**Solving Riddles**

While Uisant saw to the body of Beuneg, the remainder of the party made their way cautiously towards Beuneg’s mougev. No one was quite sure how the Kah Du-Kel would act now that their leader was dead and Gurval was happy to let Zaig lead the way. The presence of Zaig seemed to have the effect of restraining the Kah Du-Kel from attacking the folk and Gurval was happy for this to continue, while at the same time being ready to jump to the defence of his new friend if the black cats decided that Zaig was an enemy.

The party reached the foot of the path leading up to the mougev and, while a number of the cats had obviously fled after witnessing the death of Beuneg, some still remained on the path. Gurval eyed them suspiciously as they swirled and paced up and down and emitting low, deep growls that seemed to signify bewilderment and uncertainty more than anything else.

The two groups stared at each other in common mistrust, the yellow eyes of the Kah Du-Kel suspicious and watchful, but the mood was broken by Zaig, who suddenly let out a high pitched whine that seemed to startle the other cats back into sensibility. They began to stretch and shake themselves, for all the world like common, household tabbies when they awaken from a fireside sleep. In almost military fashion, Zaig started up the path towards the mougev and the remaining Kah Du-Kel sat quietly, but watchful, and let her pass. Gurval was quick to follow, indicating as he did so for to the others to follow Zaig’s lead.

Shonagh, in spite of seeing Gurval walk past the cats without mishap, approached the watching Kah Du-Kel with a certain amount of anxiety after her previous experiences of them, but all she heard was the sound of a slow, uneasy purring as she passed in as delicate a manner as possible. There was no hostile movement whatsoever from the cats and Shonagh let a little sigh of relief slowly drift from her lungs once she had passed them.

They soon reached the opening into the mougev and before them stood tressle tables, many bowls and plates, and banks of wooden trays in which all sorts of plants were growing. In the darkest corner of the mougev were the biggest trays of all, more like square tubs, and these contained a wide variety of fungi!

‘That’s just what I thought!’ said Gurval. ‘Beuneg’s been growing toadstools and mushrooms! He must hae been using them to feed to the Kah Du-Kel! Mind, the effect seems to hae worn off gey quickly. They’re fairly quiet noo!’

‘Aye,’ agreed Shonagh with some feeling, ‘and I hope it lasts!’

Andrew went over and inspected the fungi, ‘You’re nae going to believe this, but that Fungus there, the brown one with the little white spots, is called Panther Cap!’

Shonagh gave Andrew a funny look, ‘Och, Andrew, come on! Panther Cap! Are you having us on! You’re jokes are never very good, but this one’s rotten and in pretty bad taste!’

‘I’m telling you! It’s nae joke. That’s what it’s called and it’s gey dangerous as well. Eating one o them could kill you. They’re one o the most dangerous o the mushrooms that you can find round aboot here. The ones in the box next to it are even worse. They’re called The Blusher. Never go near them! If you eat them you’re a gonner! These doon here are Liberty Caps! These are all toadstools or mushrooms you should bide well away frae! There’s a gey few here I dinna ken and hae never seen before. Jings! Beuneg was certainly up to something. He could hae poisoned us all if he’d wanted! He must hae been experimenting with them to use on the cats! Gurval’s right! That’s how he would hae kept them under his control! If they’d got a liking for them they might hae become dependant on them. He just didna care what he did!’

Shonagh smiled at Andrew’s determination, ‘Well you’re the one who kens his mushrooms! What do you think, Gurval? Do you agree with Andrew?’

‘These are nae the kind o toadstools we usually see under Menez. I ken all oors so Beuneg must hae gane ootside to collect this lot. I’ve seen one or two o them afore and Andrew’s right that you shouldna eat any o them. You should never eat ony mushroom or toadstool until you’re right sure exactly what it is! Barban found the remains of three or four rabbits and hares, and two or three sheep in a tub ower at the back there, so I think Beuneg must hae been feeding the cats meat mixed with his toadstools.’

