

Urquhart

By Robert G. Makin

40 years before the birth of Angus Williamson (StrathNaver)

Mud. Mud and rounded, brown pebbles. Cold. Rain poured into William's face. *Where am I now?* He tried to shake the daze out of his head. His legs were under water. The upper half of his body stretched prone over a pebbly beach. *How did I get here?*

He rolled onto his back. The movement frightened a large sea bird that had landed nearby to investigate this body lying at the side of the lake. At his movement, it lifted away on broad wings, squawking loudly. The sight of the retreating bird somehow shook William to enough wakefulness that he knew he ached with hunger. Dragging his lower extremities out of the water, he sat up and wiped the rain out of his eyes. He suddenly realized he held a piece of cloth in his right hand. The cloth contained something. He unwrapped the cloth and found a smoked fish inside. *Manannán!* The images returned to him in a flash. The tiny boat drawn by horses made of water! *That could not have been real! But how did I get here? Where is here?* He began eating the fish, gazing across the water through the rain. *The fish is real enough!* A strong breeze was coming from his right, kicking up the water's surface into tall chops. Suddenly he stopped chewing, frozen in amazement. One of the tall chops on the lake (*how do I know this is a lake? What happened to the sea?*) stood straight up, six feet tall and became a

man. Steel armor covered his body. He held a lance at his side. He stood upon the water. *Wait! He's MADE of water. Oh no.*

The knight pointed his lance to William's left and said, "Her name is Niamh, but in that place they call her Brita." The Knight of water dropped back into the lake and joined with the white-capped turmoil the wind created on the water's surface.

William peeled some of the fish's skin and scales away from the meat and took another bite, chewed and swallowed. *How did I get to the Great Glen? That is where I must be. And that,* he glanced to the left, *is Castle Urquhart.* He rose and began climbing the bank of the lake. His shivering made the climb harder than it should have been. When he reached the top, he found a path paralleling the Loch and he immediately heard voices. *Not a good time or place to be found unawares.* He slipped back into the bushes to wait. *Are they friendly or not?* The voices were deep and brusque. William peeked from the bushes. The voices came from short, very stocky creatures wearing tall boots, heavy clothing, outlandish hats and bearing large packs on their backs. Despite the awkward dress and heavy burdens, they all carried a weapon. Of the four, two held war hammers. The other two carried large, spiked maces.

William slipped further into the bushes, but it was too late. "What's this?" shouted one of the creatures. "Someone is watching us from these scrubs. We're about to be attacked!" All four of the Dwarves dropped their packs. One snapped his weapon from one hand to the other, and as he did so, all four charged William.

William had no where to flee, except the waters of the Loch. He quickly stood straight up, raised his hands in the air and called to them. "I am unarmed. I bear you no threat."

“Why then, peering from the bushes like a rabbit?”

“Yes! Why,” two others demanded.

The fourth dwarf remained quiet, observing.

“I fell out of a boat on the Loch and barely made it to shore. I’m cold and wet. I heard your voices. I didn’t know who was coming. I hid.” *Well. That’s pretty close to the truth.*

A particularly stocky Dwarf with a red beard, fading to gray, swung his mace around his head once. “I think we should kill him now. He’s skulking in the bushes, spying on us. He could be a spy for the Elves.”

The dwarf standing in the background observing, now stepped forward. Less stocky than the others, his beard grayer, he seemed to William to be their leader. He put down his mace and pushed his hat back further on his head revealing that he had very little hair on top. “Are you a spy for the Elves?” he asked matter-of-factly?”

“Why would the Elves need a spy?” William snapped back. “They always seem to know everything long before I do. When I want to know something, I ask them.”

“Who are you,” the Dwarf demanded more sternly.

“I am William Williamson of the Clan MacAodh and of Glen Williamson in the Naver Valley.”

“Well. He’s got a name,” the red bearded Dwarf muttered gruffly. “What brings you here and why were you spying on us?”

“I was fighting in the wars in the south against invaders from the south. I was on my way home with some friends when we were separated. I fell into the Loch and was just now trying to find a warm fire and dry clothing when I heard your voices...”

“So.” The elder Dwarf interrupted, lowering his head. “Why should I not allow Broesseus, here, to smash you with his mace?”

“You seem a wise people. Wise people don’t destroy things without gaining anything in return, especially things that may come to be of service to them, some time in the future. It seems we are not on friendly terms today, but in time, we may well be. Let’s allow our friendship to mature and see what comes of it?”

