

WAVERING GOODBYES

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

He was beginning to feel slightly cocky in her arms. The pounding of the wind started fading beneath her whispers. Rocks softened to billow around them, sway them together into the night. Waves welcomed, swarmed around, wrapped them up before saying goodbye. The tall thin armored men surged from the ocean, horses glistening in the spray. He stumbled home through the howling storm, the cracked tree stump, the hushed light of a fire in the distance. He couldn't find a key but she'd left the door open. He slumped inside and dragged himself to bed.

A shower of light rain was falling like a pane of fragmenting glass, tingling his hands, pinpricks of heat. He enjoyed the sensation. Anything to distract.

Illusions would do for the moment. He thought he'd heard the distant rumble of a bomb go off but that was another time, another place, another age. He had enough trouble of his own. His head was exploding in shrieks of painful retribution.

He cursed the car just past splattering him cheerfully from a puddle that could easily have been avoided. He enjoyed cursing them and wondered what he'd do if he had one himself; the same no doubt but on mornings like this he liked to think not. Cars were luxuries he never contemplated. He shut out their sounds, their images, concentrating on the sidewalk instead. He strolled by the hyper garage, hands deep in pockets, feeling, fiddling again, for the odd bits of

loose change. He'd refused to look when he woke up knowing the pattern too well, and what he touched now, tattered lining and an old match, proved his point.

He slung a smoldering glance at the slick paintwork, glittering pumps of the garage and carried on. Mrs. Banba's was coming up: smaller, more local than those mega chained enterprises, she'd give him an advance of some cigs, and a newspaper for show. A distant crack tumbled through his ears. He recognized the sea; it was always rumbling but only occasionally heard. Its permanent closeness kept it at bay, the jaded sounds lost in the memories of familiarity. The same faint roaring day and night, day in day out, created a rhythm which somewhere off consciousness, like the whiteness of a television never put to sleep by the drunkard slouched there on the sofa snoring, there, behind the ashtray, was comforting.

It roared again. He remembered the storm last night. He felt a quick joy in the air, thrills of change pumped from the blood of the ocean. He remembered the tree near his house, cracked in two, spliced through on a forked clatter of light; and the howling of the ocean, greeny-eyed torment screaming to break out and clasp all it saw. He'd stood there watching it for hours, or what seemed like hours. He'd clung to the cliffs, for whatever time, fascinated by the sounds: dull thudding roars belting out their fury, wild and controlled. And even now, with that weeping remembered by his ears, ringing again, he recognized its sympathy with his thoughts, the identification in his

memories and he too fumed briefly and kicked an old tin in a spurt of overblown tension.

The rain was gaining weight. He felt it on his face, glancing off rough cheeks, craggy as cliffs. Shite, he needed a razor as well. He tried to think of an aria now the alcohol was wearing off. Initial euphoria was beginning to retreat behind a dull wall of painful warning, remonstrance, agonizing reminders there was so much to do, or so little. He was relieved when Mrs. Banba's loomed out of the mist. Nemed was happy enough with the distraction of jogging the last few paces out of the squall, pulling his collar up and rushing into the shop with a purpose.

"Good morning Nemed, a fine day you've brought with you."

"Wish I had Mrs. Banba."

"And did you see the storm last night? Tore roots from the ground it did. Frightening. I wouldn't let poor Rama go, pulled him down under the blankets. Wouldn't open my eyes. Frightening. It...."

"So I'm told. So I'm told," he butted in quickly. He always forgot how she liked to go on and on. A price had to be paid he supposed and it was cheap enough, a little moan for half an hour's credit. But, with this hangover, he could do without her domestic hardships. What she did with her dog was her own business.

"Didn't see it myself," he lied, "fast asleep but heard all about it this morning. Tree next door down. We were lucky enough..."

He'd beat her at her own game, keep babbling at her until she tired and gave in. By the look in her eyes she sensed his intentions, and probably the lies. She knew him, but not that well he hoped, even as he wasn't sure if he cared.

"Twenty Jipson?" she offered.

He smiled his consent, half apologetically, paused, "and the Times," he added, not too quickly, just natural. "And...can..."

"Go on son. I'll catch you on the way back." She almost smiled but he wasn't sure.

He thanked her inside but just stood there in silence hopping from one foot to the other in embarrassment. Should he try for the batteries or was that pushing his luck? She'd give them all right but it never does to move the line too far: no leave it, nearly there now anyway. He turned quickly, "Right, on the way back Mrs. Banba," and he bent around sharply to flick her a smile.

"Aye and before you hit the Maecadre, Nemed boy," she added as he slipped out the door.

Everybody knew you too well except yourself. Fortunately, music had begun to ring through his head. It distracted his attention. Spinning in loops, it repeated over and over, its lilt twisting up on his tongue until in a flash you know it, then realize you don't: your throat is caught in something else, another memory, an opera, or another kids jingle. You misplace it and the search is reduced to a loss. The door closed behind with a grievous slap.

He tried some quick calculations walking along. He owed for the cigs and the paper ... and oh shit, yesterday's paper as well. Why did he keep buying papers to hang around, get lost, and seldom be read? They lent a veneer of respect he knew, while sensing that this was far too sheer. Glancing at the headlines he wondered: war again, petty or fake, all the same, someone died someone born someone making money where they shouldn't. Nothing new, nothing strange. Should save up and invest in a book. He giggled. Mouth opened, clamped down on damp fog: shock to the lungs. He breathed deeply. The air might wake him up he reasoned. He gulped more then polluted it with the first cigarette of the day.

Yes, the two papers and the cigs. And last night? God knows how much it all added up to. It was always the same. He hadn't much to start with and knew by the feeling in his bones, whatever about his poor head, that he'd gone well above that feeble pocket limit, far beyond into the realms of the future.

Aker would have paid. He had signed on the day before. Or Toci, though she was more careful, more occasional, less reliable, it depended on the mood. Aker would have paid knowing well it would be Nemed's own turn another day, today. A pattern. Some strange magnet sucked the change from his pocket and always the night before signing on, when you had nothing at all. He gave up the financial calculations. He'd find out soon enough and he'd just passed the bank on his left which threw them out even further.

He rushed past it, head down in his collar, hands clutching their pockets. He knew they wouldn't chase out after him, nevertheless, he wished he had crossed the street just in case. Its closeness, that looming presence, always haunted and he preferred to keep his distance. He looked over his shoulder in a flash of panic, flight of fancy. It hadn't moved: solid and present, five gilded stories of its arching specter hung over the street. As high almost as the church and a damn sight more polished, shining even in this weather: the cheeky confidence of the damned. Or so he hoped. Go into any town, any bloody country, and the banks have the best all the fine old distinguished buildings: fine facades disguising their injustices, a deceit you smell immediately on walking in. No matter how much they gained or lost, we paid. No fine architecture here just fake silver and wood. Casual, half-hearted attempts at covering, but never hiding the locks and the bolts, the tacky smiles of gamblers as they twist your arms; a cheap coat of gloss layering the rotten old timbers below. Nemed took brief joy in the knowledge that such tattered wood eventually gives way. Meanwhile, they were after his throat.

He had reached Main St., more buildings glowing sedately, clasped around metal signs proclaiming their fakes, or hunched between glass windows displaying their goods. More tackiness.

He was in a bad mood. He passed the shop fronts by quickly, unable to bear the pain of their fragility on a morning like this: interiors of bright hope well sheltered, far removed from the torments outside.

He crossed the street hurriedly, dodging the few cars, their wipers flashing obscenely, splattering water: another illusion of clear vision. He strode down Lime Lane, along beneath those narrow rowed houses, clumped up like sods of turf, mutually dependent for support. No cars here, luxuries of the past; at least they lived near the damned office. He spotted the police station squatting behind high walls, and pitied, briefly, the drenched cop shaking himself at the gate. That image set him mulling through the backwaters of his brain. He couldn't avoid the bank forever.

Then he brightened up in a flashback: what had Tlaloc been saying last night? He could feel the red face too close to his own, hot steamy breath, long shaggy teeth mouthing excitement. He hadn't been that clear, quick hints, more beer and a leer. But he had some scam going, something in mind. Tlaloc always had but you never know it might just work out this time; they occasionally did when he stuck to what he knew well and didn't get too adventurous or ambitious. Sell a bit here and there, even small amounts and it'd help. If Tlaloc got his hands on it they would deliver it together; would be worth a nice little packet. Only need to be careful. Cops didn't care anymore, just the gang down Dog road if they got wind of it. Not to worry. It'd all be over quickly: a grab and a run. They would hardly notice on their scale but it'd be handy money for himself. Then he could get the bank sorted or consoled at the least, ease the flow of letters, dogged reminders of his fate.

