**Journey to Ker**

The group set off at a fairly brisk pace and again Andrew was surprised how quickly Gurval and Enora travelled. They didn’t appear to be hurrying, yet he and Shonagh had to stride out to keep up. Danny was almost trotting as was Tourz, but neither seemed uncomfortable at the rate they were progressing. They had no problem with seeing their way, because the ‘mica’ light from the granite seemed to be a more than adequate means of illumination.

As they made their way through the tunnels and passageways they passed other mougev and occasionally Gurval or Enora would stop and talk to the occupants. All the other folk, too, seemed to be preparing for the meeting at the ker, but none seemed to be showing the sense of urgency that was driving Gurval along.

‘Is everyone going to be at the meeting, Gurval?’ Shonagh asked.

‘Aye,’ replied Gurval, ‘ but they will only attend the meeting o all the folk. First o all Enourabi will meet with a few o us, a kind o a council o elders, that hae had experience o Beuneg and the Kah Du-Kel and sic like things. Once that meeting is bye, he’ll speak to all the folk and tell them what we think should be done. Then the folk will decide what they want done. They usually listen to Enourabi and go along with what he suggests.’

‘You’ll be at the meeting o the council, then?’ inquired Andrew

‘Aye, Enora and I are magerez and so we hae to be there. There might be fighting and fights can be dangerous. Folk sometimes get hurt, so I hae to be prepared and get enough plants and herbs ready to make louzen. We’ll maybe need a lot o louzen, although we can do withoot fighting. Naebody gains when there’s fighting on the go and the healers hae to do most o the work in the end.’

‘You think there’ll be a fight then? You dinna think Beuneg will just decide to stop causing trouble when he hears that all the folk are against him?’ asked Andrew.

Gurval looked sad and concerned when he answered, ‘I’d like to think he would, but nae him. He’s been getting worse and worse and doesna seem to care. He can only push folk so far before they get tired o it and begin to fight back.. That’s just the way o it.’

Enora interrupted, ‘Are we to be going in bye for Kozhiadez?’

Gurval nodded emphatically, ‘Aye, we’ll need to take her with us. What would Enourabi think if Kozhiadez wasna at the meeting?’

‘Who’s Kozhiadez?’ asked Shonagh. ‘Is she a very special person?’

Enora smiled, ‘There’s nae doubt she’s special. She is a very wise woman and I suppose you’d call her a witch or as we say a sorserez, but if she’s a witch, she’s a good witch. Hae nae doubt there’ll be wise words from Kozhiadez.’

‘She bides nae far frae the big ster,’ explained Gurval, ‘so we’ll make a wee detour to pick her up. Nae many folk will bide by the ster because they say it’s too wet at the time o the floods, but Kozhiadez just says that withoot water there’d be nae life and she lives in the top part o her mougev during the wet times.’

‘When are the wet times?’ Andrew asked.

‘Och, usually at the beginning o the season you call winter and at the end o that time when the snow melts up abeen and the water seeps through the saft parts. It’s nae all granite here, there are bits that hae been cracked by tree roots and other bits that ower the years hae filled up with earth, and the water soon seeps through and runs to the ster.’

‘Is that the river that the fish are in?’ asked Shonagh.

‘Aye, but there are quite a few ster; some are there all the time, others come and go, depending on the amount o water that seeps in frae up above,’ answered Gurval.

They turned off into a narrower passageway and Shonagh could feel that the air was cooler. She realised that it might be due to being near water and, sure enough, it wasn’t long before she heard the quiet gurgling sound of water and heard a low, soft murmuring that was like someone repeating the same phrase over and over again. They entered a cavern with a stream running through it and Shonagh realised that the murmuring she had heard was coming from a mougev that was about six feet above the level of the cavern floor and it was someone at prayer. A rickety, wooden set of steps, little more that a ladder attached to the cavern wall by roots, led up to the entrance.

Gurval stopped at the bottom of the steps and listened, ‘We’ll wait till Kozhiadez has finished her prayer, then we will call her. She will be seeking guidance so she can tell us what she thinks must be done.’

The murmured incantation went on for a few more moments and when it ceased Gurval called out to Kozhiadez to tell her they had arrived. A stooped figure came to the entrance of the mougev and looked down at them.

‘You hae strangers with you, Gurval,’ she said it a voice so clear that it was something of a problem to match the voice to the stooped figure who stood above them. ‘Who are they? Are they friends?’

‘Aye, Kozhiadez, they are good friends,’ said Gurval. ‘Come away down and I’ll tell you their story. But we must hurry to get to the meeting. You are going?’