Broesseus raised his mace again. “He’s too glib for me. He’s too smooth with his tongue. He’s hiding something.”

“Perhaps so.” The elder lifted his mace off the ground and shouldered his pack. “We will give you your life, but you will come with us. We will trade you to King Brude for shelter and food. He can decide what to do with you.” He turned to Broesseus. “Bind his hands. Then throw a blanket over his shoulders so he doesn’t die of cold before we get to the castle. Brude won’t thank us for a dead slave.”

At the drawbridge before the entrance to the castle, the five were challenged by a guard standing high above them in a tower. “Stop where you stand. Come no farther. Identify yourselves.”

The elder dwarf stepped forward. He straightened his coat, wiped the rain from his face, cleared his throat with great solemnity and announced loudly, “I am DolagBar, an emissary of King BroeNann, King Under the Mountain. We are Dwarfs of the lands south of here. These are my companions except for this human who we caught skulking in the bushes along the road.” He indicated William with a gesture of his hand. “We

offer him to King Brude in exchange for a dry place to sleep and food for tonight and tomorrow morning.”

The guard looked carefully at each of them, observing their weapons and their attire. “What is your business in these lands? What brings you to the Great Glen and the Castle Urquhart?”

“We are an advance party,” answered DolagBar. “We seek to establish friendly relations for the purpose of trade and we wish to explore these lands for precious metals.”

“Any precious metals you find in THESE lands, will belong to King Brude, I’m sure you are aware of that.”

Broesseus raised his mace in anger, but DolagBar calmed him with a gesture. “I have no question in my mind about ownership of precious metals we may find here. I feel certain, however, that King Brude will reward us generously for filling his coffers with the gold we may find.”

William’s head snapped toward DolagBar. *Gold! They want gold.*

William opened his mouth to speak. “I know wha...”

“Silence!” DolagBar snapped. “If we want words from the slave, he will be informed.

The guard hesitated. Then with uncertainty in his tones, he announced, “Please wait while I inform the King. I will return soon with his commands.”

“Broesseus spun on DolagBar and with his two companions muttering together, he challenged, “We should have killed this human immediately. Now he embarrasses us with his bad manners. And look at his condition! What King would want such a poor sample of flesh for a slave?”

DolagBar frowned at Broesseus's ill demeanor. "I don't know how much more of your rudeness I'm going to be willing to take. I am in charge of this expedition. If you don't like what we're doing, go home. If you challenge me again, I will send you home. Any questions?"

Glowing, Broesseus leaned slightly toward DolagBar like a cat about to pounce. "We will settle this in time, DolagBar. Since you married the daughter of the sister of BroeNann, who should have been MY wife, you have thrown your weight around like a child with too much authority."

"I knew of your feelings about this, Broesseus. I requested that you be included in this adventure hoping that we could rekindle our former friendship. I still hope for that."

"Never!" Broesseus' rage threatened to take control of him at any moment, but just then the guard returned. He could see they were engaged in conversation so he waited a moment before coughing politely. "His majesty the King has ordered that you be admitted to the castle, but has ordered that you will leave your weapons in the guardhouse with me. Just place them on the ground where you are. I will gather them up and when you are ready to take your departure, I will return them to you."

"Broesseus turned again to DolagBar. "No human is going to touch my mace."

"Nor my hammer," muttered another.

"Nor mine," rasped the last of them with a stomp of his foot.

"I will surrender my weapon," DolagBar told the guard with a grim set to his lips. "These others may remain outside for the night and sleep in the rain." With that, he handed his mace to Broesseus, took William by the arm and together they started across

the drawbridge. Inside they were met by a well-dressed young man wearing a long, black handled dagger on his belt, the customary Skyn Dhu of the Highlands.

“I am Barton, a servant and squire to King Brude. The King awaits you in the great hall. He is eager to see what kind of a slave he is to receive at the hands of Dwarfs. Follow me, please.”

DolagBar, with William in tow, began following Barton across the courtyard toward a large building when he spotted a few horses, off to the right. He let go of William’s arm, broke off following Barton and took a few paces toward the horses.

Barton stopped to watch and wait. DolagBar turned to him with a smile. “I have seen few horses living underground as we Dwarfs do. My I have a closer look?”

Returning DolagBar’s smile, Barton started leading the way toward the horses. “Of course, but we must not keep King Brude waiting. Let’s make this quick.”

DolagBar turned glancing at William. “I suppose,” he directed his comment to Barton, “that the slave will not be able to escape if we leave him standing against the wall there for a moment?”

