



*Lawrence M. Schoen, like a surprising number of our contributors, is a triple threat: writer, publisher, editor . . . with a secret weapon: he's fluent in Klingon. Maybe that's why this story, a myth from a warrior culture, rings true.*

## (the wrestler and the spear fisher)

Lawrence M. Schoen

On the tiny island of Aniwa, the Kefer waged war, one half against the other. It had begun as a question of succession. Fesht, leader of the Kefer, died unexpectedly, the victim of a ceremonial hunt gone horribly wrong. All responsibilities should have passed to his eldest child, except that the eldest offspring was a pair of twin boys. They were identical in all respects, both tall and strong and beloved by the Kefer. Only their father had known which of them first breathed the air of Aniwa. Both claimed right of succession and the war began.

As required by the spirits of the island, the Kefer clashed only on the nights of the full moon, when the healing herbs were their most potent. For the remainder of each month the people set aside their war, lived together, and endured a silent animosity. Such were the ancient ways as set forth by Senjo the Wise, and no previous war had ever lasted to see a third moon. It is a hard thing, to slay a neighbor one day and then return to live peaceably alongside his grieving family the next.

This war was different. Moon after moon it continued. Senjo, Walawa, Colobi, and all the other spirits dwelling upon Aniwa tried to end the war and reunite the tribe as one people. Their efforts failed. This war was not over round-tusked pigs or false claims of virginity or adultery beyond one's station. It split the Kefer in two, as Fesht's sons fought one another.

Years passed without resolution. In desperation, the island spirits imposed their will upon Fate itself and decreed that the war would not end until only one brother lived.

Even spirits can be right and wrong at the same moment. On the night of their forty-first birthday, the brothers killed each other under the glow of the full moon. Fate was not to be so easily controlled.

The war went on with the spirits powerless to stop it, bound by their own pronouncement. They could only wait for the random cycles of rebirth to refresh the souls of the twins. Years passed. Both were reborn several times, lived, fought, and died, but never both as male and on the same

day of the year. Finally, after seven generations the souls of Fesht's sons were reborn, two years apart but on the same day. They were born to different mothers, one on each side of the divided tribe, and named Deyco and Susk. The spirits watched them and waited, their anticipation building. An end was in sight.

Years passed and the boys grew to be exceptional young men, tall and strong, each with his own talents and skills. Deyco possessed greater ability with the fishing spear than any Kefer ever born, and could feed his half of the tribe by himself if need be. Paradoxically he refused to use a spear in the monthly war.

"I will not kill others of the Kefer by the same means with which I feed them," he said, and that was the end of it. There were plenty other weapons of war.

His once-brother, Susk, quickly became the champion of the young men on his side of the war. In friendly competitions, exhibitions, and wagers he had wrestled and defeated every man on the island of Aniwa, many of them taken two at a time.

None of this mattered to the spirits of the island. They bided their time. The young men passed into adulthood, received the tattoos of warriors, took wives, and were accounted full members of the tribe. The spirits allowed another year to pass, conserving their strength. Then it was time.

Senjo, Keeper of Wisdom, sent a dream to every man, woman, and child of the Kefer. In one evening all saw a vision of Susk and Deyco facing one another within a circle of fire. The full moon shone above, though in the waking world the moon was merely a few days past new. Senjo gazed down at the once-brothers, their souls no wiser despite the intervening lives each had led. The time for teaching was past. He painted the mark of the sea turtle on their foreheads so that they might see and speak with him in the dream.

"The spirits of Aniwa have watched and waited. We hoped you would resolve your differences and restore yourselves to one people. Why have you not done so?" said Senjo from the sky, his face made entirely of clouds.

"His people have attacked us again and again without provocation," said the dream flesh of Deyco, pointing at Susk. "They steal our pigs and dishonor our women by moonlight."

"Only in retaliation," said Susk, almost shouting. "His people raid our homes, falsely marked with the paint of a distant island though their deception fools only themselves."

"At the last moon your people set fire to three of our boats and injured two men," said Deyco.

"Do you deny that the month before that, your people blinded our herb woman while she gathered the healing roots shown to the Kefer by

Walawa himself?" said Susk.