‘Do you think you should take back some samples o the fungi that are here?’ Andrew asked. ‘Often plants that are dangerous can hae good healing qualities if they’re used the right way and by the right folk. Maybe Beuneg has written down information aboot how he used them?’

‘Most o what we ken is handed doon by word o mouth, but I’ll hae a look, for Beuneg was one for the writing. The rest o the folk dinna read or write much except when its affa important!’

‘Is that why there are nae written records o the folk and even the Picts?’ queried Shonagh.

Gurval considered, ‘I suppose it is, but there never was much writing done except on steens and that was done only by special folk, for the steens were gey special and you couldna let just onybody loose on them! And besides, if you pass things on by word o mouth then folk hae to talk to one another and that keeps folk together; closer like.’

Gurval nodded to Andrew, ‘You ken, I think I will take a few samples o Beuneg’s plants and see what I can do with them, but we’ll destroy everything else. It’s nae good to destroy onything, but too much trouble has come frae this mougev and it wouldna do for others to get there hands on this stuff. They might be worse than Beuneg and it would be best to make sure that the Kah Du-Kel are never tempted to eat ony more o the toadstools.’

Barban interrupted, ‘Nae sign o ony papers, Gurval. I’ve looked in every kist and drawer. There is signs at the back o the mougev that Beuneg’s been digging a hole or making a wee tunnel. You might hae a look at it. We’ll put the remains o the carcasses on the fire and then scatter the ashes. I’ve checked up on the Kah Du-Kel ootside and they are all gey quiet and lost looking. I dinna think they ken what to do with themsels noo that Beuneg’s dead.’

Gurval agreed. ‘Aye, hopefully they’ll soon get ower that and return to being just like they used to be; a nuisance, but nae too much o a nuisance!’ Right, we’d better hae a look at this digging that Beuneg’s been up to. It might hae something to do with all this trouble.’

They moved to the rear of the mougev and Barban pointed out the place where the digging had taken place. ‘I canna see any reason for the digging,’ she said, ‘but it might be important.’

Gurval looked closely at the hole which slanted along just under the surface of the floor and did not go straight down, but was dug at a narrow angle to the floor. He thought for a moment, nodded and then made his way outside the mougev and looked closely at its surroundings. It all looked like just another rock face to Shonagh and Andrew, but they said nothing and waited for Gurval to tell them what he thought.

‘I’d need to consult Uisant, to be sure, but I think I can guess what Beuneg was planning or at least had in his mind. The back o this mougev gives on to the west wall. Now, if I’m right, just below this level is the tunnel and ster that carries the water to the bigger ster that feeds water into the ker. You maybe weren’t so far wrong, Andrew, with your ideas aboot what Beuneg was up to. If he’d extended this wee tunnel a bit further he’d hae come oot on the water tunnel. He could hae fed some o his evil toadstools into oor drinking water. If he crushed the things and turned them to a powder we’d never hae kent! He could hae poisoned us all! Somebody gie Uisant a call and we’ll see what he thinks.’

Uisant arrived and explained that he’d got Beuneg’s body ready for moving back to the ker and that he’d constructed a litter on which to carry it. He listened to what Gurval had to say about the small tunnel Beuneg had been digging and after a quick inspection confirmed what Gurval had said, Beuneg could indeed have ‘doctored’ the water supply to the ker.

This discovery had a disheartening effect on the folk, ‘I’d never hae believed that one o us, nae matter how bad, could hae thought o poisoning the others. Beuneg was Enourabi’s brother!’ said Uisant in a voice that was reduced almost to a whisper by the horrific realisation of evil amongst themselves.

Shonagh tried to bring some comfort, ‘Could it nae hae been that working with all these poisonous fungi effected him so he didna really ken what he was doing? Is that possible, Andrew?’

