

KEVAR

I

No complaint was voiced. Such was 'The Way'. Throughout the swards, beyond, among the towers and crags, rang the 'word'. Noone disputed it; none doubted its validity. 'The Way' was the weave and warp of life, its last descent into death at circle's close, and its rebirth mirrored and echoed throughout all of Bechandar.

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Kevar looked up and out across the fields. Beyond lay his path. Behind... Resolutely he faced into the wind. His hair, the subtle hue of dried grain, whipped his shoulders, leaving the carved planes of his face etched sharp against the sun. His brow arched high above a nose so straight his little sistor, Alee, had teased him that it could replace her rule in lessons. Alee! Kevar's grey-green eyes shadowed, dimmed.

Her company was lost, her own whereabouts unknown. Perhaps her life had been snuffed early on the circle, only 13 cycles complete. Out in the crags, few survived an assault of the sandorms, nor that of the airborne dangs. Those who did not return were counted lost, their essence already returned to the circle till next called upon to stumble through the cycles again.

Kevar remembered Alee's bright smile and impatience at each day's dawning, eager to see what new adventures would befall, what new faces she might see, or friends she might make. He half smiled at thought of how all would unconsciously smile back at her innocent charm and warm address.

He knew that the two dagar gone signalled her loss. His heart ached. Her loss was grievous, all encompassing. Yet he could not, would not, show its depth in his bearing. The circle turned; cycles passed. Duties continued, unabated. But he could not deny, deep within, that his life had changed, as well as his focus.

Alee had made his life bearable. Now, she was gone. Naught was left to hold him here save his duty, and that was soon done. The sedak had turned. His time at watch was almost finished, not only for this dag but for this cycle, the last of his three requisites. This last cycle would signal his freedom, and then he could pursue life as he chose.

Kevar and Alee, alone these last five cycles, had planned to leave the sward at the end of this requisite, to seek out the trade camp at the towers, there to use their hard-won hoard of bekels to purchase the best keelar available. Then they would start their own frange, breeding, raising, and renting out keelar to riders throughout the land.

It was a noble idea, one with every chance of success. They had already found a promising small vale. Kevar, though only 18 cycles himself, was strong and able and knew how to erect a shelter for both their own use and that of the keelar. And Alee was adept at the cosyng jobs within, having accosted and questioned and mimicked all those within the cosy where she'd resided these past five cycles, since their mormar and fordar had succumbed to the fever. As well, she knew about the plants without - their care and use, learned from their mormar since a toddler at her knee. And Kevar had

the talent and path of a born frange rider and keeper, like his fordar and forfar before him.

Between the two of them, the youngsters encompassed the needed skills to make a go of a frange. But now.. Alee had gone with the foraging trek to find and harvest velven plants, so important for the health of one and all in the bleak versar of a cycle - the sedak of cold winds, colorless skies, barren trees and sward. Velven leaves could only be found during a brief two kedar in the harvest vers. She'd had to go!

Though young, Alee was quick at spying out velven from its neighboring herbage, and adept at gathering the delicate leaves. Her presence was counted a blessing on such ventures. And truth to tell, Alee loved to go, to break routine, to venture out and see new places. So Kevar never tried to keep her safe in the cosy.

Now, the dream was dashed. Kevar would leave as they had planned, but not to eagerly seek their twined future, rather to escape the pain of memory and loss. Naught held him here now. He must find meaning elsewhere.

II

Fron called out, voice raised to combat the whine of the wind. Even so, Kevar barely heard him. Sound was submerged, whipped away by the gale. Rather, he noticed movement below his position on the rocky face. Alerted, he peered sharply. Fron continued his climb up to where Kevar watched. With a last heave, he landed on the jutting shelf and paused to catch his breath.

"A fine watch point", he commented, panting and looking around. Then, more formally, he turned to Kevar and said, "I relieve you. Your requisite is ended." Formality ended, Fron continued on a more informal note. "Have you seen any sign of the trekkers?", he asked with concern.

"No," replied Kevar. Fron, of a similar age, was the closest to a friend Kevar had known. Yet, it was hard to let down his guard, even with him. "Two dagar gone. Tis unlikely we will see them again."

"I share your grief for your sistor, Kevar," said Fron awkwardly. "Your requisite is done. What will you do now?"

"Go," replied Kevar simply. "Naught holds me here now. I must seek my future, perhaps in the towers." But he sounded uncertain.

Fron looked at him, nonplussed. Then he directed his gaze out over the sward, vigilant, ever searching to see what did not belong, ready to raise the alarm. "I shall miss you, Kevar. Good fortune track your path," he finally said, his friendship and sincerity clear in the few well-chosen words.

Kevar's fierce brow softened. "My thanks, Fron." A slight warming eased his countenance. "Good fortune follow your path, as well." Then he turned and began the climb down the face to where the rock gave way to the fields. A few hardy trees, leaves long browned and blown away, clung here and there along the slant, providing a handhold here and there to ease the way.

In only a few minutes, he completed the descent. He looked back and up once, arm raised in farewell to Fron high above. An answering wave was his reply, but any possible words were lost. Down here, the gale blew less harshly, but still clove the air like a sickle did a chaff of wheat.

Following the path that led to the hamal and his own cosy, Kevar's long strides ate up the distance quickly. Once inside the hamal, he saw many look up hopefully, but upon seeing his lone appearance, their faces fell. Noone spoke. Resigned acceptance cloaked everyone's public faces. Yet he felt their loss as keenly as his own.

Kevar made his way to Baskar, the watch Lead, and made his final report: nothing and noone seen during his last watch. Baskar meticulously noted this in the watch file, then closed the book and looked up at the young lad.

"Your 3 requisites are ended. You are free to go. We thank you for your diligence," intoned Baskar. The little ceremony over, he looked at Kevar and said, "Now that you are formally free, I wondered if you would consider training to become lead?"

Kevar was startled. This had never occurred to him. Not many were asked to train. It was an honor. For a moment he was tempted. It would solve the problem of his future, and his standing in the hamal in one fell swoop. It was an honorable position, full of responsibility. A Lead was respected

by all. But then his thoughts turned to Alee. Her loss was so fresh in his mind. Could he bear to stay here where everywhere he turned he would be reminded of her? No! His skills, his future were meant to be followed elsewhere. He had known it before. Nothing had changed.

He turned to Baskar, who waited patiently for his answer. "I thank you for the honor, but I must decline. My road lies beyond," he said.

"I thought as much, Kevar," said Baskar, "but I had to ask. You have done well these last 3 cycles, and would have made a fine lead. But I knew you meant to start a frange with your sistor." Treading delicately around the recent loss of Alee and the other trekkers, he continued, "I wasn't sure if recent events would have changed your mind."

Kevar flushed at both the praise and the allusion to Alee. "I don't know exactly where my path now leads, but I know I must seek away from this sward. I feel called..." His glance turned to the east. A faraway look came into his eyes, a yearning shadowed his face. Then he was back, the moment passed. "I will follow the path the trekkers took. Perhaps I will find some sign."

