Dankden, Gorlen. In the slums, the poor dens at the edge of town, in the grottos where the young and senile are often left to fend

for themselves. These so-called hunters prey on the halfbreeds. Half human! Our kin!"

"No, no, nooooo," Clabbus said, as if he were weary of denying it. "Father, you know it is so. What of the body we saw tonight? The very mother who bore that child carried the evidence here for you to see. She was no purebreed phib."

"But I didn't slay that child!" her father said with a racking sob.

Taian only stared at him and did not answer. When he slumped, face in his hands, she glanced sidelong at Gorlen. He moved out of the parlor, and a moment later she followed, shutting the door behind her.

"He must admit to himself what he's long suspected," she whispered. "But he's begun to do it, and I'm proud. Now he will do what needs to be done." She clenched Gorlen's hand. "Jezzle will be resumed to us."

"I wish there was something I could do," he said. "As a stranger here, I--"

"As a stranger, you make me see Dankden through your eyes. There's a sickness here which must be cured before it kills us all."

"Whatever you may need me for, please, rely on me," he said.

She started to take his hands, both of them, but at that moment they heard a groan from beyond the door. It opened and Clabbus appeared, all weakness banished from his eyes.

"All right," he said. "I'll talk to them. I'll make them take me where they went today."

"I know this is hard for you," Taian said.

"No . . . no, it is suddenly very easy. The fact that none of them has come to me, none has offered to take me to the place . . . they are disgusting to me now. They know where my boy is hidden, but they say nothing, more concerned with protecting their pathetic and illegal trade. I will find it very easy to convince them now."

He stalked past them down the hall, and Taian turned to look at Gorlen, her eyes flashing with pride. "You see?"

"Come along!" Clabbus called. "Your brother's waiting!"

Taian threw her arms around Gorlen, and then released him, running. Once again he was left to find his own way down the stairs.

Crouching low in the sloshing dark at the back of the boat, Gorlen wished for a phib skin of his own. It had begun to rain again -- and not a light rain, but a torrent. His boots were full, and where he knelt in half a foot of water, he might as well have been swimming alongside the boat. Meanwhile, Taian, likewise

crouched, poled them expertly down watery lanes of increasingly decrepit buildings, rotten sagging piles of swollen wood in comers of which the dimmest lights burned with a sodden, sullen glow. Figures huddled near the flames, wide-mouthed, their flesh streaked gray and blue and sometimes violent red. It was hard for him to believe anyone could live here. Though few other boats navigated the swirling streets, he sometimes saw rounded objects breaking the surface, blowing bubbles, sinking again. Swimmers, he realized. Boats, here, would be a luxury, and unnecessary for personal transport.

But there were two boats ahead of them, almost always lost from view in the shifting rain. Weak lanterns hung above the streets, tossed by the wind, most of them already doused or burned out; they squeaked and rattled on their rusted brackets. Taian's eyes were sharper than his, he supposed, for after they'd drifted and dodged through a series of abrupt turns, the curtains of water might part for a moment and he'd see the ones they followed. The hunters still didn't suspect their presence.

"Stay here until I return," Clabbus had told her as he climbed into his own boat on the dock outside the Phibby Inn. And nodding to Gorlen he'd added, "You make sure she does."

In the other boat were two men Clabbus had pulled almost bodily from the inn, hide hunters with sour faces, who had sneered but finally acceded to his threats. Gorlen and Taian had stood at his shoulder among the crowded tables of the inn. All the hunters gathered there to drink hot plapioc must have known why Clabbus had come, but these two had been the least pleased of all to see him.

Taian and Gorlen had watched them scull ahead, guiding Clabbus's boat away from the inn. The moment they cut round a comer, she'd leapt down into a docked boat and signaled him to follow.

"I don't trust him with them!" she said. "Are you coming?"

