

Excerpt From

“ANNWYN”

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First published in “Enchantments: The Many Facets of Magic,” Edited by David M. Fitzpatrick, Epic Saga Publishing, Brewer, Maine, 2009

*"Once, long ago--
I floated in green seas beneath a cloudy sky--
towering columns that shadowed my swim
and blew to me the scent of distant rain.
But that was once.
Long ago...."*

I.

THE coracle drifted in a lake of molten gold, and the dip of Bogatyr's paddle trailed fire in the gloaming light. Scarred, grim-faced, dusty, sweat stained his leather jerkin as he stroked. His biceps bulged, his neck veined, his tanned forearms rippled. He worked diligently and with purpose, sculling his craft towards the setting sun; for a storm, he judged, would strike near midnight, long ere he reached the port-haven of Innis-Frith.

Glancing up from his paddling, Bogatyr searched the sky. Wide, pearlescent, touched with pink and blue, it swept above in rainbow like an oyster's inner shell. The water, placid with stillness that comes only before a heavy rain, lapped against mountains flat, gray, and backlit by the sinking sun. The air, scented with metal and must, was cool; a freeze, hastened by a withering of leaves, lingered just beyond. And despite his urgency, Bogatyr's face softened. He pulled his oar from the lake, and paused to admire the beauty of the oncoming night. He breathed, silently and deeply filling his lungs.

A fine time to pass, he thought, staring longingly past the golden light bands that shimmered across the water's surface, and into the lake's blue-green depths beyond. And for an instant, recalling the massacre of his kinsmen, he was still. His calm was the sky's calm, his stillness the lake's stillness, his thoughts the dark blue currents flowing beneath.

Turning with a sigh, he lowered his oar and sculled again.

Carving the lake with silver ringlets that swelled endlessly towards the horizon.

She rose from the black fathoms that lay at the lake's heart, her face a pale lovely oval that grew ever lovelier as she swam towards the surface. She came from the cold quiet places—her eyes the ice-blue of the deeps, her naked skin the first faint flush of sunset, her hair a fanning blonde wave.

Gazing from sapphire depths, she smiled at him—almost sadly, it seemed: her lips red, enticing; eyes gentle, beguiling. Entranced, Bogatyr sucked in his breath, forgetting in his wonderment to exhale.

Laughing silently, she kicked her smooth legs and flickered again for the deeps, stringing the lake with bubbles streams that eddied in multicolored ribbons.

Bending over the water, Bogatyr rubbed his eyes; the coracle listed dangerously close to its surface as he strained to see. But she was gone, flashed away by a stray dance of dying light—a gleam of fading, dropping whiteness swallowed by the water.

Bewitched, Bogatyr peered into the depths.

But saw only his reflection, wavering in nightfall.

Black-clouded, wind-torn, and brooding, the storm swept over Bogatyr as he plied the midnight waters of Dannish Toon. In the flash of lightening he saw the shore, distant, unreachable—a dark wall lashed by rain. The gale's fury grew, wailed. The lake trembled and heaved. Swells battered the coracle's thin leather strips until the reeds binding the hides creaked against the strain, and the seams, sewn with gut, threatened to snap.

Digging his oar into the spray, Bogatyr battled the raging crests with a savagery that equaled the ferocity of the storm, cursing the foam-capped mountains that rose and rolled beneath him like a serpent's back, snapping the craft upwards then down again.

Water, black as liquid onyx, washed into the coracle, lapped his ankles; waves crashed nearby. The fragile vessel, wallowing in the swells, listed sideways into a trough, spun like a leaf in a whirlpool.

In desperation, Bogatyr worked his paddle to turn the bow into the onrushing waves. But the current was strong, and a second wave, huge and black, roared over him, smashing the leather bowl into flotsam, and sweeping Bogatyr into the froth.

Riding the water-mountains as they flung him skyward, he shouted into the gale. Dragged into a trough, water flooded his throat, causing him to choke. Loosened by his struggles, his sword slipped from his scabbard. He floundered amidst the wreckage; thrashed his limbs against his mail's downward pull. He looked again to the land, towards the black unattainable shoreline. Felt himself slipping into the depths; cursed the waters as they closed over his head...

Then darkness, like the lake...

Overwhelmed him.

II.

THE storm's fury faded from Bogatyr's mind even as it faded from the sky; the darkness that had been cast upon him was dispelled—and, opening his eyes, he beheld her.

Water reached to the sky and the stars; clouds floated beyond, shimmering as if reflected from a mirror. She drifted just above like a spirit, a nymph; her blonde hair forming halos that danced in the moonlight. And Bogatyr thought her beautiful, naked, and wild; she of blue eyes—eyes like sea-light, flecked with a shell's iridescent flash.

She smiled, her teeth like fine pearls in the half-moon beauty of her mouth. He returned her smile—and his gaze became a stare, such that, enraptured, he forgot the need

to breathe. He floated unknowing and uncaring of the hours, entranced and suspended in the embryonic fluid of the lake's belly. The water slipped in and out of his lungs easily.

So this is what it's like to die, he thought at last, feeling the caress, the quiet, the cold of the lake currents upon his skin.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice betraying his wonder.

She laughed, and the sound, magnified by the water, was like a bell chiming. "I am Annwyn, Queen of the Gwraged Annwn, whom you may know as the 'Lake People.'"

"Then I am dead...or mad..."

"Nay, Bogatyr," she laughed again, "You most certainly are not dead, though I cannot speak as to your sanity. As for your presence here, 'tis my magic that brought you, and it will sustain you for as long as you swim the waters of Dannish-Toon. But you must never leave; nay, here you must remain—"

"Annwyn... How is it that you know my name?" He asked, trying to understand.

She smiled, her face softening from a laugh, her nose wrinkling from the joy that brightened her blue eyes. "The mortals called to you at Tannis Forth when you launched your craft, and I've followed in your wake ever since. Coracles—while sturdy, beautiful vessels—have not the strength to match blows with a storm. I found you and took you."

"You spared my life. Why?"

She pursed her lips, pretended to frown—though her eyes flashed mischievously. "Because you please me, why else?" She said, sighing with mock exasperation. "Now, no more questions will I answer 'till we reach Gwrageth Anoon—if you can keep up!"

Turning in a moonlight flash, with a flirtatious toss of her head, she lashed her dainty feet against the current, and slid gracefully through the water.

Pausing only long enough to see if he followed...