Baskar looked at him, concern and skepticism warred briefly on his face. "You know that seldom do lost trekkers return..."

"Yes, but it is along my route anyway. What harm can it do to look?" argued Kevar, sounding as though he tried to convince himself as well as Baskar.

"Right," replied Baskar evenly. "Should you see anything, send word if you can."

"I will," promised Kevar. Then he turned and made his way to his cosy.

III

Kevar wasted no time. He gathered up his few possessions, among them the cloak Alee had made for him last festive dag. The cloak still retained the smell of the herbs she had crushed and laid in the folds to keep the cloak ever smelling sweet and safe from the miniscule eaters of cloth. Kevar held the cloak to his nose for a few moments, inhaling the aroma and allowing himself to feel her loss in these few moments of privacy. None could see. Tears filled his eyes, but none fell. Rather, he clutched the cloak until he was master of himself again, and when he emerged from the room a few moments later, his usual stoic visage was in place. Noone would see his pain had any dared to look. Here in the sward, one's private emotions were just that - private.

Kevar made a final stop at Alee's cosy. Most of her things would have been redistributed among the others there, but a few personal items, significant only to Alee and Kevar, would have been set aside for his claiming if he so chose. Dame Adea was on watch and handed him a bundle, sympathy in her eyes, but she said nothing. Kevar thanked her, added the bundle to his own small satchel, and wove his way through the throng to the southern edge of the hamal. Once there, he paused for a final look at the place he had called home all his life. Then he turned, resolutely set his shoulders, and set foot to the east - lying path towards the crags. His future beckoned.

Kevar walked, the sun sinking fast behind him. He could have stayed the night in the cosy, but somehow, now that he was free, he needed to be moving. He wanted, no - needed - to find answers as to why Alee and her companions had not returned. Once he knew, he could continue on his own search for a future. But this last duty to his sistor he was determined to carry out. Else the agony of not knowing would dog his footsteps and his heart forever.

The sun was but an orange thread in the sky when Kevar finally paused and made camp in a fairly clear hollow in the rocky landscape. The wind still whistled through the grasses and upthrusting sea of stones. Not another spark of life was visible, not a feathered flyer nor a four footed beast broke his isolation. The swards were lightly populated, both by man and other life; it was too desolate and hard for anyone or any thing to survive. Thus, Kevar had no fear that his repose would be interrupted. No, it would be later, among the crags themselves that he must be wary.

He huddled in the hollow, his cloak wound close around him, his satchel his pillow, and watched as the dusk turned into night and the first stars appeared in the sky. He was alone. He had looked forward to making this trek with Alee, looked forward to her cheerful countenance, bouncy step and ready laugh to make light of the hard trail as they journeyed to a brighter future. Lying here alone, at last Kevar could let go and let his grief wash over him. He wept for Alee, he wept for the loss of their plans, he wept at being all alone. The wind blew the sound away. His tears dried on his weary cheeks and he fell heavily asleep, not stirring until well after sunrise the next morn.

He felt lethargic, yet oddly cleansed. He had needed the release. Now, rested somewhat in body and soul, he could pursue his goal with more concentration. He was eager, resolved. He would know! He would find out what had happened!

After a swift repast, Kevlar left the hollow. Little sign remained of his overnight stay there - he believed in leaving the land as unmarked as possible, not just for safety's sake, but also with respect for the land itself. Anyone else who came along and needed just such a refuge might find a few crushed grasses where he had lain, but otherwise as pristine a site as could be found anywhere.

The day was cool, but the wind had calmed during the night. The sun gave off a weak warmth as he walked, enough to keep the chill off. He was content.

IV

As Kevar walked, he kept his eyes ever moving, alert to any subtle changes around him. As well, did he listen. He had learned well these past 3 cycles, sharpening his senses to the life and nature around him. Thus could one avert or defend against any possible danger that threatened.

Kevar had walked this route before, of late in company with fellow hunters and, when younger, with his fordar, learning the roll of the land, and to read signs of beast and winged prey - happier times. He knew what to expect.

As he approached the crags, he saw obvious mark of the passing of many afoot, of a surety the gatherers Alee accompanied. The signs were faint as more than 2 dagar had passed. But they were still accessible to one of keen eyesight who knew where to look.

Kevar was not keenest amongst his fellows, yet perhaps his determination aided in his search. Close under the crags, he found where Alee and her company had made camp. Here a campfire had been carefully bounded by rocks to keep the fire enclosed. Scuffed earth showed a regular path between bushes - perhaps to the stream he could hear running nearby. And when he looked closer, he could see where they had rested in the night.

At first he could see no sign that this was their final campsite. But then, tucked well under the crags, shadowed to keep cool, he found several bundles of carefully wrapped velven, the earth around the leaves still damp to keep them fresh. They couldn't have lain there long.

This took Kevar aback. There was no way that those who foraged would have gone on to another camp and left the precious velven leaves here. Only for a meager few days could such bundling keep the velven useable. To have left something so prized was unheard of! No, something else must have happened. The leaves had not been left here voluntarily.

With this in mind, Kevar searched the site more carefully, paying keen attention for any hidden sign that might give clue to what had happened. He found a discarded knife some distance away. Naught was wrong with the blade. Why would someone have thrown it carelessly away? And then, a few paces away, he found an area much scuffed, and the surrounding green bruised and torn. He bent to look more closely and saw spatters of blood among the trampled and crushed foliage!

This was not the result of sandorm attack! Else there would have been upheaval of land. And he had found no sign of winged dang either. Kevar shuddered for he knew well that had dang been responsible, he would have found more than a few spatters of blood - he would have found chunks of tossed meat scattered like the wind! Something, or someone else was responsible.

And that he had found no further sign of injury than a few spatters of blood raised Kevar's hopes that perhaps these folk yet lived. Alee might still be alive! His heart in his mouth, he searched further.

The blood spatters and crushed ground lay along the path Kevar had noted earlier. Therefore, he concentrated on trying to read what these clues could tell him. Yes. Many had thronged along there. He looked at the marks of passage. So many had traversed, one's step atop another. But from what he could ascertain, some stumbled, walked awkwardly - some steps were hesitant. And further along he caught sign of keelar hooves.

The foraging party had not taken keelar with them! He looked again. The prints were still fresh. The tracks of keelar meshed with those walking, kept pace and sometimes covered those previous marks. They all led away from the stream that Kevar could clearly hear rushing to his left. The tracks led for some distance off to the right, south - towards the coast!

Kevar now thought he knew what had occurred. The foragers had been kidnapped. It was no wonder that no sign had previously been found. Those who had taken them had been careful to leave no obvious sign of violence. And seldom had any who did not return been hunted as Kevar now searched. The loss of those not returned had merely been accepted as loss due to the many natural dangers within the sward itself. Never once had any thought their losses due to outside cause.

Kevar looked again. The signs of passage were still easy to read. It had not occurred more than a dag earlier. It might yet be possible to regain those that had been taken.

Kevar was in a quandary. He looked at the sky. As yet, it was still mounted by sun and no clouds. But would it remain so for long? Only the Gods knew. He had a choice to make: to follow and hope to retrieve Alee and the others by himself or to race back to the hamal, retrieve the few keelar the hamal boasted, find the best tracker and so to the rescue.

