

'Ware the Sleeper

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First published 1998 in *Battle Magic* edited by Martin H. Greenberg and Larry Segriff, DAW Books. I present this story here for your reading pleasure. While I hope you enjoy "'Ware the Sleeper," I ask you to please respect that I in no way relinquish my rights to this story, characters or worlds.

This was my very first piece of fantasy writing. Having been asked for something about battle magic, after panicking for a while, I gave it some thought. I'd played enough D&D to be aware of combat magic, spell casting, and other such tricks of the trade. I'd certainly never dabbled into such a story before. I needed ... I wasn't sure what I needed. Somewhere to start. It turned out to be bone on sand. We collect sand from our travels in little watchglasses. Sand is as varied as the material from which it came, and sand beaches are where oceans toss mysteries, leaving them to be discovered by passersby or missed, to be swept away again. (I love oceans and beaches and mysteries.) The story grew from here, the writing so smooth and effortless I worried desperately it was drivel and sent it to my non-fiction editor, who I knew read fantasy. He gave it the green light and, in thanks, I changed the name of my captain to his, Bocknek. (The original name had been Liethe, for no particular reason.)

Is it about battle magic? Or is it about the mysteries below, sometimes tossed up in view, sometimes taken back again? I know one thing. It started me writing such stories. - Julie

There were bones where the children played: small, smooth pieces perfect for game markers on the black sand, and long shards Skalda remembered using for fence posts around imaginary horses. The tides washed them here, along with links from shattered chainmail and futile bits of armor.

She regarded them now as portents. *May my enemies' bones keep you company,* she wished them.

"You're certain about this, Dir Agnon," this from Rathe, the priest-warrior from the Hinter Islands. His fleet lay in safety in the cove whose calm waters defined the near edge of the children's playground. *Safety won too late,* Skalda thought sadly, looking out over the sun-sparkled water at those handful of ships, masts split by spells of lightening, crews decimated by sendings of thirst and wasting disease.

They'd come here to huddle behind the great, untested fleet of the Circle Cove, to be nurse-maided and told it wasn't their fault, that nothing anyone could do would succeed against the Enemy. *Which might well be true.*

"Certain? When are any of us certain these days, Dir Rathe?" Agnon offered in his soft, careful voice. As priest-advisor to the secular rulers of the Cove and the outlying island clusters, he was magnificently non-committal at any given time. A virtue in times of slow, peaceful prosperity; a dangerous paralysis in this time of utter peril. Skalda

stared out to the narrow mist-filled opening that led to the open ocean until her eyes ached from the water's glare.

"Dir Skalda sounded quite sure of this course in our Council. And why else are we here today, with them?" Rathe pointed a bone-thin finger at the brightly clad group near their feet. The ten children, daughters and sons collected from each of the Noble Houses, were equally oblivious to the presence of adults or to portents of doom, half-arguing and half-laughing in dispute of a shell. Their shrill voices rose into the still morning air like the piping of shorebirds.

"I am sure we have no other options left to us, comrades," Skalda answered. "Let us choose and speedily. No amount of magic will delay the tides for your debates. We've little margin as it is to allow the *Mariner's Pride* safe passage over Blood Reef."

She looked back at the children playing amid the bones of their elders' hopeless war and prepared to make her own selection. When Rathe would have simply picked the two nearest to be done with it, Skalda touched the heavy fabric of his sleeve and shook her head. His eyes were as haunted as she knew hers would appear.

The parchments, fragile with age and imperfectly translated, were clear on this point of the Summoning Spell at least. The payment for their salvation would be the blood of six innocents. That the blood should be royal and willing, not stolen from the arms of common folk, had been Skalda's decision.

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Shafts of sunlight disappeared, reappeared; they filled at times with motes of life, golden suspended dust, then at others reflected silver as the great flocks swam through their columns, dancing with the light.

I was content thus, to gaze upward through the lens of my eye into the living magic of my world, my place, and see only that which belonged here. I felt the surge of waves over the crust of my side, reading there the approach of storms, the tug of moon and sun -- events distant yet intimate. I slept, as some life reckoned this state of consciousness. It was as true a description as any; since I needed nothing and need do nothing.

If this is sleep, I sometimes wondered, struck by some particular beauty above me or caught by starlight through a rare clarity of ocean, *perhaps I dream the world*.

