**The Gathering**

Enourabi spoke quietly to the gathering, but not a single person present missed a word. The speech was an important one, and no sound interrupted the old man while he explained what decision had been made by the elders.

‘We hae thought hard aboot what should be done,’ he explained. ‘Beuneg and the Kah Du-Kel hae gone too far for us to ignore them any longer. We considered a lot o different things we could do, thought long and hard aboot it, and in the end we decided we should send a group o us to speak to him and try and reason with him. He used to be one o us and there must still be some good left in him.’

A murmuring arose from the crowd at this point in Enourabi’s speech. Not open opposition, but a feeling of unease that was all too apparent to all; even Andrew and Shonagh, who were not attuned to the sensitivity level of the folk.

Enourabi continued, ‘Well we ken what he is like and dinna think it was easy coming to this decision, but we felt it was best to gie him a chance to come round again to oor way o life withoot any o us fighting or anybody getting hurt,’

The crowd were too respectful of Enourabi to voice open hostility to what he was suggesting, but it was obvious that some of them were not happy. Enourabi could sense this just like everyone else. He gazed amongst the crowd and his eyes lighted on one of the folk who was obviously displeased.

‘Kolaz,’ he said in a soft and kindly voice, ‘you are nae happy and you must tell us why. You are one o the folk and hae as much right to speak as anybody. Tell us now. What is it that troubles you?’

Kolaz looked embarrassed at being singled out, but one or two of those around him encouraged him to speak up. ‘Well, Enourabi, as you well ken, I’m one o those that live away frae the ker. There’s just a few of us that look after the buoch in the north end and we get upset by Beuneg and his Kah Du-Kel all the time. He kens fine that the Kah Du-Kel upset the beasts and he sends them doon to upset and even attack them more and more often. If they’re nae right, you ken, they winna gie as much milk and it’s nae just a case o frightening them these days; we’ve even lost one or two calves and how long’s it going to be afore it’s one o oor bairns? He gets worse all the time. We need to do more than just speak to him. He needs to be taught a lesson.’

Kolaz had started to speak in a quiet, hesitant manner, but had got more and more forceful as his confidence grew. Other, infected by his spirit, began to call out in support of what he was saying and his call for more positive action was greeted by shouts of agreement.

Enourabi nodded understandingly as Kolaz spoke, but it was Kozhiadez who answered for the elders, ‘We see your problems, Kolaz. I remember when three o the tarv got loose after one o the attacks and did a lot o damage. Cattle are easily upset and we’re nae bullfighters so the tarv were difficult to control, but dinna you see that that is why we dinna want to get into a fight with Beuneg? We’re nae fighters, Kolaz. You other ones ken fine that we dinna settle things by fighting and scrapping among oorsels. That’s never been oor way or, at least, it hasna been for a gie long time. You think that by fighting with Beuneg that we’ll stop him causing trouble, but how mony folk will get hurt, maybe even killed, before we get it all sorted oot? Should we nae at least try to get him to see oor way o it? Does it hae to be a battle or even a war? We all ken aboot the world abeen Menez; his fighting made it a better place?’ Kozhiadez looked questioningly at the folk as she stood shoulder to shoulder with Enourabi.

Gurval joined them and held up his hands to silence the quiet whispering that had greeted the end of Kozhiadez’s speech, ‘Friends, I ken that it’s real easy to accept that we should do more to get Beuneg to behave himsel in a better way. Kolaz has the buoch and tarv to guard and look after and we all sympathise with his concern for them, and the harm that might come to the bairns and the aulder folk who live in the northern cattle lands, but Enora and I are the magerez: we ken what can happen when fighting starts. We’ll need more and more louzen, for it’s nae just Beuneg we’ve to think aboot but the Kah Du-Kel as well and naebody kens what they might do once they’re really let loose and get a taste for blood! There might even be killing! Let’s try Enourabi’s road afore we try force.’

Kozhiadez’s speech, followed by that of Gurval, seemed to silence and sober the crowd. Then small groups formed to discuss what had been said and the elders just waited and let them talk it out amongst themselves.

After a short while Enourabi, once more, took his place at the centre of the platform, ‘You hae heard what we propose. Now you must decide if you agree with what we suggest or would you rather we took some other action? We are folk just like yoursels, no better; no worse. Our way need not be the best way. Kolaz spoke well and spoke truly, you must take this into account when you decide. Hae you more to add, Kolaz?’