"Only after your people cut the tongue out of our herb woman while she roasted those very same roots."

"Which wouldn't have happened if your people hadn't defiled the grave of our greatest artisan."

"Enough," said Senjo. "The Kefer are one tribe, one people."

"That is a story told to children," said Susk.

"Even if true, it is distant history," said Deyco.

Wise Senjo painted the mark of the sea bird upon the brows of both men, and the previous lives of their souls returned to them.

"It is true," said Deyco, flushed with generations of memories, several different childhoods, long dead children of his own, and most curious of all, an image of Fesht teaching him to cast his first fishing spear so very long ago.

"The Kefer are one people," agreed Susk, reeling under the weight of past lives, previous wives, even husbands, and the faces of hundreds of friends.

"I will unite and lead the people . . ." they both said at once, then stopped, and glared at each other.

"The Kefer can be led by but one man," said Senjo. "They must war among themselves no longer. At the next moon you two will decide this, brother against brother until only one is standing within the fire circle. He I will name as victor. The other will be claimed by the tide, swept south to the reef, and ground across the coral by a storm of my making. When life has at last been stripped from him, his blood will feed the coral and his flesh will nourish the fish."

The brothers stared up at the face of Senjo the Wise; they trembled. At last Susk asked, "Mighty Senjo, when I confront Deyco in the fire circle, what rules govern our conflict?"

"We seek to mend history and restore the Kefer," said Senjo. "There are no rules."

Deyco balked. "Great Senjo, for many years we have fought, and always the spirits imposed rules. Walawa required us to spare the youngest of any group captured in battle. Colobi of Blue Water demanded that no new mothers of the past moon, nor any within their houses, be harmed. Each of the spirits has handed down similar restrictions. How can there be no rules now?"

"This is not war," said Senjo. "When brothers battle and know their conflict will end in death, how can the spirits make rules? Your contest will be between you two alone."

"Now go. Leave this dream and awaken. Prepare for the contest at the next moon. All the Kefer have dreamed with us this night, and in the waking day will find the dream's proof upon your foreheads."

Thunder rolled across the sky as flashes of lightning shattered the darkness. Throughout the tiny island of Aniwa, the Kefer awoke from their pallets and recalled the true dream sent by Senjo. Some cried with joy for the coming end of war. Some on both sides sobbed, fearing the loss of the brave warrior who had led them. Some cried out of gratitude to the spirit folk, and some from frustration that the spirits had waited so long. While the thunder echoed and the lightning fell, all the Kefer wept.

In the morning Susk was called before the council of elders representing his half of the sundered tribe. The eldest spat upon his thumb and tried to smear away the mark of the sea turtle and the mark of the sea bird from the young man's brow. They remained.

"We dreamed true," said the eldest.

"Grandfathers," said Susk, "for the sake of all of us, when I confront Deyco at the full moon, I must win."

The elders agreed and discussed among themselves several strategies. In the end they instructed Susk to wrestle Deyco for leadership of the Kefer.

"You are the greatest wrestler Aniwa has ever known," said one of the elders. "Surely you will defeat Deyco," said another.

Susk flushed with pride at the council's praise. Then he grew serious as a question entered his mind. "But what if he will not wrestle me?"

The elders all laughed. "It does not matter what he chooses," said the eldest. "Let him wrestle you or not, but you will wrestle him. The match will end shortly either way."

On the other side of tiny Aniwa, Deyco sat with his young wife, Tamla, and his father, Obji. Like the elders had with Susk, they tried to rub the marks from Deyco's brow; they failed as well.

"I am afraid," said Deyco. "Susk is unparalleled as a wrestler. My greatest ability is in spearing fish. If he defeats me, then the Kefer will be led by a man who excels in victory but cannot provide for his people."

"Can you not spear him like a fish?" asked Tamla.

Deyco laughed, which was the real intent of his wife's question. He lightly stroked her hair and said, "If Susk were a fish and if the circle of fire were a tide pool, the skill of my eye and the swiftness of my hand would have him pierced through the heart before he could speak. But he is not an unsuspecting fish, and there will be no tide pool."

