

Childrun

by Marc Laidlaw

Over the course of our fifty-nine years, *F&SF* has published quite a few stories about bards, including Manly Wade Wellman's tales of John the Balladeer and Phyllis Eisenstein's Alaric stories. If Gorlen Vizenfirthe and his stone hand didn't come to mind at once when those other bards were named, it's probably because his two previous *F&SF* appearances slipped by you. (They were in our Oct/Nov. 1995 and Sept. 1996 issues if you want to look them up.) We're pleased to welcome him back after his long absence ... and we promise that you'll be seeing more of him soon.

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The first thing Gorlen heard, as he mounted toward the walled village at the top of the rise, was the sound of children, their voices tumbling down the rutted track to greet him long before he saw a single villager. This meant his first sight of the pinched gray roofpeaks and ochre chimneyspikes above the wall came accompanied by the peculiar mix of dread and longing that he always felt at the sound of children playing. Were they laughing in delight or screaming in terror? It was an old question, and in the first and most memorable instance—when the correct answer had actually mattered—he had guessed wrong. He had lived with that mistake ever since. It had been his sister's voice then, yes, and he had thought her carried away by laughter; but it was something far different that had carried her off to a place he had no real desire to follow. He hadn't understood his mistake until he'd heard the sound of his childhood home, nestled in a sandy cove along the Pavinine Coast, being crushed beneath the weight of a gargantoise that had chosen that spot and those tarry timbers for the construction of its spitdaub-and-driftwood broodpile, where it would lay its oozy eggs and nest and doze for seven days. The cries of his parents he never heard, although they must have made some noise before the witless immensity smothered them. After that, he heard only the crashing of waves, the snoring of the huge armored amphibian. It was no wonder the sound of unseen children caused a surge of emotion, for they recalled the very instant of his orphaning.

That was one song he had never written, it occurred to him. A theme for which he could imagine no suitable tune to strum.

Why had he only thought of this now?

Perhaps it was the name of the village, crudely scratched in a marker of weathered wood, stabbed into the rocky soil at the side of the path:

CHILD RUN

A designation based upon an ancient misspelling, enshrined by years? A founder's surname? Or perhaps a place with long runs like those for kenneled hounds, devoted to the cartwheels of lively tykes? Or it might be based upon some other etymology, a rustic homophone, completely unrelated to youngsters.

At any rate it was a name, and the walled village promised rest, food, some coins to be earned sitting by a tavern fire strumming his eduldamer. He had been many days in these drear defiles, spat upon from unseen heights by green sleet and mossy gravel, wondering if the trail he'd picked would ever lead him anywhere. He'd found no sign of the hard black mineral supposedly mined by gargoyle sculptors in these mountains, which meant he might as well turn back. But he needed replenishment. Green mold covered his remaining bread and cheese, rendering them indistinguishable from one another. He prayed that even if Childrun's folk were illiterate, there might be some seasoned chefs among them. This thought quickened his step.

The city was gated, far from unusual in these lands; and the gates were locked, which was somewhat stranger. Childrun had the look of a place besieged, although it was far from apparent what it might contain worth subjecting to attrition.

He eventually discovered a small bolt-hole plugged with a wooden block on which he rapped as hard as he could. Given that his right hand was entirely formed of polished black stone, this amounted to a fair bit of noise.

After a moment, the block was withdrawn and a lumpish face appeared narrowly framed in the stone slit. "*Ull?*"

"Gorlen Vizenfirthe, my good man, wandering bard, practiced mainly in eduldamer but not afraid to admit the occasional smokebag solo is also something of a specialty, provided you supply one. I can hardly carry the apparatus on my own, you understand. I travel alone and lightly equipped, seeking only secure lodgings and permission to regale your neighbors with such tunes as I have collected along my route or devised myself."

"*Owzzat? Grrroff!*"

"Perhaps I might" (here, unstrapping his eduldamer, swinging it down so it lay across his abdomen, and striking the keys sharply with the side of

his black stone hand to bring out a bright harmonic like a shaft of sunlight cutting between the darkening mountain ridges) “offer a sample of select favorites?” But before he could get more than a few bars into “The Laggard’s Weal,” the wooden chock snugged straight back into its slot. The face was gone.

Gorlen took a step back, two, and looked up at the wall that kept him from his potential customers. Appealing to the guard was anything but; this was not a soul he could hope to touch with music, or not his brand of it anyway. But still, down from the heights came the sound of children, and he suspected that if their sound could reach him out here, his might reach them in there.

Leaning against the threshold, he began to play with abandon—not a drinking song such as he might have employed to win the guard’s affection, nor a sophisticated tirundel, but a simple cheerful melody, accompanied at full voice. It was one part of a rondel, incomplete, fairly begging for other voices to join it. It was the aural equivalent of a sugarfrost vendor’s cart bell, jingling down the lanes of a sweaty summer city. Not a child had been born who could keep from running to such a sound.

And indeed, there was a hitch in the juvenile clamor. The screams and shouts of the children faltered at one pass, as if all had been playing together in the same courtyard; as if they had heard the music swirling and fallen silent in unison. He softened the rondel a notch, so they would have to move closer if they wished to hear him better. Gorlen kept one ear attuned for the sound of footfall; and although his ears were keen indeed, he heard no rush of children. What he heard instead was something harsher—a raw braying sound, coarse and greedy, that went on and on. He heard the children no longer. Perhaps they had all run inside, safe into their houses, away from this horrible din. His own playing, he realized, had also fallen off ... although involuntarily. He bent his whole being toward making something of the sound, and even gave serious consideration to turning and striding quickly away from Childrun.

For better or worse, the decision was made for him by the movement of the sealed gate, which now swung outward, opening. The same porridgey face he’d seen before, framed by a thick rough swaddling of coarse black wool, in cowl and cloak, swam up between the halves of the gate. “*Marmsesgetin.*”

Gorlen parsed this sentence as best he could, wondering at first if he had strayed farther than he’d realized in recent days, then recognizing a semblance of known speech in the dialect. He had not traveled these

mountains before, but the speech betrayed some similarity to that of regions he knew well.