Gorlen gave an instant's thought to the owner of the boat she was untying, but figured that she knew the customs of Dankden far better than he. He jumped in beside her, losing his balance as she shoved away from the dock and toppling into the bottom of the boat; there he stayed, for the most part, while she tracked the hunters. Gorlen peered up at the roofs passing by, at the dripping caves and tottering ledges. A bit of polished stonework would have stood out like an entire golden palace; this was no place for a roving gargoyle to hide. Thus his visit to Dankden advanced his larger mission nothing; but it didn't trouble Gorlen that he had delayed his search for the sake of another. At least the dark stoniness of his hand was not spreading; in fact, although he couldn't be completely certain, he imagined that it had receded slightly, leaving a bit more flesh around his wristbones. This gave him some solace, but he was pleased to remain with the beautiful Taian in any case. She was strong and proud, and much to his liking. He stroked his stone hand with cold fingers of flesh, wondering if he might reduce the blackness still further tonight -- until

nothing remained but the tip of one finger. How many times had he reduced the gargoyle's affliction to one or two digits, and then, in a moment of recklessness, of greed or indulgence at the expense of another, felt the cold creep up in an instant and claim his hand again, threatening to swallow his forearm? He was not a true gargoyle; he could not survive as a being of pure stone. If ever the blackness touched his heart, he would die in an instant. Until he found the mineral beast who had thus cursed him, he must take care at every step to consider his motives, and never give in to so many of the whims that every other man obeyed without consequence. It would have been one thing if

the stone were directly linked to his own true heart, his conscience, his soul -- whatever one might call it. He would then have had a truer guide to his actions; he would have known in advance that he was disobeying his deepest nature. But the blackness was a gargoyle's flesh, and responded in a gargoyle fashion to his acts. While generally the gargoyle conscience overlapped with his

own, it was ultimately alien, unpredictable, unfathomable. Deeds he considered worthy might cam him another inch or two of blackness, while an act any human might have ruled treacherous would cause the blackness to recede.

He felt that in helping Taian he helped himself, and so far his stony hand had not hinted otherwise. If he could play a large enough role in freeing Jezzle, perhaps his fingers would freely wriggle again -- he might actually pluck the eduldamer for her pleasure tonight, instead of strumming it so brutally! He might stroke Taian's cheek with skin as soft as hers, instead of icy adamant.

Suddenly the boat darted sideways into an alley. Taian grabbed the corner of a slimy wall and clung to it, peering back into the street. Gorlen crept up beside

her. In the ever narrower streets the wind was largely cut off, except at certain intersections where it whirled the rain about as in a hurricane. He could see, not far off, both boats drifting. Clabbus brought his coracle closer

to the hunter's boat, and one of them stepped in beside him. They appeared to be

pointing at one of the buildings just ahead. The man alone in the hunter's boat

looked slowly around, until he was about to look directly at Taian and Gorlen. She pulled on his sleeve, and they ducked back out of sight.

"This must be the spot," she whispered. "Unless the halfbreeds come to meet them, they'll have to dive. I should have gone with my father --should have insisted. If he goes down, he leaves his boat in their care. They've already proven they can't be trusted."

"Perhaps we should announce ourselves, then," Gorlen said.

"He would be furious if he knew we'd followed!"

"If it would free him to dive, it might be worth the risk. I don't trust those two, either."

Taian put a finger to her lips, then slowly peered around the wall again.

Almost

immediately she ducked back.

"They're coming! Quick!"

She snatched up the pole and shoved them farther into the alley, deep into the dark, lapping recesses. A moment later, the hunter's boat shot past, one man

poling, the other looking back. Both were laughing. Gorlen waited for Clabbus to follow, but the men's laughter faded away, and still there was no sign of Taian's father.

The same thought must have come to them both at the same time, for even as Gorlen jumped to his feet, Taian pushed the boat forward. Once again he lost his balance and toppled -- this time overboard.

He surfaced, choking, to see Taian looking down the avenue in confusion. Paddling, he followed her eyes and saw Clabbus's boat floating empty in the middle of an intersection. Without a moment's indecision, she launched herself toward it. Gorlen graciously called, "Go ahead!"

His own progress in the stagnant streets, with one hand so heavy, was maddeningly slow. Nor did he wish to abandon his boots, though they slowed him still further. It was with some surprise, then, that after kicking along in Taian's wake, he paused for a moment's breathing space and let his feet sink -- and so touched bottom.

He stood on solid, if mucky, ground; the watercourse was no more than five feet deep; his mouth was just above water. Standing, he called to Taian, who now stared frantically into her father's coracle: "It's shallow!"

Taian wheeled around in her boat, looking at the dark decayed buildings as if they could tell her something. She cupped her hands to her mouth. "Father!" she cried. "Father!"

Gorlen too began to call: "Clabbus!"

But there was no answer, and no sign of the big man swimming. Surely even a trained diver could not have stayed under for so long.