"The circle I saw in my dream was small," said Obji. "Even if you brought a spear you would have only limited time to use it. Before you can take aim and throw, Susk will charge you. Once he manages to close, he will grapple with you and throw you to the ground. I have seen him wrestle. He is unstoppable."

"What am I to do?" said Deyco.

“Senjo has set this in motion. He or one of the other spirits can help you,” said Obji. “You have several days before the moon is full. I will give ten round-tusked pigs for you to offer the spirits. Perhaps it will be enough.”

Deyco eagerly accepted his father’s pigs and the next day took them to his favorite fishing place.

He cried out, his voice carrying over the open sea. “Colobi, Spirit of the Blue Water, will you advise me?”

Deyco’s reflection in the water blurred, replaced by the image of Colobi who appeared as a beautiful woman with a mosaic of tiny shells where her eyes should have been.

“You have your nerve, Deyco. Why should I, of all the spirits, share my insights with you? Since you were barely a child you have plundered my waters.”

“That is why I have come to you. Who else has more to gain? I ask you to see past our personal differences, Colobi. The spirits of Aniwa are supposed to care about the welfare of the Kefer.”

“And we do,” said Colobi, her image expanding over the water. “That is why you and Susk will meet at the next moon. We spirits have decided that to end the war, one of you must die.”

“But that is too short-sighted,” said Deyco. “It makes a difference who lives. It matters for the Kefer.”

“How so? Either way the Kefer will be united under one leader again.”

“If I live, the Kefer will be led by a man who can provide for them. If Susk wins, they get a leader who is strong enough to defeat any rivals, but little else.”

“But if you win, Deyco, you’ll continue to fill the bellies of the tribe?”

“Exactly,” said Deyco.

“You’ll fill them on my fishes. So again I ask, why come to me?”

Deyco bowed his head and made the gesture of oath-taking, his fingers weaving a basket to catch starlight should he ever be forsworn and banished to the sunless realms. “Colobi of Blue Water, if you aid me, I vow that from this day till the day I die, I will ever more cast my fishing spear with my other hand, and should I miss, not cast again at the same fish.”

“It is not enough. You are almost as good with the other hand.”

Deyco sighed and added, “Further, I will cast my spear only after closing my eyes.”

“A powerful oath,” said Colobi. “It would surely cause you to miss half the fish you would normally catch.”

“Then accept my oath and aid me,” said Deyco.

“I don’t think so.”

“What? Why not? You said yourself, my oath spares half your fish.”

Colobi smiled showing her teeth, and her teeth were those of a shark.

“That is true, but your death saves them all. No, I reject your oath. But I will not take your offering and return nothing. I will give you a gift, Deyco, a preview of the death that awaits you.”

Instantly, Deyco found himself submerged. The undertow tugged like nothing he had experienced and in seconds it had pulled him from the safe and gentle harbor and dragged him dangerously close to the deadly coral reefs that guarded Aniwa’s southern edge. His head broke the surface, and amid great gasps of air he started swimming, eager to put more distance between himself and the coral. The sky had somehow turned dark. A storm broke. Winds that belonged to another season churned the waters and hurled Deyco back toward the reef.

He struck it at an awkward angle, snapping his spine in two places and dying instantly. Then the fury of the storm pulled his body under and pinned him against the countless razors of the coral, scraping him along the length of the reef. Agony flooded his awareness, pain so intense it blotted out everything else and even slowed the passage of time, which only added to the torment. He died a dozen more times before surfacing again, desperately gulping air despite being little more than shredded flesh and shattered bone, despite being dead many times over. Then the storm took hold of him, threw him at the reef, and it all began once more.

Deyco collapsed to his knees, safe upon the shore again. He was soaked with sea water but not shredded or broken or dead. The reflection he saw in the water was his own and whole. Colobi had gone. The ten pigs were gone as well.

Word of Deyco’s offering spread across Aniwa. Susk heard and grew worried. His confidence in his own ability did not waver, but ten round-tusked pigs could surely tempt one or more spirits to meddle in the contest, and this concerned him. All his wrestling skill would not help him if Walawa or Fentalo or some other spirit caused the sand to slip beneath his feet.

