**Meeting the Challenge**

Shonagh had collected the pitons from Yehann, who had done a wonderful job in forging them in so short a time, and returned to the mougev. Shortly after her return Andrew arrived with a plentiful supply of ropes and one or two nets.

‘Gurval suggests we get some rest,’ he told Shonagh, ‘and I think that’s good advice. We could be in for a pretty exciting few hours and we’ll need all the rest we can.’

Shonagh gave Andrew an enquiring look and added, ‘I’m getting more and more puzzled the longer we bide here. You’d think things would get clearer as you get used to them, but that doesna seem to apply here under Bennachie. I mean, what’s happened to time? And why are we hardly ever tired? We must hae travelled miles underneath Bennachie and yet up above you’d hae nae idea that this place existed. How can the folk hae stayed unkent for so long? It doesna make sense.’

‘Does it hae to make sense as we ken aboot it?’ asked Andrew. ‘Just because we see things one way doesna mean there’s nae another way to look at things. They’re different frae us, I agree, but why shouldn’t they be? Gurval says the folk on the ootside, oor ancestors, were nae unlike them. They kent aboot the animals and the land and respected both. When they stopped doing that and started into ower muckle fighting, Gurval says, the folk o Menez just withdrew intae the hill and kept themsels to themsels. They go oot o their way nae to be seen and are careful never to leave ony sign that they’re aboot. Makes sense to me!’

Shonagh grinned, ‘I suppose you’re right. You seem to like it here. You’re not thinking o staying on are you?’

‘No, there’s nae place for us here. We’ll return and keep oor wee secret aboot Bennachie to oorsels and I’m sure Danny winna say a word! Nae even to his pals on the farms!’

‘I think if we said anything, folk would think we were daft,’ said Shonagh. ‘Who’s going to believe us if we tell them all aboot a civilisation under a hill that hundreds o people walk up and doon every year? They’d lock us up or set us up as village idiots!’

Andrew laughed, ‘Aye, but how do we explain oor absence to oor mothers and fathers? They’re bound to ask us where we’ve been. If Enourabi is right, once he’s performed his ‘ceremony of forgetfulness’ on us we winna remember anything aboot oor time doon here. We’ll hae nae story to tell. Folk will think that’s pretty strange!’

‘We’ll just hae to wait and see what happens. The folk here seem to think everything will work oot fine and they’ve been right up to now, so we’ll just hae to go along with it. Maybe oor folks will be so glad to see us, they winna inquire too closely as to what we’ve been doing!’ suggested Shonagh.

Andrew wasn’t so easily convinced, ‘But we’ve been away for quite a while, I would guess. It could be days for all we know. Oor folks hae probably contacted the police and search parties might be looking for us. And even if they’ve not done that and don’t question us too closely aboot what we’ve been up to, can you imagine Airchie nae wanting to ken what we’ve been doing? He’ll nae rest till gets the whole story! You ken what he’s like aboot Bennachie!’

‘Well, we didna meet in with his giant!’ laughed Shonagh. ‘He’d get a bit o a shock if he kent that the folk under Bennachie are nae even a metre and a half high!’

‘They might be little,’ said Andrew in a more serious manner, ‘but they certainly ken how to adapt and live their life to the full. They’ve nae money, but they’ve everything they need. Folk just help one another without any o this do-gooding carry-on. Everybody is valued the same as everybody else. It’s a pity that Beuneg is so different from the rest, but, I suppose, that only goes to show that nothing, or nowhere, is perfect. If you never meet anything that’s bad, you’d never ken what was good.’

‘You’re beginning to sound like Enourabi,’ said Shonagh, ‘but I do agree with you. Did it ever cross your mind to refuse to help the folk against Beuneg? Of course it didna and I never thought aboot it either. You just feel that you should play your part. It’s nae often I feel like that at hame. The folk here are very helpful to one another and you dinna seem to find the jealousy and pettiness we get so often. They dinna laugh at other folk’s misfortunes either, like some o the folk at my school who are oor age. Folk are just accepted for what they are. That’s no bad thing.

‘When I was up at Yehann’s forge there was one o the folk making buckles and brooches. Covered in the sorts o designs you see on the standing stones. You ken, v-rods, z-rods, cups and beasts and sic like that you’ve seen on the standing stones. They were terrific, really beautiful, and I asked Yehann if it was the lassie’s hobby, but he said it was her job. Her full-time job! I’d a job explaining to him what a hobby was! Yehann cut oot the metal for the buckles and brooches and this lassie decorated them. Yehann said it was her job to make folk happy by giving them something bonny to look at. He said nature did it as well by putting leaves on trees and petals on flowers. Just as simple as that. Can you imagine ony workman today saying things like that? I suppose there was a time when the folk in oor world thought the same way aboot their artists and craftsmen and some maybe still do, but I dinna think there are many!’

Andrew was nodding in agreement, ‘I ken just what you mean. I’d the same sort o experience at the mougev o Pol and Garid. When I asked for the ropes and nets they didna hesitate. They just smiled, in that way the folk do, and let me take as much as I wanted. Hae you noticed, as well, how much pride they all take in what they make. Everything is finished off so tidily and neatly. I suppose when time is nae a factor you can do that sort o thing.’

‘Yes,’ agreed Shonagh, ‘maybe we should pay less attention to time when we get oot o here. But we’ll soon be getting cried on to leave, so I think I’ll close my eyes and see if I can get some rest. Time will be precious till we deal with Beuneg.’

