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Gwarwyn Goes Fishing by Matias F. Travieso-Diaz

Gwarwyn was a *bwbach*, a humanoid known outside Wales as a brownie. He dwarfed other creatures of his kind, and thanks to his keen senses of sight and hearing he could perform for his human hosts tasks not usually given to *bwbachs*, such as protecting domestic animals from wolves and other predators.

Early on Whitsuntide evening, Gwarwyn had gone fishing on the river Neath, taking advantage of the summer weather. The Neath ran a meandering course through southwestern Wales until it plunged into the Horseshoe Falls, not far from where Gwarwyn had positioned himself. He stayed on the bank, because although the river bed was gravelly and gave good purchase, the current in the stretch leading to the falls was swift and there was always a chance of slipping.

As he sat on the river bank, the evening sky darkened and threatening clouds rolled in from the west. Gwarwyn was unaware of the change in the weather, because his eyelids had turned heavier and sleep had overtaken him.

He looked up with a start. His keen hearing had detected, some distance away, the sound of cries. The sounds were approaching, so he moved back from the bank a little trying to get a view of whatever was causing the commotion.

Finally, the source of the disturbance became visible: a raft was heading down the river, coming in his direction. The cries were emitted by a human female that was clutching a seat on the center of the structure as it moved randomly, drawn here and there by the current.

Despite the darkness, it took only a glance for Gwarwyn to recognize Anwen – the daughter of Tudur ap Gruffydd, a wealthy landowner in the kingdom of Dyfed. Tudur was one of the humans for whom Gwarwyn worked, tending to his fields at night and protecting his lambs from predators.

Gwarwyn had sometimes spied on Anwen when events drew him abroad during daytime, like county fairs and religious festivities. She was always nicely dressed, always smiling. A couple of times they had run into each other in the manor house's kitchen, where every evening Gwarwyn was left on the hearth food (oatmeal cakes were his favorite), clothing items, and other presents, all intended to entice him into staying at the estate.

In each occasion they met, Anwen had averted her face with disgust and left without addressing him. Gwarwyn had greenish skin, was very hairy, and had a wrinkle-covered face, all of which made him unsettling or frightening to some humans.

Gwarwyn had secretly longed after Anwen. He often admired from afar the perfect oval of her face, the softness of her body. Yet, he knew she loathed him.

As the raft approached, Gwarwyn noticed that Anwen's auburn hair, which he had always itched to caress, was shooting in all directions, buffeted by the breeze. She was pale as if she had seen a ghost, and trembled as the raft made steady progress towards the falls.

Gwarwyn jumped into the river and, as he did so, a strong wind began to blow, gathering intensity until its blasts swept the countryside. The wind roiled the waters and impeded his progress as he swam towards the raft, which was rising and falling with loud splashes, its timbers

lifted and tossed by the force of the storm. Gwarwyn's considerable strength served him well, as he was able to overcome the tumbling of the frenzied Neath as he approached the vessel.

At last, Gwarwyn seized the side of the raft, coming close to being brained by a sudden jolt of the structure. He clung to the slippery logs for dear life and, with a wrenching effort, pulled himself onboard. In the back of the raft, Anwen watched him in horror, her fear of the elements eclipsed by the sight of a creature in soaking rags that came tumbling towards her with obviously evil intent. She recognized Gwarwyn, and seeing him brought back the memories of their meetings and the multitude of folk tales she had heard about brownies' malevolence.

Gwarwyn reached her and extended a hairy hand, beckoning the girl to join him. "Come on, lady, let me carry you out to safety," he grumbled. Anwen did not move but rolled herself into a defensive ball as he approached. "No, go away, dirty *bwbach*, leave me alone!!" she cried, clutching desperately at her seat.

"Come on, please, there is no time to waste!!" Gwarwyn insisted, and reached out to seize her arm. She pushed him away and got up, lurching towards the side of the raft, intending to go in the river.

As Anwen readied to jump off, Gwarwyn thrust headfirst at her, trying to stop her from plunging to a certain death. She flung her arms out at him in a protective move. They collided and catapulted together into the water. The impact with the water drained at once all resistance from Anwen, who clung to Gwarwyn, gasping.