William backed up against the tall stone wall. An overhang sheltered him from the never-ending rain. He watched Barton and DolagBar stroll toward the horses. Barton was tall, thin, young and wore a white waistcoat with a tanned leather vest. His neatly coifed tuft of brown hair blew slightly in the breeze as the rain collected on him.

DolagBar’s short squat bulk covered in the bulky clothing and flopping hat made a comic contrast. William was about the chuckle when he heard a very soft voice just beside him.

“William! William!”

William turned and was very shocked to find himself face to face with Barte. Barte was dry. He looked warm and just as surprised to see William. “Step inside here quickly,” he ordered.

William noticed a door behind Barte. Actually, it was part of the stone wall that had opened, like a door. “Step in here quickly. Now.” Urged Barte. “Before they turn around and see us.”

William needed no further urging. As he stepped into the darkness beyond the doorway, the rocks slammed shut, silently behind him. Migal was standing just inside the door. In the dim light, William could see that Migal was grinning. A stairway, a few steps beyond the door led downward. On the stairs, stood VelMud, DarMud and Mishish. *They're all here! Just as Manannán said they would be.* “How did you get here?” William’s astonishment amused the five.

“How did YOU get here?” they all said together.

Barte took the lead. We thought you were lost when that cliff crashed down on the Morrigan.

“I was thrown into the sea,” William decided to conceal his experience with Manannán. I was picked up by a kindly old fisherman in a tiny boat.” William smiled at the image of the kindly fisherman, Manannán MacLyr, reaching into the air and pulling a freshly smoked fish out of the air. “He brought me to the banks of the Lock where these Dwarfs found me. Why are there Dwarfs in the Highlands?”

Migal’s face fell. “I’m afraid we may find out, but for now, let’s eat and be warm and comfortable.”

“What is this place?” William was looking around. Stone blocks made the walls, the floor, the ceiling. “Where are we? I mean, I know we’re in Castle Urquhart, but this isn’t exactly the Kings Great Hall, now, is it?”

The Elves exchanged glances with gradually broadening smiles. “This is one of our Havens,” Migal told him in confidential tones. “We Elves built the original foundation of this building just for that purpose. We allow others to build on top, as King Brude and others did when they erected this huge castle. This provides cover for us. None would look for us here. So when in need or danger we use this as a Haven.”

VelMud, very broad shouldered for an Elf, with oddly wide, dark eyes, turned those eyes on William. “There are many Havens in the country. Some, we built. Many were provided by some race that came here before us. They were here so long ago, we don’t even know who they were, but we are grateful to them for the gifts they gave us of these Havens.”

We know of many,” Barte continued. “But we are very sure that we don’t know all of them. We find new ones from time to time, usually in time of need, as though some god, watching over us, leads us to them. Come. Below there is food and cots where you can sleep in warmth and comfort. We will be leaving as soon as the rain stops, but VelMud and Migal both believe that will be several days. So you might as well make yourself comfortable.”

Suddenly, they heard shouting above. The sounds of running feet penetrated the stone of the walls and ceiling. A trumpet’s shrill note pierced the night accompanied by the pounding of the feet of horses. “It seems,” yawned Migal, “that they have missed you.” He started chuckling.

“I hope they’re not too hard on DolagBar.” William smiled. “He saved me. He wanted to trade me to King Brude as a slave, but without him, I’d be dead.”

Migal rose with a look of concern. “I’m going back up stairs to listen. I’d like to know what’s going on.” With that, he disappeared up the winding stairway.

“Being from Wesheshica,” Mishish mused softly, “I always find these northern Havens surprising. In Wesheshica, we have ours, too, but they aren’t as elaborate as this.” He raised his eyes to William and smiled. “There are tunnels riddling the foundation of this building none know of but us – the Elves – and now one human – you.”

Barte shifted his seat, munching on a biscuit. He offered one to William from a leather satchel he had beside him. “There are many openings from the tunnels, too. From those openings we can listen and learn what is happening in the building. Let’s go and watch.”

The hidden opening they chose for a listening post opened, when it opened, to the short hallway leading from the lower courtyard to the King’s Great Hall. A crack between the stone blocks allowed them to watch, in turn. William patiently waited his turn, but he could hear a little of what was happening. Many voices competed for dominance. Among them he could hear the voice of DolagBar defending himself in stern tones.

An angry, vitriolic voice demanded of him, “Who are you – REALLY? Who are you spying for?”