Kevar was anxious to follow, but he knew that the best chance lay in going back. The kidnappers alone rode keelar. They could not go swiftly with their charges on foot. There was yet a chance to catch them up!

Mind set, he turned, gathered up the precious bundles of velven and quickly began a jog at a steady range-eating pace back to the hamal. At this speed he would arrive well before the sun set. And, astride keelar, he and those who accompanied him could ride to take back their loved ones. Strong was the urge to hasten his pace, but Keelar had been trained well; he kept to the pace he had set himself. He would get there in good time, and still able to move, speak, plan. Meanwhile, his thoughts dwelt on his sistor.

Alee lived! Yet was there a chance for the future they had planned. He must rescue her! Alee! Alee! Alee! Each stride forward proclaimed her name.

He passed the notch where he had lain in the night. So close! The sun still rode the sky but was descending. Now, he could not stop himself. His pace increased. He seemed to fly along the track. And knew that Fron, from above, would see a runner approaching the hamal, would alert Baskar, hamal's lead, and those others who guarded.

Kevar entered the hamal, aware of startled glances from those at task around him. But he did not stop till he reached Baskar. Then, chest heaving, he gasped out, "They live!"

Quickly, as quickly as breath would allow, he related what he had found, what he had seen. He was relieved of the precious bundles of velven and assured they were still in good stead. Then he turned to Baskar and urged, "We must go on keelar, follow their spoor. Yet is there time to save our folk!"

Baskar agreed, and gripped his shoulder to comfort. "Catch breath, lad. I've sent for Berrod. No better tracker is there than he." Then he turned to one of the guard, "Gather the keelar and bring them hence." The guard sped off to follow the command. Then Baskar turned and asked for 3 volunteers to accompany the rescue party. "Ye are all good warriors. I go as well as Kevar. Who will go with us to bring back our folk? Be aware that arms will be needed, force will be used to regain those taken willfully."

Berrod strode into the hamar clearing. Baskar informed him of events and Berrod stood ready to apply his skills to the hunt.

Fron leapt forward. My time at watch is not ended, yet I would seek leave to accompany the party. My arm is strong, my bow steady, my eyes keen." Baskar approved his inclusion and the young man hurried off to retrieve his bow, long knife, sling, and travel bag. He was gone but a moment, then strode to stand next to Kevar, silently lending his friend support.

While Fron had been gone, three more guards stepped forward: Shreve and Lodan and Skar. Kevar was especially glad that Shreve had volunteered. Shreve was well known for his strength, agility, and skill at man-to-man combat. Lodan excelled at tactical ploys and often Baskar had sought him out on questions of defense. Skar was not much older than Kevar or Fron. He had recently ended his own requisite and taken up apprenticeship with the hamar's weapons' master. He showed surpassing skill in making and maintaining the hamar's weaponry, and had clever ideas on how to make the most of whatever materials were to hand.

Baskar was well satisfied. While those chosen sought their travel gear, he turned to Kevar and said, "You realize that we may be up against the Gleaners. It is ever their way to take what they can and steal away on their boats."

Kevar nodded. "I thought it so, too. Who else would steal our folk and leave lay the life-healing velven? Gleaners know naught of the plant nor of its medicinal value. They seek only slaves and what they can take for ready use."

Baskar said, "They will be dangerous to approach. It will not be easy to steal back our people. But we must try. And before anything, we must catch them up. Luckily, our keelar are fresh. We seven will make good time as we are not hampered by any who must walk. Twas good strategy, Kevar, to return."

Kevar blushed at the praise, but knew he had made the best decision. Still he fretted to be away. Within moments, his wish was granted.

The hamar boasted only 10 keelar, but all were young and strong. They had not been ridden in a couple of days so the seven chosen were frisky and raring to go. Kevar took lead point as he knew where the gatherers had camped. And what had taken him several herdar to traverse at a jog, the seven were able to cover in one. Thus, it was still before dusk when they arrived. Light was still available for Berrod to use his famed tracking skills. Soon they followed, one after another, his lead.

As Kevar had surmised, the spoor led them south. And here they were in luck yet again. For after some time, Berrod was able to state unequivocally that the tracks led directly towards the coast. Berrod had been there many times in his wanderings and knew the track well. He kept an eye out in case the tracks they followed should diverge, but they never did, and so their pace quickened.

They rode until the light faded. Kevar chafed at the delay, but knew that they must wait till dawn to continue so as not to go astray from their target. Berrod assured him that the pace of those they followed was no faster than that of a walk, and that the track to the coast at that pace would take three dagar at the very least. So they still had time.

They had made good progress on this first stretch; a few herdar of rest would only aid them in their purpose. Kevar reluctantly saw the wisdom but, although he lay down, his thoughts gave him no surcease until many herdar later. Thus, he was not as rested as some, but fully as eager to go on when they had broken their fast and settled astride their mounts.

It was as well that Berrod knew their path well, for as the dag progressed, so too did the cloud cover in the sky increase. Before the dag ended, they all anticipated rain; if it was hard enough, it would erase the signs of the tracks

they followed. Therefore, they paused only often enough to rest their mounts and allow them a drink of water from a passing stream and a few mouthfuls of the green sward to maintain their strength. Those astride ate as they rode; no time was wasted.

When dusk next fell, so too did the rain. Shreve and Baskar went ahead from their campsite to scout, returning quickly with word of several campfires not far ahead. Soon, leaving the keelar in the camp, the seven made their way on foot to where they could spy out those clustered around three campfires. They were aghast at how many sat encircling the flames - many times the number of their own lost folk. 'They must number near 100!', thought Kevar to himself.

They inched closer. Now they could see that darker shadows stood upright around the people. And they were armed. Baskar pointed to Kevar, Fron and Lohan to advance on the right, Shreve and Skar on the left. He and Berrod inched their way forward on a straight approach. Thus, they hoped to ferret out any guards around the camp.

Soon, the sound of a ketel bird was heard in the night. None but those who called the sward home would know that a ketel bird never sounded at night time. Thus were the encircled alerted to their presence. Soon the sound was repeated as well as that of a hawk beast. That was the sign agreed upon when and if a guard had been eliminated. This sounded four times.

Those encircled made no sign that anything was out of the ordinary. They too had been trained in survival. They would alert their captors in no way to aid them against those who came to set them free. Instead they continued to sit quietly, warily, glances centered on the fires.

Soon, all seven warriors had gathered again in one spot. Sign language was used to exchange information that four guards had been quietly, permanently, removed. That left six in the camp itself. Now Kevar and Fron were signalled towards where the keelar had been tied together in a line. This would be tricky as they did not want to spook the keelar into snorted awareness of their coming.

The two went upwind of the keelar and as they grew close, Kevar hissed quietly as he was wont to do with a wary beast. It alerted the keelar but simultaneously soothed them. He reached into his pocket and gave each beast a bite of apple. This kept the beasts amenable and happy. Then he and Fron quietly untied the line of mounts and led them back and away until they were some distance from the camp. They tied them to some trees where the beasts could forage at their ease. Then they eased back to where Baskar and the others waited. It had all taken maybe 20 mandar.