He needed something like that. He'd been back far too long with no prospects of leaving. Only a quick holiday, he had told Akhesa, far too long ago.

He hadn't intended it to be a lie; but he should have known better. Back here in the middle of the ocean, on the last island outpost, the almost forgotten spike of boney land jutting fearfully from the seas, it was easier to regret than to act. A quick holiday, he had promised: just return to see if his grandmother was all right after her fall and then he would be back. Back to the city, the noise, the music and Akhesa. And then money had run out, and his consciousness had dragged until he was swimming again in a haze of quickly remembered obligations, half needs and hazy fears blotted out in a land where Generals wiped away broadband and contact returned to the hope of a well-thumbed letter dragging its way across the doormat, or a faded phone call hissing through the censor's breath. He glanced at his watch. Late again and he wanted to be home in time for the post. Akhesa, the crossed doubts and paranoia of separation blotting out trust. Memories of her face on the pillow faded onto other's mattresses and visions of sweet betrayal.

He tried to draw her closer, bring her into mind. He dragged up her photo, engrained before him, amazed that he needed it; all that time together reduced to a glimpse, to a flashed second of a smile, a grasp at infinity. Alluring lips. Her warmth flowed through him coursing down his legs urging a jaunt in his stride. Get this over with and race home for the post. Fuck the banks, he just hoped Akhesa had got it together and maybe he'd write to her later. She could still buy an old-fashioned stamp he reasoned.

He felt better already and walked spritely into the Dole office not even hassled by the queue. Akhesa worked overtime on his mind, holding back the

stuffy air, steam filled jackets still misting now they were inside. Loud raucous kids clung to patient legs; crumpled cards were presented to windows showing off their number between the creases around their many folds; feeble smiles wrung themselves dry in the face of stern paneling, hard unwashed glass where you shouted for all the world to hear.

Money at last in pocket, crispy in his fingers, soothing along his palm, his heart grew lighter, he even fancied the sun shone. He'd call into the Maecadre just for one, only the one, he figured; there was still time before the post. Plenty of it. The bastard is always late, on a morning like this especially; lucky if he gets there at all.

They were feeling settled, too comfortable far too early, thought Aker. But they'd better have another. Anyway he had to wait until Nemed turned up: Aker hadn't enough to pay until he came and couldn't ask either of the other two. They got the order in just before the entrance shook. Aker sat back on his stool contented with his decision: knew he'd turn up.

"Just thinking of you," Aker greeted, as the tall figure jaunted through the door.

"You're looking well," Toci added, eyes twinkling now in homely maliciousness.

The door slammed, shutting in the gloom. Faces swam distorted paths before him, lunging up in his face. Legs hung off chairs disabled and scattered; arms waving frantically clutching old glasses, searching out bodies.

Images of that bomb again, storm cracking high, glasses of red blood overflowing. Then, slowly, it blended, pieces fitted into place. Arms rejoining, trunks floated back to sit on their legs, even the faces regrouped. He began to see clearly. The image blurred into a fleeting still from the night before, or any of those such nights: crowded smoke drained the painting of dismemberment and gore. He shook himself severely, forced aware by the greetings from the bar. Approaching, he recognized their faces, felt the jauntiness, the money in his pocket and shit, that reminded him. Not to worry. Sit down and take it easy, he told himself, brushing away the stray images, the nightmares, the paranoia. Nodding his salutes, he climbed up on the stool next to Aker. "Morning," he smiled, happy at its reception.

The other two continued talking, Nemed didn't catch what about, didn't try; he wanted to sort it out with Aker first. The barman came over but Nemed couldn't remember his name. Not the guy who was here last night, just as well, but a similar name he was sure. They were all the same, happy enough if you tipped, spilled your pint if you didn't.

Aker glanced across expectantly but Nemed wasn't up to explaining the private humor, feeling it probably sounded better in the head than exposed naked, innocent, to the flash of cheap laughs.

Nemed ordered. Dreading the first gulp, he suffered it only in the knowledge that it would get smoother, and that it had to be done. Aker raised his own glass in ironic salute and they took their medicine like two good little boys.

"Listen," Nemed began, leaning closer. He slid along the bar. Their backs hunched over, heads bending, almost joining like hearts. "How much do I owe you from last night?"

"Sure you want to know?"

Nemed grimaced: how bad could it be? He remembered now he hadn't dared to calculate, soothed instead by the dosh in his pocket, the fleeting comfort he had allowed himself. He hadn't seen it as a luxury to fondle the roll but he was glad he hadn't become too attached now as the carpet began to slide from under him. "Oh God," he groaned when Aker whispered the amount.

Actually, not that bad: it had often been worse but it still left him broke until the next one. Vicious fucking circle. Had Aker knocked off a couple of hundreds but Nemed couldn't see how it was possible, how Aker could afford that either. They were all in the same boat. It wasn't like before, when there was a Euro and somebody to bail you out. He slipped across the cash. "Thanks Aker," and they smiled, wearily, embarrassed, both wishing it wasn't necessary, both comforted by their mutual desires.

"Anytime."

Fuck it, Nemed thought, and rose his glass again covering his forced smile. Aker patted his back in sympathy and he felt much better.

"What do you think you two are up to ignoring us here? Conspiracy or something?" Toci had moved over, hand dropping onto Nemed's shoulder, forcing him and Aker around to face her. She usually stood when they sat at

the bar; that way she kept their attention with the freedom to rove as she'd done just now. She was also short and it was pleasant from time to time to feel a little above the maddening crowd or at least on face level.

Nemed looked down at her with a smile. No one could resist her cheeriness, the nervous energy spread across the small angular face, lightening the eyes, forcing them through her tangled hair, a bundle of explosions twisting in her small, well-packed body.

Nemed often wanted to cuddle her, especially at times like this; in joy, abandon, or protectiveness, he was never sure why. She had that effect now and again.

"AtonAmon. Have you seen it?" she demanded, thumping his back in excitement. They nodded, himself and Aker. "And what do you think. Isn't it just crazy? Or a piss-take or what?"

"Well that's one word for it," agreed Aker.

"Several," Nemed pointed out.

Aker continued, jabbing him in the ribs, "but I'm not sure if it is ... if any of them are the best."

"But that's the whole point, isn't it? Look at all the other stuff on T.V. and you know exactly what's happening, never a surprise. But this ... this ... this ... well it's great isn't it. Completely different?"

"Can't dispute that," chipped in Ceithne deciding to enter the game from the safety of a near-by stool. He pulled out a bit to complete the circle.

Nemed felt obliged to do the same, forcing Aker in turn, to twist completely around, back to the bar.

"Yeah crazy. That's about right." Nemed paused in thought but enlightenment avoided him so he continued in the same vein, "I mean I can't even decide what we're supposed to be ... to be doing. Like I can't decide who the detective is never mind the crime ..."

"Or who did it."

"Exactly."

"So, ok, it's a thriller.."

"..Political thriller," interrupted Toci.

"Yeah whatever, but we only know that from all the big ads, the promotion. They've been blowing our heads off for weeks."

"But that's the same with anything new nowadays," said Aker, "so many repeats churned out on satellite as if space can rejuvenate them, that when TV has something new it has to do that: blast our minds off with publicity so that anybody even bothers to watch. And that is watch, rather than keep it on in the background."

Shit. Akhesa. The post. Three beers now and he'd forgotten. He glanced at his watch anger mounting. He felt his mood change as it buried itself once more in routine: pockets quickly emptying in the drizzle of familiar chat.

He'd forgotten it was so late. Even the bar had filled up. He caught Aker's eye wandering amidst the faces, nodding here and there in recognition.

Toci had gone back to chat with Ceithne, small talk to ease her embarrassment. Nemed saw that, felt sorry, smiled in comfort as she swam into his glance. He swiveled back to Aker but he was still lost in his own ... ah, yes of course, Nemed remembered. That girl? What was her name? Tall, rather beautiful in an unusual way with long wavy hair flooding a face far too thin. "Drugie," Nemed had told him, but Aker wasn't to be deterred. He was amused for a minute watching his friend, his approach in the affair so subtle it bordered on the perverse.

Nemed was still grinning when Aker resettled on his face. He winced sheepishly at being caught. Nemed slapped his shoulder in comfort. "Listen I'm off," he added. He'd suddenly decided: he had had enough. Lost between an empty glass and the post he'd pursued his decision, settling finally on the latter.

"Going soon myself. See you later?"

"Yeah probably," and Nemed jumped up before he persuaded himself otherwise. Quick salutes to the others and he pushed himself out the door. A cold wind grabbed his face forcing muscles to contract. He'd needed that he sighed.