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Fortress and fantasy, Skalda thought as she took one lingering, hungry look at her home before climbing the ramp onto the *Mariner's Pride* later that afternoon. The Circle Cove was a perfect shaping of black hard stone, the inward-facing surface of its mountainous sides etched by generations of artists into towers of breathtaking loveliness, decked with flower-laden balconies and terraces rich with green life; the outward sides carved by the ocean herself into equally fantastic shapes. The water within was the deepest, clearest blue, framed by beaches of soft black sand. Despite the grim reality of their Enemy's spread into almost all the territory once ruled from this place, the citizens continued their

peacetime ways: floating scented candles on the calm waters each night and tossing flower petals from their balconies to grace the decks of the mighty ships each morning.

The *Mariner's Pride* had left her crew behind, a sullen group of Leeward Islanders distrustful of dry land and the mysterious ways of priests. Her Captain was the only non-priest to remain. Skalda noted without surprise how he stayed on deck, refusing to even step below into his cabin where the children, soothed by spells of sleep and forgetfulness, rested on the softest of mattresses.

For this voyage, priests crewed the *Pride*: novices and warrior, in rank from sedir to dir, selected from scanty enough ranks not for their knowledge of the sea -- they all, even the sleeping children, had that -- but for the accuracy of their magic. The battle magic they would attempt tomorrow was twofold, containing both summoning and aiming. There could be no margin for error, no chance to hesitate, fear failure, and stop. Skalda had not needed the ancient parchments' warnings or the worries of her fellow dir-priests to make that plain.

Besides, what good would a second try be? The massive fleet of the Enemy was moving inexorably closer. Why should it stop now, when nothing they had sent against it had made the slightest difference?

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"We'll just make the tide, Dir Skalda, Dir Rathe," said the Captain, Bocknek was his name, as he joined them at the rail. Overhead, the sails snapped as the breeze began, spelled by the sedir-priests below whose talents were sufficient for this (steady wind being the most useful magic to their sea-faring kind and thus the first essential learning). The tiny wind caught at the canvas edges then began to swell the sheets themselves.

Now that his ship was alive on the sea, her deck moving lightly under their feet, the man had shed his meek and haggard look, assuming a swagger to his walk Skalda believed quite unconscious and, from his reputation, deserved. "Wouldn't have wanted to wait any longer. This girl's not one to like her belly scraped on rock, no sir."

Rathe's nostrils flared and he looked down at the rotund little seaman as though trying to fathom why he, dir-priest and warrior, was being chatted with like some fisherfolk on his way to the rich hunting of the Banks offshore. Skalda leaned back against the railing, careless of her fine robes on the damp, cold wood, and almost smiled. Instead, she drew in a deep breath through her nostrils, relishing the salt and fish tang to the air, the tar-stink of fresh caulking. "We appreciate your holding at the dock for us, Captain," she said graciously. "And be sure we also value your fine ship."

Captain Bocknek's skin darkened even further under the bristles of his sparse beard. "Course, 'course," he muttered. "Dir Skalda. I wasn't implying other, you know."

"Have you taken her after baskers in the southern sea, Captain?" she asked absently, looking to the passageway ahead, its gap wide enough to pass three of the Circle Cove fleet's largest galleys abreast. The opening was protected by twin towers manned ceaselessly by priest-warriors, dir and so capable of calling rock falls on intruders: a last resort, since catapults and burning oil were always aimed and ready.

Despite the war with the Enemy, despite bones drifting in on tides she suspected the Enemy sent to appall them with its message that not even the blessed Depths were safe, none had ever assailed this port. *Some here*, thought Skalda, *slept well at nights*. She was not one of them.

As always, preparing to leave the Circle Cove and its protection, she felt both exhilaration and fear. On this journey, she suspected her exhilaration was simply that of freedom from the endless debates, the weeks of searching musty records for any hint of a weapon; her fear had a more rational source. Those protecting cliffs curled outward just enough to hide an ambush, should the Enemy's sea-skills be able to hold ships within the crashing surf beyond. For all their sakes, this ship must not be stopped.

The Captain's reply drew her back to the moment. "Baskers for sure, Dir Skalda, but the southern seas? Not damn likely, excuse me, even if the fish were willing to climb in the holds. The Enemy was scouting those parts long before their bows dipped into the Hinter Island Sound. Dir Rathe knows that."