At his urging, the council of elders brought together twenty round-tusked pigs, though they required two days to do so. Susk took the pigs to the highest point on Aniwa and offered them to Walawa. The spirit appeared as a column of rich soil.

“Why do you call me?”

“Help me, Walawa, Robust One.”

“Why should I do such a thing?” asked the spirit. “Your course is clear to you. You need only best Deyco in the circle of fire.”

“I can do that,” said Susk. “I am more than a match for any man.”

“Then why do you waste my time?”

“Because I am only a man. What if Deyco has enlisted the aid of another spirit? It is known he has made offerings. I cannot stand against such

powers as your kind possess. Nor would it be a fair contest between us.”

“What you say is true,” admitted Walawa. “Would you have me grant you some special gift?”

“No. I want nothing for me but my own skill. But if Deyco does receive help, I ask that you counter it.”

The column of dirt collapsed to the ground and a giant yam grew from it. The yam opened its many eyes and regarded Susk.

“I have reviewed my sister spirit’s realm,” said the yam that was robust Walawa. “An offering has indeed been made. I find that Colobi of Blue Water has come into the possession of ten excellent pigs. I cannot tell what boon has been granted, but you are right. The contest is to be between you and Deyco. Colobi has altered that balance. I will visit Deyco in his dreams this evening and ensure he takes no advantage from Colobi or any other spirit.”

The yam withered and returned to the earth. The twenty pigs were gone as well. Susk told the council of elders all that had occurred. Then he went home, ate his dinner, and went to sleep.

That night, Walawa snuck up behind Deyco in his dreams, taking care not to be seen. The Robust One could not simply render himself invisible; Deyco still bore the mark of the sea turtle. Instead, he took the form of Deyco’s shadow and crept close. He examined Deyco from head to toe, but could find no sign of the boon that Colobi had surely given. All he found was the Coral Death in Deyco’s memory.

“Colobi is shrewd,” said Walawa too softly for the sound to leave his shadow. “No doubt she showed you the loser’s fate to cover any sign of what else she did. But I am shrewder still, and I will foil her plan with her own meddling.”

Then Walawa, heartiest of the spirits of Aniwa, created a new mark, the mark of the Coral Death, and he placed it upon Deyco’s brow.

Deyco awoke, screaming and flailing. He flung about so violently that he struck his wife, bloodied her nose, and knocked her from the pallet they shared.

“Deyco, what is wrong?” she asked.

Deyco hugged himself and shuddered, his body trembling. “A nightmare,” he said. “I dreamed the Coral Death that Colobi showed me two days ago. It was so . . . real.”

“It was only a dream, my husband. The Coral Death is not your fate. Susk may be strong, but you are clever and swift. You will find a way to defeat him at the next moon.”

Deyco nodded. “I hope you are right. Perhaps I will think of something while I fish today.” He drew on his clothing, took up his favorite fishing



spear, and kissed his wife. Then he went out into the predawn morning to find a solution in the simple pleasure of what he did best.

He spent the morning uneventfully, catching all the fish he aimed at, but gaining no insight into his coming contest with Susk. As the sun rose high, he found himself a shady spot beneath a tree, laid down his spear, and took a nap. Not long after he closed his eyes, Deyco found himself again caught up in a storm and being torn apart against the coral reef. He screamed in agony and awoke, safely back under his napping tree.

He leapt to his feet, snatched up his spear, and ran to his father's home, calling, "Objj! Objj!"

Deyco found his father digging for yams in the garden. He had described the Coral Death to Objj days earlier. Now he related the day's two nightmares. His father listened calmly and then led him to the home of the mute herb woman.

"You are just nervous, as any man in your place would be," said Objj, though he gazed with silent suspicion at the new mark on his son's brow. "No man wishes to be a force of destiny or a tool of the spirits."

The herb woman gave Deyco a powder to ease his sleep and dreams. Objj escorted his son home and sat with him.

"Worrying will do you no good, my son. It is all but out of your hands. Put it from your mind."

They spent the rest of the day playing games of pebbles and shells, a thing they had not done since Deyco's boyhood. It put him at ease and gradually the horror of the Coral Death left his mind.