"Clabbus!" he called again.

And at that instant, he became aware of countless wet faces watching them from the buildings all around, peering out of drowned doorways, out of water-filled rooms, looking down from the dripping frames of unrecognizable piles that might once have been cathedrals just as easily as warehouses.

There was a loud in-drawing of breath, an immense choking cough from somewhere inside those ruined structures.

"Father!" Taian cried.

"So that's who you are," said a voice, sounding near though Gorlen could not see its source. The deep-throated coughing went on and on; and it did indeed sound like Clabbus. "Playing games, all of you, trying to sneak in by some roundabout way? This isn't where we said to come."

"Please," Taian called. Gorlen edged slowly toward her boat. "It's not him you want -- he keeps to the swamps, he's proud of his skills, he respects you and your people! We only want his son -- my brother."

"There's plenty parents here who want their children back, sibs too," the voice said, low and harsh.

"We didn't harm them! The two who lured him here -- they and their kind did that!"

"While you looked the other way? What is it with humans? Why should we think it any kinder of you to hunt the pure amphibians, our swampland cousins? Why don't you go hunt apes instead?"

"There are those who do," Taian answered, her voice sinking almost to inaudibility. Gorlen heard it because he now stood beside the boat, his left hand on its rim. He had no clear impression of who addressed them, or where the speaker stood. None of the phib faces he saw seemed to be moving; they all stared impassively, yet full of unmistakable hate.

"Excuse me," Gorlen said loudly, though it was his least wish to draw all that amphibian attention to himself. "Perhaps, as a stranger in Dankden, a more impartial party here, I can be of some service to both sides."

"Impartial?" said the sneering voice. "What human is impartial? You travel with hunters, the very ones who slay our children and our elders, the ones who rob our clutches to cure our flayed hides."

"Fortune alone brought me into the gracious presence of Clabbus and his children; I might as easily have ended up among your folk, had I come into Dankden from the swampy edge of town. Nor am I completely human; I am, like you, a halfbreed."

There were cries of disbelief from many gray-tongued mouths. Gorlen raised his right hand to silence them.

"My father was a gargoyle!" he cried. "I have all my life observed human affairs as an alien, an outcast. Only the kindest humans have welcomed me into their homes, as Clabbus has. I would speak for him and his children." "They are part of the corruption here! What hunter is not?"

"I cannot answer that, nor can I argue politics all night. I suggest some action be taken -- some solution sought."

Clabbus suddenly let out a groan. "Those hunters tried to drown me here, and make it look like your work," came his muffled voice. "What other evidence do you need that I am their enemy?"

"That does not make you our friend."

"I only wish . . . for all of us . . . peace. That we may live together. I swear I'll do my part to stop the illegal traffic in halfbreed hides. I am not without some influence in Dankden."

"That is so," the speaker replied. "Why do you think we were so pleased to have your son delivered to us?"

Gorlen stepped away from the boat, his black hand in the air, mud sucking his boots from his feet. Well, let them go. He felt more agile barefoot, and he had the feeling he was going to be in liquid for awhile.

"Take me," he said. "Let me visit the boy. Let Clabbus and his daughter, who are more familiar with the workings of the hide trade in Dankden, go back among their people and confront your murderers. I will be your hostage, with Clabbus's son."

He caught Taian staring at him; he could not read her face, but he could feel something happening to his hand . . . a spreading tingle where before he had felt nothing.

Not now! he thought.

He quickly shoved his hand beneath the water, aware that some discussion was going on in the ruins around him. Clabbus's voice was part of it. Finally he heard the hunter say, "Of course I swear it! I would do so even if you did not hold my boy."

A moment later, Clabbus emerged from the shadows, sloshing toward the boats. Taian poled toward him, knelt and put her arms out; he was covered with waterweed and mud, but didn't bother to rinse himself. He clambered in quickly, embraced her, and turned as if it were an afterthought to Gorlen. "We'll have you out soon," he said. "Thank you, Gorlen."

Gorlen started to raise his hand in acknowledgment, but saw as it broke water that the blackness had already receded halfway toward the first knuckle of his thumb. He was doing far too good a job.

"I'm grateful I can help," he said, keeping his hand down.

Clabbus tossed a looped rope to his coracle, drew it in and tied the two boats together; then he seized the pole and started moving away from the intersection, down the avenue that had brought them here. Taian stared back, white faced, as if she were in shock. "Be brave!" she said.