“Ah ... I thank you,” he replied, stepping swiftly through the gate, only to be drawn up short by the sight of “Marm.”

“I do apologize,” said the pale young woman in her bright taut cap and beige floral skirts. There were ribbons about her head, and these in combination with the design of the headdress tipped him instantly to her profession. “Are you truly a traveling bard? For if so, you see, what luck! Please say that was you I heard playing the eduldamer. And was that not a round I heard? It has been so long. Please say it was you.”

“I will say almost anything you wish,” Gorlen responded, “and more besides, if you will give me the honor and pleasure of playing for you and your charges this evening.”

Her eyes grew wide. They were very green except where flecked with bits of copper. Also coppery were the strands of hair that mingled with the ribbons of her cap.

“Am I correct in my intuition, Marm? That you are indeed the schoolmistress of this fortunate town?”

“You are indeed,” she said. “But fortunate in what way?”

“Why, to have you in such a position.”

Gorlen felt himself becoming carried away, and when she blushed, he sensed where this day would almost certainly lead him. So as not to leach away his luck, he bowed humbly and said, “Please do not think me untoward. I have seen caps of similar style in other towns, and I believe those ribbons, almost as pretty as your eyes, each indicate a formal mastery of educational subjects. So many, in fact, that I must put myself in the position of envying your students.”

“Well,” she said, with a sudden darkening of demeanor, “there is nothing to envy in that regard, as I fear you soon will see. For these ribbons, Mr....”

“The Vizenfirthe is too unwieldy. Please do not trouble yourself with it. ‘Gorlen’ is the name I long to hear you utter.”

She gave him a sidelong glance, askance, and slipping her hand

through his arm, began to lead him up a dim lane as the gate clanged shut behind them. “You are rather forward, Mr. Vizenfirthe.”

He tore his eyes away from a waxy red cylindrical talisman that hung from a leather cord around her neck, like a stubby scarlet wand marked with crescent imprints. Recalling himself, he said, “Ah! How lovely that sounds when you say it! I had always thought it a ghastly, bulky inconvenience of a name, but on your lips....”

She giggled. “Please. This way.”

“Do I then have you to thank for my admittance?”

“Indeed. I heard your music. I could hardly let that pass. Although I fear you may end up wishing I had. Oh, I hope you do not resent me in the end.”

“Unlikely. I will go so far as to commit myself to an emphatic *impossible!* I am here to play for you and all who’ll hear me.”

“Thank you. Thank you so very much.” And she squeezed his arm with great appreciation.

It was about this time, as she led him up through steep winding streets, through many turnings that would have defied even a concentrated attempt at memorization, that he noticed how closely they were being watched. Not from every doorway, stoop or window, but from most of them; from half-ajar doors, from shabby curtains flicked momentarily aside, from peepholes and deep within alleys. Everyone stared as he passed, and he was immensely grateful for her company—her protection. He realized:

“Great goodness! I have divined your occupation, but not your name!”

“Ansylla,” she whispered, in a voice that acknowledged his fear for his safety was not unjustified. “Ansylla Chordacio.”

“Let me speculate, Ansylla, that strangers are not often seen in this town; and when they are, hardly welcomed.” This certainly put holes in his plans for sitting freely in a tavern. In such an environment of hostile suspicion, one might find nothing but resident inns.

“It was not always thus, I regret to say, but recently ... over the last some odd years—in fact most of the time since my own arrival—it has been more and more as you perceive.”

“You are not then a native?”

“Dear no. I was born in Riverend—”

“Ah, the Spiral Bridge!”

“You know it? Splendid! You will almost certainly have more recent tales of my home than I can recollect ... I hope you will share them this evening.”

“My pleasure. But how came you—”

“After my education, in the Academy at Currish, I was hard pressed to find any post. I confess this was the first that came my way, and I had not the luxury of waiting for a more glamorous assignment.”

“Very pragmatic.”

“So I have been told. If I were more idealistic I might not have come, I suppose. Or I might have left here by now. But I feel a certain devotion, to my charge. If not for me, well ... what then?”

Her face had grown so thin that he did not wish to push her down this avenue. They were near the top of the town now, and coming toward a tall steepled building built of unpainted boards, its shingles warped and green with moss, of a design so different from that of the residences that he took it for the schoolhouse.

“Now,” she said, “you have gratefully offered to play for us, so I must first make the offer worth your while. If you will perform, then I can offer you board at the school. There is plenty of room, and more than enough food.”

“You not only educate but feed your pupils as well?”

“The townsfolk provide ample fare, as you will see. Now, if we have time before the meal, it might be best....”

The square before the schoolhouse was busy with villagers coming and going. On a long table before the front door they were laying out gifts of food like offerings. Pies and loaves of fresh baked bread; pies and more pies. It did not seem a particularly balanced diet for the needs of growing children, although certainly it was to the taste of any child. And although Gorlen himself these days preferred savories to sweets, the sight of such a

sprawling dessert evoked childhood fantasies of living in a world made entirely of edible treats. Had he come on some festival day?

Whatever the occasion, it would be hard to imagine a greater contrast than that between the grim, shifty-eyed burghers with mouths like twisted scars, and the merry cream-slathered trifles they set by the board, before darting off resentfully into the shadows.

Ansylla gave a short sigh and took a large ring of keys from her flowery pocket, then wrestled briefly with the massive front door. The villagers tipped their hats to her and pretended not to notice Gorlen, who began to contemplate the potential for an outdoor recitation. However, he did not wish to be rewarded entirely in pies.

“Would you mind?” she asked, balancing massive pastries in each hand. Gorlen, not wishing to draw attention just yet to his immobile right hand, slipped his wrist through the handle of a basket loaded with sweetpuffs and fruit tarts, while gathering up a twiggy bundle of brittle sugar-faggots in the other. He went behind her down a dark hall, then out into a somewhat brighter classroom with hazed windows on its far wall. School desks, stools, and benches were pushed back to make room for a long communal table. She set her burden down on the large table, then returned to the street to bring in the rest of the pastries left by the townsfolk. Gorlen followed her example.

