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Splashing in Puddles

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*There are people who can achieve huge success in life,
while adding a bit of fun and a splash of color
to this increasingly grey world. — Peter James*

The village where Glok grew up lay near the bottom of a saddle, the lowest point between two adjacent mountain tops; it had a placid stream running through it in summer. Its location meant that the town's green often got flooded in the wet season, and large puddles of standing water were left behind when the downpours stopped.

Like all kids, Glok was fond of running through the puddles, enjoying the resistance of the water to his advance and the crashing sound of the liquid as it rose and fell under his naked feet. Such a seemingly harmless pastime was, however, frowned upon by the elders, who found it disrespectful to the naiads, the water nymphs that rule freshwater domains.

"Don't you see how you are disturbing the goddesses?" Glok's mother remonstrated, pointing to vague forms that writhed in the depths of the puddles. "If you keep doing this, they will go away taking the stream with them and this area will become as dry as a dead jackal's bone!"

"Naw, Mother" would reply the boy. "What you see are weeds or little swimming creatures moving about in the water. Besides, the goddesses would love me because I'm so handsome, so they wouldn't mind my shaking them a little."

The self-praise was no exaggeration for, even as a child, Glok was very good-looking. He was tall and slender, had large eyes and sensuous, pouty lips, and his oval face was framed by unruly bangs that crowned his forehead and nearly reached his thick eyebrows. When he was not splashing the puddles, Glok sometimes stood at the water's edge, admiring his image.

As he grew into his teens, Glok became even more handsome, and every girl in the village who was still unattached — and some that were already spoken for — sought to draw his attention and lure him into a romantic entanglement. He was charming to all, but he resisted every seduction attempt with the same response: "Sorry, but my heart already belongs to another." His refusals became a puzzlement, for he was never seen

associating with anyone save the farmhands that tilled the land and the elders with whom he occasionally shared a mug of brew.

Janin, a girl more enterprising than her peers, became determined to solve the mystery behind Glock's solitude. She plied him with choice morsels and liquor, played the wooden pipe and danced for him, and gave him so many other signs of attention that he was unable to ignore her. Finally, he confessed his predicament: "Janin, you are a wonderful girl, and I am quite attracted to you, but I cannot love you, for I am under a spell."

"What do you mean by a spell?"

"Years ago, when I was no taller than your waist, there was a torrential monsoon and, following it, I went splashing in what I thought was a regular puddle. In fact, the heavy rains had eaten away at the soil at the bottom, which had collapsed into a sinkhole. No sooner had I taken two steps into the puddle when the ground gave way and I dropped beneath the surface.

"I would have drowned but, suddenly, my body was lifted until my head emerged from the depths. Holding me afloat without touching me was this transparent being, a maiden more beautiful than words can describe.

"As she propelled me to the edge of the puddle, she whispered: 'You have been a very naughty boy, kicking at us and all that. You cannot actually do any damage, but you are annoying and just for that I should let you drown. Yet, I am merciful. I will let you go, but from now on you are in thrall to me. You shall love no woman until the end of your days, when you will descend unto the waters and serve me, Argyna, so that I can be your mistress for all time.'"

"Do you mean she made you her slave and forced you to remain celibate for the rest of your life?" asked Janin, pity thickening her voice.

"I'm afraid so."

* * *

Years passed. Glock, now a fully grown man, rose to become chieftain of his village. He was a sullen leader who commanded the respect and obedience but not the affection of the warriors under him. He did not hesitate to make war on neighboring villages and led his forces to victories that gained them spoils and dominance. At last, however, he took on an enemy more powerful than him and suffered a bitter defeat in which his army was all but annihilated.

Glock found himself being chased back to his village, pursued like a hunted stag by a horde of angry men wielding staves and sharpened irons. He was out of breath and trembling with fear as he stepped on a large puddle, a remnant of recent rains. His hurried steps disturbed the waters and, as he was crossing them, he was hit by a thrown missile. He experienced a sharp stab of pain, lost footing, and had the disorienting sensation of falling headfirst into the puddle. His fall was followed by another, almost as intense, moment of agony as he struck the bottom with great force.

Was he dead or alive? For a few confusing moments, he could not tell. Then a voice he had not heard in many years greeted him: "Hail, mortal! Your lifespan is now over, and it is time for you to join my retinue."

Glok was seized by panic. "Nooo, I am too young to die! Please, set me free!"

"That cannot be," replied the naiad gravely. "You have shed the mantle of life and shall remain forever with us. But do not fear. Our yoke is light and your duties will not be burdensome."

"What do you want with me?" replied Glok.