"Did you hear him with Tlaloc? Don't know what they were up to but it sure looked intense."

"Can't have been any good knowing Tlaloc. Something shady to say the least."

Toci didn't mix words. Aker sighed in recognition. "Of course," he muttered nodding in their agreement in the closeness of long feelings. "Do you remember the time..." and they all did, when Tlaloc had disappeared for two years, lost without a trace. There were fine stories at the time, great epics, soothing out some sequence amid scarcely known, unfollowed, unseen events. There had been vast theories of complicity, duplicity on all sides. But they never knew, hardly guessed beyond the relaxed visions of their stools here and now; no one had ever known what had really happened. Eventually, the whole adventure became buried in the weave of its own myths.

And then he'd come back straight out of the blue, a blue as normal as the day he'd gone. He took it that way at the very least. No explanations. No great cries of relief, only the familiar crinkled laughter beneath the beating of his winking eye.

Aker had never delved further and no one else had dared. The disappearance passed on into folklore, then the mythology of growing fame. And Tlaloc played his part. He never explained what had happened, only offered lots of excuses, wild theories or sly hints, a collection of assortments waylaying all truths. Embellishment was fostered carefully, under the cover of shy glances, patted confidences on the back and a low deep voice scarcely loud enough for the rabble to hear. He'd played it all too well and now lived for the fame. Notoriety that bred a certain trust, a belief in what's well told, well known and understood to be fake by them all. Tlaloc was a legend in the Maecadre.

"No, no good at all I'm sure. But then again you know Tlaloc. Know what he's like. It could have been anything."

Toci nodded in agreement; "Bullshitting away, we all know what he's like."

They did. Tlaloc had built himself into something. Everyone knew they would never know why, if there was a reason, if those two years had seen real glory. No one cared, they were all happy enough with their own little share of fame, whatever he passed on, crumbs grasped in flitted conversations in the shelter, through the haze of late night whispering thoughts.

Aker continued thinking around his original memories: "but whatever about Tlaloc, whatever the two of them were up to, Nemed was in great form, wild he was."

"Maybe he's found something after all. He's been moping here too long," was Ceithne's proffered solution.

"Haven't we all. And it's hard enough for him. He kind of had to come back with the grandmother and everything..."

"I know, I know," but they were words of dismissal: Ceithne wasn't one for sympathy or, 'shoddy sentimentalism', as he saw it himself. They all needed a break. They'd all had to come back for one reason or another.

Nemed left the pub behind. The conversation quickly faded as if it knew something more important was at hand. Without thinking he began walking towards a destiny. He turned his back to the wind, automatic reaction. Only now did he realize he'd forgotten to ask about Tlaloc. Shit. He wasn't perfectly

sure what they'd been discussing the night before but enough remained to keep his interest ignited. And just about then he also realized he was going the wrong way. Instinctively, he'd ducked the stiff breeze, and in doing so, faced off in the wrong direction, down Ruffle St., Smooth Lane with its sheltering narrow alleys, wind only gusting through the gaps in the long lost windows. Now he was out in Smefeld, more imposing buildings, bleak open window frames, smashed glass panes proffering crumbling stares as he passed.

It didn't matter. He was late for the post: he'd only have to hope the bank had held off another day and Akhesa hadn't. Delaying, a certain perversity shook his soul, the agony of waiting, the hope more pleasurable than the pain of a bleak door mat. Too often he'd raced back, or down the stairs from his bed to encounter nothing but the stomach cramping bitterness of another twenty four hours wait.

This morning he was suddenly in no hurry; he'd prolong the grief, the hope of pleasure, joys of defeat. One eye spotted the white van crawling superstitiously down the side street. He ducked around a corner just in case. Too many had faded into the white vans to appear later in black hearses. The price you pay when politicians decide it is easier to don the uniforms of Generals rather than keep rigging elections.

He felt better. The wind was clearing his head; he didn't turn away this time but gulped it up instead. Deep breaths of fire roared down through the sinews of his lungs, spreading outwards, life shaking spasms. He brightened in the face of another day. And he could still hope, imagine, fantasize about the

past, with the sickening sensation of discovery prolonged a little more. The haze sprinkled gusts filled him with new life. He could even head for the cliffs: they were just down the road. He was half-way there already, unnoticed. He could stroll along for a while and get those thoughts removed, back under control. He convinced himself.

He loved these rocks, their raw, powerful emotions, brute presence working down to his soul. Images of them alone, drew fresh energy from his bones. Head bent forward under the rising gale, his hair ruffled back in a mane, blaring out his courage for all to see. He laughed to himself, at the imagery, grasped its ridiculousness and lay back in its hope: out here he could create, dream up whatever he desired. Out here he'd once felt free as a child; and it had been here that day he'd decided finally to leave. Standing alone, bare to the elements, hanging over the sea, he'd made the decision. Waves were crushing themselves fatefully below drowning ripples in his thoughts. Huddled up against the wind he'd suddenly realized: and was gone within the week. And those green waves, the plummeting birds had stayed with him, pushing him on when faint heartiness urged for home, even as they promised their never failing loyalty if he had to return.

They'd been right of course.

He knew he'd have to stick it out, and didn't need the wind to blow that pressure in his face. And yet, it had helped in some strange untouchable manner to continuously sense the sea when far away. The bar, those friends, creaking doors, battered streets had all faded, their powers long eroded; they

had flown away all too quickly leaving only the wind, always whistling round his ears, painful in its reminders, conflicting in its tones.

Those musings brought Akhesa and with her a thousand dreams of what could and what had been. Old visions flashed by of times now so far away. It seemed like years. He knew it was a question of distance rather than time, but that knowledge didn't bring them closer, only increased their value and blotted out the edges. The NetKids channel was a long way away, like some old film they blurred under gauze, idealistic reminders of all he was missing. That night in Bloretown came back. For a minute. In full color. Blood running wild spattering hailstones full of gore. After the carnage roared they were told, told that they should never have played in a place like that. They cursed the manager; he just smiled and waved a wad of notes. Typical. Bloody late to complain now they all knew: no wonder they had paid so much for a one night gig, for an almost very famous band. Nemed was only glad Akhesa hadn't been there so that he could spare it all from her later in private; and cuddle her close for comfort in the shade of their own secure walls. The next day another ditty for the kids channel and all was right again. Kiddie tunes for the man who dreamed in opera. That summed him up. Just about appropriate.

He shook himself in the fresh air, eyes opening wide as his lungs. He flapped his coat open: he needed all the cold he could accept. He let the iciness bite through those memories, sift the good from the bad. Up on the hills surrounded only by the odd tree even Akhesa was far away, fading even. The occasional brave bird flew over cackling in the breeze; the muffled chugging of

a ship roved over from the harbor. They had become scarcer and scarcer. The island had returned to nature, he thought, there was nothing else any longer, nothing to keep them there. The ships had long gone. Even the birds appeared to have become scarcer, bled out like the internet, shot by the Generals for fun or just in warning.

The sea was pounding, crashing out the sound of the wind in his ears. It roared down there, unseen beyond the cliffs jutting out in incessant bravery.

Nemed climbed on slowly through the soft earth and low bushes. They pricked his hands, gently, soothing reminders of real life. This wilderness was so far away from everything that crowded out his mind. He'd climb up a bit further over these two hills and then, out on his ledge, he'd sit there hidden between boulders, staring away to the sea. He needed that: just to squat and listen, try to understand, make sense of the mull in his mind, as he had the night before, as a child.

Hunched up between the rocks he saw her.

He'd lit a cigarette and was beginning to feel sharper and even confident. Always plans and more plans bred from indecision, more efficiently than the proverbial rabbit. Sit down, sort them out logically, look at the options: but decide. Make up your mind. And when you've concluded what to do the rest follows naturally and plans fade before the choices that follow each other inevitably. And he'd nearly reached one: an elimination, a what to do. It was dead simple when you perched and thought about it.

Hunched between rocks of the ledge, squatted, arms hugging pointed knees and watched the screen spread out before him, unfolding its own stories, baring his soul, dreams came into focus.

Spray reached him even up here, even with the wind cut off by the rocks at his back.

The music was soaring, swirling in circles. He clasped his hands to his ears, shaking his head slowly, lost between the desire to note its cords and forget it entirely as a worthless rip-off.

It was then he saw her. Briefly. Vaguely. Out of the corner of his eye, between the waving vision before his wagging head.

He didn't believe it at first. He only caught a quick image of shadow, passing down there on his right, cast warily on the narrow strip of pebbles, unprotected from the force of the waves.