Only when they had retrieved the last pasty, and shut the door to the street, did he realize it had been some time since he had heard the children shrieking. He presumed they had been called in by their parents, but the conduct of their teacher made him wonder if they might be bent to their studies. In which case, who was instructing or supervising them? And quite apart from the laughter, what of the horrid sound that had interrupted it in the first place?

The walls of the classroom were lined with faded drawings. Whatever children had drawn these were apparently limited to pigments mined from the dreary mountains that surrounded them. Smudgy strokes of cinnabar and lead, drab yellows, fingerpaintings done in mud. All color had leached from the place. Gorlen had never spent any of his own childhood inside a schoolhouse, but he had seen plenty of them in his travels, and it was rare to find one not done up in colors meant to match the cheer of the children. Here, he saw tackheads holding nothing but shreds of old torn paper, imperfectly removed. He wondered what the children he'd heard could have found to laugh about in such confines.

“Now,” she said tentatively, taking his elbow again, “bring your instrument, if you will, and come through here.”

At the far side of the classroom were two small dingy windows, and centered between them, a door. He thought he heard the murmur of voices on the other side, children in conversation, muffled whispering. But as Ansylla put her hand on the knob and turned it, as the old hardware creaked, the voices stifled instantly.

He found himself staring out into a flagstone courtyard, completely surrounded by windowed walls, with one antique, etiolated willow mourning in a corner.

In the center of the court, where the children must have once come to frolic between lessons, was but one child.

The destination of all those pies was suddenly obvious. The boy was immense, his eyes small and black, his mouth wide enough to more than earn the appellation “batrachian.” A few strands of lank black hair lay damp across his domelike brow, and but for those strands he was entirely hairless. He also lacked a neck. The child reminded Gorlen of nothing so much as a huge egg, peeled and incompletely boiled. Squatting in the midst of the courtyard, it devoted all its energy to not tipping over. Fat legs jutted out like the points of a broken tripod. Gorlen realized the boy was leaning back against a second willow, this one completely stripped of leaves and most of its branches. A reminder of greener days, it served the child as a scaly gray prop.

“Here we are!” Ansylla said brightly, and he did not understand the reason for her merriment until he realized she was not speaking to him but to the child, as one would speak to a very young and temperamental babe, or to an idiot. The child’s behavior instantly confirmed his conjecture, for as soon as she spoke, it began to bang its heels against the flags and set the bare twist of willow shaking violently.

Gorlen would have held back, but she held firmly to his arm and tugged him forward.

“I’ve brought you something wonderful today,” she said. “Music! Lovely, lovely music! Did you hear it a little while ago? I thought you had. I thought for certain I heard you calling. Isn’t that right? Oh, isn’t that so?”

She turned to Gorlen with a wide smile, grinning and nodding at him until he could only nod and grin back like a lunatic, understanding none of it.

Were they to humor the repellent child?

“Now this nice young man,” she said, “is a bard. He’s the one you heard! See this lovely instrument he holds, with its strings and polished wood? That is called an eduldamer. *E-dul-da-mer!* Now, he is going to play his eduldamer and sing you a song, one I’m sure you’ll like. You will like that, won’t you?”

The egg regarded them with watery confusion. Then it began to bleat.

He recognized the sound as a very gentle warning of the greater horror he had heard from outside the gate. No wonder the other children had ceased their play and fled when this monstrosity began to wail.

“No, no!” she said, deftly swooping in to take one of the child’s tremendous hands and begin to pat it. “He’ll play now, and you’ll eat after, isn’t that all right? You always like to sleep after you eat, but you wouldn’t want to miss this. We don’t know how long Mr. Fizzinforth can stay. Let’s hear him now, shall we, and then you can ... then you can ... Mr. Fizz ... Gorlen, why don’t you ... why don’t you....”

Truly, it was a sound that would have rattled anyone’s concentration. He could hardly believe she submitted herself daily to such a force of ill nature. Gorlen stood his ground, although his one desire was to bury his fingers deep in his ears and back steadily away. Quickly he unslung his eduldamer and began to play—not the rondel he’d started on earlier, as there were no voices to join in, but a tune much simpler and more direct. A song of childhood; and in fact, one originating in the province of Twilk, whose capital was Riverend. When Ansylla realized he was playing it for her, she raised her eyes from her student and gave him a grateful glance. Nervously, she plucked the waxy red wand on its leather cord and began to gnaw at it, red shavings gathering on her teeth. He realized it was not a talisman but a crayon—a teacher’s stylus for correcting student errors, arithmetic mistakes, the like. He had spent so little time in school that he’d hardly recognized it.

As Gorlen played, the child watched him fixedly, his mouth pressed shut. There was grave suspicion in those eyes, although it was surprising to see anything in them, considering their resemblance to a crustacean’s glossy black eyespots. The child lacked eyebrows, or apparently even lids, from which Gorlen could extrapolate joy or displeasure. But at least Ansylla looked relieved. He could not have been doing badly.

At least, that was, until one of his strings broke.

“One moment! With apologies!” he cried, and dug into his knapsack to pull out a coil of bright new wire.

He replaced the wire quickly, but he could feel those fat heels drumming at the flagstones and sense the child’s growing impatience even as he hurried. In fear for his physical wellbeing, he overtightened one peg and struck a high sour note, and instantly regretted it.

The child threw back his head and wailed, howled like a mirewolf calling to its pack.

“Oh no, my dear!” cried Ansylla. “There, there, all will be well ... just a moment, my dear, just a moment! The nice man will soon make the pretty music again, you’ll see! Won’t you, Gorlen?” Pleading in her eyes.

His ears now ringing with the shock of sound, he nodded mutely and began to play again, hoping this would calm the brute. And indeed, his strategy was effective to a point. The piercing wail cut off, but in its place was another sound, more disturbing: The sound of weeping.

It was a weird chorus of voices. Children’s voices. If he closed his eyes, which he did to hide the face of the animated egg, he could almost imagine that the courtyard was full of distressed children. Yet they all had one source. It was an uncanny performance.

“There, there, happy now! Happy!” she said. And the tone of the voices began to change. The cries faded out, turning gradually more garrulous as Gorlen played, and soon he realized that this one throat had given rise to the sounds he’d heard outside the gate. The entire range of children’s voices had emanated from this child.