Kolaz, once more the focus of all attention, shuffled nervously and then gave a shy nod, ‘Thank you, Enourabi, for letting me speak and for seeing the problem we hae with Beuneg. You are right, of course, to say we must try to reason with Beuneg first. It has never been oor way to try force first and we shouldna be starting now. I was thinking selfishly and forgetting the way o the folk o Menez. I say that we try speaking to Beuneg as the elders suggest to see if that will work.’

‘Thank you, Kolaz, but you do not need to apologise and call yourself selfish. You did what any o the real folk would do, and that was to think o protecting your family and oor beasts. That is truly the way o the folk,’ said Enourabi and the murmurs of agreement within the crowd exhibited their sympathy with both men and made it plain that the decision of the elders to negotiate with Beuneg would meet with universal approval.

Kolaz, having gained in confidence and aware that he was not to be made a fool of for speaking, spoke once more, ‘Do you nae think it’s strange, Enourabi, that the Kah Du-Kel seem to hae gotten far worse this last while? They never used to be vicious like they are now. They might hae been a bit short-tempered at times, but they never attacked any o the beasts or went ootside to kill! What can hae caused them to turn as wicked as they are now?’

Enourabi, who had been nodding in agreement with what Kolaz said, replied for the elders, ‘We agree with you, Kolaz, that something strange has owertaken the Kah Du-Kel. A lot o the beasts in Menez can be dangerous, but that’s because they act as such beasts should. We ken the tarv can be devils when they like and that’s why we keep them in the north pens, but the Kah Du-Kel used to wander freely and were never a real bother. We spoke aboot this at oor meeting and like you came up with nae answer other than to suppose that Beuneg has somehow gained influence ower them. That would seem to be the most likely explanation.’

There were cries of agreement at this and Enourabi chose this time to explain fully to the gathering what the elders had decided to do. ‘We’re to send a delegation to Beuneg to see if we can make him come to his senses. It winna be easy for them that go and it might even be dangerous. Because it could be putting folk in danger, the elders decided that we should keep the numbers down to as few as possible. Naturally, I’ll go mysel and I’ve asked Gurval to go with us too, for his skills as a magerez help make him a patient and considerate man and I think we’ll need that before we’ve finished with Beuneg. Barban, wife of Yehann the marichal, is going as well, for she is cousin to Beuneg and knows his ways. She is also expert with a goaf and, although we’d rather not see her use it, she might have to defend us! They have agreed to go with me, are you agreed that they should go?’

There were cries of assent from the crowd, but Enourabi wanted to make sure and asked if anyone thought they should have someone different on the delegation. There was no response from the crowd.

The group on the platform split up and came down into the clearing. Gurval gathered together some louzen and some food and put them into a bag which he slung over his shoulder. He lifted the naer and laid it carefully on top of the bag. ‘Just in case we meet in with the Kah Du-Kel before we meet Beuneg,’ he explained, ‘We’ll at least be warned if any o them are near!’

Enora approached her husband and pleaded with him to take care. They stood for a brief moment, gazed into one another’s eyes and slowly rubbed their palms together in a way similar to that used by the folk when greeting one another, but this time, to Shonagh and Andrew, it seemed far more personal and to be far more meaningful.

Enourabi and Barban approached and Gurval joined them. The trio, pausing only briefly to acknowledge the good wishes of the folk, set out briskly and were soon lost from sight down one of the many tunnels that ran off in myriad directions from the ker.

‘Will they be long, do you think?’ Shonagh asked Enora.

‘They will take as long as is necessary,’ she replied calmly, ‘that is all we can say.’

‘I’m sure everything will turn out for the best,’ said Andrew, ‘surely Beuneg will see sense. He can’t fight everybody and I’m sure he doesn’t want to.’

Enora gave a little knowing, but sad, smile, ‘You might think so, Andrew, and we might pray that you are right, but folk dinna always do what seems sensible here in Menez, just as they dinna in your world. Come now, we’ll go and eat and hae a wee rest. That will do us all good.’

Enora’s suggestion that they relax for a while, reminded Andrew and Shonagh that they had not had any rest, or even sleep, since they’d entered the Hill and had never experienced or felt the need of it.

‘Are you tired, Andrew?’ asked Shonagh as they made their way to the visitors’ mougev, ‘I dinna feel a bit tired, let alone sleepy. It’s a gie queer world here under Bennachie!’