Shonagh closed her eyes and Andrew, taking her cue, did the same. Whether they slept they were never to know because, in what seemed to them like only a few seconds, they were roused and informed that the group who were going to face up to Beuneg were gathering in the ker meeting place.

When Shonagh and Andrew arrived at the clearing most of the party who were going to confront Beuneg were already gathered. Gurval checked that everyone had the necessary equipment and arms and, when he was satisfied, addressed them all, ‘This will nae be easy, but you’ll be aware o that. You ken what we hae to do and we’d like to get it done withoot anybody getting hurt, and that includes Beuneg. If he sees that there are a few o us come to face up to him he just might give in: it’s nae likely, but we hae to hope that he’ll see sense even at this stage o matters.

‘We should only take with us what is really needed, dinna take onything that we winna need. I think, Andrew, it would be better if Danny was to bide here. Things might get gey wild up at Beuneg’s mougev and I wouldna like onything to happen to your wee pal. I’m sure Enora will look after him.’

Andrew nodded agreement because he felt that it would be better if Danny was not there and he knew that he’d be perfectly happy with Enora and his friend Tourz.

‘Can I go and say farewell to Yehann and my bairns, Gurval?’ inquired Barban.

‘Certainly, you must all do that. It might be quite a while before we get back. Tell your kin folk nae to worry, we’ll hae nae trouble at all. Off you all go and we’ll leave as soon as you all get back, so dinna take ower long.’

Andrew and Shonagh went in search of Danny and found him with Tourz sitting at the entrance to the mougev where Gurval and Enora were staying. He wagged his tail in greeting, as usual, and Andrew spoke to him, as if Danny would understand, but didn’t actually expect him to, ‘Danny, I want you to stay with Enora and make sure you do what she tells you. O.K.?’

Danny looked at Andrew and both he and Shonagh could have sworn that he nodded his head in apparent agreement before he got up and walked inside the mougev, accompanied by Tourz, to join Enora who was just saying goodbye to Gurval.

Andrew surprise was apparent, ‘Whatever else, this place has had a very good effect on Danny. I’ve never kent him to be so obedient. He was never a bad dog, but now he’s not only perfectly behaved, but seems to understand everything we say. Maybe it’s telepathy!’

‘There’s certainly been a change in him,’ said Shonagh, ‘and you must hae noticed how all the animals that spend their time around the folk seem to have a similar attitude. They all seem to understand what the folk want them to do, except the Kah Du-Kel!’

‘Well, Gurval seems to think they’ve been ‘got at’ with mushrooms and he might be right. My father’s showed me a lot o fungi that are really dangerous and one or two that can make you act in a gey queer fashion so there’s maybe some truth in what Gurval says.’

Shonagh responded quickly to Andrew, ‘The beasts all behave strangely! Yet it’s nearly always for the better. They’re different from the beasts we’re used to and yet the difference is really nae very much. As for the Kah Du-Kel; they are like nothing I’ve experienced before. Even the couple o wild cats I’ve seen took one look at me and ran for cover very quickly. It must be very special fungi Beuneg is using. Would you recognise any o the dangerous toadstools if you saw them?’

‘The more common ones I would, but there may be some kinds o fungi growing here aneth Bennachie that dinna exist up on the surface,’ answered Andrew.

Enora walked over to them with Gurval, ‘You’ll mind and take care o this man o mine. He’s just a magarez and nae a general so dinna let him start pretending to be too much o a hero. You must all take care. Beuneg and his Kah Du-Kel could be very dangerous. You’ve got the naer with you, now, Gurval? There’s nothing better for warning you if there’s Kah Du-Kel near.’

‘Now, now, Enora,’ inserted Gurval, ‘we’ve been through all this already. I’ve got the naer here in my sack and I’m nae gan to put mysel in danger nor any o the folk who are gan with me. But I hae to deal with Beuneg, one way or another, and that’s the only thing I can say. We’ll take good care o oorsels and you see that everybody here does the same.’

The departing trio gathered their equipment and Enora handed Shonagh and Andrew a small bag. ‘That’s just a wee bit bara and some kraon. The bread’ll fill you up and the nuts will help keep up your strength if you have to wait a while for food. Long treks in the tunnels can eat up your energy.’

Gurval turned to face Enora and they touched foreheads lightly before Gurval broke away and joined Andrew and Shonagh on the path to the meeting place. When they got there all those in the party had already arrived and quite a lot of the folk had gathered to wish them good luck and wave farewell. Shonagh noticed that one or two of the younger folk, little more than toddlers, had tears in their eyes as if they knew that their folk were about to face a hazardous task. Just before they left the clearing Enourabi and Kozhiadez joined the group.

‘Gurval, all of you,’ said Enourabi. ‘we pray that Doue will smile on your task for it is a serious and dangerous one. It is one that must succeed if we are to keep oor way o life peaceful and quiet the way it should be. I’m sure you will return victorious. Andrew and Shonagh, we owe you much for taking oor part in what is a problem o Menez, but your skills will help ensure that things go they way we want. Beuneg might yet come round to oor way o thinking , but that is nae likely. Deal with him, but try to avoid too much violence for violence can lead to more violence and that is nae oor way.’

Enourabi raised his hands and held them, palms outwards, towards the group and each member responed in like manner. Even Andrew and Shonagh returned the greeting in the way of the folk. More than ever they were becoming folk of Menez.

At Gurval’s signal the group headed towards the tunnel which would take them on the road to Beuneg’s lair and their encounter with him and his Kah Du-Kel.