**Friends and Foes**

Shonagh stared down into the dim light in the passage opposite the mouth of the mougev and saw only what looked like a cloud of rapidly moving dust heading in their direction. Suddenly she thought she recognised what it was, ‘They’re pigs!’ she cried, ‘and they’re certainly in a hurry!’

‘No!’ countered Gurval, ‘they’re boars!’

‘Are they that dangerous?’ asked Andrew, struggling to try and move the barrier across the front of the mougev.

‘Usually they’re nae,’ said Gurval, ‘but every now and then they take to their heels and charge about the place. Sometimes it’s the Kah Du-Kel that set them off by attacking them and stirring them up, but often it’s nae all that easy to ken what it is that’s flegged them. The trouble is, they canna see very well and they can ram things withoot thinking aboot it. Their tusks are very sharp so it’s as well to keep well away frae the hoch. They get very excited when they’re running and often charge folk withoot warning.’

Gurval went to help Andrew close the barrier and, as they tried to push it into place, one of the hoch veered off and headed straight for them. ‘Quick! Behind the barrier!’ cried Andrew. Gurval and he leapt for safety, but Shonagh just stood as if transfixed.

‘Lassie! Lassie!’ cried Gurval, ‘Come on! They’re vicious, get away!’

‘Shonagh! Run for it!’ roared Andrew.

But Shonagh couldn’t move. As she been trying to help shift the barrier her trousers had got snagged on the roots that had been twisted together to form the barrier. ‘I canna move! Help me! Help!’ she shouted trying to keep the hysteria out of her voice. Her eyes stared hard in front of her and she could see clearly the sharp tusks of the boar as it raced towards her seemingly intent in crushing her.

Andrew and Gurval seemed frozen to the spot, both transfixed by the horror of what seemed bound to happen. Danny, blind to what was happening, but sensing that something was wrong, barked hysterically, but couldn’t help. There was no way they could get out in time to assist her. Shonagh was on the point of screaming aloud when suddenly out of the corner of her eye she noticed a very rapid movement.

As they hoch sped towards her, blind to everything but what was immediately in front of it, Tourz raced across and rammed his head into the side of the hoch, knocking it to the side and away from Shonagh. The hoch careered into the barrier and came to a dazed halt. Tourz turned, head still lowered and faced the dizzy beast. Tourz needn’t have worried. The hoch, having learned one lesson for the day, shook its head vigorously and strolled, with a slightly wayward and wavering step, after the rest of the hoch herd still puzzled about what had happened to it.

Shonagh let out an enormous sigh of relief and had to fight back the tears of joy, while Andrew found himself cheering aloud the effort of the ram, ‘Tourz! You were magic!’ he shouted.

Shonagh, with shaking, but less panic stricken hands, managed to free herself from the barrier, with a little help from Gurval, who looked very relieved that his new found friends had not come to harm while guests in his mougev.

Laughing slightly nervously Shonagh bent to hug Tourz who stood calmly and accepted this as placidly as any shy hero gaining a medal for bravery. What else would you expect from a sheep?

Enora led Shonagh gently back into the mougev, ‘Are you sure you are alright? You must drink some heather bree, that will help calm you.’ So saying, she produced a jug and a wooden cup and poured in the heather bree.

‘Not too much, mind, Enora. Heather bree is really for adults!’ said Gurval.

‘Shonagh has just escaped a wicked charge by the hoch. She has earned a drink o the bree. It’ll help her recover.’

Shonagh drank the heather bree and found the taste rather strange, but not unpleasant. It was quite strong but seemed to have a calming effect once she had swallowed it.

‘That’s really quite good,’ she said with a smile, ‘ I hope it won’t do me any harm, will it?’

‘No,’ said Gurval, ‘but it can be strong sometimes if there is a lot o pollen in the heather when we make it. Men who drink too much o it often end up being a bitttie unsteady on their feet!’

Andrew, still slightly worried about the hoch spoke up, ‘Do the hoch often set off on the rampage like that?’

‘Nae very often,’ replied Gurval, shaking his head. ‘It usually takes something very serious to make them charge like that. It’s not so much the charge as the stopping it that’s the problem. They dinna seem to look where they’re going. They just race on, breenging and barging. There’s nae much sense in it.’

‘Any idea what set them off this time?’ asked Andrew.

