**The Defiance of the Kah Du-Kel**

They had only been walking for a short while, along the route to Beuneg’s mougev, when they came to a small tunnel, whose entrance one might have missed, it was so well concealed in the rock. Gurval raised his hand to halt the party and called on Uisant to come forward, ‘You’ll need to lead the way, Uisant. You ken the old tunnels. You’ve got plenty o wet cloth to wipe a light for us?’

‘Aye, I’ve taken a pitch bag with me and it’s filled with wet moss. That’ll keep the cloths wet enough to wipe the granite.’ Uisant showed Gurval the small bag which was made of a rough, coarse cloth, but had a lining of tar inside it so that it could hold water to keep the moss damp.

Gurval turned to Shonagh, ‘This passage is one of the old roads. You can see how narrow they are and are nae used by many folk these days, and often they dinna light very well. Using these old tunnels might shorten oor journey and Beuneg maybe winna be expecting us to use them so we might surprise him. Uisant spends a lot o time checking these old passageways in case o rock falls or flooding which might cause danger to the ker and some o the ootlying mougev so he’s the best guide we can hae. He’s better than most o us, as well, at getting light in these old tunnels. Often moss and sic like grow on the walls making it difficult to wipe a light and Uisant kens just where the best o the mica lies. It’s nae all granite in Menez, ye ken. Sometimes we get seams o clay and they’re bad for gathering water.’

Shonagh nodded understanding, appreciating the fact that Gurval had taken the trouble to explain just what they were doing and why they were leaving the main passageways which would have made travelling much easier. She looked round and spotted Andrew deep in conversation with Barban who was no doubt giving Andrew the information that Gurval had given her.

Andrew and Barban had taken up position at the rear of the group because Gurval felt that the naer would give ample warning of any attack from the front, but the back of the group might be exposed to an enemy attack. Andrew was certainly the tallest of their party and looked, even if he wasn’t in fact, a formidable opponent, while Barban was the most skilled user of weapons. It was felt that, between them, they could handle any trouble that crept up on them from behind and their mere presence there might deter an attack.

It was immediately apparent on entering the old tunnel that it was much darker and not nearly as high as the main tunnels. Sporadic rock falls had raised the floor level in a few places making it necessary, not only for Shonagh and Andrew, but also the folk of the hill, to stoop while travelling along the tunnel. Shonagh kept thinking back to her earlier encounter with the logod - how long ago that seemed now! - but although she felt the occasional tickling sensation on her face, hands and feet she saw nothing of the logod and assumed that she must just be brushing against trailing plants or the odd spider’s web. Luckily she’d no idea what was causing the tickling for one or two of the Bennachie spiders were not altogether a pleasant sight!

They were nearing the end of this particular passageway when the naer began to emit a shrill, nervous cry. It was not loud, just an unsteady continuous trill whose undulations pierced the ears of all who were close to it. Gurval raised his hand to halt the group, ‘The naer is detecting some Kah Du-Kel, but they must be a fair distance away for he’s nae getting too excited. We’ll continue, but be wary, for we dinna want to be attacked when we’re nae ready. They maybe dinna ken we are here and it might just be a group o the Kah Du-Kel who are wandering aboot.’

They reached the end of the narrow tunnel and came to one of the main tunnels. Gurval and Uisant told the others to wait while they investigated what was up ahead. As they made their way forward the naer kept up its warning noise which seemed to be becoming slightly more agitated.

On their return to the main group Gurval explained what he felt they must do, ‘We dinna want to get involved in a fight with the Kah Du-Kel at this stage o things so we’re going to leave the main tunnel again. If we hae a fight with the Kah Du-Kel now it’ll just be like sending word to Beuneg that we’re on oor way to his mougev and the later he kens o oor presence aroond here the better. Uisant kens o another o the aul tunnels that’s just a short distance along the way so we’ll head for that. He says it could save us a bit o time, but it is nae a tunnel that’s easily lit so we’ll hae to stick close together.’