DolagBar answered with dignity but in tones too soft for William to hear clearly. More voices intruded so that many were talking at once. William heard the crack of a

lash! *They're lashing him!* An undertone slowly crept into William's awareness. A soft sobbing sound was coming from immediately outside their hidden door. Just then a passing figure snapped, "Quiet Brita! What you do is sob and hide! Go to your bed and sob there!"

Brita! Manannán's daughter! Barte and Mishish stood between William and the spy-hole. William took them both by an arm and whispered – that is Brita. I was sent here to rescue her from this place. I'll explain later. Quickly, open the door and draw her inside!"

Barte answered with, "We can't just snatch people out of here. There'll be a hue and a cry that could last for months!"

"We must," William urged. "We must – hurry. Trust me. When I have explained you will agree! Get her! Trust me!"

Mishish and Barte stood aside after swinging the hidden door open just a little. William rushed through the opening. She was muddy and wet from the rain, crumpled in a sitting position on the ground. William took her from behind with a hand under each armpit, trying to reassure her with "Shhhh! Shhh! Come. You'll be safe." He quickly drew her inside the door. Barte and Mishish quickly closed it.

"I hope you know what you're doing!" Mishish led the way back to the interior of the Haven.

William led the distraught girl of about fifteen years, down the stairs followed by Barte who was trying to conceal a grin. "You are safe, now." William whispered to her. "No one will harm you again."

William explained to each of the Elves, in private so that Brita could not hear. “Manannán wishes that she not know who she really is, just yet. I want to honor his wishes.”

Only Barte chuckled at him. Humans in the Highlands often take their wives in this way. It is not the way of the Elves, but if you have chosen to follow this tradition of your people, we will not block your way.” Grinning, he turned and rejoined the group.

William gave Brita what he felt was a fair choice. “You may return to the castle as soon as we leave, if you do not wish to be rescued from this place. If you come with us, I will take you to my village where you may live for a year. Get to know us and our ways. If you wish to return then, I will personally make sure you get back here safely. What is your wish?”

“I – I was praying for rescue.” Niamh pushed her knotted gold hair out of her eyes and tried to straighten her clothing. I thought I would die here. I will go with you.” A certain fierceness closed over her soft face reminding William of her father, Manannán MacLyr. “I will go with you and I will never return to this place!”

Migal leaned back against the stone wall, smiling. “I think we should leave here sooner than we planned. There is quite an upset in the Castle. Two people have now disappeared. They thought Brita had gone to her bed, but now they know she too is missing. They fear some god has intervened. Some think the Dwarfs were gods. Of course, all the Dwarfs are now dead except for one who escaped into the mountains.”

“They killed the Dwarfs?” William was not pleased. *This is my fault! Well, maybe not.*”

“Human kings are a suspicious lot.” Barte had seen his share. “Most kings among the Humans of Alba achieved their thrones by killing their fathers or brothers. Power is tempting to them. Kings among the Elves are chosen by election and they have no real power beyond their ability to become actual leaders. They are also chosen for their wisdom or special skills. Kingship among the Elves is not coveted as it is among Humans.”

Migal rose and began pacing in a casual manner. I had a dream or vision. In that vision, Forest Old came to me. He explained to me much of William has told us and urged that we depart as soon as possible.”

“Dreams!” Barte guffawed. “You are the Dream Maker. Is this a dream you made?”

“All of us make our own dreams.” Migal took the jab in good humor. “This dream came to me from the one who makes my dreams. Forest Old always tells truly. We must take his advice seriously. We should leave now – tonight – rain or no rain. As soon as the sun rises, these hills will be filled with searchers. They will be hunting with intent to kill the escaped Dwarf. They won’t find him, but if we delay, they may well find us.”

William could still hear the shouting voices in the halls above. A horse whinnied. Others joined it. The chaotic sounds from above frightened him. “How can we get out of here, now? Listen to them up there!”

VelMud and DarMud were smiling. Barte grinned broadly. Mishish looked at William and softly answered his question. “We have a Dream Maker. Watch and learn.”

Migal rose to his feet. He raised his eyes to the stone ceiling and began scanning the ceiling as though he could see through it. He raised his hands above his head, palms up and continued scanning with his eyes. Gradually, the pandemonium from above softened and then subsided. Migal continued to scan the ceiling with his hands held aloft. Finally, he lowered his hands, smiled at William and the others and he said, "I have given them a dream. They are sleeping. Let's go. Now."