"Dir Rathe knows it is time to go below and continue our preparations," that worthy snapped, walking away with one hand reluctantly clamped on the wet railing to counter the increasing plunging of the deck as the *Pride* entered the channel and rose cheerfully to meet the incoming swells.

"Dir Rathe," Skalda informed the offended Captain in a low voice, "also knows this deck will surely be splashed as we pass between the Cove's arms."

Captain Bocknek's eyes met and held hers with unexpected directness. She realized Rathe's rudeness hadn't bothered him after all. He reached out as if to touch her arm. "Dir Skalda. I confess I'm not -- comfortable --," words seemed to fail him, and his face paled suddenly, as if seeing a whirlpool ahead into which he was about to plunge. "Forgive my impertinence, Dir Skalda. But I worry about the children. The hazards of this journey. They looked so young when you brought them on board. And they sleep."

Skalda found she had no comfort to offer him. His eyes went dull as he looked into hers and understood. "Like that, is it," Bocknek said in a voice oddly free of bitterness. "As well they sleep, then. Would we all could."

**

Men rained down on me one day. I watched them come, limbs given grace by the ocean, armor catching sun glints as it dragged the bodies to me. The great flocks, startled apart by the disruption, disappeared beyond my crust. Moments later, they coyly returned to start their feast. Blood clouded the water beyond my eye, but it was a temporary blindness. I'd seen all this before.

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They practiced below decks, rehearsing ritual none understood and, truth be told, none trusted. Skalda's urgings from the beginning had been to follow the Summoning Spell without modification, including use of the archaic language forms used in the parchments. Agnon, their best linguist, had coached them all in how to pronounce the

words, since subtle changes had occurred since this Spell was last cast. If it ever had been. Rathe expressed all their doubts.

“The Summoning. It promises to bring the destruction of our foes, to guarantee utter and uncontested victory. Explain to me then, if it worked before, how could our Enemy have rebuilt its fleets?” he objected one last time as they rested. Captain Bocknek had sent word down. They would reach the Blood Reef at sunset, coinciding with the highest tide of the season in this place: safety for his ship’s keel but most importantly, the appointed hour for the Spell.

“There may have been another Enemy,” Agnon answered, always the reasonable one. “It was certainly long ago.”

Skalda sipped from the mug of mulled wine, thanking the sedir-priest who brought it warm to her hands. It was cold below deck, cold and redolent of the *Pride’s* usual cargo. But the fisher had been the best choice available: speed and camouflage in one, her low profile on the water an aid to what they must do.

So there was no luxury in the *Pride*, beyond that given the sleeping children, and no food for any of them until the deed was done. She noticed the others drank cautiously as well, valuing the heat in their empty bellies but keeping their thoughts cool and directed. “If you have another plan for our salvation, Dir Rathe,” she snapped, losing her patience, “we’d all be grateful. After all, you are the only one of us here to contest the Enemy’s forces directly in battle. Perhaps you believe the Circle’s Fleet can defeat them at sea?”

There were six of them around the crude table, all dir-priests: of the six, she, Rathe, and Agnon would bear the action of the Spell, casting it over the Blood Reef. There was a second for each of them, a source of strength if any faltered, replacement if any were killed. For herself, Dir Clefta, a grim, silent man from the Hinter Isles. His community had been the first to abandon their homes to the Enemy’s newest offensive; he and three sedir priests all that survived to protect their few ships as they fled to the Circle Cove. Dir Segon would stand at Rathe’s back; she, though young, was already believed heir apparent to Skalda’s own place in the council. *It was dangerous to risk her here*, Skalda thought with regret, but this throw of the dice risked far more than the life of her promising apprentice. Agnon would rely on the quiet good sense of his own brother, Dir Agnar -- theirs being one of very few family pairings within the priesthood. It added a strength to their abilities beyond either alone.

Strength? Experience? We have those, Skalda said to herself, gazing at each in turn, collecting a somber reply of determined, if anxious looks. *Let’s hope we also have the blessing of the Depths and Her Quiet God on this ancient magic as well.*

There had been soul-searching and argument far beyond Rathe’s reasonable doubts. While magic had been the tool of priests since records were first kept, that tool had evolved with their society’s growth and change. Today’s magic was precise, well-schooled, applied by specialists. The older magic had been, as far as their researches could discover, larger in scope and far bloodier in cost.