The tide was coming in, eating up these stones. He'd often swam down there but at this time of year never, not with this wind, those rolling thunders: it was dangerous enough in summer and a relatively tame swell. So he didn't really believe it, that someone could be down there. He sensed another illusion to add to the confusion of his morning weariness. But he couldn't ignore it either.

Curiosity swung him forwards, to peer over the ledge, down into the mist. Eyes peeled through the dampness in search of a fleeting glimpse. Billowing like the wind soaring like the waves, the tall thin figure paced slowly along the shale that passed for a beach. Looking closer he knew why she

floated: she didn't, her clothes did, a long flowing gown of many apparent layer. Breeze poured around it, through, billowing it out in great gusts. Her head was similarly covered, a long veil of waves, hair and material sweeping back over her shoulders in a gale of mysterious beauty.

Nemed slouched back into a dangerous mixture of astonishment and amusement. Greyey blue green gushing into reddy yellow orange, uncountable, useable shades coaxed from the waves bounding at her feet. She had just turned around to stride back down the strip, casual, rhythmic steps back towards him, hips swaying down there beneath his perch. He felt his heart pounding in a perverse excitement. Aria long gone, only the wind around his head was still whistling sweet merriments, teasing his hair into untidy straggles before his eyes. He brushed them to one side one hand clumping them behind an ear. He stared down again, deep through the haze.

Closer and closer she crept. She turned towards him, still approaching from underneath. He knew he should break the stare; this position of voyeuristic advantage was stroking guilt in his knees. But his eyes remained drawn below, and deeper down, focusing through all the wind and wet spittle with unrecognizable ease. Jesus, maybe they were just playing tricks. Still hung-over, or drunk. He could have sworn she'd been naked just now, just then, long-limbed smooth body, curved softly in pleasure. Imagination working overtime. Akhesa flashed through his mind. God it must be a long time. Frustration. Wet fantasies on the beach. But he wasn't imagining it he persuaded himself.

Irascibly he drew forward to check the fallacy of his dreams, ashamed in the blows of too fertile a mind.

She was still there as he'd left her, a little closer, but definitely fully dressed, in her sense of the word, if they were clothes. They were blending almost completely with the sea. It stretched out behind, folding them in its grasp, until they billowed like sails, flowing around the long fragile beauty they vaguely protected beneath. She must be frozen was all Nemed could, dared, think. In a flash, through his stares, he caught the movement. Natural and graceful, a long arm slid from her cloak to briskly brush back its folds, quickly, silently through the distance, away from her face as it looked up framed gracefully by the cloth and the sea raving behind. He caught the high cheekbones, and the dark sunken eyes, sparkling pools of enchantment, as they focused on his.

He jumped up in the shock, the shame. Her face, now clearly formed, was staring deeply through his. It was perfectly clear, rising up to greet before turning quickly, hidden anew in those folds of green light.

He jerked back panting, sweat glistening his cheeks. Hot flushes of embarrassment surged through cold veins. She'd stared straight at him. His mind wandered in circles. He braced himself slowly, and rose up a little from his slump, rolled over onto his knees and crawled back to the edge. He peered over again, bent down into the stone. No. Knew it. She wasn't there. No wild women in mysterious tapestries. Mind working overtime. That's all.

He looked over just to be sure but caught only spray, and lost his breath in a gulp of gusting breeze; his ears filled with the roaring. Waves crashed down below, eating up those pebbles, the ones where she had been standing.

There's no way down there at this time of day. No way up. A sudden tang of fear. He scoured the strip of land from end to end. Darkness was seeping in now so he couldn't be quite sure of what he was seeing: she's not down there. Never was. Shook his head in confusion as he rose softly to go home. So much for getting his head straight. Far too straight. Twisted up in fantasies.

He began walking quickly. He wasn't sure if all this fresh air was doing him good or bad. Her face kept resurging, floating there before his own. He wiped it away abruptly: he had enough to sort out without wild dreams by the sea. He strode on even faster, coat flapping in the breeze. It was beginning to rain. He smelt food as he opened the front door. The hall table was empty. He sighed and moved on.

"No post?" he shouted through to the kitchen, as casual as he could in the stifling hot air. She peeked around the door all wizen and beaten and gentle. He felt himself flushing, blamed the heat but sensed his plans disturbed, cruelly twisted. He turned away quickly to hang up his coat.

"No not a thing. Were you expecting anything?"

"No. Not really," and he gave her a smile, some genuine warmth from the daze of emotions. She patted him on the back as he slid past her for his dinner.

"You've been out on the cliffs again.' she admonished. "Take care of yourself out there. Catch your death of cold ... if nothing else."

He avoided her stare wondering how she knew. You don't get to that age without intuition he presumed rubbing life back to cold ears which turned tingly red under the pressure.

"You take care now." grandmother Harrapan continued, heaving him a steaming plate.

He gobbled thankfully in silence: one way to finish off a hangover.

CHAPTER TWO

"No I tell you Birdisi is the detective."

"What do you mean? Nothing but a dirty old bastard."

"Yeah did you see him peering through the window as Alicia ... although she is not bad at all ..."

"Pervert yourself. And that's all he is I tell you."

"Yeah, I think you're right. I mean he only appears now and then anyway. Just a red..."

"Exactly. A red herring. That's why he's got to be the one. Don't you see the way it works ... always the unexpect ..."

"The one who what? The detective or the spy or both or the killer or are they all the same?"

"Possibly, knowing this series. So many characters and all of them doing nothing. They're all red herrings if you ask me."

"And what do you know?"

"Well for starters, that's what it is. A series. And they'll play as many games as they like to keep us watching. And secondly ..."

"Don't be so pedantic."

"No. Let me continue. Secon ..."

"Yeah, why not?" and the advocate went to the bar.

"Listen. Only joking. But seriously ..." the voice followed.

A drink was sipped. "Really when it comes down to basics. That's what it is ... a series."

"Well we all agree on that."

Laughter cackled around their corner, shoulders shook, sides split.

"No. But seriously. They can't let us know what's happening, not anymore, not in a series like this. It is advertised as a Spy story after all ..."

"In some of the ads only"

"Well I reckon they are all red herrings so far and the good guy has yet to turn up."

"What good guy? No good boys anymore on Sat TV, or what they allow us see of it."

"Bullshit. They're just better disguised."

And they all had to agree to that.

Ceithne went to the bar again, his journey interrupted immediately as the shout for four more beers and a G+T was added. He looked disgruntled but headed off with their orders. Aker leaned across Nemed's face and then he two headed for a fresh round with Aefe shouting her order across the room after him. She hadn't finished the one she had but they all knew how quickly she could down them with a new one on the way.

They had moved onto something else, sports, or music, or the latest gossip. Nemed's attention was flickering. Sitting, poised dangerously on his stool, he leaned forward over the crowded table. Balancing on the front two legs he stared over the litter of empty frothing glasses and smoldering cigarette smoke. Exhumed through innumerate nights of fading decay, their foul stale smell caught up his nose. He pushed himself back jolting his back bone as the hind

legs of the stool jarred to the floor. The legs poked noisily, dull thuds into the threadbare carpet long exposed to its bone. He glanced over at the bar grateful to see Aker struggling faithfully between shifting bodies, two beers and a short in his hand. Another drink owed. He'd get him back later. He wondered again where Aker got his money from but he never questioned. He rose briefly to unburden Aker of his beer before slumping back to slouch on the edge of their cozy group, lost briefly to the recycled conversation, flying remarks well practiced.

They faded into the distance losing coherence as the new glass rose to meet him in a rosy cheery gaze. It wasn't the beer he saw, not it's head, but another. Still watching, still questioning, challenging, accusing, her eyes pierced his mind. They had been lurking all afternoon, hiding somewhere at the back of his few thoughts, thinly veiled, sharpening into focus occasionally in daggers of pain. Guiltily as he felt for Akhesa as he tried to erase other emotions with hers, he took a gulp. Toci glanced over and he nodded, agreed to the chit chat, whatever it was about. He hoped his brief nod was enough but leaned forward just in case, in the pretext of paying full attention.

"... No. I tell you it isn't. You've got it all wrong..."

"Listen to me will you..."

Poor Urchar was losing out. He was the youngest and was forced to play his role. Ceithne continued blasting him, making him feel every second. That man has no mercy, Nemed thought, and then she was back.

Her simple, narrow face floated before him, large green blue eyes adding dept. Healthy brown gauntness. Not a film star by any means, would never have passed an audition for AtonAmon, but unique. Damn it. She'd looked at him. He still felt her gaze. He hadn't been out there for ages. There was now way she could have been waiting for him, or expecting to see him hiding among his favorite rocks. Well she could fuck off. It was still his spot and he'd be damned if he wouldn't go to hide there whenever he choose, without accusations of spying.