Everyone, in spite of their desire to settle matters with Beuneg, was grateful that Gurval was doing his best to avoid confrontation with the Kah Du-Kel. Although everyone thought it unlikely, they would have all been delighted if Beuneg could be put in his place without things becoming violent and fighting breaking out. They were all aware of the results of the many battles that had taken place around Bennachie over the centuries and they didn’t want that sort of violence in their own community and the sadness and heartache that always accompanied such happenings.

When they got to the passageway they were to take, they were instantly aware of how small a passage it was. The entrance was less than a metre high and Shonagh and Andrew had to crawl on their hands and knees to get into it. Because the entrance was so small there was a lot less light than was usual entering the tunnel which made it difficult to wipe up any light and let the mica magnify it. Shonagh was well aware that they’d need to stick closely together to maintain contact, while Andrew’s thoughts were concentrated on what would happen if they were attacked while in this tunnel. He would have great difficulty moving, let alone using a weapon and even Barban had little in the way of space to manouvre in. This could be more dangerous than it seemed!

Andrew’s worst fears were soon to be realised when the warning note of the naer suddenly changed to a high-pitched scream. There were a few moments of confusion as everyone tried to figure out where the attack might be coming from. A shout from Uisant let everyone know that the Kah Du-Kel were right up ahead. But, due to the narrowness of the tunnel, Barban and Andrew could not make their way forward to help beat off the attack.

‘Bide still everyone!’ shouted Gurval, ‘We’ll deal with it. Stay back and let us hae as much room as you can.’

The remainder of the group stopped, although all craned their necks in order to try and see what was happening. Shonagh, nearer the front of the group than most, saw Uisant hold his staff straight in front of him and move it slowly from side to side. The screeching of the naer was now augmented by the faint, but distinct, growling coming from the Kah Du-Kel whose presence was marked only by the sound for, in the poor light, nothing could be seen of the black beasts.

Suddenly, Uisant leapt back, colliding with Gurval and, as he did so, one of the Kah Du-Kel came into view snarling, spitting and lashing out with its sharp claws. Uisant’s stick appeared to be having little effect and when he had leapt back he unbalanced Gurval long enough for another of the Kah Du-Kel to get up to join the attack.

As quickly as they could, Gurval and Uisant renewed their attack. The slashing and growling were as noisy as ever and the restricted space made it difficult for the men to defend their position. Nevertheless, by sheer force and a wee bit of desperation, they drove the Kah Du-Kel slowly and relentlessly back along the narrow tunnel, until at last the cats turned and fled.

‘Are you all right, Gurval?’ yelled Andrew from the rear.

‘Hae nae fear o that,’ replied Gurval, ‘both o us are fine although for a wee minute there I thought we’d be beaten by space. There wasna much in the way o room along here!’

‘How did they know we were in this tunnel?’ inquired Barban. ‘It was only at the last minute we decided to take it!’

‘Aye,’ answered Gurval, ‘they must hae had a few o the main tunnels covered knowing we were likely to be coming. The probably heard us in one o the tunnels and, when we couldna be found in the main roads, decided to put a few o the Kah Du-Kel in to the old tunnels to keep watch. There were only four o the black beasts facing us this time so it must just hae been a group sent oot to do a bit o spying who thought they’d get up to a bit o devilment.’

‘Mind, at least we ken that they’re aboot, so we’ve to be thankful that we’ve had a warning. We’ll just need to be more watchful than ever,’ said Uisant and everyone nodded in agreement.

Barban added her thoughts on the matter, ‘If they ken now that we’re aboot in the passageways, I canna see much point in travelling by the old narrow tunnels. They’ll be just as watchful as we are and these tunnels are too narrow for us to put up a strong defence. Andrew’s near bent double half o the time and wouldna be any use in a fight and I’m nae much better. It was a good idea as long as we had a chance o springing a surprise but the chance o that is long past. Let’s stick to the main roads, I say.’