The rain was worsening. Gorlen wiped it from his eyes, left-handed, and blinked around him into the gloom, so poorly lit by swinging lamps. He waited for some one or all of the amphibians to move, to walk forward out of the shadows and seal the bargain. Instead, cold fingers clutched abruptly at his legs, his arms, his shoulders; swarming over him from all sides, they drew him under, giving him scarcely time to draw a breath. He should have known they moved faster underwater.

Thoughtfully, they brought him up for air every now and then, though never as often as he would have liked. He willed himself to relax, to let them drag him

unresisting, to save his breath until he felt them rising, when he prepared to gasp as large a lungful as he could. The worst part of it was that gradually the

liquid grew thicker and thicker, until they were dragging him through mud. It closed on his chest, as if he were being squeezed, and he could never quite breathe as deeply as he needed to. And then panic began to overtake him, so that

he could no longer keep himself calm, but began lashing out and trying to hold himself above the surface for longer periods -- though his struggling simply made it harder for him to get the air he needed.

Finally, they held him under far too long. His struggles mounted until, sparks exploding in his eyes, he began to lose consciousness. It was then that he felt

rain on his face, washing the mud away, and he sucked in a desperate draft of air; and then another, and another. He opened his eyes and saw above him the intricately tangled silhouettes of plants. The phibs were towing him through water, among enormous looming trees. It was not only rain that washed him, but water pouring from the leafy canopy. Between breaks in the leaves he saw breaks

in the clouds, and once again the night seemed luminous; at least, that is, until the swamp grew denser and closed in from above. He supposed they were wise

not to keep him in the town; for all he knew, Clabbus's words might simply spur

the hunters of Dankden to a genocidal frenzy, send them poling down en masse to

the watery ghettos, descending on all the wet lairs they suspected of holding treacherous halfbreeds, to relieve them a//of their hides. . . . Gorlen's life wouldn't be worth much as ransom at that point, nor Jezzle's.

Without warning, they dragged him under again. He went down sputtering, coughing

up the bit of air he'd chanced to have in his lungs. This time they were definitely pulling him deep down; he didn't know how he could hold out. Then they shifted their grip on him, pushing him up, up into air -- but this was a stifling atmosphere, clammy and oily, with a rotten edge that smelled as though

the swamp were spoiling. He struck out with a hand and felt a muddy bank; they shoved him onto it. He lay there without moving, blinking to see if he could find any trace of clouds or stars -- but the sky was black as a cave.

A cave, he thought. Close enough. This must be one of their dens.

He raised his hands to see if he could find a ceiling, but there was nothing. From the sloshing sounds and the hollowness of the voices around him, he knew he

was in a closed chamber of some kind. He remembered what Taian had told him about never knowing what poisonous creatures might be inches away; remembered that the hunters did exactly this for their livings, and shivered. He was thoroughly chilled anyway. He wondered how well they knew the needs of humans, if they would allow him to get warm and dry somehow.

"Hello?" he ventured, to see if they would object to his questions. There was no

reply, only further splashing. The voices had ceased. He held his breath and listened, but heard nothing more. They'd dropped him here and gone away.

Gorlen huddled for awhile on the wet bank, but as he grew colder, he decided that movement would be wiser. He went onto all fours, crawling away from the

water, but had gone no more than a few feet when he bumped into a wall -- a slimy mass of tightly tangled cords and cables textured like rubbery bark. He followed the wall until it led him back to water, within several body lengths. He could not imagine this was a true home -- not even an amphibian's. Nor did it bode well for his comfort. He had to clench his jaws to keep his teeth from chattering.

Suddenly there was a bubbling sound, and a choking breath. Coughing. Splashing. Gorlen drew back to the wall, trying to see anything, but failing. He didn't need vision, though, to recognize a boy's curses.

"Jezzle?" The boy grew quiet. He could hear him paddling quietly, then dripping as he hauled himself onto the bank.

"Is . . . is that you? The bard?"

"Gorlen, yes." He moved toward the voice, put out his hand and felt the boy's face; he tightened his grip on Jezzle's shoulder.

"But how'd you get here?"

Quickly Gorlen told him what had happened since Jezzle's abduction. "They'll work something out," he promised. "I'm sure of it."