Ansylla must have seen his dawning wonder, for indeed, it was a miracle that such lively and beautiful noise could pour from such a gullet. She must have felt her charge’s mood had stabilized sufficiently that she dared to reach out and touch Gorlen lightly on the shoulder, with a nodded promise that all would soon be clear. Once he’d finished that song, he turned to a more festive birthday jig, in honor of all the pies spread out in the next room; and that in turn spurred him to laugh out the words to the “Pie-So-Long Song” for the first time in many seasons. By the end of it, he felt quite jolly, and Ansylla’s mood had also lifted. As for the child ... his mouth had closed in a sleepy grin, almost attractive in its elongated way, and the courtyard enjoyed the benefits of its master’s contentment. Even the naked willow seemed relieved.

“Why don’t we bring him something to eat?” she said, just above a whisper, wiping red wax from her two front teeth.

Gorlen went to this task with a will. Anything to put some distance between himself and the now peacefully grinning child, and to have a chance for a moment’s conversation out of the lad’s hearing. Back in the classroom, he loaded her arms with pies, and as he held the door to let her out into the courtyard again, he dared, “A moment, Ansylla, if you will....”

“Yes? He does not like to be kept waiting, Gorlen. He is sure to be famished.”

“I’m sure not. I just ... simply ... is the child an idiot?”

She pursed her lips delicately. “We do not use that term in the Academy,” she said. “He has been traumatized, no doubt, by the gradual disappearance of his many classmates; and never has he been completely what you would call normal. And yet ... yet, he has wonderful gifts.”

“Gifts?” These had not been at all apparent.

“Why surely you noticed. He is a splendid mimic!”

“Ah. The myriad voices. That is certainly remarkable.”

“Yes, remarkable. We are fortunate to have him ... although he is the only one left.”

“What became of the others? I can’t believe the Academy posted you here to care for a single child. And if I might say so, your current task seems more suited to a nurse or nanny than a highly decorated Marm. Your ribbons seem wasted, when your only charge is so....” He held off using any word she might find offensive. If “idiot” had been met with approbation, he could only imagine her response to “moronic.”

“When I took the post, the school was full, and bustling. But that did not last long. I arrived just as a shadow had begun to fall across—”

But now a shadow fell across her features. From beyond the door, the beginnings of a titanic moan. The edge of greediness, beyond mere hunger, brought him again to the all-devouring sound that had come keening through the gate earlier that afternoon.

“We’d best....” She shrugged, with her burden of pies, and Gorlen opened the door.

A thin pink tongue darted from end to end along the mouth’s extensive lower lip, like a lizard running back and forth along a mossy wall. Now he saw that the eye did indeed feature lids, for they drew open wide at the sight of the numerous pies. The black knobs protruded slightly, lending credence to his earlier suspicion of crustacean ancestry. He felt he had seen such eyes deep in the dark cracks that clove these forsaken mountains; usually these were watchers that shrank from light or movement, so that one never had any more than the vaguest impression of their form. Still, the white hands that came grasping for the pies were those of a pudgy child. And the way the child ate was purely human: Spoiled beyond belief. Human hunger, human gluttony, a childish human rapacity for self-indulgence. So very spoiled.

There were more loads of food to be carried out before the table in the classroom was cleared. One loaf, slightly less sugar-encrusted than the others, Ansylla held back for herself and Gorlen. The rest went into the cavernous pit of her pupil’s mouth. Maw. Gorge. Such words came readily to mind as Gorlen watched him eat. It was a squeam-inducing sight. One benefit of the heavy traffic into that mouth was that sounds ceased emitting from it, other than the noises of gulping, gnawing, and slobbery mastication. The troubling echo of a children’s chorus did not intrude on the meal, for which Gorlen was obscurely grateful, although he could not have said why. There was something horrible in the cosmic indifference upon that vast visage, something wholly at odds with the spontaneous clatter of excited remembered voices.

“So ... a mimic, you say. And these sounds....”

They were gathering up empty pie tins, old cracked plates, bread baskets, and retreating with them back into the classroom. The table was heaped with the remains of the child’s meal.

“The cries of his schoolmates, yes. He makes them to amuse himself, I believe, for he is so stricken and lonely. This is his way of expressing feelings of loss. Can you not hear how forlorn those calls are? He has such a remarkable talent that at times I can almost make out the individual voices of his classmates ... my former pupils. How they used to play around him, right here in this very yard. Between lessons, such energy, such bright times.... It could not have failed to make an impression on him, although he was much as you see him now, seeming to take little note of those around him. But I can hear it in the cries. How much he misses them.

It is a forlorn mimicry, is it not?"

Loading his arms with empty platters and pans, Ansylla motioned him down the hall to the front door. Gorlen followed, but his mind was far from the chores of cleaning.

"It certainly gulled me when I first heard it," he said. "I thought the village overrun by children."

"That is what it sounded like when I first arrived. He replays their sounds endlessly, and in endless variations. It is his only pleasure. Besides eating."

"I was going to mention that as the more obvious source of satisfaction." He realized he had not completely expunged a tone of ironic judgment from his voice.

"Yes ... he is spoiled," she quietly conceded, hesitating before she opened the door into the square. "The villagers cannot help themselves, and I can hardly blame them. He is the last child, after all. If they were to lose this one, what would they have left to hope for? What future? So ... I do my best. That is why I cannot leave. I have grown accustomed. Attached, even. And besides, the Academy has no other postings for one of my limited qualifications."

She opened the door, admitting the dim light of early evening. The square was quiet but not unpopulated; in fact, a small crowd of citizens had gathered at the edges, and seemed to be watching with great interest as Gorlen followed her out into the light and set his clattering load upon the common table. Several of the villagers came forward to reclaim their housewares. They gave him sullen, even hostile looks, before trudging off to their cheerless, childless homes. These were the parents, he realized. Who else but the bereaved would have bothered to feed such a child unless they saw in him some connection to those they had lost? He could not imagine what they must have felt, hearing their children's shrieks parroted back to them, forever beyond reach. He felt a pang of pity for the whole village; but was still relieved to retreat into the schoolhouse and pick up the thread of their conversation.