No warning had been raised. Those in the camp were still unaware that they were until scrutiny, that the guards posted were gone or that their keelar had been stolen. It was time for the next step.

Baskar signed again and this time the seven split up to evenly spaced positions around the camp. Inside the camp, the captives were laying down to rest. Soon their captors, at ease thinking they were well guarded, lay down too. Six of those who watched were careful to note exactly where each captor lay. While one remained on guard, the six waited until they were sure that all of the enemy slept. Quiet reigned.

Then the ketel bird sounded again. It was a muted sound, not likely to disturb the slumbers of those in the camp. But still they waited. Nothing changed. The warble sounded again and this time, each of the six inched forward until each had reached one of the captors. At a final warble, each of the six silently dispatched his victim. Again, no sound split the night. They withdrew and again made the rounds of the camp to be certain they had gotten them all. It was as well that they did, for a couple of minutes later, two

Gleaners astride keelar approached the camp, their riders calling out to their fellows and herding even more victims before them.

When noone answered their hail, the two stopped abruptly, wheeled, and would have departed as quickly as they had come if there had not sounded the shriek of a war bird. The keelar reared at the sound for they feared the birds mightily. The riders swore but lost their balance and fell to the ground. Their captives leaped away and in their place came the seven avengers. The Gleaners were quickly subdued and bound. They were not harmed; they were meant for questioning.

The all-clear was sounded and those in the camp and those who had just been herded to join them came together to greet their rescuers by the fires. The fires, which had been banked for the night, were stirred up anew. Kevar soon found Alee, safe and sound. He hugged her close and she hugged him back, hard.

None had been hurt save for a scratch to the arm of the one the gatherers who had had the misfortune to first accost the Gleaners; in his startlement, he had fallen among the thorny groundcover and spattered the foliage with a few drops of blood.

After some conversation, it was discovered that the Gleaners had kidnapped folk from hamals as much as five dagar's ride to the north. Some of the company was very weary, having traverssed such long distances on foot. Alee's group was the next to last group taken over. It was mere fortune that Kevar had discovered what had happened so quickly. Assuredly, all the more than 100 collected had long been given up for lost. Great would be the joy in their hamars when they returned!

Baskar, Berrod, Lodan and Kevar now turned their attention to their captives. The 2 bound Gleaners glared at them with haughty hatred. Both were of solid build, sported long lanky near-colorless hair, and were dressed in skins from some beast never encountered in the sward. They and their clothing smelled of the sea.

At first, they would not respond to the questions put to them. They spat their defiance and sneered their contempt.

Finally, Berrod lost patience. He knew a little of the coastal tongue and tried that. One of the two looked at him with disdain but answered nonetheless.

Berrod translated what he boasted, "I am called Glebel. I ride the seas and take what I want when I want. None gainsay me or my brethren. I have taken many of your weak race to slave and I and my brothers will take even more in time."

Berrod answered something in the strange tongue and Glebel glared all the more, and spat again. He forbore to make reply.

Berrod translated, "I told him that his slaving days were a thing of the past."

The four of them walked a ways away to confer.

"I think what he says is true. I think that he and the other Gleaners have taken many of our folk as slaves. It would explain many of the disappearances," said Baskar.

"And if we do nothing about these ships, they will continue to raid as they please. We were just lucky this time," said Kevar.

"We have a triad of tasks then," commented Lodan. "We must get these good folk back to their homes, we must rid ourselves once and for all of these Gleaners,

and we must alert the Towers to their deprivations. For surely if we do not, these Gleaners will continue to steal our people and take as they will, with no expectation of reprisal."

"I think the same," said Baskar. "These good people will have to wait a bit longer before we can aid them to return to their own. The boats of the Gleaners are here, only a dag's ride to the coast. It is quite possible to expect other raiding parties than this one are off on their errands. We must hasten to the coast and stop them before they can sail away with more hostages."

One among the freed hostages, one Nemark, would be given use of a keel to make his way to the Towers with the information gathered. He would be exceedingly wary on his journey, for now he knew what he faced in addition to the usual dangers of the sward. With any luck, he would reach the Towers in three dagar. And then the alert would be sounded throughout the many swards.

The seven avengers from Kevar's hamar had worked well together. They would continue. There were a few among the hostages collected who had guard training but no weapons. This was soon rectified, and guards were set to protect so that Kevar and his companions could continue on to the coast. So it was decided. All but the guards lay down to rest for the remainder of the night. The morrow and next dagar would tax their energies; they needed to rest while they could.

Kevar settled within a hand's breadth of Alee. Now that he had her safe, he disliked the thought of leaving her so soon again, but knew it had to be done. But for this night, he would watch over her safety himself. Thus he rested, but with ear canted for any warning cry; he would not lose his sistor again.

V

The dawning came soon enough. And with it, the seven were ready to ride as soon as they had broken their fast. Their mounts had been fed and watered, well rested through the night. Kevlar hugged Alee and bade her be most wary, to stay with the others until he returned.

Chastened by the recent activities, Alee was quick to promise. Her spirits had risen again once the Gleaners had been felled and she had been reunited with her brother. She would be cautious but at the same time, there were so many new faces here that she would not lack for interesting conversation or company. She felt no need to go awandering.

The two remaining Gleaners were left in camp, well bound and under strict guard. Their former captives would not allow them any chance of escape. Their future fate had not been determined. However, they had been stripped of their strange garb and those garments now resided in a pouch strapped to the keel Baskar bestrode. The Gleaners had been left in their woolen undergarments to make the best of their situation. Even as the seven left, the Gleaners had not lost their arrogance. They could not conceive that they would not soon be freed to wreak vengeance on these overbold weaklings. Noone stayed to disabuse them of their certainty, rather left them to face reality with the surety of time.

Once again, Berrod took the lead. They left at a good clip, but one which the keelar would be able to maintain easily for many herdar. Even so, along the way the group stopped now and again to allow their mounts to drink at a stream or chew a few mouthfuls of the rushes lining it.

They kept their voices to themselves and their eyes wide in case they should cross paths with any other Gleaners. But if there were other raiders out and about, they must be coming from some other direction for none were encountered. The land lay silent with but an occasional rustle of small game or the trill of a bird in flight. And even these were few.

It was almost as if the land lay hushed and waiting as did they for the intruders to pass and be gone once again before things could return to normal. Even the weather seemed to sympathize. It continued to drizzle off and on. The sun hid behind darkish cloud cover and at dusk, when it finally peeked through for a few moments, it was a sullen red in color, then lost to the bruised green, blue and purple before falling behind the horizon. It was a dismal ride, and not easy riding through the high wet grass.

Kevlar thought to himself that it would make it that much harder for Gleaners to force their captives on the trek to the coast. And so it would take that much longer, given them further respite and time to plan their offensive.