"Well, I'm not waiting around," Jezzle said. "If they think they can hold a hunter. . . ."

"Jezzle, be calm, be patient. It's what your father and sister would want."

"My pa hunts phibs, he doesn't bargain with them! You can't trust the halfbreeds, you idiot, they're worst of all. We've gotta get out of here before they come back and kill us."

"I don't think that's what they had in mind. Why would they have left us here if they meant to kill us?"

"Hell, nobody understands the phibs -- they're stupid animals. You'll see what I mean when we swim out of here."

"Swim -- where?"

"Down, out, and up. I do this all the time -- swim into empty dens for practice, you see? This is nothing to me. Are you coming?" "I -- I can't let you do that. I gave my word." "You can't stop me, can you?"

He didn't give Gorlen time to answer. He heard the boy hit the water. Gorlen pictured Taian's reaction when she learned that he had let her brother go alone into the swamp. Try explaining diplomacy to a rash youth. . . .

Gorlen stood clumsily at the edge of the bank, filled his lungs with air, and dived. He felt relatively sure of the direction by which he'd entered the den

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at least, he felt sure until he found himself swimming into thickets of submerged rootwood. He clung to the roots in order to keep himself from succumbing to his one true desire, which was to bob back to the surface of the enclosed pool and await the return of those who held his life in their webbed hands. Resisting the temptation of a passive captivity, he squeezed the air from

his lungs and dragged himself deeper, going hand over hand, flesh over stone. His head began to throb. Between the roots were spaces wide enough to accommodate him. One of them was the passage the phibs had taken. He thrust blindly through one promising opening and stroked desperately toward the surface, face tipped up so that he could suck air the instant he surfaced. He was discouraged, to say the least, when he plowed full-face into a root cluster.

Thinking to swim around it, he struck out for open water -but found only more thick wooden cables enclosing him. Gorlen saw clearly that he was engaged in the

root mass. From the throbbing pressure of his sinuses, he estimated that the surface was ten feet above -- it might as well have been ten leagues. He clawed

at the roots, telling himself he would not panic. The water, black until now, began to fill with streaming lights. A distant liquid music swelled in his ears

as though an operatic riverboat were passing overhead. This developed into a rich, throaty vibration, a catfish purr. According to those who had been revived

from the edge of watery death, drowning was almost peaceful once you gave in and

inhaled the waters, once the body surrendered and let the soul drift free. Gorlen clung to this last hope as he opened his mouth and inhaled --

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Warm, fishy air.

He nearly choked. Cold lips out of nowhere pressed tight to his own. Opening his

eyes in disbelieving terror, he saw nothing. Nor could he move; something powerful bound his arms to his sides, albeit without hurting him. Reflexively he

breathed in deep, then deeper still, unable to believe that there was air enough

to fill him. There was a rich taste in his lungs, an undercurrent to the clammy

essence, some perfume that flooded his brain and seeped down his nerves like a whisper, nudging him with secret knowledge, eking out revelation on such a fine

level that he felt his atoms were conversing with a stranger's atoms. The mouth

sealed to his own began a slight suction, encouraging his exhalation; he gave up

the stale air gladly. On the second inhalation B shallower, less desperate B his

blinded eyes lit up with a vision of the swamp, all its tangled waterways cast through him like a glowing net whose intricacies were as homey and familiar as the sound of his own pulse. He knew his location: near the sea, not far from Dankden. Dankden! Human town! At the thought of the place, he felt a violent urge to flee at any cost, to swim and keep swimming until he had put that loathsome blot far behind him. An evil paradox posed itself in the same instant:

there was literally nowhere left to run. The swamps, once vast enough to

remain
uncharted even by their most ancient inhabitants, had dwindled alarmingly
within
the span of several generations; encroached on by human dwellings, drained and
poisoned and tamed by air-breathers, the swamps had been reduced to a few last
drops.

Fear and frustration filled Gorlen; he drank them in even as he withdrew from
the verge of death. His heart rate slowed. He was sinking. Dropping free of
the
root-clutches. He continued to breathe slowly, his savior somehow producing
fresh air for him, none of it laced so powerfully with the visions of the
first
few breaths. His toes sank into bottom slime. His captor puffed him full of
air,
gently closed his lips to seal it in, then launched him up. He paddled weakly,
limp but buoyant. Moments later he broke the surface, tasting wind and rain
and
a vast open night. He looked down but the black water betrayed nothing.
Thinking
of what was down there, and what might surprise him here, he called quietly,
"Jezze!"