"From time to time, one of your kind will find himself or herself beneath the waters and at risk of perishing. If this occurs in a river or some other fresh stream, it is the charge to us naiads to attempt to succor the victim; if it happens at sea, the duty falls on our sisters, the nereids. It is a tricky assignment, because oftentimes the fallen human is not the victim of an accident but is willfully seeking death, in which case we must not interfere, but allow matters to take their course."

"When you fell into that sinkhole many years back, I thought it gave rise to the opportunity of creating a new sort of immortal being: a male naiad who could be detailed to succor ones of your kind the way we always have done."

"So, what will you have me do?"

"First and foremost, you shall be my mystical consort. In addition, you will swim with us beneath the rivers, lakes, ponds, tarns, and puddles, and if you discover a human who has fallen into the water, you should lead the victim to safety ashore, unless you detect a wish to die, in which case you should cease your rescue attempt."

"What if the person in peril is a female?"

"She will also be your charge. You will lead her to safety. However, you must not, under any circumstances, seek to become involved with a girl or woman who has found herself in our waters. To do so would have grave consequences."

"I do not think I will find great joy in the tasks with which you charge me."

"Perhaps. But it should be preferable to vanishing into the void, the fate that would await you if you refused my boon."

* * *

In the years that followed, the shadow that once had been Glok carried out the tasks that had been laid upon him. He consorted with Argyna and accompanied her and the other naiads in their unending pilgrimage across rivers and lakes, always on the lookout for creatures whose misfortune had placed them at risk of perishing under the waters.

He rescued men, women and even beasts, always doing so efficiently but without interest, leading his charges to safety without paying great attention

to them except in cases where he detected a suicidal impulse in the thoughts or actions of the one under his care. He let go of those seeking death with the same lack of passion he afforded to the ones he would lend succor.

It came to pass that, one afternoon, the stream he was traversing took him near a familiar site: the village where he had drawn his first and final breaths. A storm was raging, and the huts were almost invisible in the curtain of rain that fell implacably over the land; thatched roofs, fallen timbers, entire trees dislodged from their roots littered the surface of the stream, which coursed with a deafening rumble carrying it all away.

Amidst the tumult, Glok perceived the high-pitched wailing of a creature in great distress. Moving rapidly in the direction of the noise, he detected a figure clutching a floating timber, embracing it like a long-lost lover and hanging onto it for dear life.

The force of the wind and the impact of the fast-moving waves threatened to dislodge the person and bring about a quick drowning death, so Glok flung himself in the direction of the castaway. He was, of course, an incorporeal spirit immune to the savagery of the wild waters, but his target kept bouncing near and far randomly with the current, defying his efforts to get a hold on the log or its occupant. Finally, Glok was able to apply his telekinetic ability to push the person towards high ground.

The danger past, Glok examined his charge. It was a young woman, similar in many ways to those he had encountered many times before. This one, however, was particularly beautiful and resembled the one named Janin. who once had applied herself in earnest to winning his affection. As the girl calmed down, he projected a soothing voice: "Here, child, you are safe now. Soon the storm will end and you will be able to return to your family."

Her reply was surprising: "But I do not want to return to my family. I was trying to get away from them!"

"Why?"

"My parents demand that I marry a disgusting toad who will make life miserable for the rest of my days. I would rather die in a storm like this than become that man's wife."

"Neither outcome is necessary," offered Glok. "I can carry you far away from here, to a place where you can be free and safe to pursue your dreams."

"Would you do that for me?" Glok detected a glimmer of hope, perhaps mixed with something else, in the girl's plea.

"I would, but I would need to depart when you had reached safety."

The girl did not respond, but Glok now detected a disappointment that reminded him of the dismay his refusals had often caused when he was alive.

He swam upstream a long distance, always carrying the girl floating on the waters, until the river they were coursing emptied into a larger one, so wide that one could almost not see one shore from the edge of the other. He

deposited the girl gently on the ground and voiced a farewell: “Go in peace and be happy, if you can.”

As he drew away, his gaze met the girl’s, whose vision was clouded by tears. Glok felt a sudden pang of regret, recalling all the women he had forsaken while alive as commanded by the naiad’s spell, and made a sudden decision. “Wait, I will accompany you for a bit,” he offered.

“Can you leave the river?” questioned the girl.

“I don’t know,” replied Glok, “but nothing is lost by trying.”

As he sought to extend his essence into the meadow that opened at the river’s edge, he met a stubborn resistance he was unable to overcome.

A few moments later, the face of Argyna appeared before him, her features contorted in anger. “You have betrayed us and forfeited your right to stay with the naiads. Be gone!” she pronounced with finality. With a gesture of her hand, the river waters roiled and Glok was struck by a myriad of sharp pellets that shattered his form into fast-disappearing smidgens.

As his essence was annihilated, one final thought assaulted Glok: “I should have tried doing this ages ago! A life without love is not living at all!”

And the waters quieted before the eyes of yet another disappointed girl.

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