"So you have considered changing locations?" Gorlen asked.

"Why deny it?" She shut the door and turned, putting her back against it, a look of resignation aging her prematurely. "This was hardly what I pictured even in my most despairing moments, when it seemed the

Academy was sending us into a world that had no use for education, no interest in the betterment of its children, a world proud even of its own ignorance.”

“Well, well,” said Gorlen. “We must do something about this. No situation can be considered permanent. My way may take me through other towns that would almost certainly use you better. That red crayon of yours needs errors to correct! If you like, if you ... trust me, that is ... I would be happy to carry your credentials, to tout your qualities to any town with something more to offer than this dreary place.”

“I ... I think I do trust you, Mr. Vizenfirthe.”

“Again, Ansylla. My name is Gorlen.” And he touched her cheek with his left hand. This caused her to glance down at the right one, which he had so deliberately not used.

“There is a story there,” she said quietly, “is there not?”

“There is, but too long to be told in even one long night.”

“And you ... will be traveling on in the morning?”

“There’s little call for a bard here, and I suspect your student will soon grow weary of me.”

She nodded, admitting the truth of this. Gorlen figured that the allure of anything but more pie would quickly pale on that particular child’s appetite.

“And this hand of yours,” she said, reaching down to take his right, “is it the only part of you so formed?”

“Of cold hard stone, you mean? Yes. The rest of me is warm. And soft. Mostly.”

* * * *

Upstairs were several rooms belonging to the schoolmarm, which must once have seemed a luxury of suites for a young teacher fresh from the Academy. There was little joy in them now. She fixed them a small supper, a salad of shredded roots, with crumbling cheese and the loaf of bread she’d spared from the child’s repast. The child himself, as she had foretold, followed his meal with a sudden torpor and had made no further

sound. Gorlen found himself thinking hard as he sopped vinegar from the salad bowl and sucked it from the softening crust of bread. Such a gift of vocal mimicry was common among certain creatures, although one associated it more with birds, of course. There was nothing birdlike about the child, except his exaggerated resemblance to some kind of soft-shelled egg. And for a creature with such a finely tuned ear for subtle gradations of human speech, it was odd that the child had never attempted to sing or hum along with Gorlen's tunes. The eduldamer's notes, or at least the songs Gorlen sang in accompaniment, would have made a fine subject for emulation. But perhaps the act of mimicry relied on some sort of traumatic episode to force imprinting. The absence of his classmates had caused the child to recall them in the only way available to him. Which thought led Gorlen to the obvious question ... although he refrained at first from asking it.

Ansylla was lovely by firelight, and lovelier still when she untangled the vocational ribbons from her copper locks and put aside her teacher's cap. Only her red crayon she did not shed, which he had to admit he found rather charming. He did not want to ruin the mood by probing Childrun's no doubt depressing history. A gloom of loneliness pervaded the town. If he could do anything to push it back, to illuminate even this one room, he meant to do so. He played the eduldamer and spoke of Riverend as he'd last seen it, as it had always been, a creased valley deep in the Shalled Mountains, where the river in question, namely Gharrousel, came down from perpetually snowy peaks, passed under the ancient Spiral Bridge, and fell away abruptly and entirely in a whirlpool. The swirling funnel churned away forever, swirling endlessly down a vortex that carried it away beneath the earth. It was a place where those who wished to forget things went to forget them. Jilted lovers wrote the names of their ex-partners on vellum boats and sailed them into the current. That was one romantic use. Other riders of the spiraling waters, only slightly less frequent, were the spurned lovers themselves. But in a far less dramatic manner, the maelstrom had also taken in rotten fishheads without number and the contents of countless garbage bins. He had heard of the beauty of the whirlpool throughout his life; but no one ever mentioned the copious rubbish and fetid debris strewn along its cobbled banks. She laughed at his story, which was nothing new to her; but a memory shared shines brighter for it, and he could see the thought of her home warming her in all her parts. Nor was his talk of lovers completely innocent, or without result.

It was not very long before they dozed together, in an afterglow that seemed to permit more direct questioning than he had earlier dared. And indeed, no longer in fear of scaring her off, he broached what was surely the most terrifying subject of all.

“What happened to the other children?” he asked as he lazed. She was idly scribbling red spirals on his chest, lying over him with her red crayon dangling. “You said they went gradually, yet ... how?” And as if this were not enough to start the conversation, he could not keep himself from asking the flood of questions that had been crowding in his mind all evening: “And how is it you came to take sole charge of the lad? Where are his parents?”

“He was a foundling, I am told. Left at the village gates in a night when the mountain streams ran to flood. This was only a short time before my own arrival here, but the most popular conjecture is that he was mothered by some impoverished woman, scarce able to feed herself. You must have noticed the harshness of the terrain along your way.”

“A stingy country indeed,” Gorlen agreed. “And yet generous in finding such a village to take him in. Although I imagine they were glad enough to accept an orphan, when their own offspring were disappearing.”

“Oh, but none had been carried off just yet. That commenced after my arrival.”

“I guess you are fortunate they have not blamed you for the disappearances!”

He found her soft fingers suddenly covering his mouth. “Do not even jest about such things! Do you not think that fear has gnawed at my heart since the first child vanished? Yet the villagers blame me not; they are most emphatic about this. There has always been another event to blame for the vanishing, and in each case they have felt their guilt to be greater than anyone else’s, for not seeing the signs, for not doing all they could to prevent it.”

“And what event was this?”

“I know it is not at all apparent from the town’s demeanor in this dark time, but once the village turned a friendly face to the world. The gate was always open. Travelers were common. Thus it was when I arrived. But gradually we realized that every child’s disappearance was linked to the arrival of ... a stranger.”

Gorlen felt a chill beginning, different from any foreboding he had felt so far in Childrun. Less sourceless now; something very like an icy accusatory finger that had begun to tap upon his bare shoulder.

“What ... which stranger?”