Skalda had deliberately sought the fabled old magic, once reports were confirmed that the Enemy -- no, she would not keep them faceless -- the P'okukii were about to crush the Island states once and for all.

The P'okukii had been content to rule the vast interior of the Western continent, trading for generations with the islandfolk for the riches of the sea. They had little in common, relying on a halting trade tongue and neither side interest in learning more about the other. The first of many mistakes, Skalda and many other Islanders realized too late. For while they knew the P'okukii feared invasion from some mysterious eastward land -- a fear the more widely traveled islanders dismissed as superstition -- they had not appreciated the depth of that fear. After all, who would take seriously a people who refused to step from the land.

Then, fifty years ago, a new soothsayer had appeared in the desert, warning the P'okukii that the doom from the east was coming. The tiny island states between, with their fierce independence and strange ways, must be conquered and fortified to defend the continent itself.

The inconceivable resources of the P'okukii were turned to the ocean they feared. Ports were closed; shipbuilding went on at a feverish pace. The amused Islanders simply took their trade elsewhere, among themselves, blind to what was coming.

For during Skalda's childhood, the P'okukii flooded seaward, melded into a vast fleet consisting of more and larger ships than all of the islands together possessed. All that saved them was the caution of an enemy new to the sea. The Enemy was fearful, their sorcerers grappling with the unpredictability of land spells over water, their commanders inexperienced. The Circle Isles defended themselves in surprise, expecting offers of reconciliation, resummptions of trade.

What they received was unending war. At first, it was an even conflict, the sea-knowledge of the islanders and their priests more than a match despite the superior numbers of their foe. Then, slowly, island after island was conquered, their inhabitants forced to flee or die. The Enemy, while never embracing the ocean, learned her ways. Their sorcerers became deadly, gaining spells stripped from the minds of dir priests captured before they could kill themselves. Somehow the battle magic of the islanders, blessed by the Depths and her Quiet God, had proved even more effective in the hands of pagans.

There were, Skalda sighed, *never guarantees on what offended deity.*

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“Ware Ships!” the cries from the crow's nest pulled them all on deck, only those responsible for the wind filling the sails ignoring the distraction. Skalda whispered a seeing spell, hearing muttered echoes from either side and behind as the multitude of priests did the same. The Captain steadied his telescope, not needing magic to see what was swarming over the horizon.

Rathe and other survivors hadn't exaggerated, Skalda thought with regret as her vision focussed on the wavy line of painted prows and tossing masts. It wasn't a fleet -- it

was as if an entire nation had armed and loaded itself on to the sea. *Why do they think us such a threat?* she wondered again. The very old tales held rumors of a decisive battle centuries ago, one in which the island states gained their freedom from the mainland. But battles, successful or otherwise, seemed unlikely to spawn such hate and fear as this. *Unless, she thought uneasily, it was how that battle was won.*

"Why are they here, Dir Skalda?" It was the Captain pulling at her elbow urgently. "There is nothing in this direction worth attacking. Just the deserted Outer Islands and then the open ocean."

Segnon's clear, calm voice had the slightest shiver to it as she drew the conclusion they all feared. "The Blood Reef. They have learned about the Summoning Spell. They seek to stop us."

"Or to use it themselves," Skalda said flatly. "Or use it themselves." She deliberately turned her back on that threat and raised her voice so it soared over the murmurs and speculations filling the deck. "Raise all the sail the *Pride* carries. Dir-priests. Spells of protection, especially for the hull and the sedir-priests. We must not be hindered. We will not be stopped. For the Cove!"

"For the Cove!" they chanted back, eyes afire with purpose, gnarled hands rising in the air beside smooth young fists to accept her challenge.

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The *Pride* drove her prow deep into the waves as speed became their best weapon. Skalda stayed well away from the railing now, knowing she had no right to risk herself so close to her duty. Wind whipped her hair free of its knot, lashing her cheeks.

"Ware! The Blood Reef! 'Ware below!" came the cry heartbeats later. Priests scrambled to drop the *Pride's* sails. The Enemy fleet had already halved the distance between them; now its ships were close enough for shouts to carry, close enough for protection spells to be tested by the magic of sorcerers. So far, only those in the crow's nest had been harmed, caught in the boundary between forces, screaming as they were blinded. Another victory for their Enemy.