The boy didn't answer in words; instead, after a moment, Gorlen felt a hand on
his arm. Then came Jezze's whisper: "Good, you came. Now we have to find our
way toward the sea. From there we're home free."

"There's an open channel just there," Gorlen said. "If we can get into it, the
tide will carry us out."

"But the tide's still at peak," Jezze said. "You can't even feel the swirl in
here -- and when it starts out, it just makes false eddies."

"Don't worry," Gorlen said, sensing the swamp around him like a living map. "I
know what I'm doing."

"How could you know? You're a bard! Even my father's been betrayed by the
suck."

Gorlen quelled a momentary impulse to share his experience with the boy. It
was
important to waste no time; but more than that, his rescue seemed sublime,
magical. He did not think he could find the words for it . . . not yet.

"We can't stay where we are," he said. "You might as well have remained in the
den, if you weren't willing to risk the tides."

The boy fell silent.

"If you don't want to follow me, fine," Gorlen said. "But I'm going now --
toward
the sea."

He began to swim in what he knew was the right direction, and Jezze --without
a
stronger opinion -- followed.

As he swam, he felt no fear of the waters around him. Everything seemed quite
different since his entry into the swamps, when every shadow had threatened.
He

knew there were dangers here, but he also knew how to recognize them. The hardest thing of all was to keep heading toward the dark spot of treachery that

ravenously fed on the edges of the swamp: the city of Dankden. In his heart, Gorlen wanted only to flee the place; but he owed the boy a safe journey home. He still had hopes of seeing Taian again, and of achieving some kind of reconciliation among the phibs and their hunters.

They moved into steadily wider channels, the trees ever thinner around them, until at last they emerged in a wide tidal flat, with open sea ahead of them, and juts of mist-hung rock standing up beyond the waves.

"I can't believe it," Jezzle said. "I know this place. How did you find it?"

"Gargoyles have a faultless sense of direction," he lied. "The curse carries with it a few advantages."

They followed the treeline, sometimes clambering over sandbars as the tide receded, but mainly keeping to the trees. Gorlen's sense of dread increased as they approached Dankden, which threw rays of sickly light out over the flats far

ahead. It was a relief when he sighted a pure silvery glimmer some small distance into the swamp, among the trees, an image which made his heart sing with hope for reasons he did not fully understand, but which had something to do

with the clammy breath of life he had received. "Look there!" he called to Jezzle, and started off into the swamp until he reached the object of so much joy. This was a cluster of silvery wet globes, piled among the knotty strands of

a knuckleroot, barely visible as the moon peeked out from the slight gap between clouds and horizon.

"How -- how did you spot these?" Jezzle said. Gorlen smiled inwardly at having impressed the boy with his superior knowledge of the swamps, although he did not

yet understand exactly what he had found. Kneeling closer, he saw small swimmers

inside each of the spheres. They seemed to sing to him in the silvery light.

He glanced over at Jezzle and saw that the boy was quietly, quickly stabbing the

globes with his knife. He had already cut into dozens.

"Fertile ones, and perfectly ripe!" Jezzle said. "If I only had a net to drag them home right now!"

"What are you doing?" Gorlen seized the boy's elbow, but Jezzle tore away, confused.

"What do you mean? I'm fixing them. I'll come back tomorrow for the harvest, but

I can't let them grow any larger, can I?"

"Why . . . why not?"

"They'll be ruined for curing, you idiot!"

"Curing?"

"What did you think they were for? I can't wait to see pa's face when I bring him here."

Gorlen remembered the leathery globes Taian had tossed on the smoking fires that afternoon, to give the hides their finish. He'd thought they were vegetables!

Jezzle began puncturing more of the spheres. Gorlen leapt on him from behind, pulled the boy back and flung him down in the mud.

"What's wrong with you?" Jezzle said, spitting with fury.

Gorlen didn't answer. He stared down at the swimming shapes trapped in the few undamaged globes remaining. A generation of pure phibs, massacred. Sickness filled him. He rounded on Jezzle, saw a greed much larger than one boy -- and held his tongue.

"There's no time for this," he said in a deadened voice, seizing Jezzle by his elbow and dragging him to his feet. "It's more important to get you home safe to your father."

"You're no hunter," Jezzle said.