“Oh, no particular sort. Not at first. It could have been anyone. But after the third disappearance, we noticed that always there was someone about, someone unseemly, someone never seen here before, who appeared one day and disappeared the next. He might have been a merchant or a tinker, a peddler, a wandering monk. As I say, at first we suspected no one. But gradually we—well, I mean, they—began to suspect everyone. Every strange face that appeared was suspect of being the next abductor. Still, the village’s innate hospitality held sway. All visitors were welcomed, even though with less open gladness than before. This was only natural, for as sadness took hold, it began to cover the whole village with its shadow.”

“So ... any sort of stranger wandering through ... a bard, perhaps....”

“I do not recall a bard ever before,” she said. “Not in connection with a child’s disappearance. It is strange, now that I speak of these things for the first time in many months, that we have never uncovered any connection between these isolated strangers. Nothing, that is, apart from the fact of a child’s abduction.”

“It seems a very fragile thread from which to hang an accusation against someone you ... scarcely know.” He realized he was slowly drawing away from her beneath the coverlets, and estimating the whereabouts of his scattered clothes. “And these strangers, what ... what became of them?”

“Why, nothing, of course. They vanished in the night. Along with the children! That is why eventually the villagers came to see such a clear connection between the two events. But as their grief grew, so did their unwillingness to let this happen again. Thus they took to locking the gate even during the day, as you have seen.”

Gorlen sat up and slowly pulled on his garments. She watched him quietly. “Why do you rise at this hour?”

“As a stranger in this place, I find myself suddenly ill at ease,” he said. “Say I wished to try the gate at this hour of the night? Do you think I would be permitted to leave?”

“I very much doubt it. Not, at any rate, until the whereabouts of all the children...” She giggled. “...which is to say, the child, had been verified. That would only take a short time, however. And then I’m sure all would be well.”

Gorlen was not able to share her certainty, especially now that he was quite sure he heard stealthy shuffling steps somewhere nearby. The chamber had one small lozenge window, which he unlatched and opened a very small amount, having first ascertained that the room's one lamp had been snuffed. He peered out through the slit and found himself looking down on the public square where the villagers had heaped pies that afternoon. It was a dark night, moonless, but there was enough ambient light to show him that the square was thronged by darker shapes, all moving quietly, wordlessly, toward the schoolhouse.

He closed the door as quietly as he could. Then, stifling the strings, he picked up his eduldamer and slung it over his shoulder.

“Gorlen, where...?”

“I know you meant nothing by it, my dear, or at least I hope you did not, but I must now inquire as to the possibility of a back door from this place.”

“A back ... are you leaving then?”

“I'm afraid I must, my dear Ansylla. You may find nothing suspicious in my demeanor, but your villagers, I fear, are not so charitable. Now, meaning no harm, I must ask again—”

“There is no other door; that would have made it difficult to keep the children from slipping away unnoticed. However, a time or two, one spry child was known to climb the old willow in the corner of the yard, and thus gain the top of the wall. From there, alleys will lead you off through the town. But Gorlen, all the village gates are locked at this hour. And none will open while you are loose.”

“Matters to trouble me another time,” he said. “Hopefully, not so long from now. Now here, for you, a kiss.” Sweet, so sweet. She had begun to rise and pull her own raiments on. “And now, I must be off. I will carry word of your academic expertise to other towns, I promise, and soon perhaps you will hear from another of these institutes. One with a more wholesome student body, I would hope.”

With that he slipped into the hall and headed for the stairs.

The villagers must have considered the school their public property, for even as he reached the darkened classroom, he heard a key turning in

the front door down the hall. But that was not his avenue anyway. He moved quickly to the courtyard door and let himself through. Out in the courtyard, cut off from whatever light reached the square, he found himself in utter darkness. He stood very still for a moment, trying to recall the layout of the place from that afternoon. A simple rectangle, featureless except for the willow in the center and the other in the corner, which ought to be at his left hand now. If he crept straight ahead till he reached the far wall, and then moved left, he would surely find the corner and the tree with its promise of escape.

Taking short shuffling steps, he advanced very slowly, trying to ignore the sounds growing louder beyond the classroom door. He glanced back once, and heard a murmur of muffled voices, and then a dim light bled across the dingy glass, as if someone had struck a match or lit a weak taper. Shuffle-shuffle a few more steps, and suddenly he realized the light was growing brighter. Bright enough to see his own shadow forming ahead of him on the flagstones. Surely he had not reached the far wall, and yet his shadow ended abruptly and flung itself up on a pale smooth surface ... too smooth and pale to be the opposite wall. Behind him, the door was creaking open. Ahead of him, the light it let loose glimmered briefly on two glossy black knobs, set in the pale wall like handles he might seize to pull himself aloft. But these eyes went up and up above a growing darkness vast and complete enough to steal his shadow. His toe caught on a rubbery edge or, more aptly, a lip; and because in spite of himself he had started to panic and to hurry, his momentum carried him forward, off balance, and over he pitched into the pitchy black.

He lay there a long moment with his eyes shut, waiting for the villagers to set hands upon him, to drag him back into the classroom, to begin to do whatever it was they did to the strangers they caught in their midst. With one child left in the town, one child to spoil and protect with all their number, he suspected they had very few reservations when it came to dealing harshly with strangers. After all, they had prevented this last child from being abducted for ... for how long now? He had never thought to ask. Well, perhaps they would answer one simple question before thrashing the life out of him or pitching him into some cell where he might land upon the bones of other unsuspecting travelers.

But no hands fell upon him, and in fact he heard nothing now of his pursuers. The floor was wet and sticky, but not so far as he could tell with his blood. He was unharmed. He could not imagine why they had let him alone so suddenly, but he did not trust their reluctance or change of heart to last. He might as well find the willow while he was at it, and hoist himself over the wall, and see if it might not be possible to leave the village by way

of rooftop scampering.

Shuffle-shuffle a few more steps, and then his paces grew longer. With his right hand out before him, he waited for the clink of stone against stone, but waited in vain. Soon he was striding briskly along, before he stopped in sudden realization of the vast interior into which he belatedly realized he must have strayed.

“Good grief,” he said aloud, and thought: “He’s swallowed me. Like one of his pies.”