The *Pride* settled into position above the Blood Reef. There was a sudden hush, as all realized they would soon to be within the range of more mundane weaponry, against which they had no defense.

"Wake the children," Skalda said calmly.

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A finger of darkness scratched the crystalline sky above me, a moving finger casting its shadow and more into my sight. Six forms detached from it, drifting down to me in synchrony and sacrifice. In their wake, I could hear the old words.

The Summoning.

The forms, small and devoid of armor, fell closer. The flocks converged, undeterred by blessing or purpose. Blood stained my vision and didn't diffuse into the

ocean as it should. Instead, it flowed down to me, coated me, entered my mouth tasting of innocence shed for rage's sake.

At last!

If I had slept, this was the moment I awoke.

**

"It's working!" shouted a voice, panic-fringed rather than triumphant. *Something was happening*, Skalda amended to herself, bracing as the deck of the *Pride* shifted under an ocean seeming to be rise under their feet. A barrel came loose and rolled, making the sedir-priests jump to dodge it.

The water lifted impossibly beside them, with no wind, no swell to explain it. The Enemy fleet was caught as well, cries of alarm ringing over the strange silence of the sea. Only the noises of human and ship broke against it.

The *Pride* began to slip down the side of a watery mountain, the movement so delicate and deceptively slow the Captain let go his death's grip on the wheel and simply stared, open-mouthed at what was becoming plain.

For it wasn't a wave rising to loom beside them. It was the Blood Reef itself, its coral-crust bulk shedding water in a fall miles long as it rose beyond the ocean's grip, the roar enough to drown out any screams. Fish died, caught by spurs and outcrops of stony growth, imprisoned helplessly in air. Other things were caught as well: bits of bone and flesh, swords and armor, a child's robe.

Skalda found it contradictory that she could hear the sounds of Dir Agnon losing his mulled wine beside her over the din of the waterfall.

She clung to the rail, more to hold what was human-scaled than because the ship was unsteady. The waterfall ended, replaced by a single loud whoof of air as whatever they had summoned expelled its first breath.

"What is it?" breathed Clefta, his hand still tight on her shoulder.

Skalda shook her head, then realized she did know just as what looked like a promontory to one end of the floating reef turned to regard her through a gleaming black and yellow eye easily as tall as the *Pride's* mast.

"It's the Quiet God himself," she whispered, "roused to war."

**

Vision sharpened and added the plane of horizon, distracting with its promises of *far* and *new*. I sought the Summoners. *There*. There must be three.

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"There must be three," Skalda said, repeating from the parchment.

“Yes, yes. Three to Summon,” Rathe added, moving to stand beside her and Agnon. His voice held the same mixture of pride and horror they likely all felt. It was one thing to pray daily and interpret blessings -- quite another to wake a God and wait.

“Three to Aim,” Skalda said in the same stunned whisper, tearing her eyes from that one great eye to seek out the scattered but formidable fleet of their Enemy. “But how? ‘Each to become an Eye’ the parchment said. What do we do?”

“Sweet Depths,” breathed a voice behind her. She couldn’t recognize it and didn’t turn to see. Her question was answered as the huge, unbelievable head turned fully towards them. There were two more eyes, similar in size to the first, opening slowly as coral cracked away from their lids to splash in the water below.

“Quick!” Skalda ordered, her voice grown cold and calm. A shame her insides were the opposite, but that was a distant problem. “Run out the plank!”

“Remind me not to be near you when you are wrong,” Rathe said, his eyes fever-bright. He undid the sword belted low around his hips and let it drop to the deck, an instinctive and accurate disarming, Skalda decided, following suit. Agnon had no weapon beyond his wit. He looked as though he’d prefer to pick up one of the deadly blades himself.

The Enemy fleet, perhaps reassured by what appeared to be merely a new island, had begun to reorganize. Catapults fired test shot, thumping into the ocean just distant from the *Pride*, cautiously not too close to the Quiet God. “Hurry,” Skalda urged the others, moving first to the plank.

It was broad and dry, quite secure to walk along. As if fully aware of what was happening, the Quiet God slid closer, closer, until the end of the plank hung not over open water but grated delicately against a cheek of dying coral and sponge. Something held the *Pride* rock steady; looking down Skalda thought she could make out an immense ridge of coral disappearing under the keel.