"...that would suit Tlaloc" and they all laughed, the whole corner shaking in mighty quakes.

God. Yes. Tlaloc. That reminded him. Eye swiveled through the room but to no avail. Not in yet. Nemed hoped he would turn up. He tried to seek someone's watch in the fast action of gesticulating wrists, conversation punctuations, glasses lifting, cigarettes melted. Keep an eye out for him, he told himself, he should be in tonight.

Glass clanged hollowly, close by, beneath his nose. He would recognize the sound anywhere. "My turn for the bar ..," he scarcely needed to beckon. Brain swirling orders struggled through the crowd and he rose to face the bar. Shite. What's his name? Awkward bugger of a barman.

"He's quite tonight, isn't he?"

"Who?" inquired Aker lazily, eyes floating around the room.

"Nemed," Toci punched him, gently but with force.

Ribs jerked inwards sloshing beer around nervously. "Jesus, what are you doing?" he choked, "what was that for?"

"A bag of weasels yourself. Has she not turned up yet?" Toci covered her smirk in a glass, wild eyes still tearing him apart.

"Who?" He scolded.

She just laughed. They both did. He sat back in his corner. He had chosen it carefully. Back to the beaten paneled wall worn on the edge of hairy drunken heads. And just high enough to crack his skull hung the metal frame of stained glass window pane. He sat back gently, avoiding it this time. No, she hadn't turned up, he didn't have to explain. Embarrassed by his own dreams he turned to Toci pressing his full attention. "Yes he is. But wouldn't you be after last night?" and they laughed once more in joint comfort.

"I was here. You don't remember!" They broke out again.

Nemed eyed the heaving corner, feeling lost at the bar.

"Yes son" snapped the bald one behind the bar.

Nemed had almost forgotten the order. Having shouted once and been ignored he hardly dared now, could hardly be bothered. The drinks eventually arrived, sourly. Nemed muttered a thanks. Nobody bothered to reply. Didn't need to: knew he'd be back.

In the corner Aker countered Toci's insinuations, edging away from the conversation, sidetracking it he hoped. "Well we all have our nights, don't we?"

Toci was not to be perturbed. "Why didn't you approach her last night?" she lurched before realizing yet again the dangerous speed of her tongue in waters best untrodden.

Aker smiled. Faintly, vaguely, he was still hoping he would do it tonight. Piss off, he felt like saying but she was too good a friend to treat with the honesty of passing anger.

"Do you think he'll go?" Toci countered, eager at once to redirect his thoughts and quench her own thirst.

"Nemed? Who knows. Couldn't we all?"

He glanced at her. She looked away quickly. They turned silent. She was briefly relieved as Nuada picked her up, drew her into some other chat, other charms: God, not the TV again. And now Aefe was crowding in as well, her young cheerful innocence spouting out old catchphrases without realizing their sell buy date.

Aker sighed. He was beginning to wish he hadn't chosen the corner: there was no escape. And it was obviously a waste of time, stupid to begin with. He'd chosen it for the clear view of the door, but she hadn't turned up and he doubted now his courage to make any approach even if she had. What was he playing at? He'd received his just rewards, hemmed in by the pointless chattering in which he too must play his part. "Load of shite" he agreed, winking across at Aefe ... Cute. Nemed landed his drink. Another. Yes. Cute. Aefe smiled back, eager earnestness lighting up her face in the haze of blue smoke.

Ceithne had gone to the men's. Toci quickly grabbed his stool and moved closer. "What's up with you then?"

Nemed hadn't noticed her change of position and jumped in the lurching proximity. "Nothing."

"Hung-over?"

"Suppose so."

"You drunken bastard," Aefe joined in from around the corner spilling a beer as she reached over. "Know what you were doing last night..." peeling off in laughter.

"Don't mind her," Toci rocked, "she was just as bad herself." She pushed Aefe's arm off the ledge of their table and smiled in conspiracy. They both giggled.

"At least I remember," Aefe teased slapping Nemed's leg a little too hard for his ease.

He jerked it up in response jarring it under the table in the motion. He was forced to bend them back. He hunched forward searching for a little comfort, nose in glass, eyes down into Toci's, her blushing red cheeks, piping hot in laughter. Nemed felt his own jaws reddening. He smiled blearily in a feeble attempt to share their joke, uneasy, unsure, a little lost in the soggy ground rules for this game. They're just having me on, that's all. He hoped.

Aefe leaned off again leaving them, the two of them. Toci's arm squeezed his shoulder. "Don't worry. Only joking."

He smiled, had to. Once more he caught her eyes searching for the truth. Further evidence of his paranoia he told himself, of his easily disturbed consciousness.

"Who cares?" He shrugged his shoulders trying to be flippant, to regain control.

Toci kept her arm there on his shoulders. He didn't want to move, to lean towards it, or away. That face was back, floating in his beer, watery as the proof of her existence. He shook it furiously, wiping it around the glass. The mirage crinkled in sashes, freckled bubbles of gas. He threw them back quickly a short quick gasp.

"Want another?" Toci asked, "I'll get it" she added hastily and was gone before the reply.

He warmed to the offer, appreciated the thought. Well, maybe, but she was decent deep down.

She enjoyed his appreciation on her return. A warm feeling washed through her as she handed him his glass.

"Where's mine"" Ceithne demanded interrupting their gaze.

"Get your own." Toci snapped, a lobster scuttling angrily sideways.

Once distracted, the feeble spell of her attention broken, Nemed took the chance to search around. He caught Aker's eyes and held them briefly in sympathy, smiling weakly. Aker broke away to reach for his drink. Nemed had been watching too; he'd his back to the door but had done a quick check on his way to the bar. No. She hadn't turned up. He couldn't really understand Aker.

He wasn't the most forward himself but this type of distant infatuation was too much.

"Hey you."

"What?"

"You lost again?" Toci was trying her hardest and her patience most of all.

"Be back in a second," Nemed mouthed, catching the familiar hulk in the corner standing at the bar. He rose gratefully and blended across tables, apologetically jabbing the stumbling bodies littering his path. "Hello Tlaloc"

Tlaloc was no weight-lifter, it was his shadow Nemed had seen; but with his prominent jaw and big nose the shadow was easily identifiable: he always had presence. No one was sure why. They blamed it on his reputation, laughed at it when he wasn't there, crowded around when he was. 'Magnetic', Ceithne had once described him as 'attracts all types'; and everyone had to agree failing other definitions of how a body so small could have a hold on so many hardened hearts.

Nemed bent over him, closer until the two grew deep in hush idly exchanged words, quick nods and movements highlighting their thoughts.

Frowned puckered lips punctuating palpitating instincts. That was all Toci could see from the corner of her eye.

"What are those two up to?" Soberer now they were alone, Ceithne at the bar, the others drunk, and their subject immersed in the corner, Toci sought an extra opinion.

"Who knows. Nothing good I'll bet you," she contributed glancing to note its effect. Toci still stared, long skinny fingers circling her drink.

"Don't bother. He'll be gone soon."

Toci flinched in the sharp young wisdom, under the weight of the hard facts she continually avoided. Looking back at Aefe she wasn't sure if she was grateful or filled with hate; she smothered her answer, a bitter taste down her throat. Sensing the hurt, Aefe patted her wrist quickly banishing feelings of seditiousness in the familiar touch of two friends. She stole a last glance at the couple near the bar, their bent bodies, faded shadows of intensity: up to no good at all. She shivered. Someone else had come in, the damned draft through the fucking door.