That blackness beneath the beady eyes could have been nothing but the child’s enormous mouth. The notion was so right that he wasted not a moment disputing it, but immediately tried to turn exactly half a turn around, and head back in precisely the opposite direction he’d been heading. But suddenly the ground, which had felt so level before, seemed a slope, and a sheer upward one at that. The darkness was designed to disorient him. And in his reluctance to become a willing participant in his own further ensnarement, he stopped and immediately sat down.

This would take some thought. Some cunning. Neither of which emerged out of panic or panicked flight. The best thing to do, as always, was to give himself time to think, and a way of evoking his deeper mind, the cleverer nature of which ran dark and unseen but still quite tangibly beneath his ordinary surface thoughts. This lower tide of wise cunning he equated with the improvisations of music, for they were much the same.

His eduldamer found its way into his lap, and he began to strum and play, stretching out calming patterns of sound through which he might weave patterns of thought substantial enough to support more weight.

The unexpected result of his song was not, as he had hoped, the quieting of his own thoughts, but the sudden raising of other sounds from all around him.

Voices began to call out. Worried, cautious, questioning. “Who’s there?” “What’s that, do you hear it?” “Is it real then, the music? Do you all hear it, too?” “I thought it was only me, but ... but it’s not. It’s real. It has to be real.”

Gorlen silenced the strings and listened, afraid that he himself was imagining only what he might have wished to hear.

They were children’s voices, and as the music stilled, they grew more

plaintive.

“Noooo!”

“It’s stopped!”

“Why did it stop?”

“Please, no!”

Gorlen strummed again, and then began to hammer and slide on the strings. All the voices fell quiet. He played for several minutes before breaking off to say, “The music you hear, it’s real. I’m real! None of us could have imagined this!”

The darkness was full of gasping, amazement. He could almost see the awestruck eyes of children gaping through the dark. But of course, he could not. He had only sound to go by. Fortunately, he was expert in its uses.

“Where are you all?” he asked.

“Where are any of us?” called one voice. “Inside. The same as you.”

“No, but ... I mean, where inside? Are you together? Are you near me?”

“Those things mean nothing here,” said another voice, older than the first, more worldly and despairing. “We’re just lost in here. All of us. Forever. We’ve given up. You’ll give up soon, just like the rest of us. Stop looking and trying to find each other.”

Several younger voices pitched in for a moment. “No! Stop! I want my Mummy....”

“Your mum’s not here, none of ‘em’s here or ever will be here, so shut your bawling.”

But that only made it worse. Several young wailing voices carried through the dark, while older voices groaned in misery. “Now you’ve done it!” complained the strong clear voice of an older girl. “There, there, dears, don’t listen to him! He only wants to make you cry. Same as ever—a bully, even in here.”

"I'm no bully. I've hurt no one," the petulant boy replied. "I just don't like 'em making it worse than it is when it's already bad enough."

"It wouldn't be that bad if it weren't for you always telling them how bad it is."

"Me? What about you!"

"I never—"

Gorlen cut through the bickering with a plucked high note, which he held and shook so that it bound the dark together with one pure sound.

"Do you all hear that?" he asked, as the note faded.

Scattered murmurs of assent floated back to him. It sounded as if they were all around him in the dark.

"That's what we need," he said. "We need to move together, if we wish to get out of this place."

"Out! You obviously haven't been here very long. There is no out. There is no place. This is all of it, mate."

"Shut up," said the girl who'd stood up to the bully before. "Just listen to him. He's making more sense than you have in a long time."

"You need to stop arguing," Gorlen said. "You need to start listening. Just listen to the music. And ... move toward it. I'm going to play now, all right? I'm going to play and I want you, all of you, to just come toward the sound."

"We've tried this before," someone said, "we've tried talking each other through it—"

"But this isn't talking," said another. "This is music. It's already different, can't you tell?"

"Exactly," said yet another.

"What do we have to lose?"

"Mummy!"

Gorlen played till their chattering subsided, and kept playing. He hummed along with it a bit, but realized the pure tones of the eduldamer were strong enough to summon them. They needed the unadulterated tones to make up for the loss of their most relied-on sense.

It was quite some time before he admitted to himself that it was not working. The children began to state the obvious long before he could bring himself to agree with them. Silencing his instrument, he again sat and pondered the possibilities.

“Told you,” said the sourest of the voices.

“Still, we had to try. There’s been nothing else to try for the longest time.”

“How long have you been here?” Gorlen asked.

“We don’t know. How long is long? All we know is some have been here longer than others.”

“I was the first,” said the boy with the sour voice.

“I was last,” said the smallest voice.

“And you came here ... how?”

“He promised us things.”

“He who?” Gorlen asked.

“The one we’re in, of course. Before he swallowed us up, he asked us to sneak in and play with him. He said he had secret things for us. He said to tell no one.”

“He was clever. Teacher didn’t know he could even speak! And he always waited till there was a stranger in town, so blame never fell on him.”

“You’ve put this all together, have you?” Gorlen said.

“What else have we to do but compare stories? Sit here in the dark and sulk and wait and talk and sometimes shout. We call and call but nobody hears us.”

Gorlen thought of the children’s voices he heard, attributed to the ugly

child's gift for mimicry—actually owed entirely to his diet.

“And how do you live? What do you eat?”

“Oh Gods no, please don't say it—”

“Ugh, ew, no!”

“Don't talk of it ... anything's better than—”

“PIE!”

He heard them gagging at the sound. “Huge chunks of it raining down on us ... halves of pies, hunks of sweetened sourstem, meringues and creams and pickles ... half-chewed, is the worst of it. But if you're hungry enough, you'll eat it.”

“I never thought I'd miss eating vegetables.”

“Me neither!”

Gorlen thought of the voracious child, the huge mouth, and of the sound it made when it wailed for food. His thoughts turned to the first time he'd heard that horrid hunger, how it had swelled up and frightened off the sounds of other children while he was playing. And what was he playing? What had he done that caused the immense egglike being to drown them out, so they could no more hear the music than Gorlen could hear them?

Then he remembered: The rondel. The round. The choir waiting for voices to join it.

Perhaps it was not the music then.

“I have another idea,” he said. “Something to try. Are you willing to try?”

“Does it mean eating pie?”

Gorlen chuckled. “Hardly.” And mentally banned himself from ever playing the “Pie-So-Long Song” for this crowd. “Do you know what a rondel is?”