Later, after Objj went home, Deyco and Tamla retired to their pallet and fell asleep in each others' arms. No sooner had Deyco slipped into deep slumber than the nightmare returned. He died, and died again and again, and awoke screaming as before.

Tamla soothed him and prepared the sleep powder they had forgotten. Pale and shaking, Deyco swallowed the medicine and lay back down. The powder worked its magic; his mind and body relaxed and soon Deyco slipped back into sleep. Tamla sat up, watching him by the dim light of the nearly quarter moon shining through the high window.

Deyco's breathing deepened. His chest rose and fell rhythmically. He looked peaceful and at rest. In an instant that changed. Every muscle tensed and Deyco's eyes opened wide as he screamed, a hideous cry of the repeatedly dead.

There was no end to it. The nightmare, the experience of the Coral Death, returned every time he fell asleep. The memory, the vivid detail and sensation, only faded while he remained awake.

Deyco spent the day sitting in his house, weary and resting, but not

daring to sleep. He stayed awake that night, propping up his elbow and resting his head upon his palm so he would jerk awake if he began to doze. The next day was more of the same. Deyco's color worsened. He could not eat and drank only a few drops of water. Obji and Tamla attended him constantly, taking turns sitting with him and keeping him awake. On the third night Tamla accidentally nodded off; Deyco soon followed and woke both of them with his screams as the coral cut him apart. Panting, his heart pounding, Deyco curled into a ball in the corner of his house. He rocked back and forth, not daring to shut his eyes.

Neither Obji nor Tamla told the rest of the Kefer of Deyco's condition, but neighbors heard the agonized cries night after night, and even at times during the day. Rumors blanketed Aniwa as the Kefer wondered why Deyco no longer ventured forth. All recalled the dream Senjo had sent and looked to the coming moon for answers. Even Susk began to fear again, wondering if perhaps Walawa had taken his pigs, but only to play a trick on him. He could do nothing except wait, like everyone else. Wait, and practice his wrestling holds.

The days passed and Deyco grew weaker. His eyes yellowed and sank in their sockets, the dark bands beneath them became sinister. His hair lay flat and matted and lifeless. The flesh hung from his bones, jaundiced and running with sores. His voice was less than a whisper, and when he did lapse into sleep, which happened more and more often, he jerked back to wakefulness with a faint whimper.

By the day of the full moon he had gone without sleep for nine days. He was no longer truly awake, but existed in a listless waking trance, only vaguely aware of his surroundings. Now Deyco had merely to close his eyes to summon the full force of the Coral Death upon himself. He had long since lost count of how many times he had died.

"This is wrong!" Tamla said as she again tried and failed to get Deyco to drink some broth. "This is not the contest Senjo showed us in the dream. How can Deyco fight in this state?"

"I have spoken to others among our side of the tribe," said Obji. "I have told them very little, only that Deyco is beset by some spirit and is not at his best."

"Not at his best? Look at my husband. He has become an image of death like the nightmare that keeps him from sleep."

"Be calm. I could not tell the others the full truth; they would panic. Instead, I have convinced them to give me many of their pigs."

"Their pigs?"

"They are gathering them now, two thousand of them. I will offer them to Senjo myself and demand justice."

“Do not make demands,” said a new voice from beyond the house’s threshold. “Speak to me instead. I will be more inclined to listen.”

“Who is there?” said Obji, pulling back the curtain but seeing no one outside.

“I came to see who was preparing to offer so many pigs. Invite me in, and I can spare you the offering.”

“Senjo,” said Tamla, “if you are that spirit, enter and be welcome in mine and my husband’s house.”

A breeze blew aside the outer curtain and swirled into the house, carrying a spiral of dry grass. The grass transformed into the figure of a small boy, his skin tinted a faint green, the shape Senjo was known to take when he came calling.

“I am the spirit you name Senjo,” said the boy. “What justice do you seek?”

“You and the other spirits declared a contest between my son and Susk,” said Obji.

Senjo nodded. “To end your war, for the good of all the Kefer. A fair contest, one man against the other. Leadership of the Kefer for the victor, and death for the loser.”

