**The Ally**

In the wider, larger main tunnels the party made far better progress although it was steady, but watchful, progress they made. Gurval had made them all aware of the dangers that lay ahead and they knew they could expect an attack at any time. Andrew and Barban now led the party, with Gurval in close attendance, for their ‘early warning system’, the naer, was of vital importance.

At each tunnel junction or off-shoot they slowed and either Andrew or Barban would ease forward to inspect the way just in case of treachery. That a sneak attack was probably more likely than any other, was Gurval’s view, and the rest of the folk were as equally certain as he was.

The warning from the naer did not, though, come suddenly. His shrill warning grew slowly and increased as they approached a major crossing point in the tunnel system.

‘They’ll be up ahead,’ said Gurval, ‘and I’m real surprised that they’re so open aboot their attack. They must be feeling gey confident. What’s up ahead, Uisant?’

Uisant thought for only a few moments, ‘We’re coming to a big clearing where a lot o the tunnels meet together. I suppose they’ve gathered there to gie them more room to attack in force. More o them will be able to charge at us at once. Could be gey difficult for us, Gurval.’

‘Aye! Make sure you’re all well armed. Use you’re goaf for stabbing. Dinna try and throw it. You’ll just lose it and nae get it back. Listen carefully for my orders for I’d rather retreat if there’s ower many o them than see any o us killed or badly hurt! We’ll maybe hae to find a means o escape oorsels, so dinna get separated frae the group whatever you do. Now, bide close and beware o everything. This is the danger area.’

The naer’s shrill cry had reached fever pitch and on exiting the tunnel they were quickly aware of why it had grown so excited. A hoard of Kah Du-Kel faced them as they entered the clearing that marked the ‘cross-roads’ of the tunnels and Shonagh was quite taken aback by their numbers. She hadn’t realised just how many Kah Du-Kel there were and this group, that snarled and spat at them at the moment, was certainly three times as great as the pack that had attacked the ker.

Shonagh gripped her goaf extra tightly and placed herself in the front line alongside Uisant and Andrew.

‘Whatever you do, dinna show them that you’re scared,’ counselled Uisant. ‘They seem to ken when folk are feared o them.’

Shonagh nodded in understanding and resolved to do her utmost to fend off the attack in as spirited a way as possible. She adjusted to the same pace as the others as they went forward steadily, but carefully, in a double line. They all watched the Kah Du-Kel carefully and Shonagh and the others were surprised, even a little frightened, by the wild growls and roars and the evil gyrations of their bright yellow eyes.

At first it appeared that the black beasts were quite content to wildly stretch their necks, lash out threateningly with their claws and roar as loudly as they could, but suddenly, as if on a signal from an unseen hand, a group of the beasts charged straight at the front line.

For one heart-stopping moment Shonagh thought that the Kah Du-Kel were not going to be repulsed and were going to break right through the defenders ranks, but determined stabbing with the goaf slowed the charge and eventually brought it to a spitting and snarling halt. The black ranks did not retreat, though, and the charge was replaced by constant darting and slashing attacks as the beasts lunged forward and lashed out with their dangerous and deadly claws.

Just when it looked as though the attack was going to be unsuccessful, a second wave of attackers raced forward to reinforce the initial group. One or two of the Kah Du-Kel who had received injuries in the attack retreated, but most stayed and had their confidence boosted when the second group arrived. Gurval realised that the folk were in danger of being overrun and shouted to Uisant, ‘Uisant, is there onywhere we can make a stand? We’re too exposed at the sides and open at the back. We’ll hae to find a place we can defend or find oorsels being beaten.’

‘Just down the next tunnel there’s a wee cave. We could defend that more easily,’ gasped Uisant as he tried to answer Gurval and keep us his spirited stabbing with the goaf.

‘Back down the next tunnel and into the cave!’ shouted Gurval. Some of the folk didn’t hear his instructions but they caught on quickly when they saw the others moving and Uisant managed to guide everyone to their supposed haven.

The cats seemed to be surprised by the sudden retreat of the folk and this allowed Gurval to move his group quickly and with minimum fuss, but the cats soon realised what was going on and renewed their attack. It was when the Kah Du-Kel attacked the defenders at the cave that Gurval became aware of his error. They might be safer in the cave, there was less of a front to defend and they could not be attacked from behind nor from the side, but once in the cave they were trapped!

Gurval quickly voiced his fears to Barban and she shouted back, ‘Right! We’ll just hae to hold them a few metres frae the mouth o the cave. It’ll nae take many o us to do that!’

Uisant and Shonagh joined Gurval and Barban while Andrew saw to the defence of those who had taken shelter in the cave. At first it seemed as though they were going to be successful in driving off the cats as slowly the number of attackers seemed to dwindle and the folk found themselves gaining ground once more, but those who had left the fight had only done so in order to take a breather, for soon a larger than ever group charged in to renew the attack.

There seemed to be black cats everywhere and Shonagh found herself stabbing out in all directions and often fighting back to back with Barban. Confusion and chaos seemed to have taken hold and it was difficult to keep one’s bearings and stay with the group.

Uisant shouted in alarm, ‘We’ll need to go back, Gurval! These beasts are everywhere. If we get put down the rest o the folk will hae anybody to defend them!’

‘Right! The rest o you get back to the cave while I hold them as long as I can to guard your retreat,’ roared Gurval above the din of the roaring cats and the cries and shouts of the defenders. Shonagh was never aware of how loudly she was shouting as she stabbed and parried with her goaf.

Uisant, Shonagh and Barban took the earliest chance they could to break off from the fight and headed back to the cave while Gurval covered their movements as best he could. As they approached the cave Andrew came out and protected their passage for the last few yards. On reaching the mouth of the cave they turned and were just in time to see Gurval go down in the face of the Kah Du-Kel’s crazed attack.