"Give me your knife."

"What?"

Gorlen twisted Jezzle's wrist till the knife dropped. He stooped to pick it up, then knelt to press the tip against one of the spheres.

"Watch my hand," he said.

"Your hand -- hey, the stone's nearly gone. What happened?"

"It comes and goes. Now watch and you'll see why I'm no hunter. Why I cannot kill."

The knife blade quivered, sending ripples across the wet spherical surface. The small shape inside stirred and seemed to move toward the point, as if it were a parent. Gorlen waited; he pressed slightly, and waited again. Waited for the advance of stone, but felt nothing. Pressed harder, till thick clear liquid began to spill down the blade toward his fingers -- fingers that steadfastly refused to turn to stone.

He yanked the knife away, hoping it was not too late. "I don't understand," he said. The egg continued to leak.

"Give me that," Jezzle said, snatching at the knife. He then buried it in the egg and pulled it out again. The swimmer was dead. "You only wounded it, Gorlen. At least be quick."

Gorlen stared at his hand, the black tip that refused to claim more of his finger. "You wretched rock," he whispered. "You gargoyle conscience!"

"You're right, though," Jezzle said. "We should get back; these'll keep

overnight."

This time it was Jezzle who dragged Gorlen to his feet.

"Are you okay? You look sick."

"I'll be all right," Gorlen said.

"I said it before: You're no hunter."

The moon dipped below the horizon, consigning them once more to darkness by the time they had reached Dankden from the seaward side. At low tide, Dankden looked like a different town completely. The streets were draining toward the ocean and the swamps; lower tiers of stepping stones and even muddy cobbles were revealed; fish flopped and eels curled in accidental pools. The stilts beneath most buildings were thickly furred with brown and green weeds; clusters of gold bulbs dangled from the pilings; barnacles hugged up tight inside their conical shells, though it did them little good when the harvesters came at them with hammers and tongs. All this was lit -- in addition to the lamps -- by a leaping orange light that played upon the low clouds, outlining the rooftops, coming from some distant part of town. It was with a sinking sense of failure that Gorlen recognized the tossing glow. He had seen more than one city in flames.

"That's coming from the phibby slums," Jezzle said as they sloshed along. "I knew my pa wouldn't let them off."

"It couldn't have been Clabbus," Gorlen assured him. "He has enemies, you know."

"Hunters stick together! Yeeeah!" Jezzle broke off running toward the center of the conflagration.

Alone, Gorlen moved more slowly, like one doomed. If there was anything he had learned in this life, it was when to leave. He would claim his eduldamer, purchase a new pair of boots, and set out. Perhaps a farewell kiss to Taian, more likely not. Even she -- lovely, sensitive girl -- tossed living phib eggs on the fire and wondered why each year the swamps held fewer phibs. Nothing he did here would matter in the least. He had not managed even to play the part of a hostage.

There were plenty of folk in the streets; they seemed more merry than concerned, as if the fire were the main event at a festival. The tide would return, and it was starting to rain again. They, at least, were safe.

He asked the way to Clabbus's house, and eventually found a man who knew the hunter. When he pounded on the outer door, the landlord recognized him from earlier in the evening, and let him in to find his way up the dark stairs

which
he now knew he would never climb often enough to master.

In Clabbus's apartment, the smoke-stench of curing hides repulsed him, but he pushed through them in search of his belongings, which he had left near the fireplace. As he straightened, his bags slung over his shoulder, his heart jumped with surprise.

Taian stood in the doorway. She was wrapped in her phib hide, pale face streaked with mud. She seemed shocked to see him.

"I -- I've brought your brother back," he said.

"Something horrible has happened!"

"I guessed as much. But Jezzle's safe. I think he went to find your father."

Moving like a woman carved of knucklewood, Taian crossed the room and sank down in Clabbus's chair before the coals.

"We went to the Phibby Inn," she said. "It was a riot there. Everyone believed the phibs had murdered my father. They were gathering to descend on the halfbreeds, to destroy them in their slums. When we appeared, it should have stopped them; they should have seen how they'd been lied to. But . . . it didn't even matter. They didn't want the truth. They wanted to do what they'd been set on all along. We couldn't turn them aside. They didn't even care that you and Jezzle might be out there."

Gorlen sank down next to her. He put his right hand on her neck, barely noticing that even his fingers were flesh now, flesh almost down to their glossy black tips.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I -- I came back for some things," she said. "Then I'm leaving."

