

Old William (in his youth) and Manannán MacLyr

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40 years before the birth of Angus Williamson (StrathNaver)

Practically deafened by the shrieking of the woman before him William Williamson crept into the light, behind her. She didn't see him – yet. Barte's feet, planted slightly apart, body hunched forward, he was posed for attack, resolutely glaring at her, facing her, waiting for the right moment. His back was to the only door in the room. The bolt on that heavy oak barrier assured them of no quick exit. The curses she cast at Barte had such intensity that William could see the darts as flecks of brilliant light flinging themselves at the stolid Barte. He tossed his shock of golden hair in mockery, spit in her direction and glared with such intensity that it frightened William. His nearly black eyes darkened in response to her. He raised his shimmering staff before him, as a knight would raise his shield and as a shield, its aura of protection covered not only Barte but also the two companions on his either side. They were Mishish of Wesheshica and Migal of the Naver.

The staff raised in the hand of Mishish emitted its own shield, as did the one in the hand of Migal. The overlapping barriers of radiance defied the curses of the woman, but her shrieking grew in volume till William's head began feeling odd, swimming with the overwhelming evil of her tones, but he stepped forward as planned. The rope of woven grasses in his hand was imbued with the magic of the Grays. "It will quiet her and subdue her," Migal had told him that afternoon.

The wine cellar had one entrance, behind Barte and his two co-defenders. It boasted numerous crypts, each with its own door, each door with its own heavy bolts.

Behind those doors, in the darkness, last year's vintages aged in silence. From the two doors on either side of William, two more heroes crept from the darkness, each with a rope from the same weave as that in the hands of William. They were VelMud of the City of the Vision on his right and DarMud, brother of VelMud on his left. In their intrepid youthful innocence, they had taken on what none of them knew.

At a wink from Barte, William stepped forward, slipped the woven rope over the woman's head and tightened it around her neck, drawing her back into the wine crypt, but before he could take a step, there were suddenly two more of her. One was a vicious old woman who raised a dagger at him, just before VelMud slipped his rope over her neck. The other was young, in the prime of her breeding years. She had two daggers, one in each hand, that she raised at William, just before DarMud slipped his rope over her neck.

The touch of the rope seemed to subdue the raging passion of the three. Taking advantage of their pause, the six companions rushed the women into the separate wine crypts and quickly closed and bolted the doors.

Laughing in relief of the tension they had escaped and their fortunate, if temporary victory, they plopped down on some hay bales that were resting on the floor. "So that's the Morrigan," chuckled Barte. "The three in one."

"She's remembered as the Crone, the mother and the maid," Migal entered the chat. The humans in this region worshiped her out of fear. They felt if they praised her enough, she might leave them alone."

"Those three young men we saw her drain this morning," Barte continued, "must not have pleased her enough..."

“So she took her pleasure with them by force,” VelMud interjected with a grimace.

“She can’t be killed,” Migal went on. “She’s an immortal. What can we do with her?”

William scratched a piece of hay out of his shirt and yawned, “If we leave her locked in where she is, in time, she’ll get out and go on another rampage.”

Barte stood and paced to the central door. “We can make the prison more firm and if it’s firm enough, it might last quite a while.”

Migal furrowed his brow. His long, brown beard was tangled in his shirt. As he untangled his beard he muttered thoughtfully, “When MarGaynsiel imprisoned the Baelrogg, it was underground with no passage to the surface. That was many years past and so far, it has not yet returned.”

“But it will,” snapped Barte. “Immortals always return, in time.”

“We could try,” Migal suggested reasonably.

Just then a horrendous roar came from the center crypt of the three where the Morrigan’s three personalities were imprisoned. The five Elves and one man snapped their attention to the barred doors just in time to see two of the three rooms merge to become one.

“The Morrigan is re-gathering itself. We must flee.”

With that, Barte headed for the outside door. He unbolted it and the six rushed outside. The waning afternoon sun was behind the high cliff where an enterprising vintner had carved his wine cellar out of rock. That wine cellar or cave now imprisoned the Morrigan. Barte bolted the heavy door from the outside but the earth was trembling

and rocks were tumbling from above. William retreated farther from the door of the cave but his path was blocked by the waters of the sea. The other five scattered in the two remaining directions to get away from the falling rocks.