CHAPTER THREE

His stomach was gurgling; he could feel it rumbling up and down, swirling back and forth, rhythmically swaying until the sensation became sweeter, relaxing, soothing. His body tingled in the pleasure of ears being licked, bones lapped, rocked in giant hands, comforted like a child; he could feel the sensations harden under him now, pressure along his spine. Some type of crude raft he thought before leaving it to one side. Eyes closed in the softness, the rhythmic abruptness of each falling wave as he bobbed above them, half eaten inside them. He stumbled somewhere different, somewhere half remembered, half torn, the memory dull and yellowing, crinkled up in the corners like a faded old photo. Yes he knew this place. He recognized each stone on the path and that tall tree over there: at least it had seemed tall at the time. Now he was grown and reached the heights with ease. Once again the tangled gnarls of its branches swept down to entwine him; but what had taken ages as a child was now conquered with ease. A quick climb and he was up, cradled within the spindly arms. Perched there on top, he could reach the ground with a single leap. The shouted warnings of his childhood floated past in a heap. But there was no need: he had grown. He was the same size as the tree now, elongated, mature, but he could still scrap his knee; familiar blood trickles met his eye. Tears come in the memory, huge sobs of despair; tears of embarrassment, of pain and of fear. "Here. Here. Here, Up Here." He wanted to shout but whistled some new tune instead. He knew those two faces also, recognized them in the

distance. Through time they came calling, sounds so at home in his head. "Here. Here Up here," he sobbed quietly, peering cautiously at his mother through the branches and their leaves. Arms swooped up to grab him, hairy, warm and firm. Fingers under his armpits, thumbs hurting with their pressure. He was searching for his mother through the green haze, the fading light, his hands clasping at hairs, straws. Her familiar face unrecognized now, fading, away: that's not my mother. Recognition of the features as they slid through his vision, blending and focusing, etched out in pain, faded, then reinforced until he thought he recognized them. But still he couldn't place the features. His stare disappeared into the woman's deep eyes, seeking, crying out in despair. Sirens began wailing, calling, growling their own shivering sounds of good cheer. He hadn't realized it had been so silent for so long. He turned, avoiding those stares, the nameless faces, the bright pools of light that trapped him, frightening him with their glare. He twisted in refusal and felt himself fall. Like melting butter the leaves dripped to let him slip through velvet arms. Limbs flailing frantically clutching out for the raft, any faint touch of firmness in this gluttonous mess. A hand stretched out for him, long, thin arm, full of grace, of strength as it clasped him. The fingers clung like tendrils around his poor bones, then lifted him gracefully up out of the grime, up to the face, angular and warm. He reached out for that look, all familiar and torn. He jumped up awake. Until she faded, and left him sweating and worn.

He shook himself into awareness then shivered in the morning cold and the sweat dribbling down his spine. Shit, needed a piss badly.

He sat in the kitchen nursing himself through the paper, eyes skipping the words like bad pupils, failing to connect, glancing through, off their meaning. It was just for show he knew, to hide red stains; something to concentrate on, focus, settle down his body.

He could hear his grandmother foraging up food behind him. She hadn't said anything yet about his obvious state. She seldom did; afraid perhaps, afraid to hassle him in case he took off in a huff. He felt bad at the thought, that hidden power, that illusive, subtle blackmail he preferred not to have but perhaps couldn't avoid wielding. He wasn't sure if he could even stomach food but he knew he had to. It was part of the bargain. She pampered him, felt good, buying up his time.

She landed a steaming plate down flat in front of him, pushing it beneath the newspaper, contented determination lighting up her face.

He caught her eyes, briefly, searched them, hid back in fear. She needed him, the knowledge tore through his heart. The feeble old woman's ties strangling his hung-over strained appetite. He pushed the food around messily, forcing a mouthful anytime she looked. He couldn't drag words out; he shied away from conversation: further deceit covered up gently in lies, half truths, sly pointers, false leads glazing over his intentions.

"Quieter last night," she said.

"What?" he asked without thinking, then repeating the question quickly, louder as he remembered she was going deaf.

"The sea. No storm last night thank God"

"No, seemed fine, they might have finished now."

Busying herself at the sink, she continued in silence, back shielding him from a direct gaze.

He wondered if she really was deaf, really so old. Her inherent strength constantly surprised him. In vicious moods he had often wondered if it was all an act, both of them playing roles they didn't want to assume. He let her cook, run the house, wash clothes, things he'd been doing for himself for years; and now tainted by these luxuries, tempted back in their ease, he'd got used to them, even enjoyed them, reasoning it all away happily: poor woman, she needs something, has to feel useful. I have to let her, give her something, he reasoned feebly trying not to delve too deeply into the mysteries of his Grandmother's own intentions or fears. People called her mad he knew. All too often he wished that was all she was. Living close to her he saw more than craziness, sensed sharper ears and a more vivid sight than anyone credited her with. In the rages of a hangover he was no longer sure whose will was the strongest, who was keeping who from what.

Plates clattered in his grandmothers' hands, cracking echoes in head. He stuffed more food down. He had to: he couldn't take any more. He soaked up long gulps of his cooling coffee to hide the taste, to drown the mouthfuls and keep them down.

"You never know this time of year."

"What?" He was reduced again to losing track of the scattered conversation.

"The storms. The sea. Can never trust them at this time of the year."

She'd turned around to clasp him in the narrow beads of her eyes. Staring at her, caught firmly in her gaze, it definitely wasn't madness he sensed but a deep force of concern. She was stronger indeed than they all thought, in will if not body; although she frequently surprised him in the latter respect also. "You were restless last night," she continued still holding him bound to her eyes.

"Just a dream." He remembered, clenching his cup in renewed fear, as he felt himself falling again, briefly. Instinctively, as if not thoroughly awake, his hand clasped the chair.

His grandmother looked startled, fussed, and old. "Be careful young Nemed. It's a bad time of the year."

Maybe she was a bit mad after all. Difficult to decipher sometimes, the gaps between it and age: did the years breed lunacy or maybe it was just an older way of thinking. They had always said she was crazy. He couldn't remember who, just vague memories of being taunted by the common feelings around town. It was something she'd done in her childhood. He'd never discovered what, and it was forgotten now in the bleakness of years long passed away, bound up in their own memory alone.

"Any plans?"

He jumped again in response. "No not really, I don't know..."

"I mean for today."

Her sharpness cut through him, slicing up his emotions, dislocating feelings of helplessness. Too sharp. Too quick.

"No!" he snapped, biting his tongue. "No. Not really," he added to soften initial rashness. She nodded absently as if she didn't really care.

Outside he felt better, freer, as he walked down the path kicking loose stones, humming even, as he waited outside the phone box.

"Nice day Mrs. MacNeill." He even managed a smile.

"Morning Nemed. How are you?"

"Fine. Fine."

The woman moved in front. He looked after her, smile still clenched between his teeth as he tried to ignore the frustration of a ten minute wait. Fuck it. A minute earlier and he'd have beaten her to it. That woman talks. It's one thing out in the open when you can duck flying tongue staccatos, another completely when she's stuck on the phone. At least she had see him. He'd made sure of that. She was forced to recognize that he too wanted the phone: he wasn't just standing here or wandering around the box just to keep warm. No difference. She babbled on and on.

If he hadn't been enjoying himself, finally awakening with the clean air, he'd have gone to the next one; it was better walking than standing there unheeded. But he was in the mood to wait and it began to give him malicious pleasure.

Everyone knew her, knew her too well. She was well accustomed to their leaving, to braving out their stares; it was almost a rule if Mrs. MacNeill was on the phone, you just had to move along. Well, he'd wait her out this time. The thought lent strength to his smile.

"So what are you up to these days then?" she challenged, still blocking the door.

Get out of it bloody woman. Let me use the blasted phone. The powerful body still blocked his way. She had him trapped, and would force replies before giving away her ground. And all this after a twelve minute wait he moaned deeply, he should have known better from the start. Another reason no one waited: you couldn't win. The reward for waiting was her undivided attention. No one survived long.

"Not much. You know the way it is."

She just nodded, thin lips pursed as if she did, or knew the way it was for the likes of him. She'd everyone classed neatly, her own clearly sculptured categories. And she knew the way it was for each of them, according to her own definition: she never tolerated abbreviations. She stored up information that aided her conclusions, and ignored everything else as proof of her own rules.

"And your grandmother? How's she these days? Survive the winter?"

They'd been talking only yesterday. She knew very well. Kill the fucking woman: if you could touch her through all those layers.

"Fine. Doing well..." he couldn't resist, "... you know the way it is."

Not sure if he'd offended, if her thick skin had prickled under his humor. Not caring, he risked a smile. It had worked. She loped off, basked thumping well made thighs. "Give her my regards," she flung. It caught in the slamming door.

"Phew." He released breath while foraging for the beer mat with the number. It had faded a little, caught under a stain; but it was still legible.

He got through on the second dial. Some deaf idiot had answered the first time but after Mrs. MacNeill he wasn't in the mood for any more nonsense. He'd slammed it on the hook hoping he hadn't broken it: that would be too much. He couldn't face the fifteen minute hike to the next cabin now, not at this stage. He dialed again quickly and got through. Damn it. You'd think they would have gone back to digital by now. Smoking was allowed in public again so why not a decent network. Too fickle to record each word obviously. Slow them down, keep them doped. Why do you need broadband when lofi will keep you cool, lowdown, incoherent enough to leave any trace worth recording as evidence.

A couple of minutes later he was standing outside contented, a little nervous, hoping it would all work out. It sounded easy: but it always does. There was nothing he could do now, it was all arranged; he only had to wait and see.

He had thought he was used to it but maybe you never are: the background rustle of the sea was suddenly crushing through his head with

unusual force. He turned around quickly, went straight towards the house at a rapid pace, swift enough to leave behind further distractions.

"Back early," his grandmother greeted.