"I understand. Where will you go?"

She shook her head. "I can't stay here, that's all I know. Father can live with them or fight them as he wishes. He can take care of Jezzle, in any case. The boy wants nothing but to hunt." She turned to Gorlen, her eyes wet. "They murdered halfbreeds in their homes, unless they were fast enough to flee to the swamps. But they're not full phibs, Gorlen! They're dependent on Dankden. They can't survive out in the swamps, not for long, not anymore. Even calling them halfbreeds is unfair. They're people. People like us!"

He pushed back her hood and stroked her hair, at last feeling the warmth in his fingers, flexing them in amazement. If he could only hold onto this feeling forever, the knowledge that he was doing the right thing no matter how hard (although at this moment it felt so easy). . . .

"It's all right," he said.

She hid her face in her hands. "I saw -- I saw a mother and her hatchlings -- I mean, her children. She was so afraid that she was tearing them prematurely from their eggs, giving them the breath of life, and pushing them into the canal, hoping some few of them might swim to freedom. I saw them struggle and choke; they floated past while I stood there, unable to save a one of them."

"The breath . . . of life?" he said.

She looked at him, as if noticing him for the first time. "Phibs, even halfbreeds, are born underwater," she said. "They take their first breath from their mother, who carries fresh air just for them, enough to get them to the surface. But these were too young . . . undeveloped lungs . . ."

"Good Goddess," Gorlen whispered. He could taste the fishy life-giving air again, the breath that had saved him in the root cage, and imbued him with an inner, living map of the swamp. Closing his eyes, he could sense the swamp so near . . . could sense also where it once had been in its primordial state, claiming the very soil where Clabbus's home now stood. He carried the swamp inside him, as if some compass needle had been activated in his head. The phibs must have had some homing instinct, a gift from their mothers--would have it even once their home had been destroyed. And now it was his as well, to the limited extent his humanity allowed. Wherever he went, he would feel the swamp somewhere behind him, dying, doomed, crying out . . . until it was silenced. And even then, he would hear its murdered ghost weeping.

He opened his eyes when he felt Taian lean against him. She was sobbing. His preternaturally sensitive fingers moved in her hair, feeling every strand. She was cold, and his first impulse was to warm her, but he was colder still, and wet from the swamps. They moved together, closer to the glowing coals.

"I must leave," she said in his ear. "Before my father returns. I must go now, before I lose my determination."

"Yes," he said, but his heart was quickening, and he sensed that hers was too. "I'll go with you. I know the roads."

"No," she said. "I must go alone. It's the only way."

His hands, both warm, began to rove.

"Please, Gorlen. I -- I can't wait. I can't take the time."

Gorlen bit back words. He wanted to stroke her, to feel her nakedness beneath her cloak. He wanted the warmth between them to build to a fire; he wanted the time to spend with her, but there was none.

"Please," she said, but he couldn't bear to let her go. He reached for her as she spun away; reached, knowing that if he could grab her wrist, she would not resist him. Reached --

And felt his hand turn to stone.

"Ohhhh. . . ."

It was a weary, drawn-out groan. From across the room, having easily eluded a

hand that could not grasp, Taian looked back with concern. "What is it?
Gorlen,
you understand, don't you?"

"Of course," he said, pulling black stone fingers back into his sodden sleeve, hiding his affliction. "It's nothing. Go, now. I'll explain to your father as best I can. It's your choice. He'll understand, Taian."

She hesitated.

"Go on," he said. "Quick! While you're determined!"

Taian smiled, blew him a kiss, and then he heard her on the stairs. He jumped to his feet and ran down the hall to the outer balcony. He watched her walk out onto the street, anonymous in her dark cloak of phib hide, in the rain, clutching a traveling sack. Low-tide was short-lived; already the streets were awash.

"Good luck, Taian," he said quietly. "May we meet again, when we both have the time."

A cold gust kept carrying rain over the balcony, but he was already as wet as it was possible to get. He looked at the dried globes stacked by the smoker, and shivered in his soggy cloak of common cloth. Common cloth, yes, but from that moment forward he would never wish for anything finer.

He drew back his damp sleeve and raised his right hand. Obdurate, stony, inky adamant fixed in the act of grasping.

"You fool," he said, as if it were something apart from himself.