‘I’ve never missed a meeting and was just getting mysel prepared for it. I ken that you’ll always come and fetch me for the meetings and this is one o the most important we’ve had for a long time,’ she answered and began to climb down the rickety steps in a manner that proved to Shonagh and Andrew that though she may be old she certainly wasn’t restricted in her movements.

When she reached the bottom of the ladder she turned to Shonagh and Andrew and greeted them, as was the way of the folk, by placing her hands palm outwards towards them and they responded as they had seen Gurval and Enora do. As she rubbed their palms with her own she looked straight into their eyes and both were amazed at the striking blue clarity of them. When she dropped her hands she turned to Gurval, ‘You are right, Gurval, they are good folk, but how did they get here?’

Gurval repeated the story of how Shonagh, Andrew and Danny had managed to get themselves lost under Bennachie and explained that he was to seek advice from Enourabi on how to return them to the outside world.

‘He’s the one to tell you, ‘ Kozhiadez said, ‘but ask him after the elders meet, for he will be giving all his attention to the troubles with Beuneg. Now, let us be on oor way. There’s much to be done and we’ll need to settle with Beuneg if we’re to continue living in peace. Trouble makes trouble.’ And so saying, she turned and went off at the same quick pace that all the inhabitants beneath Bennachie seemed to find suited them best.

They hadn’t travelled far when the naer, who had found a resting place in a bag being carried by Enora, gave a loud screech. His head appeared to rear from the bag and, with his tongue sensing the air in a very rapid motion, changed the screech to a note that heralded extreme dislike of whatever was upsetting it.

‘It’s the Kah Du-Kel!’ cried Gurval. ‘They must be somewhere along this passage. The naer can smell them frae a long way off. Only they could make him as angry as this!’

‘We’d better not look for trouble with them just yet, Gurval,’ said Kozhiadez, ‘maybe we should find another route to the ker.’

‘I think we should find another way, too,’ agreed Enora.

Gurval paused to think, ‘Aye, I agree, but we dinna want to be late for the council. Time is precious. What way do you think we should take?’

‘The way o the logod would be best. It’s dark there, but it’s straight and nae far frae here. That’ll take us oot near the old road to the ker. We might even save time,’ suggested Kozhiadez.

‘Aye, but what aboot Shonagh and Andrew. You ken fine that the folk frae up abeen are nae keen on the logod,’ countered Gurval.

‘What are the logod? asked Andrew. ‘What have we got against them?’

Kozhiadez smiled broadly and said, ‘Logod are mice and you ones up abeen spend a lot a time trapping them and I ken frae what I hear that the lassies, in particular, dinna like them at all!’

‘Well, I dinna mind them,’ said Andrew, ‘what aboot you Shonagh?’

‘If I’m honest I hae to say that Kozhiadez is right, but I’m game to give it a go,’ replied Shonagh.

To remind them all of the urgency of their position the naer gave another screech and Gurval made the decision for them all, ‘Right, we’ve nae option but to take the way o the logod. It’s dark in their tunnel for there is no granite there, just soft earth. That’s why the logod like it. Hold one another’s hands and stick close together. The way is fairly straight so you canna get lost if you lose contact, just keep gan forward. I think it would be better if you carried Danny, Andrew, just in case he gets too excited and, Enora, keep the naer locked in the bag or he’ll be having some o the logod for his supper! You might hae to stoop a wee bit, for the passage isna that high, and dinna let the wee squeaks and scurries put you off. They’ll nae eat you!’

Shonagh took a deep breath and entered the tunnel holding tightly on to Enora’s hand. She heard the logod before she felt them. As they inched their way forward in the darkness Shonagh heard the hundreds of squeaks, squeals, scurryings and scratches that came from the logod. After a few metres she felt them also, because the logod, never liking to be disturbed, were running in all directions in a sort of aimless panic and they scurried and scrambled over her feet and sometimes her legs as they scampered in a wildly, crazy fashion at this invasion of their territory.

Shonagh gritted her teeth and kept telling herself not to panic as she felt the tiny feet of the logod pitter and patter around and over her and she had to battle inwardly with herself to stop from screaming out as her seemingly endless ordeal went on and slowly on.

‘Nae far now,’ said Enora apparently realising what Shonagh was going through, ‘we’ll soon be on the old road to the ker and we’ll be rid o the wee beasties.’

Shonagh had been blindly following Enora, for she’d had her eyes closed most of the way, as if shutting out one sensation would help to dull the others, particularly that of the sense of touch! She opened her eyes and was sure she could detect a faint glimmer in the distance. Things began to get brighter, the sound of squealing began to fade and she could no longer feel the logod running over her feet. Release at last! They were, thank goodness, through the way of the logod!