Skalda concentrated on setting one sandaled foot ahead of the other, step, pause, step, the rhythm like that of a bride’s procession. Ahead waited the soft darkness of an eye larger than herself, a darkness she knew was her future, one final payment for her people’s rescue.

The end of the plank, and the world she knew. Skalda had traveled from her body in magical learnings, had swum beyond light’s reach in the ocean, and known the dream plain. This great eye was another doorway, she told herself, dismissing the natural fears of her body. She stepped through its dark disc, into the warm, black core.

WELCOME, SUMMONER, throbbed reality.

**

Expansion. I flowed around instincts and passions, explored terrors and lusts, searching for the common purpose of the Summons. There.

Destruction.

Was that all?

**

Her hands and touch, her mouth and breath were no more; almost worse, her legs prickled as though asleep. Skalda gained then lost her sense of self repeatedly. Finally, she refused the effort and focussed on what was here -- sight.

And such sight. As part of the Quiet God's eye she could see the regrouping of the Enemy fleet; at a thought that vision sharpened so she could see the foreign shape of their sails and swords, the exotic pallor of their skin. Otherwise, they were men and women like any others she had known. The realization was disquieting. Never had she considered them so.

If she relaxed her vision, glints appeared on the periphery of the immense lens: Rathe and Agnon, she knew without understanding how. She concentrated, trying to ignore fear and wonder -- neither were helpful -- and focussed on uttering a spell without a tongue.

The effort drained her but was not forbidden. A link was forged between the dir-priests, as well as their host.

Skalda... she felt her name, wrapped in vibrations that identified the source as Agnon. *What are we? Are we dead?*

We are the Aim, Rathe stated, less voice than a pressure on what once was skin.

YOU ARE THE AIM, agreed some vastness. I HAVE BEEN SUMMONED.
WHERE MUST I GO?

The minds of the dir-priests focussed in an instant. There was no sense of motion, yet the Enemy fleet seemed to leap closer.

Skalda's view also included the *Pride* as a coral-cruled flipper tossed it aside, the long planks of her hull scattering over the water like so many sticks.

**

I accepted their guidance, almost blind in this drier, brighter world. Their rage had a color, hate another. Fear for self was there. As was regret. I'd felt all of this before.

They aimed me at frail craft filled with men and I obeyed, my passage sending more to the Depths, carried down by their armor, limbs given grace by the water, to enrich the great flocks below.

**

WHERE DO I GO? boomed that incessant voice, not impatient, Skalda could tell, but rather a plea like a plaintive cry from a child. She still shuddered over the ease with which the P'okukii fleet had been wiped from the ocean. Their magic, their weapons, and their numbers had availed them nothing.

Almost. There'd been one attempt at defense and one loss. A harpoon had penetrated one great eye. Agnon's presence was gone.

There'd been no pain along their link. Only a skewed view of the harpooner, lips drawn back in a rictus, his skin so white his face was already a skull, the desperate eyes black pits.

She could scarcely believe they'd won the battle. What she could believe was how many were now in the Depths. It was as if she'd had to look into each and every face as they died, share their fear and horror. None sought the sea willingly. Was it worse for the P'okukii to die here, away from their beloved earth?

No matter the cost. It was done and they had saved their people. But what now?

She had tried the Spell of Departing; they'd not been fools to summon unknown magic without being able to dispel it again. But Agnon wasn't there to support her. And Rathe had found a home for his hate.

WHERE DO I GO? wailed the God.

She couldn't keep out the punishing demand. Rathe's response was a matching crescendo of torment. *To their ports! Crush their homes as they crushed mine. Kill them all!*

No, Skalda objected, horrified. *The Enemy is defeated. The Cove is safe.*

SAFE?

Almost instantly, her memories of her home were exposed like shells on a beach, carved free from sand by the icy winds of winter. She could somehow see each one as it was torn from her: views of moon through the arched windows of her bedroom, tall to the child-she'd-been; breathless glimpses of the royal barges from a hiding place high on her Aunt's balcony; the cool, musty darkness of the underground passages interrupted only by spells of light; the prised beauty of fireworks overhead as she swam in the warmth of the cove.

Then, as abruptly, nothing. Skalda wept without tears or eyes, feeling the loss of her home more intimately than the loss of her physical form, the longing to return so intense she knew with horror it wasn't hers alone. The Quiet God felt it too.