He crept over the floor, worn carpet slipping at his feet, then along the landing, his progress echoed in faint creaks. The first two steps bent under him before he turned the corner of the stairs and peered down the remainder to the table at their feet. Light filed through the glazed glass of the front door, brightening the hall, casting deep shadows up the stairwell. Shielding his eyes from stray rays he saw nothing at all, only the phone book, long useless, faded edges curled up in disgrace. No post. No letters of any hue. His eyes searched first for the red and blue airmail, Akhesa, and then the plain blue threatening dark printed ink.

"No nothing at all," his grandmother shouted, "saw him myself. No post this morning. Passed right on."

Cursed woman. She was everywhere. He didn't bother to reply, only creaked back to his room still sneaking out of spite. He sat on the bed; there was nowhere else really. The sole chair lay useless, littered under clothes. And the two boxes, his pride, his opera collection. He'd never kept a copy of the kids ditties that had briefly made him money. The comparison was too bitter, worth a tragic aria of it's own. It would have to be a solo at this stage.

The curtain slipped back neatly, coyly to one side of the window. Poor Old Mrs. Harappan followed him down the path, watery eyes watching the lanky figure fade away at the bottom, down the incline. She'd heard the door bang and had jumped up to make sure. Her breath fogged the window, hiding the emotions welling up from deep down behind her eyes.

Perched amidst his rocks he felt ridiculous, busy searching out other reasons for his being there: he needed the air, the salty taste of the sea, he argued; he'd always come here. This was his spot, his own personal temple of high peace ever since he was a child.

It was that child he sensed now, foolish and young.

Hung-over and drunk, he could have seen anything, dreamed the fears of kings. Pulling deeply, watching the tip glow bright red, eating into itself, clawing through its guts, he tried to silence the racing panic of his mind. He exhaled slowly, watching the feeble puffs fade to the wind, little clouds of vein expectancy, curiosities, dissolving faithfully to their doom. He blew more to keep them company in the great puff graveyard in the sky then threw away the butt carelessly, and watched it flutter drunkenly down the cliff, to be lost finally in some cleft of oily green moss. A sudden urge to slid down after it hit him. Don't be stupid he groaned and huddled closer to himself in the wind.

"Anything else Mrs. Harappan?"

"No that's all I think."

"Did I give you the bread?"

"Yes. I think so. Yes. It's here at the bottom of the bag."

"Good. Good. Sometimes I think I'm losing my memory."

"Aren't we all," the older woman sighed, "doesn't it come to us all."

Poor Old Mrs. Harappan, thought Mrs. Banba, braves it all, not a complaint to be heard. Although to be fair, she keeps her years well. No one could ever tell how old she was; she'd looked this withered when Mrs. Banba herself was only a toddler. They used all be afraid of her, that hulking shadow in black, carrying the same old walking stick. It was a bit big for her now; the wood had failed to shrink with the body leaving her hands lifted high to the top of her stick, its handle just below her chin. Yes, she had aged, become frailer, bent up in the passing of age, of time. But the face still looked the same, still crinkled and strong. It hadn't changed at all. And the eyes that had frightened them as kids, still bright, sunk back a little further maybe, but ever glowing, forever sharp. "You're looking well Mrs. Harappan," she added, "keeping well are you?"

"Surviving," and she sighed, deep, tired, out of character.

Mrs. Banba lifted her eyes, head still bent to the bill; she was silent in uncertainty, in surprise: there had never been a sense of weakness in this old woman before. Softening quickly, she sensed an opportunity. Her mind began turning over something to say, to detain the old woman just a few minutes longer, to comfort and console. She wasn't a bad character really. A tough nut. Mrs. Banba's sympathy rose up in the face of the shell cracking; in power now,

she could pity, sympathize, rush out inane solace. Searching for the opening she dawdled longer with the figures. "I gave you the soap, didn't I?"

"Yes." Silence before the older woman continued, "and give me two packets of cigs for Nemed before you add it all up. You know the ones he smokes, don't you?"

Eyes flashing gratitude, Mrs. Banba's hands quickly whisked them to the counter. "Indeed I do. In here only yesterday." She saw the gate warily open and the path flowing up ahead. "And how is Nemed?" She let the pencil stay in its clockwork path, and glanced briefly into those eyes, words of pity ready, lurking behind her lips. She got little satisfaction.

"He's fine." The short answer punctuated Mrs. Harrapan's impatience to be off.

Quickly pursuing, Mrs. Banba was forced to try again: "Hasn't found anything yet, has he?"

"And he won't here."

Mrs. Banba drew back in shock at the bitterness behind her customer's words, the anger piled up, forcing its way out past the pale lips, shaking her feeble body as they slipped out, hanging threatening in the air.

"He only stays here for me." Then she added, feeling some need to defend: "He's a good lad."

Steam lost, not sure where to proceed, Mrs. Banba had one last try. "Well it's good to have someone, isn't it ... if I'm as lucky myself ..."

"I don't need anyone. Taken care of my self all my life and I can do it now. Don't know what he came back for. Nothing to do with me."

Struggling now, Mrs. Banba continued bravely, attempting to gain lost ground, "but, I mean ... it must be nice to have him."

"He'd be better off out of here. Shouldn't have come back. Don't know what brought him. Better off back where he belongs ... before that changes." Her voice was shaking but Mrs. Banba failed to notice, still intent on a scrap of gossip, anything at all, anything concrete to feed along, anything she wanted to hear, not these crazy babblings.

"Maybe he just needs a nice young girl." Ill at ease Mrs. Banba broke into a smile, voice squeaky high, forced humor crashing in the silence of the response.

Mrs. Harappan seemed to shake, the old bones quivering under some strain. "How much do I owe you," was all she said, and Mrs. Banba told her without delay even as she calculated what their strange exchange might have meant. She'd done her best; she'd been available to comfort and console. Some people never knew when they have it good. She'd be lucky herself to reach that age, never mind have someone back to take care of her, and the neighbors as well. She shook in her own dream, her own flirting imagination; she had many years left yet, needn't worry on that score. She calmed herself.

The eyes followed Mrs. Harappan as she struggled out the door, a new one, polished metal and glass, stiff and automatic. She rushed around the counter to help, pulling it apart with both hands. "There you are now love," she

gushed baring her shop indecently to the elements. "There you go," she repeated, grateful for the chance at last of helping.

Poor Old Mrs. Harappan said nothing. Her beaten figure walked off into the dusk, silently, quickly, stick flying just to show the busybody: she could have opened the door well enough by herself. She saw Mrs. MacNeill on the other side of the street but kept her head down determinedly. Not today. Not now. She avoided another meeting, the crushing clash of strong wills all seeking advantage, pointers of their own worth. The knotted old lady swung round the corner gathering pace with the wind at her back.

Mrs. Banba slammed the door, shutting out the rising gust. Graceless old woman she felt and had been like that as long as she'd know her. A hard old nut. Always was. Memories stroked, caressed her tired brain. There was something strange in her past too, wasn't there? All mysterious and faint. Some scandal. Squatting on the high stool behind the counter she cringed her eyes in the effort to remember. A long time ago now. Something about that family. They'd always had it rough. Attracted to the deep. Poor Old Mrs. Harappan, she thought, softening her heart; she's seen a lot, a mountain of memories, experience and desires clogged up in that poor brain. And now Nemed. She wondered why she wanted him to leave. They always said she was a bit mad.

She made a note of it. Owed her for those cigs. Stuck it roughly on top of the cash till. It fluttered as the door opened, then fell neglected as another customer approached, another round.

His mother had screamed as she darted to pull him back, long freckled arm blue ribboned in tension; her neck bulging, face fringed with torment as she shouted his name.

It had frightened him, shocked him to submission. He couldn't move in the torment, the confusion. They were grabbing him, tugging roughly. His knees skint of the rocks. "Don't ever go down there again!", Holding him to her breast, swaying in the wind, sobbing in his hair, she warned him, voice trembling. He too cried, roared out soundless in the gale, injustices rolling down both cheeks. "Come here," she smoothed when they had both calmed down and she led him gently to the edge, hand tightly around his arm. She bent down between the rocks, closer to the edge, mouth frozen in concentration: "Look!" She let him slide out a little, stretching out, his arm still firmly in a ring of clenched steel, her knuckles whitening as he leaned, then grabbing him back.

"Did you see?"

He nodded, unsure, tears welling up again.

"Did you see how far down it is?"

He nodded still uncertain.

"And look at those rocks."

His eyes stayed sunken in hers.

"Look how greasy, slippery they are. Do you know how easy you could fall? And you saw down there, didn't you?" She shook him gently with emphasis, "didn't you?"