That evening they made a dark camp by the last of the crags. No campfire would alert their enemy to their presence. They ate a cold meal, set a watch, and settled in for the night. On the morrow, Berrod was certain they could reach the coast before the noon hour. They would take what rest they could this last night. Tomorrow they would spy out the situation and develop a plan. They could only hope that their small number would be sufficient to the deed.

* * *

During the night, they took turns at watch, allowing one and all to get the maximum sleep possible. At dawn, Fron, who had taken final watch, shook his

companions to wakefulness, with a care to avoid noise. He had heard keelar approaching.

With Fron's help, Kavar hastened to make sure their own mounts made no sound to attract attention. The others spread out to discover who came, how many and from what direction.

The Ketel bird sounded once, twice, and all made their way back to camp. Lodan quickly pointed back the way he had come. He spread a hand twice to indicate ten riders, then spread his hand again four times to indicate twenty captives. They would have to be very careful if they wanted to surprise the Gleaners and free their hostages.

Kavar and Fron attached food pouches to their mounts to occupy them. Then they joined their fellows and inched their way through the dew-dampened grass to a knoll where they could look down on the approaching riders. Two Gleaners rode ahead. Three rode behind. The rest meandered to either side of their captives, effectively boxing them in.

This time, the rescue must be affected in the light. It would be much more difficult as the riders were fresh and alert, looking to be newly started on the final approach to their boats.

Luckily, Lodan had noted that the company must pass through a narrow gap in the crags to continue on to the coast. There they should be able to pick off a few of the Gleaners before their cohorts were made aware. Only two or three walking would be able to edge through the pass at a time. And those astride could only make it through singly. Once through the pass, a sharp bend in the trail blocked the view of those behind.

It was obvious that the Gleaners knew of the pass and the bend for the riders who had ridden to either side of the captives now wedged their way in between those who walked so that soon, there was a steady line of alternating riders and a few captives all the way to the end. Those afoot would be hard put to attempt escape in this way, if any had spared a thought for it. But these captives must have walked far, for they appeared completely cowed by their circumstances. Not one glanced up as they made their way towards and through the gap. All had their eyes on the ground and feet in front of them, almost blindly following in the former's footsteps. It was no wonder that the Gleaners looked on them as weaklings!

As the party approached, the seven set on rescue took up their places around the gap's exit. Now Shreve's great strength came into play. He strung out a looped rope and as the first rider made his appearance below him, he settled the rope around the Gleaner's neck and swung him out of the saddle and into the brush above. No sound was made. The keel seemed startled by the sudden loss of weight from its back but continued at a plod the way he had been heading. The captives behind kept up their steady pace around the bend to where Kavar and Fron quietly led them to concealment.

And so it continued until all the captives had been taken to safety. The three riders that tailed the group came all unawares through the gap. The first of the three was dealt the same swift execution. But the last two were alerted by his sudden disappearance. They stopped short of the exit. However, there was no way for them to turn around nor to dismount. The space was too narrow. They called out, hoping their comrades would come to their aid, but none appeared.

At last, after a whispered consultation, the two drew their weapons and exited at a gallop. But it did not save them. Arrows thudded into their bodies as they exited. Neither survived.

The captives were free. They looked dazed and utterly weary. It took them a few moments to realize that their ordeal was over. They had been caught and collected far to the west almost ten dagar before, and had been forced on this march every day since then. The seven companions helped the former captives back to their previous night's camp and settled them in. Once they had had a chance to rest and collect their breath, to eat and drink and regain their energy, they would be able to go back home again.

The seven felt it imperative to continue on to the coast, so again they left some weapons with a couple of the former captives, showed them the best places to set up guard, shared out food and left. It was the best they could do for them at that time.

Berrod led them at a smart pace. They had lost time with this latest skirmish, but it had been worth it. But now they must hustle to get to the coast by the noon hour. They wanted to be there as quickly as possible so as to gain some idea of what they would be facing: how many more captives, how many more Gleaners.

They moved swiftly but kept a wary eye about them. But they did not cross paths with any other all the way to the coast. When they left the crags, it was to ride across flat country with high grasses. Here they would have to be extra wary for here the sandorms reigned. And the closer to the coast they approached, the more likely they were to encounter the fierce worms. So they kept a sharp eye on the terrain as well.

The sandorms would give some warning upon approach: the ground would begin to shake. Holes would start to appear, and sand and dirt would trickle into the holes and heave around their sides. Then one would know that a worm was close and about to surface. The sandorms were huge and secreted a horrible sticky mucous which, if it touched one, would burn. The sandorms were blind, attracted to their prey by sensing motion. Once felt, the worms would surface in front of their prey, then pounce on them in hopes of flattening them. Then the worms could engulf what they'd caught at their leisure. It was a hideous death.

Once the sandorms had surfaced, it was very difficult to avoid them as escape involved movement and any movement led the worms straight to their prey. One's only hope was in being completely still, hoping that a worm's first eruption and pouncing would bypass its prey. The worms were likely to wait for a little while before giving up. But it took all one's nerve to stay still in the presence of such, especially as the worms slung mucous around as they wavered in the air awaiting motion to pinpoint their prey. The only thing that alleviated the burns was the velven leaves.

The party of seven travelled across plain after plain. Finally, they knew they were getting close by the sharp salt smell that crossed the grass. Here, the fibers of the grasses were tougher. And if one was not careful, one could easily be cut by them.

They dismounted. The keelar could not force their way through this. Noone could. They needed to find one of the numerous paths through where sand kept the grasses at bay. It was the only safe way. They found a small patch of green some distance away and out of sight from the coast. It would not hide the beasts from any Gleaners who approached from further inland, but the beasts might be taken for wild if their riding gear was removed and hidden. Kevar just hoped the beasts wouldn't stray too far or the return journey would be a long one indeed!

Now Baskar and Shreve took the lead. They walked along the verge of the grasses until they found a likely sand trail. It was but one man wide. So they continued single-file. They went slowly, half bent in the grasses to keep their presence hidden for as long as possible. But also so they could evaluate

each step before them. If anywhere, it would be here that they would encounter the sandorms.

Just before the narrow path opened up to a wide beach that extended down to a bay, Baskar saw the telltale trickles of sand. He motioned for those behind him to stay perfectly still. Thus far, he could see no actual holes, so if there was a worm below them, it might not be totally aware of them and therefore might not surface if they didn't move for the minutes it took for the worm to lose patience and interest and go elsewhere.

Each in turn, those behind Baskar saw trickling sand, too. But their luck held. When the last trickles were behind Skar, who was last in line, they waited a couple of minutes more. When noone saw any further sign, they resumed their slow pace off the path and onto the harder packed sand of the beach. The giant worms would not come here.

Some distance down the beach, they saw two boats anchored in the water. And they also saw a huge crowd of people bunched together on the sand between the two boats. Of the Gleaners, they could make out maybe ten, some busy on the boats, others guarding the prisoners.

Noone looked in their direction, but as a precaution, they lay flat on the damp sand to keep their presence a secret. Berrod, who was the only one among them who understood some of the Gleaner's language, painstakingly inched his way closer until he could hear some of their speech.