“How can it be a fair contest if the men are so mismatched?” asked Tamla.

“Each has his talents,” said Senjo. “Susk is stronger, but Deyco is clever and swift. The outcome is in doubt.”

“Look at my son, Wise Senjo. Is your contest still in doubt? How can you claim it to be fair?”

Tamla went to her husband’s side. She easily lifted him to his feet. Deyco turned dim eyes upon the figure of the boy. His parched and cracked lips parted. The words rushed out too soft for mortal ears, but the spirit heard them.

“Senjo the Wise, all my life I have trusted you. In the memory you gave me of all my lives it has always been so. You tell me that for the good of the Kefer I must fight the brother of my past, and that I might die. I understand and accept this. But tell me, why did I need to die a hundred times and more in the past handful of days?”

Senjo stared at Deyco’s gaunt figure and then gazed deeper into the man’s mind. He gasped, and reached up to touch the marks upon Deyco’s brow.

“You have been wronged, Deyco. This was never to have been. No spirit was to have interfered.”

“Then you will call off the contest,” said Tamla, “and remove this cursed mark from my husband.”

Senjo shook his head. “I can do neither. Once set in motion these things cannot be stopped. Deyco must meet Susk tonight in the circle of fire.”

“But he has no chance. He can barely stand. Susk will kill him without effort.”

"Perhaps not." Senjo took hold of Deyco's arm and bent it back cruelly. Deyco winced in pain, coming more awake than he had been in days.

"Hear me, Deyco. Close your eyes. The pain of the living world means nothing to a dead man."

Grimacing, Deyco allowed his eyes to close. Immediately he returned to the water and being shredded on the coral. It was agonizing, but a familiar agony for all that. He had endured it so often he was numb to it. As he died again, he was dimly aware of Senjo's grip upon his arm, like a fragment of knowledge rather than sensation. He opened his eyes, banishing the nightmare and awakening to the pain in his arm. He grunted softly and the spirit released him.

"I understand. Thank you," whispered Deyco. He turned to Tamla and beckoned her close so she could hear him. "Broth," he said. "Then you must help me bathe and dress so that I might face Susk when the moon rises."

Obji confronted Senjo once more. "That is all you will do?"

"It is enough. There is balance again. It is up to him how he uses it."

The spirit boy smiled faintly and blew apart, leaving behind only a few bits of dry grass.

Obji and Tamla spent the rest of the day preparing Deyco. He offered no resistance as they bathed him, applied salves to his wounds, fed him, and dressed him. Twice he let his eyelids close for an instant, each time jerking them open, having died again and again.

After sundown and shortly before moonrise, Deyco took his favorite and second favorite fishing spears, one in either hand like a pair of canes. With their help, and with Tamla and Objj supporting him, he struggled down to the beach. Clouds filled the sky. All of the Kefer had gathered. Many had brought torches, which they had thrust into the sand to form a circular clearing.

"The circle of fire," said Tamla, and Deyco barely nodded. His eyes were little more than slits, but they found Susk.

"You look like death itself," said Susk, laughing a bit too hard. "I expected a challenge. I remember you from when we were brothers, seven generations ago. You weren't much fun then; you don't look to be very entertaining now. Out of kindness for your family I will make this as quick as I can."

Deyco said nothing. He shrugged off Tamla and Objj. Leaning heavily upon his spears for support, he pushed his way into the clearing and waited for Susk to join him. The clouds parted, revealing the full moon. The contest had begun.

Susk circled warily, but it was all Deyco could do to cling to his spears and remain standing. Weariness weighed upon him, all the greater because he knew he could have no rest. Susk feinted one way and then darted the

other, an elegant and impressive move, wasted on Deyco. Susk closed, swept the fishing spears from Deyco's grasp and tumbled him to the ground. Deyco landed badly, one leg bent awkwardly. A crack sounded, like the snapping of driftwood, and Susk jumped back, surprised.

Deyco grimaced in pain, his eyes squeezing shut for an instant. An instant was all the Coral Death needed. He was again in the ocean being dragged over the coral by the storm. He knew his leg had been broken, knew it with the same certainty with which he knew his wife's name, but he couldn't feel it. He was too busy being dead. The agony of dying and dying yet again blocked it out.