Within moments, the cliff collapsed completely burying what were once the wine cellar and the Morrigan. The Earth dropped out from under William's feet and he found himself submerged in salty water. A large wave crashed over his head. The out-draft pulled him far out into the ocean. By the time he struggled to the surface he was far enough away from the land that his five companions could not hear his shouting for help. The current carried him farther into the open sea. William had learned to swim in the River Naver, as a boy, so he was in no immediate danger of drowning, but swim as he could, the current was faster. The land was soon a distant glimpse at the top of each swell.

I'm done for, thought William. At least I had a chance to fight for Alba in the south. Some fine victories we had. We even subdued the Morrigan, for a while.

A breaking sea hit him right in the face causing him to choke. With the sun going down, darkness was almost upon him. *I'll just float a while and see what happens.* He watched the last of the sea birds heading for land for the night, or dropping to the water's surface to sleep, fear rising within his heart. The first of the stars were becoming visible, *but no moon yet.*

His last sight of land was nearly a lost memory. His world had become just water, salty water. The only sounds he could hear were breaking chops, a fish jumping, a bird's call. The only thing he could feel was his body's shivering against the cold of the sea's

water. *Wait! There's a light! A fisherman? Sudden Hope! A boat crossing from Wesheshica?*

The light grew closer but William could hear no oars, no flap of sail, no voices. William waited as the light came nearer. A tiny boat bobbed toward him in the choppy surface. The light came from a lantern suspended above it. William's fatigue and the chill from the cold water had almost finished him before a voice said, "take my hand. Quickly, take my hand."

William found himself on the bottom of a tiny fishing boat. He panted and shivered with the cold. An old man wearing a dirty white cloth wrapped around him, perched on the bow of the boat watching him. The boat seemed very unstable in the choppy water and the freshening breeze. *This could get nasty out here. Is there bad weather coming?*

"You're safe enough." The old man just watched, as William became more aware of his surroundings. "There's fresh water in that pot beside you," the old man pointed. "And on your other side is fresh smoked fish wrapped in that cotton clothe."

"What's cotton?" William picked up the cloth and unwrapped the fish.

"It's cloth, obviously," the old man snorted. His eyes flashed briefly with a light unlike anything William knew. "I forget," the old man continued. "You're from the north of Alba and not familiar with such things."

The old man approached him and touched his shoulder. William suddenly was dry and warm. "I must protect your seed. I have use for you, William Williamson."

William bit into the smoked fish. "This is delicious. Where's it from?"

“A pious fisherman who lives on the boat of the Middle Sea sacrificed it to me. I don’t eat fish. You may have it.”

“Sacrificed it to you? Who are you?”

“That doesn’t matter. I want to show you something. Knowing of this will help you. First, finish eating. If you want more, there is plenty.” With that, he raised his hand above his head. When he lowered his hand, it held another cloth, the tail of a fish protruding from it. “See?” The old man smiled at William’s astonishment. “If I ate all they gave me, I would be as fat as those others who travel these Whale Roads.”

The choppiness of the sea seemed to be subsiding. This surprised William since the wind was stronger than ever. Gripping the mast that supported the lantern, William hoisted himself to his feet.

“There, there,” cautioned the old man. “Don’t fall out of the boat, now.”

William almost choked on his bite of fish when he realized the boat was riding many feet above the surface of the sea. Long strings of what he believed to be seawater stretched from the bow of the boat. Drawing the boat through the sky by these long strands of seawater ropes were large horses made of roiling water the same color as the sea below. The sea foam dripped from their panting maws as no bridle guided them along the path chosen by the old man.

“I. I know who you are.” William couldn’t take his eyes off of the horses. He watched their huge muscles flexing under the load they pulled through the sky. Their hooves made no sound. Clouds zipped past. “I know who you are.” William said again.

“It doesn’t matter.” The old man was seated now on the port side of the tiny boat, yet it did not lean. That he didn’t take his eyes off of William made William nervous.

William tore his eyes from the horses and looked directly at the old man. “You are Manannán, Manannán MacLyr. I didn’t believe you exist.”

The old man started laughing. “It’s a good thing for you that someone does. Otherwise you wouldn’t have that fish.”

“Quite a day.” William joined in the old man’s laughter. “I defeated the Morrigan in the afternoon and met Manannán Mac Lyr in the evening.”

“I wouldn’t get too excited about beating Morrigan. She’ll be back in time. I know her well. She’s my sister and she’s very angry right now.” The old man continued laughing. “When she grows a little more in wisdom, she’ll stop teasing your kind. I warned her, but she thought she knew better than her elders. Now she’s without a body.” He continued laughing. “She’ll be back. Look below now.”