He stayed there for a good her before wiggling slowly back to join his fellows. He whispered, "I heard the guards. They were impatient that the three groups sent out for captives hadn't yet returned." Everyone understood the significance of that: they had only encountered two groups. One group was still out there and probably expected back any time now with another collection of captives.

He continued. "They also spoke of the idea of taking back the current captives on one boat and leaving the other for those on the way. The captains haven't made the decision yet. But I think we shall have to hurry if we want to save the people down there on the beach."

Now it was time to make use of the clothing they had stripped from the Gleaner captives. Berrod and Baskar were closest in size to the two captive Gleaners so it was they who donned the strange garb.

Their plan was simple. Berrod would call out for help from the Gleaners at the boats, and lure them away to where they could be dispatched. It was a chancy plan but the best they could come up with.

Evidently this was expected behavior when manhandling prisoners down to the boats. The Gleaners who had been working tasks on the boats immediately dropped down to the beach and made their way towards the disguised Baskar and Berrod. Berrod took the lead away from the beach up beyond the sandy grasses and the Gleaners plodded along behind, all unawares. Baskar and Berrod made sure not to let the Gleaners get so close as to see their faces, so the farce continued undiscovered until all were well out of sight and hearing from those left by the boats.

Baskar and Berrod led them to where their compatriots waited, hunched down in the sharp grasses. Then, as the Gleaners passed them by, they silently took out the last in line until only three remained. Some slight noise as a third fell made one of the final three look behind out of curiosity. His eyes widened and he was about to call out a warning when Baskar and Berrod turned and crowded them from the other direction. Now the three Gleaners were trapped between two hostile parties. Before they could shout, their throats were cut. The ruse has netted them six of the ten Gleaners that had been seen.

They quickly stripped the clothing from five of the six raiders and soon all seven of the party were garbed in Gleaner garments. It would not fool the remaining Gleaners for long as only Berrod could speak, and once their faces were seen, then the trick would be exposed. But they were hoping they could get close enough to carry out the next part of their plan before that happened.

They trudged back down the beach. As Berrod had warned them, it looked like the Gleaners had decided to board the prisoners onto one of the boats. A gang plank was being anchored off the side of one of the boats and the guards were prodding the prisoners to their feet.

A quick count showed four Gleaners, two with the prisoners, two working on the plank, but then Fron spotted a fifth watching from the 2nd boat. So. They still had five Gleaners to rid themselves of. It would be tricky.

The Gleaner guards were focussed on the activities of the prisoners and the gang plank. They paid no attention to the returning bogus Gleaners. The fifth Gleaner, perhaps the captain of that boat, spared them a quick glance but then turned his attention back to the action.

The seven bogus Gleaners took up positions near the five real ones. Once they were in position, Shreve trilled the quick call of the Ketel bird. Then knives flashed. The two guards went down immediately. The two manhandling the gang plank tried to use the unwieldy board to block, but Skar and Fron were too quick for them. They hurled their blades through the air and both Gleaners fell overboard, one with a blade in his neck, the other in the stomach. That left only the Gleaner on board the other boat.

Upon seeing the attacks, he attempted to cut the anchor so as to sail away, but while the others had been busy with the four Gleaners to-hand, Kevar had begun climbing the rope ladder onto the deck of the 2nd boat. He was up and aboard before solitary Gleaner was aware of his presence.

Kevar threw his knife but the Gleaner turned at the last second and the knife clattered past him to land on the deck. Now the Gleaner faced him. He was a big man and his sneer of hatred and contempt for the smaller and much younger Kevar was just as arrogant as that of the two prisoners back at the first camp. The Gleaner pulled out a sword. This was the first sword Kevar had seen upclose and he was quick to see the advantages of it over a knife. For one thing, the blade was much longer. It greatly extended the man's reach. And Kevar could see that the Gleaner was well accustomed to using it.

He backed warily away from the Gleaner and looked about him quickly to see what he could use in his defense. Above was a block and tackle affair. Keeping an eye on the approaching Gleaner, Kevar jumped up and grasped hold of the giant hook that dangled there. When the Gleaner swiped at him, he was able to pull himself up and over the blade. But he knew this was a stop gap measure. He could only stay out of the man's reach for so long. Then he heard a whistling sound and looked down to see an arrow sprouting from the Gleaner's chest.

The Gleaner, concentrating on Kevar, had forgotten about his other foes. He dropped to the deck, a startled look upon his face. Kevar dropped too and made sure the Gleaner was truly dead. Then he waved to his friends the all-clear.

He climbed back down the rope ladder and joined his comrades who were questioning the prisoners quickly as to whether there were any more Gleaners about. The answer was no, but that another raiding party was still expected.

The seven warriors had achieved much, much more than they had ever hoped for. But the threat was not over. They still had another party of Gleaners to face. And when asked, the former captives were able to number them at twenty. The biggest party yet. It would not be easy.

VI

This last party was expected from the east. The Gleaners had sent out one raiding party in each of 3 directions: east, north and west. The coast lay to the south of the sward.

It was hard to believe, but the sun was not much past its nadir. It did not take long to disrobe the five Gleaners and dump their bodies in the hold of one of the boats. They were well hidden there. Several of the captives were cajoled into donning the Gleaner garb. They would not be expected to fight but by wearing the clothing, they would be helping to maintain the fiction that all was as it should be in the eyes of their captors. Two were given the task to stand guard duty. Others took their place on the boats, ready to look engrossed in deck duties when the alarm sounded.

The rest of the folk were asked to maintain the ruse of still being held captive. However, their mood was distinctly more optimistic than it had been. Still, they sat quietly and rested. Some realized the immediate danger was past, but that a threat still existed. And they were quick to calm their cohorts and urge them to keep quiet. When the remaining raiders returned, nothing must give lie to the illusion of normalcy.

Baskar, Berrod, and Shreve made their way delicately back along the sand path, this time without any sign of sandorms, and crouched low into the tall grasses, careful to first cut down and trample a 'hide' so as not to cut themselves on the sharp grass blades. Kevlar took up position on the beach, just this side of his compatriots' path. From there he could see his compatriots and hear them, but also had ready access to the camped folk on the shore. Meanwhile Skar and Lodan walked far down the beach in an easterly direction in the hopes of bypassing the sand traps of the sandorms. Finally they came upon a section that boasted washed-up stones and boulders in place of sand. The going was hard but at least here they did not have to worry about danger from below as well as in front. They each settled next to boulders that provided some cover from immediate discovery and settled to watch for the returning raiders.

Much of the afternoon passed before they finally caught glimpse of the raiding party. The Gleaners herded an enormous crowd of people before them. Lodan and Skar looked silently at one another but raged inside. So many! It was amazing that the disappearance of such a number had not caused suspicion, but the fact that captives were collected from all over the sward had disguised how many had actually been lost.

The party was some distance away, barely to be heard. Lodan and Skar climbed carefully but swiftly back down the stone facade and jogged back to let their cohorts know that the time of confrontation was fast approaching. Immediately, the disguised former captives were placed in position and shown how to act their parts. One tramped back and forth on one of the two vessels, now and again pausing to look out over the land. Two took their place as immediate guards of the prisoned mass.