Gwarwyn looked at the girl and then at the raft, whose surface had almost disappeared from sight. There was a crushing sound: the raft had been propelled against a protruding rock and had splintered into a thousand pieces, disintegrating from bow to stern. Gwarwyn clutched Anwen's body closer to his and covered her body with his to protect against the flying wreckage.

The forward pull of the river as they approached the falls became stronger. Gwarwyn made out a disturbance in the waters ahead, a vortex into which the floating detritus was being drawn. He put his left arm around Anwen so that he could steer them both clear of the raft remnants that sailed past them in the current. He tried to push the floating objects away with his one free hand as the river thrust them against him. The ones he could not avoid hitting he met with his body to save the girl from injury.

The falls came into sight. Gwarwyn looked around anxiously, searching for a way out. The river banks were near but out of reach, for the current kept him, burdened by the girl's weight, from making headway towards the shore. There was nothing left to hold onto; even the wreckage from the raft had gone into the abyss. Gwarwyn stretched his legs as far down as he could, but failed to touch bottom.

The waters became white with froth, and broke into an irregular circular motion. Gwarwyn could tell from the mist rising about the surface that they were about to start gyrating and plunge down the falls to their deaths. The maelstrom was only twenty feet ahead. Then, he saw something that stuck out of the water from a pole at the shore to another in midstream -- a thick rope net strung just above the whirling surface of the river. Wreckage from the raft, tree limbs, roots and rocks were caught in the net's webbing, as well as countless dead fish.

Gwarwyn felt relief rise in his chest, to be squelched by the realization that they were likely to be impaled on a sharp piece of flotsam or a nail-covered board. He maneuvered with inhuman strength, further increased by desperation, to find a relatively empty corner of the net. He found one and allowed himself and the girl to be slammed into it.

The ropes that formed the netting gave a little so their impact against them was not too painful, but the strain of the rushing waters pushing around them towards the falls made

Gwarwyn feel as is his flesh was being strained into a liquid mass that would be sucked in by the net and then released into the maelstrom.

With a supreme effort, Gwarwyn began to advance towards the shore along the netting, holding onto one of the tie lines. He had to let go of Anwen's body, who mercifully continued to cling onto him. Hand over hand, inch by inch, he made the excruciating trip along the rope, resisting the push of the stream that drew them towards the falls. Twice he faltered and almost let go; each time, Anwen's groans gave him renewed strength and saved them both from certain death. He continued on until at last his feet found the gravel at the river bottom. He half walked, half propelled himself and Anwen towards the river bank.

Before reaching the safety of the shore, they came upon a large moss-covered boulder by the water's edge. Gwarwyn laid Anwen down on the rock, prying her fingers loose, as she would not let go of him. With an exhausted sigh, he collapsed on the rock next to her. He could go no further.

They lay there for a very long time, recovering from the shock and the pain that throbbed through their bodies. At last, Gwarwyn turned over on his side and contemplated the girl. She was wearing a jerkin over a plain blouse, loose fitting brown trousers and leather boots – not unlike his own uniform. Her jerkin was torn and open, and her breasts heaved up and down under her blouse with her irregular breathing. She was slowly regaining consciousness, shuddering from the cold.

Anwen's hair was matted and covered her eyes. Gwarwyn ran his hand over her forehead to straighten it out, and halfway through his gesture it became a gentle touch. Unable to control himself, he let his hand slide over her cheek and traced with his index the curve of her upper lip.

Anwen opened her eyes and looked vacantly into Gwarwyn's face, just above hers. "Are you hurt?" asked Gwarwyn in a soft voice, holding her chin in his hand.

Anwen then gave a start and came awake. She said nothing but put her arms around Gwarwyn's neck, as if seeking reassurance after their near-death experience. Gwarwyn pivoted on his free arm and let his body drop carefully beside Anwen's. They stared at each other without words, still prey to the terror they had just shared.

On a sudden uncontrollable impulse, Gwarwyn pressed his lips against the girl's in a stream of kisses, at first soft and then increasingly more passionate. Anwen did not resist but responded in kind: she tore away at his tunic, which bunched up over his shoulder blades exposing his bruised and wounded muscles.