“Miss Chordacio taught us. She sings them. We know.”

“Can you name one you all know?”

“A little while ago we heard one ... heard someone singing ... was that you?”

“I believe it was,” Gorlen said. “I was singing for you, without knowing it. Would you like to sing that one?”

“Oh, we started to, but then the sound went away, we couldn’t hear a thing when he started howling to drown it out. It was all that terrible sound in here, and then when it finally quit we couldn’t hear you anymore.”

“Well, you’ll hear me now. What I want you to do is sing and not stop. I’ll start you off, playing along with you, and then I’m going to do something else with my eduldamer. I want you to just listen to each other, keep the rondel going as long and as strong as you can, and ignore everything else. Do you think you can do that?”

“We can! Miss taught us! We’re good at it.”

“All right,” Gorlen said. “Now, here goes.”

He began to play the rondel he’d picked out earlier, weaving his voice through the tune. Voice by voice, the children joined him. This time, he felt the darkness solidify. He could hear their locations in the dark. Their own voices gave them a location, a bearing, by which they could make out their relation to the others. Without his even urging it, he could sense them moving closer to him, closer to each other, drawing in. The round of voices was sketching a tightening circle of beings as well. Voice by voice they drew themselves together, until he could feel them around him. He was at the center of the round, the voices swirling and spiraling, and it felt so solid he knew he could finally take his next step.

He silenced the strings, and waited to make sure the children would not stop for even an instant. They hardly seemed to notice the eduldamer’s absence. Gorlen twisted the pegs, loosening some wires, tightening others. When he thought he had gauged things just right, he struck the strings with the edge of his gargoyle hand.

The racket cut through the seamless shifting beauty of the children’s voice. It was a chilling, wracking sound, designed to set teeth on edge. The sort of noise that would make dogs howl.

Dogs and other things.

A slight tremor passed through the rondel, but it recovered instantly, even as Gorlen began to draw long screeching wails from his strings.

A larger tremor, verging on violent, passed through whatever it was he sat upon. With a grin, he twisted a peg and plucked a triad of disharmonious wires. The sound was almost agony, even for him.

Then came the howl.

Light suddenly shone in on them, as if a boulder had rolled away from the mouth of a cave. It was pale, wavery, like the glow of a distant candle; but his eyes were so steeped in darkness that even the faint illumination felt like the beam of a lighthouse sweeping over them. He could see the faces of the children, dozens of them, caught and lit up, eyes gleaming, mouths open in song. They all saw each other at the same time, and with the recognition came movement. They had gathered in a circle, like a manifestation of the rondel, and now they moved together, all as one, toward the light.

The glow began to dim, but Gorlen plucked the strings again and the brightness increased.

Ahead of them, he saw the courtyard now. He saw a couple lamps held in wavering hands. He saw faces, looking this way, and heard muffled shrieks of disbelief.

As they reached the threshold of the enormous howling mouth, more lamps were lit, and grieving parents, faced with hope, pushed forward in shock. The children could contain themselves no longer. As they dashed forward, they let off singing; the rondel collapsed. Gorlen watched them rush into welcoming arms, there in the school courtyard, and ceased plucking.

The darkness sealed him in, the mouth nearly lopping him in two, but that he stumbled backward into darkness. His eduldamer fell from his hand. He saw it clatter onto the flagstones, just out of reach. Then the mouth sealed him in again.

That was a terrible moment, and an endless wait that might have been merely seconds. He had but one voice after all. He could not find his way out, alone.

But then the light came. Many hands, prying on the mouth, the adults

of Childrun pushing bodily with all their strength, together opening a passage. And the voice of Ansylla, in her best stern schoolmarm intonation, ordering the disobedient child to “Spit it out right this instant!” There formed a tiny, niggardly passage through which he dragged himself.

Gorlen lay in the square for a moment, hardly believing he was free until he saw Ansylla leaning over him. The children, reunited; parents still running weeping to reclaim their lost young; and variations of one particular conversation:

“Come away now, love, Mummy will bake you a marvelous p—”

“Please no! No, Momma! Never again!”

“No more pie forever!”

In the end, only one orphan lay unclaimed, although hardly forgotten.

The child, so immense earlier that evening, was now a withered, flaccid sack of skin, hardly enough to fill a gentleman’s cap. It resembled the shreds of a rubbery shroud. Gorlen thought he should be the one to go toward it, but as soon as he made a move in its direction, it drew itself across the courtyard like a shifting puddle. Disdaining to use the willow as a ladder, it wriggled its way up through cracks in the old wall and slithered over the top, heading toward whatever slimy rock-filled mountain fastness it had crawled out of.

* * * *

Ansylla Chordacio, her many ribbons fluttering, her pack of students accompanying them with great merriment and echoes of last night’s rondel, kissed Gorlen on the cheek and linked her arm in his as they strolled out through the wide open gate. He would return the way he’d come and pick up another more promising path; that was the extent of his plan.

“I assume you no longer wish me to present your vitae at any future institutions I may come across?”

“Goodness no,” she said, smiling down at her children, as if they were all her own. “I have more than enough work here to keep me busy. This is the job I came for. Now I can finally do it. Thanks to you, Gorlen.” She kissed his other cheek. “The children and I and all of the villagers ... well, you will be long remembered in Glour, I can assure you.”

“Glour?” he said. “What is that?”

She stared at him, baffled. “Why ... the village, of course. What did you think it was called?”

In reply, Gorlen pointed toward the sign barely in sight down the path.

“And what is that?”

“The village marker....”

“One moment.” She turned to the children. “You wait here, children. I will be right back.”

She walked with him down to the turning of the path, where he pointed to the sign that read CHILD RUN.

“There,” he said. “The name of the village. I thought it might be a misspelling, but how do you get Glour out of that?”

She laughed into her hand. “I’ve never seen that there before. Someone fleeing must have put it there. Look again, Mr. Fizzenworth!”

She leaned forward, tugging her crayon on the end of its lace, so that she could add two red corrective marks to the sign.

“It’s not misspelled,” she said, “simply poorly punctuated. Look.”

CHILD! RUN!