There were screams and shouts of horror from the folk as they saw their leader go down and Barban led the others in a rescue charge, but before they had got even half-way to the stricken Gurval there occurred an event that will be sung of in the ballads of the folk for many years to come.

Gurval had been knocked off his feet when one of the Kah Du-Kel managed to gouge a deep wound in his leg and the pain had caused him to stagger back momentarily. Off balance he could not keep his feet when another of the cats lunged at him and he toppled to the ground. Luckily for Gurval his fall had startled the cats and they had fallen back long enough for him to recover his goaf and swing it wildly in front of himself as he tried to raise himself painfully to his feet. He was crouched over trying to test the strength of his injured leg and defend himself at the same time when the Kah Du-Kel, having recovered from their initial shock, launched another attack.

To those rushing to help him it seemed that, at best, Gurval would get off with severe injuries and many thought an even worse fate might befall him. But just before the bloodthirsty beasts reached him another of the Kah Du-Kel appeared as if from out of the rock wall and leapt right in front of the charging horde. Shonagh thought, at first, that the animal had leapt to get Gurval from behind and had just misjudged its target, but she was wrong. The interloper turned on her own kind and with, ferocious lashings of her claws and fangs, forced the attackers to abandon their attack and some of them even ran off!

‘Did you see that?’ shouted Andrew. ‘That Kah Du-Kel has just saved Gurval’s life and now she could be saving ours for she’s driving most o the beasts away!’

It was exactly as Andrew had said. While Gurval lay unprotected his rescuer stood in front of him wildly attacking any of the Kah Du-Kel who tried to further the injuries Gurval had already received. The arrival of the other folk was enough to frighten off the rest of the attackers. A few went slowly, snarling, growling and roaring defiantly as they went, but the sting had been drawn from their attack and all that was left was a show of defiance and little more.

Shonagh helped Gurval to his feet and the group’s new ally stood a few metres off from them breathing heavily, but uninjured, after its heroic rescue. Shonagh, having ensured that Gurval could stand unaided, stepped back to grab Gurval’s louzen bag and as she did so the Kah Du-Kel eased itself forward and moved slowly towards Gurval its head lowered, but its eyes looking straight into his.

As it moved towards him Gurval held out his hand and said quietly to the others, ‘This is the Kah Du-Kel that we helped when it was injured. See her wound can still be seen on her hind leg. She has come to repay her debt and now I owe her my life.’

The black cat stopped in front of Gurval and as everyone watched, fascinated as a former enemy greeted the man who had helped it, the beasts red tongue began to slowly lick the wound on Gurval’s leg. Shonagh made to come forward, but Gurval’s hand indicated that all was well. The beast did not want the taste of blood it was doing what animals have always done and was trying to clean the wound of a friend.

Gurval gently stroked the lowered head of the cat and everyone exhaled a communal sigh of relief as peace seemed to have been restored, at least for a short while. And short it was!

Andrew had taken Gurval’s bag into the cave and laid it carefully on a ledge inside the mouth of the cave. Inside the sack was, of course, the naer! The cessation of the fighting and the intervention of the Kah Du-Kel had caused everyone to forget about the naer, but it had not forgotten about the folk. When calm had once more descended on the group it cautiously slithered its way out of the bag and went looking for its master. Its initial reaction at seeing the Kah Du-Kel was predictable.

A loud warning shriek was followed by the sharp warning trill. The sound startled the black cat for it jerked back away from Gurval, confused by the sudden change of mood. The naer sidled forward and raised its head high in the air. Its forked tongue tasted, and tested, the air while the cat watched it with almost hypnotic fascination. Gurval broke the spell.

‘Naer, this is a friend. Calm yoursel. He’s just saved my life, so dinna let yoursel get all wound up. Come meet oor friend the Kah Du-Kel!’ And Gurval carefully stroked the naer forward to meet its former enemy.

Shonagh marvelled again at what appeared to be an almost telepathic understanding the folk had with animals. Both the naer and the cat slowly approached each other. The cry of the naer dwindled to a slow purring and the cat responded with a similar, if deeper, sound. They seemed to stare into each others eyes looking for understanding and the folk just stood and let the old ways of the animals play its part. Soon they were at peace, the naer lay content beside Gurval and within a hands, or paws, distance lay the Kah Du-Kel. ‘If only folk could resolve their differences as quickly,’ thought Shonagh to herself, ‘then oor world might be a far better place to bide in!’

She bent down and began to apply some louzen to Gurval’s wound, doing exactly as directed by Gurval and using the medicines as he directed. The wound was deep, but not as bad as they’d first thought. Shonagh cleaned it and then applied a lotion. Gurval nodded approval, ‘You’ll be a magerez to match the best o them yet, Shonagh,’ Gurval said, ‘this’ll nae take long to heal now. We’ll rest for a wee while and get a bite to eat then we’ll hae to set off for the mougev o Beuneg. Oor job is nae finished yet.’

‘Do you think it’s wise to be setting off so early, what with your injury and everything?’ asked Andrew.

‘There’s nae time like the present. We’ll hae to get this sorted oot soon and the longer we wait the worse things will become. My leg will nae be lang before I can use it just like it’s never been damaged. Shonagh’s a great magerez! Besides noo that we’ve given the Kah Du-Kel a big scare they’ll nae be so keen to face up to us again. And besides that, we’ve gained a valuable ally. Beuneg isna the only one that has Kah Du-Kel on his side!’

The rest of the folk grinned in agreement. Gurval’s speech had done much for their moral and the sight of him on his feet, and apparently without pain, had assuaged their fears and worries. Soon they would have rested and eaten and then they would be ready to face Beuneg in his lair!