Regaining his senses, Gwarwyn sought to restrain himself. It was not right to take advantage of their ordeal to abuse this human girl who abhorred him. He flexed his arms and raised his body to walk away. Yet, Anwen pulled him in, and sought to resume their kissing.

The surprising way Anwen was behaving caught Gwarwyn in a surge of desire. They embraced again and then undressed hastily, fingers fumbling over buttons and clasps. When their bodies were freed from all bonds, Gwarwyn seized Anwen's wrists and held her outstretched arms above her head as he entered her.

Joined, they rose and fell in a wild, arrhythmic concert. Their faces pressed against each other, now rubbing tenderly, then bumping at random. At last, they sighed and embraced one last time, eyes closed; they then passed out, dead to the world in their ecstasy. Around them, the rain stopped, the river grew calm, and only the crashing sounds of the falls and the calls of night birds broke the evening silence.

When Gwarwyn rose from her body, it was dawn and the moon was starting to sink below the horizon. He lifted Anwen's head up and brushed her eyelids with the tip of his tongue. Her eyes opened and he kissed her slowly, all urgency gone, savoring the taste of salt, blood and sex in her mouth. As their lips separated, Gwarwyn ran his hands on her wet hair, finally completing the gesture that had initiated their lovemaking.

Gwarwyn reached over his side and groped for his tunic, which he took in both hands and wrung out, releasing as much of the filthy water as he could. He sat on the boulder and found Anwen's own blouse and jerkin, which he wrenched dry and handed over to her, repeating the operation with their trousers. Not a word was exchanged while they were getting dressed.

When he was ready to speak, a multitude of questions assailed him. "What were you doing alone on a raft in the river in the middle of the night?" He asked softly, to avoid sounding reproachful.

She gave a rueful smile. "I was running away from home. I was intending to float only a few hundred yards until I reached the landing at our neighbor's estate, where I meant to steal one of his horses. Once in the raft, I discovered I could not guide it because the current was too strong."

"Why were you running away from home?"

Anwen's reply was full of bitterness. "My father wants me to marry Ormund Rhys, a swine if there ever lived one... I'd rather die than live with him. But, of course, now ..." She broke off.

"Now what?" asked Gwarwyn anxiously.

“Now I don’t have to worry about marrying him, or anyone else. I hope my father will allow me to hide in a nunnery to wait out the rest of my days. When he dies, I will be free to do as I desire.”

“But Anwen,” protested Gwarwyn. “I love you and will marry you and will make you forever happy as my mate.”

“Me marry YOU?... My family would never consent, and we would face universal rejection. ... And ... me marry an unclean *bwbach*?! How could I live with you, who are not even human? What would happen when we had our first fight and you turned into an evil *boggart* bent on hurting me?” She seemed so vehement in her rejection of the marriage proposal that Gwarwyn did not have time to get offended.

Finally, he shook his head with a grimace. “I would never have hurt you. It’s not allowed to those of my kind to commit physical violence upon humans. ...” He tried to say much more, but words stuck in his throat. “But you’re right. I am a *bwbach* and can’t wed a human. Let’s get you back to your family.” He helped out of the rock and together they waded towards the bank of the river.

As they got to the shore, their wrenched garments were starting to dry, clinging to their bodies. They halted for a moment to rearrange their clothing.

“Well, we best go on our separate ways,” he declared. “I won’t tell anyone what happened, but will remember you forever. Please try to be happy.”

“I’ll have to tell Father that my maidenhood is lost, but won’t say it was you who took it. Go in peace.” Anwen turned around and started to draw away. Then, suddenly, she came back

and kissed his cheek. "I'm sorry. I'll always remember you. You were kinder to me than any man I've known."

She walked away without looking back again.

Gwarwyn sat on the ground, his breast heaving. He had known love and tasted despair. He bent the head on his chest, and uttered a disconsolate moan. The memory of an unrealized dream, of lips that had passionately touched his, would remain with him for a long time.

He glanced around. The morning was advancing and there was not a cloud in the heavens. The Neath ran placidly as it flowed towards the falls.

He gathered his pole and fish basket. His fishing trip had ended leaving him empty-handed and with an ache in his heart. It was time for him to move.

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