William directed his gaze over the side of the boat, at the landmass far below. They were too high for him to see trees or rocks. He could barely distinguish mountains from plains. He returned his gaze, quizzically to the old man.

“I want you to see the lay of the land. Look there. He pointed behind the boat. In the distance, there, you can see a long island, stretching north and south. Do you see where I mean?”

“Yes. It looks so small.”

“We are very far away. That’s why it looks small. That is where your home lies. The northern end of that island is the land of Alba. Now. Look that way.” He pointed again, this time to the south. We’re too far away. Let’s get closer. I want you to see where this place is in relation to your home, so before we descend look again at how to get there.”

William felt a little vertigo from the altitude, but he pulled himself together and studied the land and the sea, far below. “I think I could find the place again, but the distances seem to be very great.”

“Sit now over there,” the old man indicated the bow of the boat. “There you can see where we’re going more easily. Do you know what gold is?” The old man lifted his eyebrows in query?

“Yes.”

The old man pointed at a stretch of land below the boat. “There are vast deposits of gold there. The metal is far beneath the earth’s surface, but that’s of no matter. There are also vast deposits of diamonds there. And I do mean VAST.”

“Do you wish to make me wealthy?” William, hanging on to the side of the boat for dear life, turned to the old man. “I have no use for such knowledge.”

“You are already a wealthy man.” The old man smiled warmly at William. “That’s what I like about you. A wealthy man is one who is satisfied with what he has.”

William frowned. “Are you saying that a wealthy man is one who is satisfied that he can’t do better?”

The old man started laughing again. “William, you are a pleasure. Now. Tell me. Can you find this place again from your home, if you have to find it?”

“Absolutely.”

“If you must, can you tell another how to get there?”

“Yes.”

The boat began ascending again. The horses appeared at the ends of the long strands of seawater and the vessel began speeding north toward Alba. “Now I want to tell you about my daughter.”

William broke eye contact with the old man, looking instead at the island in the distance where the boat was going. *Old people seem to always want to talk of their children. I wonder how long it's going to take to get off of this boat?*

The old man started laughing again. “Do you think I can't hear your thoughts? I am not an old man. I am not even a man. I am Manannán Mac Lyr, as you said. And I want you to rescue my daughter.”

“If you're a god, why can't you rescue her yourself, as you did me?”

“She's having a Human experience and she doesn't know she's my daughter. I'll thank you to not tell her so. You do owe me, you know. I did save your life.”

“True enough.” William cleared his throat to pause for time. “So. Do you want me to sacrifice fish to you? Goats?”

“Manannán laughed and raised one hand in protest. “No. No. I have enough fish and I told you I don't eat fish. I don't eat goats either. These poor animals have enough trouble in their lives without dying for nothing. All I want you to do is rescue my daughter. It might occur to you while doing so, that she might make you a good wife.”

“You want me to marry your daughter? Maybe you should put me back in the ocean?”

“I’m not asking you to marry my daughter. I am giving you permission to marry her, if you wish it, because I know that in time you will want to ask me and I might not be available to chat.”

“I don’t know what to say,” mumbled William.

“Say to me that I can count on your friendship. If you do this for me, you can certainly count on mine.”

William was afraid he was dead and hallucinating in some afterlife. Maybe he was asleep in the cold of the ocean and dying. Maybe he was cast on a beach somewhere, asleep and dreaming. *A man doesn’t kill a god then get rescued by its brother. Then the brother has a daughter and the reward for killing his sister is the hand of his daughter. This gets weirder and weirder. Then there are the gold deposits...*

“Manannán started laughing again. “I told you there’s a lot you don’t understand. Morrigan is fine. She’s just without a body and quite angry about it. My daughter is a spiritual being having a material experience – something like what you’re doing, but a little different. Right now she’s having a hard time. At the present time, she thinks she’s the physical daughter of King Brude of the Castle Urquhart in the Great Glen. He’s a Pict. They tend to be a little brutish with their women sometimes. He’s getting brutish with my daughter and I want you to get her out of there.”

“Let’s see. All I have to do is mount an assault on the castle, kill the guards and King Brude’s army, such as it is. Then I have to scale the walls, climb the tower and

carry the damsel, over my shoulder, down the tower wall, across the moat and home to the Naver Valley. Is that all?"

"I knew you'd understand. It's simple." Manannán was grinning broadly. "Your companions are heading toward Urquhart as we speak. They caught a boat that dropped them off at the west end of the Glen. I'll drop you close enough to them that you can rejoin them. They'll help you."