Andrew, perhaps as equally relieved as Shonagh, was the first to express his feelings. Placing Danny back on the ground he said with a sigh of relief, ‘Well, thank goodness that’s over. I dinna ken how much longer I could hae put up with all those little feet running over me!’

‘Dinna remind me,’ said Shonagh feelingly. ‘If it hadna been for Enora I don’t think I would have made it. I never want to do that again!’

Gurval nodded understandingly, ‘Aye, I suppose it’s a bit o an ordeal when you’re nae used to it, but if you’d lived here like we do you’d soon get used to it. We just accept them for what they are. Logod just do what logod do, there’s nae point in expecting them to be different.’

With that piece of common sense soundly in place the party set off along the old road to the ker and Shonagh found herself asking why it was called the ‘old’ road. Kozhiadez supplied the answer. ‘It used to be the main route to the ker but a long time ago one o the ster took on more water than usual and changed its course, cutting this road in two. We’ll hae to cross the ster, but it’s nae too bad at this time, so dinna worry aboot it, and we might catch sight o a moch-dour.’

‘What’s a moch-dour? Is it a rare animal?’ asked Shonagh. ‘I hope it’s not like the logod!’

‘You might hae seen them on the standing stones o the Picts,’ said Gurval. ‘ They’re water pigs. I’ve heard tell that some folk think they are a kind o an elephant because they hae long trunks, but they’re nae. They use their feet like flippers and their long snouts are for digging sweet bits o moss and other plants oot atween the rocks in the ster.’

Kozhiadez took the story up, ‘There used to be a fair number o them lang ago but things hae changed up abeen and the water has changed. I think you’d call it pollution. It did a lot o harm to the folk at first but we managed to find water that was well filtered through the rocks an soils, but the moch-dour were stuck with whatever came through Menez and the chemicals, or whatever it was, didna agree with them and a lot o them suffered. It was sad times here aneth the hill when so many beasts died frae drinking bad water. There’s very few moch-dour left and it’s said to be a good sign to see one in the ster.’

‘Well, we’ll soon see if we’re gan to be lucky for the ster’s just up ahead,’ said Enora.

They approached the river and both Shonagh and Andrew kept a good look out, but saw nothing. Gurval tested the depth and declared that the water was quite low at the crossing point which was a slight detour off the old road. Shonagh was feeling rather disappointed at not having seen the moch-dour when suddenly Kozhiadez grabbed her arm and said, ‘Be still!’ in a hushed, but urgent fashion.

There in the ster, not yards from where they were crossing was the head and elongated nose of a moch-dour. Their joy was to be trebled for, as they stood quietly enjoying the sight and revelling in their luck, another slightly smaller moch-dour came into view and there, clinging to its back, was a very young addition to the moch-dour population.

The group waded quietly out of the ster and Kozhiadez expressed all their joy when she said, ‘Brenn! That is almost a miracle. It is wonderful to see one moch-dour but to see a family is really special. It is the first youngster I’ve heard o for a long time. Our endeavours will be fruitful, now, I am sure. The water must be improving also if the moch-dour are breeding again. Maybe those above hae learned to think o what harm they can do if they dinna stop to consider the likes o the beasts and other folk.’

It was a much happier group who continued their journey along the old road and it wasn’t long before Gurval announced that the ker was just around the spur of granite that they were approaching. Shonagh was pleased, for she was eager to see what the ker looked like.

As they approached the ker Shonagh saw that some of the folk lived in mougev not unlike that of Gurval and Enora, but others lived in primitive houses with walls of granite slabs. The gaps between the slabs were closed off by roots covered in dried mud and they didn’t have doors as we know them but a barrier of woven roots that, Shonagh supposed, was just placed over the entrance when privacy was required. These ‘houses’ formed a semi-circular boundary to a fairly large clearing which faced a raised platform of granite which created a natural stage. She supposed that it was from this platform that Enourabi would address the meeting.

The thought of Enourabi brought back to Shonagh their own problems. Would Enourabi accept them, as the other folk had, or would he reject Gurval’s pleas for help on their behalf? Perhaps he didn’t know of any way they could get back to the outside world or, even more worrying, perhaps he didn’t want them to get back in case their story encouraged outsiders to go looking for the folk frae aneth the Hill.

Nervously Shonagh approached the ker with the others in their party, wondering if Andrew had had the same thoughts as herself and aware that their problems may not seem important to folk who were being threatened by Beuneg and the Kah Du-Kel.