Andrew nodded in emphatic agreement, ‘You’re telling me,’ he said, ‘and I’ve never seen any o the folk sleep either. Only Danny and Tourz seem to take any rest and I suppose most beasts like them do anyway. There must be some explanation, but I’ve no idea what it is.’

When they had settled themselves at the table in the mougev, Shonagh was keen to try and take Enora’s mind off thinking too much about the delegation. Although she never actually said anything, it was plain that Enora was a little concerned about Gurval going off to face Beuneg even though Enourabi and Barban would be there. Andrew, recognising the drift of Shonagh’s thinking, asked Enora about Kolaz and the cattlemen. What he really wanted to hear about was the tarv, for he’d always been keen on bulls, and the bulls at the annual Keith Agricultural Show were a major attraction for him.

Enora was more than willing to tell him what she knew. ‘Well, Andrew, the tarv hae always been aroon for as long as I can mind, but they didna belong to us in the first place. Kozhiadez, who kens most aboot oor history, tells us that they came frae the lands across the seas to the north. Folk frae far away must hae taken them to this part o the world and it’s said that they were first kept roon aboot the north coast. Legend tells that there were six bulls and that the bulls that we hae noo are descended directly frae them. The great tarv, o course, is Kohle. He’s often called the great tarv o the north and he’s right well looked after by the herdsmen, but he’s nae easy to keep under control and they hae to be gey careful aboot how they handle him.’

Andrew’s curiosity had been aroused, ‘What about the other bulls? Are there still six bulls?’

Enora smiled, ‘Och, nae the first six! There must be aboot ten or eleven noo, but I’m nae real sure, for all the buoch and tarv are kept in the far north nae far frae the place you’d call Burghead, up in Moray. That’s the land o the buoch and being so oot o the way makes them easy prey for the Kah Du-Kel. That’s why Kolaz had been so worried at the meeting. Naebody likes trouble aroon their mougev and being so far frae the ker would make it more difficult for them to get help quickly. That’s worrying when you hae a family to think o and protect.’

It was apparent that in such a close-knit community, where everyone depended so much on everyone else, it was impossible to stay off the subject of the meeting with Beuneg for very long and Shonagh, admitting the failure of her efforts decided to ask Enora about Barban, wife of the blacksmith, Yehann.

‘Barban has always helped Yehann and in time has become a skilled marichal hersel. She’s very good at putting a keen edge on bouchal, kleze and things like that. She also became gey skeely at using the things she made. She can fair throw a goaf and she’ll hit the mark nine times oot o ten!’

Shonagh, keen to hear of a woman who was admired for her skills with weapons, pressed home her inquiries, ‘Is a goaf the spear she was carrying when she left? Is she there to protect the men?’ This was a most appealing idea to Shonagh.

‘She’d be among the most skeely with weapons that we hae. Why should she not be there?’ Plainly Enora found the question unusual and difficult to understand. Why would anyone ask it? Obviously Barban being a woman who outmatched the men in skill with weapons did not seem strange or unusual to Enora.

Shonagh decided not to pusue the matter, realising that, in Menez, the roles of men and women were not judged as they were in her world.

It was Andrew who noticed that Tourz, closely followed by Danny, had risen and was standing at the entrance to the mougev listening intently. ‘What do you think is up with Tourz? He seems to be listening for something or someone.’

Enora’s expression told them that she didn’t like Tourz’s reaction. ‘There’s something worrying him. He wouldna stand like that unless it was something he didna like. He’s staring right doon the north tunnel, so whatever or whoever is making him wary is coming frae that direction.’

As if in sympathy with Tourz, Danny began to growl quietly and this caused Andrew concern, ‘I’ve never seen Danny act like that. Tourz is obviously influencing him. He’s becoming quite a watch dog!’

Shonagh’s shout explained the reaction of the animals. ‘It’s Kah Du-Kel! They’re charging down the tunnel towards us! It looks like they’re going to attack!’

They peered into the dim light of the tunnel and, sure enough, snarling, spitting and sprinting towards them was a pack of about fifteen Kah Du-Kel. Some of the other folk had seen them and a few had grabbed sticks and even bouchal in order to defend themselves, while others had rushed to get their bairns inside their mougev and pull their barriers into position.