Gurval nodded, ‘I think you’re right, Barban. That was a gey close encounter there and Uisant and I nearly put one another in danger in the narrow space. We’ll travel by the main tunnels in future.’

The company gathered their equipment and continued along the old passage, each one of them listening carefully for any sign of the black cats, but they reached the junction of the main tunnel without further mishap.

Yet, they didn’t have long to wait before another raid was visited upon them. The exit from the old tunnel, like the entrance, was quite small and meant that even the smallest of the group had to bend low to get out. Shonagh and Andrew had once more to resort to crawling and it was while Andrew, who was taking up the rear, was squeezing his way through the narrow gap that the second attack was launched.

The members of the group were gathered in a bunch awaiting Andrew when the naer suddenly screeched aloud once more! A momentary confusion gripped the band as they tried to determine the direction of the attack. Nothing could be seen in either direction along the passageway and it was Andrew, in the process of rising to his feet who looked up and saw, almost directly above their heads a small group of about four or five of the black cats waiting crouched on a ledge in the rock face.

‘Above you!’ he roared and immediately everyone’s eyes rose to stare at the deep fiery, yellow eyes of the cats. Barban was the first to act. She raised her goaf and kept the point turned towards the Kah Du-Kel. Once he was on his feet, and had steadied himself, Andrew joined her. He too was holding up a goaf and he made stabbing motions with the spear to discourage any attempt the cats might make to spring on top of any of the group below them.

Shonagh came up beside Andrew and in her hand she held a few small rocks, ‘We could try throwing a few o these at them. It might force them to back off. We can’t travel anywhere as long as they are over our heads. What do you think Gurval?’

Gurval nodded his assent and he stooped to pick a few goodly sized rocks himself, ‘Stand back, the rest of you. Shonagh and I will try to drive them off with stones. Barban, can you and Andrew remain on guard while we do it? You’ll need to beware you dinna get hit by any of the rocks that fall down again.’

‘Dinna you worry aboot Andrew and me,’ said Barban. She reached into her waist-bag and pulled out a rough leather helmet. ‘Here, Andrew put this on. I’ve another for myself. I thought we might need them afore we were finished. This’ll gie us some protection.’

As they spoke the snarling, spitting and growling continued unabated up above them and didn’t alter until Gurval threw the first of the rocks. Shonagh and he kept up as rapid a firing rate as they could and, to help them, Uisant collected as many loose rocks as he could and laid them at their feet.

At first their efforts only seemed to enrage the Kah Du-Kel even more and the growling was replaced by a hideous roaring, but gradually the beasts retreated along the ledge. It looked like the folk were once more going to be successful in defending their position, but how many spurious attacks like this could they stand and still make progress to the mougev of Beuneg?

Andrew thought that things could only get worse now that the Kah Du-Kel were aware of their presence and he was sure that a significant attack on them would not be long in coming, ‘Gurval, do you think a major attack by the Kah Du-Kel is likely soon? Beuneg is bound to ken that we’re gey close to him now and that we’re on oor way to his mougev.’

‘There’s nae doubt in my mind that it winna be lang in coming. These wee attempts by them to scare us off are naething mair than that; just silly bit raids to cause a nuisance. They’re nae very serious, that I’m sure on. The only thing we hae to worry aboot is where the attack will take place. We’re nae all that far frae Beuneg’s mougev and I’m certain the Kah Du-Kel will hae another go at us afore we reach his lair. They canna take the chance that we’ll get bye them and get at Beuneg afore he has a chance to put up more defences or make a run for it. No, there’ll be an attack soon. We’ll just hae to listen carefully for the naer’s warning and keep a watchful eye on everything else besides.’

Gurval was to be proven correct. A serious offensive was on the way and it would provide a surprise, but the surprise was not in the nature of the attack, nor was it for a reason that had been considered by Gurval, Shonagh or, indeed, any of the folk.