‘Sure is,’ confirmed Andrew. ‘Mushrooms, toadstools and the like hae thousands o little spores that float aboot all the time and they’d fill the air if you were breaking up a lot o them. He’d hae been breathing them in all the time. Bound to effect him eventually.’

‘Maybe that’s the true explanation,’ muttered Gurval, but the doubt was still in his voice. His tone strengthened, ‘But, whatever else happens we’ll hae to destroy all this stuff in here and then see that this mougev is sealed up so that naebody ever gets affected again. We’ll fill in Beuneg’s wee tunnel as well just in case he was nearer to breaking through than we think.’

Members of the group set about breaking up the remains of Beuneg’s goods and equipment while others, after filling in the tunnel Beuneg had started, began to prise rocks away from the walls in order to get enough material to close off the mougev. ‘We’ll nae manage to seal it completely just yet,’ explained Gurval, ‘but we’ll do the best we can and get Enourabi to send a party back to really seal up the entrance.’

Their work completed the group gathered on the rocky bank of the ster below the mougev and four of the party picked up the litter that contained the remains of Beuneg. Uisant had borrowed a cloak from one of the folk so that the body, which looked very small in death, was covered over while it was being carried.

The Kah Du-Kel watched silently as the party moved away. They made no sound, just watched with typical feline interest as their late master was carried back to the home of his folk. Andrew asked the question that was also in Shonagh’s mind. ‘Do you think they know what has happened and that Beuneg is dead?’

Gurval shook his head sadly, ‘Who can tell? Maybe they didna even ken what they were doing when he was alive. We’ve nae idea what all these toadstool did to them: we’ve nae idea if it’s done them ony harm to have eaten the stuff. We can only hope that they bide like they are noo. There’s been enough o fighting and scrapping we want to get back to the auld ways o living.’

‘What do you think could hae happened to Zaig?’ asked Shonagh. ‘She’s disappeared!’

‘Oh, she’s probably gane back to her ain folk, just like we’re gan to do. The other cats will accept her withoot any bother, I’m sure,’ answered Gurval.

The group then fell to silence as they made their way back to the ker. The travelled at their usual quick pace and not having to worry about sporadic and surprise attacks from the Kah Du-Kel made it much easier and they could travel by the quickest and best route.

Soon they were exiting the tunnel that led to the ker and it was obvious on reaching their destination that word of their adventure and its outcome had gone before them. The largest crowd of the folk Andrew and Shonagh had ever seen had gathered to greet them and Danny, along with Tourz, was at the forefront wagging his tail excitedly, but making no sound, as though he was aware of the more serious side to the group’s return. In fact, the numbers were so large that they wondered where they all had come from and were totally mystified at how such a large group of people could keep themselves almost totally hidden from the folk in the outside world!

They watched with the others as Enourabi lifted the cloak to view the remains of his brother and former enemy and they were as moved as the folk obviously were at the stark sadness and pain that was evident on the kind, old man’s face.

They found it rather odd that Beuneg had been prepared for burial by having his knees bent upwards till they were against his chest and he looked just as if he had curled himself into a ball to fall asleep. Enora was later to explain that the folk, when they died were always buried in that position, some of their most prized possessions were also put in the grave, and that only very close relatives actually attended the burial which was held in a very remote part of Menez.

Gurval, having spoken with Enourabi and Kozhiadez and explained what had happened, returned to the group and searched out Shonagh and Andrew. ‘Enourabi asks that you wait for him to see to the burial his brother. He wants to thank you personally for all you’ve done for the folk, but he has to see to his duties as a brother and he kens that you’ll understand that this must hae priority. He’ll also hae to prepare you for return to your ain folk and he wants to see that you get back as soon as possible, for he doesna want your folk getting too worried aboot you.’

It was only then that the full realisation of their position dawned on Shonagh and Andrew. They had grown so used to life beneath Bennachie and so much had happened to them that they’d almost forgotten their other responsibilities. Now they must prepare their minds and themselves for a return to the ‘normal’ world.