‘As I said, it could be the Kah Du-Kel. They’ll cause trouble, if Beuneg tells them to, and I think sometimes they hunt the hoch. Nae too often, mind, for a hoch in a rage is a very dangerous creature and a Kah Du-kel on its own would be nae match for the hoch. No, there’d need tae be a pack o them before they’d seriously attack the hoch. They might do it for devilment, mind. Just to stir things up.

‘ The hoch are funny to, of course. The Picts got some fun oot o them when they chased them doon Menez. The hoch often tumbled doon, rolling round and round and then they’d get up, gie themselves a shake and run off to safety. Besides that, they get restless sometimes and just take off in a bunch withoot warning. Nae even Enourabi seems to ken why they do it.’

‘Can’t Enourabi do something aboot Beuneg?’ Shonagh inquired.

‘Enourabi is a thinker and a man o peace. He kens a lot o things - good things. Like most o us under Menez he disna ken a that much aboot fighting. We’re nae warriors. Fighting is nae oor way and hasna been for thousands o years. Anyway, Beuneg usually kens nae to stir up too much trouble just in case Enourabi does get the rest o us to take some action. Beuneg causes trouble, but it disna often get oot o hand.’

While they were talking Danny had made himself comfortable lying next to Tourz and they were joined by a goat who wandered in and lay quietly down next to them.

‘I’ve never seen animals like these,’ said Shonagh. ‘It’s really amazing how tame they are, and how friendly they all seem to be towards one another.’

‘Och, all animals are like that if they ken they’re safe,’ said Gurval. ‘You’ve got ki and kah that are like that. I’ve seen them on the hill.’

‘Yes, dogs and cats can be pals and you get the odd cow or sheep like that, but all the animals here seem to act so naturally!’

Andrew laughed, ‘Well, Shonagh, how else would you expect an animal to act, but naturally.’

‘ Oh! You ken what I mean. They’ve nae fear o us at all.’

‘That’s as it should be,’ said Gurval seriously. ‘You hae to respect all life, nae just yoursels. The beasts hae as much right to a life as we hae. They can be a lot o help can the beasts. Wasna it Tourz that warned us aboot the hoch coming?’

‘We’ve never seen any of your neighbours. Is there any one that lives near you?’ asked Shonagh.

‘We live oot on the edge o the settlement. There’s more plants grow in the places where there are nae many folk and we make most o the louzen for the folk. That’s the medicines we make frae the herbs, plants and roots. Gurval and I are magerez. What you’d call nurses although some folk might call us sorser.’ said Enora with a laugh.

‘Is a sorser a wizard?’ asked Shonagh.

‘Aye, it is,’ said Gurval, ‘but we’re folk wi a wee skill in curing some ailments and sicknesses. Naething else, but when folk dinna understand things they have to find something to blame so they blame witches and wizards. It’s just ignorance.’

‘How’s your arm, Shonagh,’ asked Andrew.

Shonagh rolled up her sleeve and raised the tree bark bandage and peeped in. ‘It’s amazing,’ she cried, ‘ it’s been on no time at all and already it looks as though it’s healed!’

‘Nae yet, lassie,’ said Gurval. ‘Leave it for a while yet. When you can feel the bandage moving, you take it off and your arm will be fine. Nae before.’

Enora rose from her seat and crossed to the corner of the mougev where a sort of small cave had been dug out. She stooped and pulled out an earthenware jug. ‘Some nice cold laezh from the gavr is what both of you need. That’ll make you feel nice and fresh.’

Andrew looked puzzled. ‘Goat’s milk,’ said Gurval in answer to the look on Andrew’s face. ‘You’ll hae had goat’s milk before?’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Andrew. ‘Have you had goat’s milk, Shonagh?’

‘I did once. We were shown round the Rowett Institute and the man let us taste it. I canna remember if I liked it or not.’

‘Well, you can have some laezh and bara made with kerh. That’s bread made with oats,’ said Enora with a laugh. She was beginning to enjoy using the old words to Andrew and Shonagh and they were beginning to enjoy being taught them.

Danny was given some bread and milk too and it was while he was supping this new-found treat that he paused, looked up and gave a wee almost undetectable growl.

‘What’s up, Danny?’ asked Andrew. ‘What’s upsetting you?’

‘It can’t be anything serious,’ said Gurval, ‘Tourz would hae warned us. It must just be a visitor that the ki doesna ken.’

‘You mean,’ asked Shonagh, ‘that they can tell the difference between friend and foe?’