With a high-pitched roar that was almost a whine the Kah Du-Kel bound into the ker. They charged in all directions snarling, biting and scratching at anything and everything. Some of the folk managed to beat them off, but others found themselves with deep gashes, gouges and scratches after being attacked by the evil cats and the cries and moans of the wounded began to fill the air.

The attack may not have been organised, but it was highly effective and caused tremendous alarm to the folk of the ker. The Kah Du-Kel kept up a continuous harassment, pausing only for seconds, as they chased their intended victims into an indefensible position, against a wall or crammed in a corner, and lashed out with their razor-like claws at the unprotected limbs of the folk. The lashing claws and slashing jaws dealt out injury and pain and then the Kah Du-Kel leapt swiftly on to their next victim.

Screams rent the air as the black cats pressed on with their attack, and property and goods too suffered as the raging black clan charged and ripped their way around the ker. Storage jars, pots and lighter pieces of furniture were scattered in broken heaps by the onslaught. The panic aroused by the attack caused too much confusion for most of the folk to organise any real sort of defence. Most mothers grabbed their children and shepherded them to safety before thinking of their own welfare, while fathers, stunned by the speed and suddenness of the attack, were intent on trying to protect their families and mougev by trying to get barriers into place. Shonagh ran to help Kozhiadez, who was in a near-by mougev, but Kozhiadez had already dragged the barrier into position and was quite safe, while outside the chaos grew worse.

While the Kah Du-Kel revelled in the confusion they had caused, some men did try to form themselves into a defensive force and retaliated by attacking the cats. But the folk of the ker were not fighting folk and their efforts were weak and disorganised. They did manage to frighten off some of the kah Du-Kel and divert others from their intended targets, but they were not very effective.

Tourz and Danny joined in the defence of the ker and Tourz was very successful at head-butting some of the Kah Du-Kel away from their mougev. Enora grabbed some louzen and left the mougev to try and give aid to those who had been hurt. She was running across the meeting place when one of the Kah Du-Kel spotted her and raced across the clearing to head her off. Danny spotted the move, and he set off after the Kah Du-Kel. Andrew found himself shouting at Danny to come back, but the wee dog was intent on its rescue mission. It looked as though the black beast was going to catch Enora, but Danny, moving faster than Andrew would ever have thought possible, threw himself at the cat, forced it over and the Kah Du-Kel spun and rolled on to its side.

Enora, hearing the noise, spied her assailant and ran to safety in a nearby mougev. Danny, tongue lolling as he gasped for breath, skidded to a halt, just as the Kah Du-Kel regained its feet and turned to face the enemy who had knocked it over. It screeched in rage and leapt towards Danny, who just managed to dodge the frantic leap.

Andrew, seeing Danny in difficulties, ran towards the scene of the fracas, but realised he could never reach the scene in time to beat off the cat. Danny had got himself trapped against the wall of a mougev and there was little chance of escape. As the cat rounded on Danny once more and prepared to charge, Andrew looked around for something to throw and divert the beast’s attention away from his pet. He saw a likely looking rock, snatched it up and flung it with all his might so that it would just miss the Kah Du-Kel.

It was at that moment that the Kah Du-Kel decided to launch its attack and just as it leapt forward the rock smashed into its rear leg. This stopped the attack and, with a loud scream of pain, the beast sank slowly to the ground. Danny, quickly realising that he had just been saved from possible serious injury, darted to safety in the nearest mougev.

Seeing the Kah Du-Kel fall to the ground was an immediate cause for concern for Andrew and he ran to where it lay, but the beast, aware of his approach, dragged itself away towards the tunnel where already some of its tribe were disappearing, and Andrew’s last sight of the injured animal was of its tail as it hobbled into the darkness.

The rest of the Kah Du-Kel had called off their attack and were rapidly disappearing from the scene. Enora was doing her best to attend to the wounded and Shonagh was doing her best to act as her assistant and tend the less seriously injured with the louzen that Enora had given her.

Now that the offensive was over, angry cries were beginning to be heard as people began to realise that this attack had taken place while the delegation of elders were trying to bring about peace in Menez. The blame for the attack was beng laid plainly at the door of Beuneg. It also began to dawn on the folk that, if the Kah Du-Kel had attacked the ker in such a blatant way, what might have happened to Enourabi, Gurval and Barban. Would Beuneg also have ordered attacks on their leaders? Perhaps it was time to organise a rescue mission to bring their leaders home.