All was in readiness.

Berrod, Baskar and Shreve took turns peeking just above the tops of the waving grass to measure the progress of the approaching folk. As before, at least 1/3 of all the guards walked to the fore of the prisoners. The prisoners, gaining sight of where and through what they were expected to tramp, tried to halt their progress. They attempted to tell their guards what danger awaited if they went through the grassy field. But whether their guards did not understand, thought it a ploy, or just didn't believe or care, they forcefully suffered their prisoners to continue on the chosen path.

The prisoners proceeded, but single file and nearly on tiptoe, and once the guards saw how the grasses cut the keelar they rode as they tried to push through the grasses to the sides, they fell back and went single file too, stubbornly still astride, inserting the keelar between every few prisoners so as to keep their captives docile. They needn't have worried. The prospect of walking through the sand traps and bladed grasses had all walking as quietly and sedately as was possible. But the sheer mass of folk was enough to waken the sandorms below. Before long, trickling sands were showing and, too soon, small holes appeared. Again the prisoners tried to point out the danger to their captives but to no avail.

It was just sheer luck that when a sandorm reared up in front of the Gleaners in the lead, the few prisoners that followed were in line with the 'hide' that Baskar, Berrod and Shreve had made. The three quickly pulled the prisoners into the 'hide', pulled them into a crouch and bade them not move an inch. The prisoners were quick to comply.

Meanwhile the Gleaners, not knowing what faced them nor how to fight it, did all the wrong things. They spurred their keelar toward the sandorm which only allowed the worm to find them all the more easily. The sandorm reared high above the Gleaners and then crashed down, flattening all five, including their mounts, to a pulp.

Other Gleaners who had just started along the path, seeing what had happened to their fellows, backed their keelar quickly out of the sand path and watched to see what would happen next. They put down the coincidental disappearance of the prisoners to the fault of the giant worm as well. It never occurred to them to look for any other explanation.

They watched only long enough to see and smell the hissing burns of skins touched by the sandorm mucous as the giant worm began to engulf their lost fellows. Then they encircled the remaining prisoners some distance from the sand flats and sent off scouts left and right to find another path towards the waiting boats. Their prisoners dropped where they stood, relieved to be off the sand path, but too weary to know what to expect next, just glad at the reprieve.

Kevar had heard the roars of the terrified keelar and Gleaners, followed by the sudden quiet. He knew what it meant for he had seen the giant worm rear into the air. He could only hope that his own friends had not been within its path.

Then he heard the Gleaners shouting. He bent low and made his way along the beach until he could see what they were doing. He saw two scouts being directed to the left and right of the sand flats. From his group's own forays, he knew that they would find no ingress to the right, so assumed that they would soon be shifting farther down the strand to the stony beach where Lodan and Skar watched.

He scuttled down to fetch Fron, Lodan and Skar who remained on this side of the sand traps. The four raced down the beach until they again found the stone facade. This was the closest possible approach. It would be here that they would make their stand. There were still fifteen Gleaners alive and now angry.

From previous experience, they assumed that the same follow and sneak attack would be practiced by their fellows who followed on the other side, that is if they had survived the attack of the sandorm. The four could do more than hope and do their best on this side. With that in mind, they hastened to settle into natural cavities among the stones that they might strike from hiding. It was decided that two of them would hide there, a third would conceal himself some distance away from where he could use his bow if necessary, and the fourth would make a final stand aboard the boat closest to where the Gleaners would approach. From there, he would use his bow for as long as he was able. Skar and Lodan were best with the bow; Lodan would stay nearby, while Skar jogged

back to take up his position aboard the vessel. Fron and Kevlar settled into rock cavities. They had only to wait.

The wait was not long. As the Gleaners had seen no sign of other than a bestial attack, they had no fear that their camp or doings had been discovered. Therefore, they proceeded with less care than otherwise. And their arrogance proved their downfall.

Their scout found the rock face, and sloped back to say that he had found a safe way through, albeit not without some inherent difficulties; all knew that traversing such a slope on slippery stone could well end up in a broken leg. The Gleaners were impatient with the way things had gone. They did not like it that their will had been thwarted, no matter that it was caused by a freak of nature. They were so close to their destination that they did not want to waste any more time. They were ready to stow these slaves and set sail for home. This land was not as hospitable as they had first hoped.

So they forced their prisoners once more to their feet and directed them to make all haste to the stony crossing some distance down the strand. That their captives moaned and wept in their weariness and despair only made their captors more impatient with them. The Gleaners drove them relentlessly, shouting at them, and even striking one or two to get them moving.

Sullenly, the crowd moved. But no matter how hard they were pushed, they could go no faster than a slow walk; they had been pushed beyond their endurance. Once they were moving, the Gleaners realized the captives were doing what they could and satisfied themselves with the slow pace. Slow or not, they were moving. The end could now be envisioned.

Once more five Gleaners rode before the mass, another five took up positions to the right and left and the remainder took up the rear. As soon as the last Gleaner moved off, Baskar, Berrod and Shreve urged their charges out of the 'hide' and exited the sand traps. They bade them wait there quietly. The captives were exhausted; they plopped down where they stood and watched dully as the three warriors sped after the departing Gleaners. They were too tired to wonder at the chain of events, glad to not need to walk any further.

It did not take long for the three to catch up. The Gleaners had eyes only for the slaves in front of them. They had no reason to look behind. And the three who followed were very quiet. They took down the first Gleaner quickly. The keel stopped where it was, content to graze.

On to the next. One after another, they were able to take down all five. Then, a few at a time, they took aside a few captives at a time and hid them in small hollows along the way. There the folk lay flat out, too tired to do any more, too tired to even thank their rescuers, just glad they didn't have to walk any more.

As they approached the stone rampart, the Gleaners to the fore looked down to appraise the descent. It would not be possible to descend mounted. With put upon sighs, they dismounted, and called to those Gleaners behind them to do the same, but did wait for reply. Then, reins in hand, they started the climb down, two at a time. All seemed to be going fine. Then, as the fifth stepped up for his turn, he saw those in the lead inexplicably falter. One after another they lost their balance and fell, jouncing from one boulder to another. The fifth unconsciously stepped forward to go to their aid when he too lost his balance. His yelp of surprise was covered by the snorts of the keelar mounts, which were much more nimble among the rocks. When the Gleaners fell, they lost hold of the reins, allowing the keelar to make their own descent in their own way.

Soon all five Gleaners lay in a heap at the bottom of the rampart, some moaning, some making no sound at all, while their mounts stood docilely once

they reached the strand. Lohan was quick to lead them away. Within moments, no sound was to be heard from any of them.

The prisoners who followed had seen none of it. They proceeded as the tired sheep they had become. But unlike the Gleaners, they knew how to manage the descent, tired though they were. And none suffered any hurt on that climb. When they got to the bottom, they awaited the order to march on. But the order did not come. No Gleaners awaited them at the bottom.