‘Dinna ask me how they do it, but they can always tell if there’s trouble on the way. If one o oor neighbours comes in aboot, they just lie there peacefully. They seem to ken when they’re threatened and when they’re not. It’s very handy for us, saves us keeping a ki-kolveg,’ explained Gurval.

‘What sort of dog is a ki-kolveg?’ Andrew asked.

‘Oh, just a guard-dog. With all the beasts around we’ve no need o one.’ So saying Gurval pushed back the barrier a little more and listened carefully. ‘Aye, it’s coming from the main passage so it must be someone from the ker coming to see us. I canna think that they ken you’re here so it must be someone after louzen.’

Shortly afterwards they heard a clip-clopping sound coming along the passage and soon they saw a man of the same build and stature as Gurval and dressed very much like Gurval, approaching on a small pony. The pony was perfectly formed but even smaller than a Shetland pony. It held its head up proudly and its high stepping action reminded Shonagh of a pony she’d once seen in a circus on television.

The rider dismounted, approached Gurval and placed his hands against Gurval’s, just as Gurval had done earlier when he’d greeted Enora. He didn’t try to tie up the pony and it strayed only as far as a clump of moss and began to nibble graciously.

‘You’re well, Gurval?’

‘Just grand, Tual. What brings you here? Are you after louzen? Is somebody ill?’

‘No, no Gurval. Nobody is ill or hurt. Enourabi has sent me,’ said Tual and then hesitated when he realised that a pair of very strange people were listening intently to what he was saying.

Gurval saw his confusion and explained, ‘These are two folk frae the ootside. They fell in on us by mistake and I’m going to try and get them oot, but I’ll hae to ask Enourabi for help. Dinna worry aboot them. They’ve already proved to Enora and I that they can be trusted. They’ll do us nae harm. What message do you bring.’

Before Tual could reply Enora appeared with a bowl of heather bree. ‘Gurval, you were forgetting yoursel. Tual must hae a drink o the bree before the talking starts.’ Tual nodded in appreciation and lifting the shallow bowl to his lips downed the heather bree in one long swallow.

‘Thank you, Enora, that was grand. You still make the best heather bree in Menez,’ said Tual and then he addressed himself to her husband. ‘Gurval, I have a message from Enourabi. He fears that Beuneg is overstepping himsel and causing more trouble than ever. Did you hear aboot the hoch?’

‘It’s nae that long since they were here. They very nearly got the lassie. You ken what the hoch are like when raised. Tourz barged in and saved her.’

Tual nodded sympathetically and then continued, ‘Well, you were lucky. Although there are nae injuries that need your help the hoch did a lot o damage this time and there are some as think that they were herded in the direction o the ker for just that reason. Enourabi agrees and thinks we should hold a council to see what we should do. The Kah Du-Kel are becoming too active ootside Menez as well and Enourabi thinks that it might lead to the ootside folk taking action against us!’

‘Sator dallik!’ exclaimed Gurval. ‘That’ll nae do at all. We must do something to stop the shenanigans o Beuneg. We’ll come to the meeting as soon as we’re ready and I’ll bring Shonagh and Andrew for they’ll need the advice o Enourabi as well.’

‘Brenn!’ said Tual. ‘Now I must go and tell some o the others that stay oot o the ker. I’ll away now. Good health to you, Enora and my thanks for the bree. I’ll give Katell your regards. Gurval, I’ll see you at the council with your friends. I’ll be away.’

They watched Tual and the pony as they trotted off along yet another passage and Andrew asked the obvious question, ‘Will there be fighting do you think, Gurval?’

‘I hope no,’ he replied, ‘but I’ll take my bouchal with me and a kleze just in case. You never know about Beuneg; maybe the time has come to settle with him at last.’ Gurval picked up his axe and then took a short sword and stuck it in his belt. ‘Right, Enora, we’d better be heading for the ker. Shonagh you can walk with Enora and Andrew and I will follow behind. There shouldna be any trouble, but you never can tell. Tourz! come away. We might need you to help us oot and tell us if any dangerous beasties are around!’

Andrew called on Danny, but he was sticking close to Tourz and they seemed to have formed a bond already. The party was ready and after placing the barrier carefully in position in front of the mougev they set off along the main tunnel and headed for the ker.

Shonagh’s head was swimming with questions. What would Enourabi say when he met them? Would he help them or leave them trapped? Would the Kah Du-Kel attack them on their journey? What unknown dangers waited for them on their route? Shonagh took a deep breath and resolved to stop thinking of such things. She would take a more optimistic attitude towards their adventure.