Deyco flailed about in the sand, reaching blindly for one of his spears. His fingers curled around a shaft even as the waves smashed him against the coral. He drew it nearer and then with both hands used it to pull himself upright again. He kept his eyes closed and managed to find his voice over the roaring of the storm.

"How will you provide for the Kefer?" he asked Susk. "Will wrestling matches on the beach keep them fed? Will you simply defeat anyone who opposes you?" Deyco stood upon one foot, his damaged leg dangling uselessly.

Susk's eyes widened but he advanced again. He grappled Deyco about the chest and brought him down hard against the sand. Deyco's spear fell away.

"I will lead the Kefer because I am the stronger of us," said Susk.

"There are many kinds of strength," replied Deyco. His eyes were still shut. Distantly he felt the sand beneath his back and Susk's weight upon his chest. More immediately the coral pierced and tore him.

"I will show you strength," said Susk. He stood, lifting Deyco in his arms like a child's toy. "This is strength," he said and in one swift movement he dropped to one knee, snapping Deyco's spine across the bar of his muscled thigh.

"You are strong enough to break me, but are you strong enough to kill me?" asked Deyco, refusing to open his eyes. All feeling in his legs had fled. Once more his fingers searched the sand and found the other spear. He gripped it tightly.

Susk roared and lifted Deyco again, throwing him to the perimeter of the circle where he smashed into one of the torches before falling forward. Pitch stuck to one shoulder and Deyco began to burn. He thrust his spear firmly into the sand with what strength he could muster and levered himself upward, one hand reaching back, gripping the blazing head of the torch for balance. His flesh sizzled as the flames climbed up his arm, spread across his body and down his other arm until even his spear was afire.

"How will you lead the Kefer?" asked Deyco, his voice softer but still audible. "Will you put their needs above your own? Will you invoke the spirits to aid them before yourself?"

People were shrieking all around the circle. Many turned away, unable to watch. The stench of burning hair and flesh rose into the sky, accompanied by the calm tone of Deyco's words.

"Why won't you die?" Susk screamed at Deyco. "Why won't you die?"

"I've died too many times." The storm thundered again, though only Deyco heard it. The waves crashed against the reef and shredded him once more. "I'm tired of dying."

The flames spread over Deyco's body, burning him to the bone. The stench was terrible and yet he stood. The fire ate away his face, his eyelids still tightly shut, and none of it reached him; he was far away in the water and the storm. Time passed. Susk could only stare as his opponent burned but refused to fall, refused to die. Deyco remained silent. There were sounds of sobbing from some of the gathered Kefer, but no words were spoken.

Eventually fire consumed even Deyco's bones. He fell to the sand as the charred pieces collapsed under their own weight. His spear crumbled into ash. Pale, Susk turned and addressed the people around the circle.

"You all shared the dream," he said. "Only one man shall remain standing, and he shall be the victor."

"I still stand," said a voice behind him. Susk whirled.

Deyco stood amid the pile of smoldering ashes. He stood upon two good legs. He looked healthy and strong though his hand seemed empty without a fishing spear.

"You died!" said Susk.

Deyco shook his head. "Many times." He stared into Susk's eyes. "Remember that in the time ahead."

Clouds moved back across the sky, blocking the moon. They formed a billowy face above the Kefer on the beach. Senjo spoke to them.

"Susk has prevailed. He leads the Kefer now. The war is ended."

"No!" cried Obji. "My son still stands. The contest is not yet won."

"Only one man stands within the fire circle," said Senjo. "The man that was your son lies at the feet of the spirit he has become."

"Spirit?" said Tamla, staring at her husband.

"When the body dies and the mind refuses to feel it, what is left but spirit?" said Senjo. "I name you Deyco of the Coral, newest of the spirits of Aniwa, protectors of the Kefer."

"May I keep this then?" said Susk. He had retrieved Deyco's first and favorite spear from the sand. "Surely a spirit has no need of it."

"What need have you?" asked Deyco.

Susk met Deyco's gaze. The spirit's eyes had changed and were now the pale pink of the coral reef. "I should learn to fish."