It was a feeling and intention Rathe didn't share. *To their ports*, he insisted, rage coloring his presence so Skalda felt she looked through heat shimmers as she watched the empty ocean ahead.

This, she realized suddenly, was why there had to be three to Summon and Aim. With just two of them left, there was no consensus, no clear voice to guide the God. She wondered how long it would take them to drive the God insane.

**

The pain was new, a novelty I would as soon excise from my body. All I could do was close the damaged eye. My flippers drove into the water on either side, there being no reason given to stop moving. My lips cracked open, shedding even more coral. Warm ocean flowed over them, healing, soothing, reminding me of greater things than now and here and me.

But the Summoning locked me to the surface where I could not seek them.

**

Skalda...Skalda

Once, well, more than once, she'd dozed over the parchments; the stuffy room and hours of close reading making a poor combination. Each time, she woke not fully aware, her eyes glued shut until she rubbed them free of sleep, her mind slow to rouse from its subconscious exploration of the words of the Great Spell. This might be one of those times, she thought, on the edge of a dream.

Skalda.

Her name drew her back to reality, a reality encompassing the loss of friends, the agonizing defeat of an Enemy, and the sure knowledge of her own doom.

Rathe, she replied unwillingly, but aware that even his insanity was more human than anything else here.

He was in one of his calm states, almost reasonable, as if this was one of their innumerable practice sessions in the Council Chamber. *They foresaw this, you know*, he said to her. *The P'okukii foresaw it all.*

The soothsayer. Their fear of the east and superstition. Skalda would have wept if she could. *Rathe* was right. The Summoning Spell had been cast before -- she knew it now. The Quiet God had risen at their whim and blood, destroying their Enemy so that the island states could grow and flourish. They had forgotten, attributing lifetimes of prosperity and peace to long ago human heroes and human magic. But the P'okukii, terrified of the sea, terrified of the east, had better memories.

In a sense it didn't matter, Skalda thought. Many things in the world moved in vast cycles, unnoticed until one's life was ground into insignificance by storms, famine, or drought. That they had had a part in this one was merely proof that the Depths showed her power however she choose.

We must end this, she urged *Rathe*, unsure how much he could understand.

We must kill them all, he replied, still soft, still reasonable.

**

I burned. The sunlight lost its beauty without the lens of ocean. Fish, large and small, tossed themselves ahead of my wake without recognition. The Summoners fought constantly, their purposes bright and conflicting. When they dreamed, I had no peace, only longings for a place. The Cove.

**

THE COVE. The darkness confused her only briefly as the longing woke her. Skalda focussed and saw stars spilled overhead. Stars she knew.

Rathe, she wailed. *It's taken us home!*

Kill them all, he sang softly. More gifts for the Gods.

KILL.

No! But her protest wasn't helping. She could sense confusion. Alone, she wasn't strong enough to overcome Rathe's madness.

There was another way.

**

The entrance to the Cove was narrow. I struggled through the rocky barrier, heaving myself half out of the warm sea with reluctance, driven.

Look! Look there!

The Aiming was imperative. I turned my head upward in time for the mass of jagged stone to smash into the side of my head. Then I could no longer see the color of rage. I could no longer see at all.

Except through one eye.

**

Without Rathe, the Spell of Departing would work, Skalda knew. Yet she hesitated. The Quiet God waited too, stopping up the channel into the Cove. The ships within looked like a school of tiny fish startled by a shark, scattering at random as galleys rowed, others with sails filling with bespelled wind.

The balconies? They were filled with people as well as flowers, equally beautiful and as still. They were waiting too.

WHERE DO I GO?

Where you will be safe, she thought, releasing all claim on that world outside. *Where we will be safe.*

**

Shafts of sunlight disappeared, reappeared; they filled at times with flower petals, twirling downward. At night, the stars were doubled by closer, smaller flames, floating above us to outline the dark hulls of ships.

We were content thus, to gaze upward through the great lens of our eye into the living magic of this place and see that which belonged here. The great flocks came, seeking the richness of the new reef, dancing in the light. Others swam among them, taking as was their need, sometimes just to dance.

If this is sleep, we sometimes wondered, surprised by bursts of fireworks, or touched by the hands of children, *perhaps we dream the world.*