The prisoners milled around, shifting just enough to make room for those coming down behind them. And then a shout at the top made them all shift enough for the Gleaners above to make their own way down. Seeing their captives below and in one piece convinced the Gleaners that the descent was not as difficult as it might seem, especially as the Gleaners who had been in front did not call out to warn them otherwise. They didn't even notice the absence of their fellows or their mounts, assuming they had gone on ahead. So they arrogantly started down the rocks in their slippery boots. It wasn't until the third had joined his colleagues that they found that they had misjudged the skill and speed needed to get safely to the bottom.

First one then another stumbled and soon all three unknowingly suffered the same fate as their predecessors. That left two.

Up at the top, the last two Gleaners had no idea what had befallen their comrades. They continued to herd their captives toward the point of descent. One watched as the lumbering slaves made their stodgy way down the hill. Then he sighed and stepped forward to follow them. It was purely by chance that he looked back at his fellow, just in time to see him seemingly fall off his mount. He was so startled that his foot came down at an angle on the stone façade and slid right out from under him. He lost his balance, grabbed for something to break his fall, but there was nothing there, nothing to catch hold of. His head slammed against the stones again and again. When his body came to a halt at the bottom, he was dead.

In a few more moments, Baskar, Berrod and Shreve looked down to see Kavar, Fron and Lodan looking up. Baskar held up six fingers - accounting for six of their enemies downed. Kavar held up one hand once and four fingers, accounting for another nine. That made 15, and with the five lost to the sandorm...

Amazingly, they had downed all twenty raiders! And no one had suffered any hurt. It was over. Now all they need do was to sink the boats. If the boats and their crew inexplicably disappeared, perhaps it would make other Gleaners think twice about raiding in this land. They could only hope.

With the help of the Gleaners' mounths, they dragged the dead raiders to their boats and dropped their bodies into the holds. Then a couple of holes were chopped into the hulls of both vessels; then they waited for the tide to drag the remnants out to sea. Later that night, they saw the last of the masts disappear beneath the waves. It was a relief.

VII

The folk gathered solemnly. They were too worn to cheer. Too worn to do more than thank the Gods that they had survived. They fell to the ground and wept their relief. They wept and hugged one another until they fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. And the seven who freed them stood watch while they rested. They did not weep, but they too thanked the Gods.

* * *

Baskar, Berrod, Shreve, Lodan and Kevar consulted. They were resolved. Henceforth, a watch would be maintained at this most southerly point of the sward. Never again did they want to be taken by surprise. Never again would they allow Gleaners or any other to steal their people nor take without a fight. If those at the Towers did not support their decisions, they would institute a watch of their own.

The near loss of so many, the sheer number the Gleaners had stolen away with no one's knowledge, had hit them hard. Life on the sward was not an easy one, but it was the only life they knew or wanted. It was home. And they were willing to guard it with their very lives.

The 'Way' had taught them to accept this hard life with no complaint. But it had not demanded that they sit back and be herded like sheep to a fate of another's choosing in another land. All their lives they had been taught to guard and guard well. This was merely another part of the sward that needed to be guarded, one they had not been aware of. Now they were. And they meant to live up to that charge. It was their duty and their privilege. They would not fail to honor both.

Kevar realized he could not, in good conscious, desert his comrades in this battle. He remembered the many plains they had passed on their way here to the coast. He thought that along that route would be good land where he and Alee could start their frange. Perhaps others would join them. And from there, it would not be too much to ride the range to the coast to keep eyes wary for any marauders who thought to sneak into the sward from that vantage point.

He spoke long with Baskar and Shreve. And they approved his ideas. They would mention the good land here to the south; perhaps there were others among the multitude of people they had just saved who would be willing to risk a new start. And to Kevar's surprise, Fron also evinced interest in moving here. He must complete his final requisite first, but that time was not far distant. And Kevar found he would welcome the company of the other young man.

Fron had proven himself a true friend and a brave warrior. Kevar would gladly welcome his presence. Now all he must do was consult with Alee. He hoped she would be amenable. It might be a lonely life just at first, but it held such promise!

The large party, which now numbered close to 200, rested for several dagar. The sea provided sustenance. Only when all felt ready, did the long trek back begin. For awhile they would all stick together. But eventually the mass exodus would split into three. Some would head east, others west. And Kevar and his companions would follow their path back to the north with those taken thence.

Along the way, Kevar looked more closely at the land. Among the plains, he espied one vale which held fresh flowing water and grass both lush and plentiful. It was bordered on one side by the crags, but lay open to east and west, lands yet unexplored. All knew now what lay to the south. But that and

the dangerous grounds of the sandorms were at least two dagar's ride distant; the danger could be avoided. And the land could be fenced so that keelar would not be tempted to forage in the direction of the sand flats.

It would be no safer nor dangerous here on their own than in the hamar where they had grown up, but the land would be their own. And should Fron take land adjoining one side or another, they would have a good neighbor, one to share guard duty, as well as the long lonely nights in the cold sedak versar. Perhaps, too, here in the south, the versar of the cold sedak would pass more quickly, maybe even less harshly. Berrod had heard tell that the sedak in the south were longer in the summer than in the winter.

Kevar was excited at the thought. With a longer warm sedak, a frange's keelar could range longer on the grasses outdoors, requiring less over the colder versar, thus requiring less forage to be bundled and stored. He could raise and break more keelar in one long sedak than he ever had before. And so their frange would be more likely to be successful.

Life beckoned. Kevar smiled. The future looked bright. His sistor was well and safe. He had found a vale, one where he could also honor his vow to help guard the coastal port from Gleaners. His life was suddenly overflowing in purpose, with a tangible goal. And he was certain that Alee would be happy here. Their own hamar; their own home. It was the beginning.

INDEX OF TERMINOLOGY

The Way:	philosophy of life and death for one and all in the swards
The word:	accepted practice of 'the way'
circle:	life's extent
cycle:	a year
sedak:	season
vers/versar:	month
ked/kedar:	a week
dag/dagar:	a day
her/herdar:	hour
mand/mandar:	minute
bekel:	local currency
dangers:	sandorms (sand worms) ; dangs (flyers)
keel/keelar:	horse-like animal used to bear riders and baggage
ketel bird:	pheasant type bird
hark beast:	small beast who forages on nuts, foliage
war bird:	large bird, known for attacking keelar and other large prey
frange:	ranch
Bechandar:	the country
mormar:	mother
fordar:	father
sistor	sister
bror:	brother
mormor:	grandmother
forfar:	grandfather
anor:	aunt
unor:	uncle
velven:	medicinal plants
cosy:	communal home
hamal:	village
sward:	rural area
requisite:	manditory guard duty for 3 complete cycles

CHARACTERS

Kevar:	main character, experienced keel rider and breeder
Alee:	his sister, knowledgeable in cosy and plants
Berrod:	tracker
Shreve:	warrior respected for his strength, agility, skill at hand-to-hand combat
Lodan:	master tactician
Adea:	dame of Alee's cosy
Skar:	young warrior newly apprenticed to the weapons' master
Nemak:	former captive sent to inform the Towers of the Gleaner threat
Baskar:	'Lead' of hamar's guard
Gleaners:	raiders