He sobbed, sucked breath between teeth and searched for the appropriate face. He was still not sure what was happening. Would it be better to keep crying? But something iron in his mothers voice forced silence and shakes.

"What would happen if you fell, if you fell down there, down the cliff onto those horrible green rocks?" Crying again she hugged him. He tugged her closer. "My love ... I'm sorry," she muttered, mouth lost in the rough cloth that was his shoulder, coat several sizes too big.

He began crying again. Shaking, frightened, he could see his frail body smashed bloody pulp. The image crowded his mind as it had just done his mothers. The pair huddled, cuddled their comforts in the sobs of near panic.

It had been so long ago, yet, looking down, he could still feel his mother's anguish, mixed even now, with the same childish desires, wild impulses, unthoughtout recklessness.

Time had ebbed away the vision, distorting memories. Maybe he had always come here. Possibly the same spot. But it could have been anywhere. The cliff folded the same all along, abrupt rocks carving the one illusory protection. They had enticed that child as they continued to do the adult. Dangerous in their serenity, they lead away calmly: behind them there was

nothing, a sheer fall stretching down, etched, drawn with the rough lines of crevices, harsh shades of jutting rock hacked onto the face.

Down down down into the swirling green below. Mouth open, an unfed tiger, all claws and sharp glinting teeth, the waters crashed; dark foaming thunder, endless mass shuddering, twisting angrily in its cage. He sensed the coldness of the water; it reached up here to his heights.

He had never trusted the sea. He had always treated it with respect, the caution built on a fear, deep bred within all those who pass out their lives at its edge. And behind all that vigilance lay the love propagated under its presence, its mystical attraction, a hold which stretched through the years. The sea, the ocean, the rough soothing threat as it waved and strayed in your dreams. It was the one thing he'd missed in all that time away. Make the best of it now he told himself, it'll be soon gone again.

He sat in the silence which only accustomed sounds can create. Seeping beyond his ears, deep down in his head, rocking and soothing, drawing sleep from deep depths, the stillness comforted, the waves caressed. He lounged in their arms in no hurry to move. No rush at all. A little longer. A few seconds more before finally facing the real world at his back.

The lights of the town bobbed uneasily behind them. The feeble glows were beginning to fade, closing in together as they did so, distance merging the individual specks, as one until there remained only a haze, a faint orange glow, floating, suspended not unlike the clouds as they too became hidden by the

night. Dancing, jingling, they cast obscure shadows no longer seen: they were out too far now. The moon dodged about in dark shadows, resting there in its own secrets, far away, covered, warm behind a blanket of cloud. Their dark blue mantle kept it at bay, left it in peace, let it dream on in its own fantasies, far removed from the world below. Out of sight, out of mind. A lone star peeked above them, a pinpoint of focus in the dead of the night. There had been another earlier but it was lost now to sight. It had been much brighter before and, fearing a bright cloudless night, Tlaloc had almost called it all off. And then it was too late. They embraced the darkness, shivering in its bleakness, grateful for its shelter. They wouldn't do it without cover, Tlaloc had promised; they'd take no chances. They needn't worry any longer. It was dark.

Nemed sat up in the prow, crouching silently, steadily, awkwardly, in case he shook the tiny boat. The noise of the motor crackled through the night guided gently under Tlaloc's hand in the stern. Eyes peeling Nemed stared into the gloom. A damp, clammy cold slipped beneath his woolen layers; bones quaked uneasily under sticky warm wet skin. Lying there, senses open, he was lost to the sea, briefly swallowed up in its sound. Relaxed almost, tuneful. Then he snapped back wide awake. Tlaloc had cut the motor. Nemed swallowed hard, noisily in the gaining silence, the frightening sound of nature filling the vacuum they had just left.

They bobbed, held on a cushion, the slush slush of the sea, waves flapping, smartly slapping the rough hewn wood of their craft which in turn, lolled gently at their tips. No wind thank God though Nemed, all quiet, peaceful,

sea at ease. Just as well. Wouldn't fancy being out this far on a rougher night. He hadn't thought they'd be out so far, the shore so distant, an orange haze crumpled like a used handkerchief. Snotty clouds congealed on the green hue of the horizon.

Such a small boat. Tlaloc hadn't told him either; Nemed hoped there weren't other things missing vocal recognition. He eased his head slowly, twisting several degrees. Neck muscles cramped but he still couldn't see beyond the shadow, equally silent, at the other end of the boat. A little over a meter yet it seemed miles between them: one could have been left behind there on the shore and neither of them would have noticed: they couldn't even see each other. He stopped thinking and tried to steady his nerves, to elbow back the adrenaline and keep to his task. In this inkiness it shouldn't be hard to spot what he'd been told to look for, he assured himself.

Tlaloc too was nervous and wanting to stretch, stamp, move around to ease the wait. He looked at Nemed lying prone; he could almost touch him with his feet. He wondered what he was thinking. Not too much he hoped: doesn't pay. Stay steady. Remain safe. Tlaloc hoped Nemed wouldn't panic, that he would keep it together if anything went wrong. Christ, nothing better have. Not this time. He needed this one, he was relying on it badly. He clutched his fingers tightly to his nose, and squeezed to stop a sneeze. He hurt himself and nearly shouted. He pinched harder in violent punishment: he wasn't going to let anything interfere. He'd kill Nemed if he put a foot wrong.

They were both relaxed, sufficiently tense, when Nemed gave the cue. Clicked his fingers once, snap breaking the blackness ... twice. Once will do you fool, screamed Tlaloc silently, nudging him roughly instead with his boot. The boat rocked violently in the emotion. Shit. They settled down. Tlaloc saw it too. Bright pin prick to the left shining through the gloom where ocean met its counterpart in the black of night sky. Sea mist curled, sniffing the beam as it drew closer. Tlaloc flicked their own torch. He knew the code. He'd done it before Nemed noted. He concentrated on the beam swiveling closer under their guidance.

They felt its approach through the timbers beneath them. Creaking, screaming out in the silence, their turbulence, groaning reaction to the waves at their side. The longer craft cut its engines, its wake subsiding, silence regained. Tlaloc stood up gently, legs apart, shakily balancing. The first box came down. Nemed stumbled to grasp it from Tlaloc's impatient hands as he passed it on. Heavy.

Another, another, and more, until Nemed lost count. He knew why he'd been brought. They could never be moved by one. Seven or eight he reckoned, sitting down on them with a jerk. The motor roared again, spitting out fire and they speed around on one side in a long graceful curve. Neither of them felt the beauty, the tenderness of the night, as they leaned forward, urging it on to the shore. It's black mass loomed nearer, stretching out above them disappearing as they drew under its shade, welcoming it's protection.

They hit the wrong place first. Nemed could hear Tlaloc cursing, sharp words hissing on his breath, sizzling in the electricity pounded out by nervous hearts. They pulled away quickly, dropped in closer and they found the right spot. They hauled the boat out of the water, the gritty pebbles giving way, protesting beneath slippery wet feet. Trying not to splash, attempting to muffle wheezing breath, they struggled with the boxes, haste fully shuffling them to the back of the van. Finally, they jumped in panting, slammed it in gear and out to the road. Heaving breaths frosting the windscreen as they roared down dead country tracks. For almost an hour they drove before they'd recovered some poise. They still didn't speak.

Lights off they slipped into the clearing, its space overhung by the shadows of tall trees. Wind rustled branches as they waited, each leafy flutter an inconsiderate thumbtack in the behind, jerking them straight with the shock. Nerves jangling, they didn't dare even smoke. "Any minute now" was all Tlaloc murmured to his silent guest, praying for it not to be the last. Think of tomorrow, Nemed tried to calm himself, when it'll all be over and everything set up, on course, and we can get out of here again. Off to anywhere they liked, back to Akhesa. Shite! His head rang. His brain was thumping. His eyes spun, dazed, out of focus. He lifted himself off the dashboard. Something hot was flowing in his mouth. Time was frozen in eternity. Mind overloading, sticky in doubt, he struggled to obey the screams.

"Get out. Get out." Tlaloc was pushing him, "get out you crazy bastard and run. Fucking run!"

He fell out on his knee, stumbled up and did what he was told. The urgency, the shaking pleas of Tlaloc's shouts pushing him on. There were lights all around, staring, searching for their truth. Instinctively, Nemed ran between them, deep into the trees ... ran on fumbling, tripping, dashing his knees. He raced through the roar of shots, the hiss of a smashed branch. A hand grabbed his shoulder, dragging him closer. He pulled away swiping at the limb, fist clenched, a bundle of nerves.

"It's me!"

Nemed couldn't see anything. He kept running.

"Keep going. Get out of here. Out of this town lad. 'Cause if you don't that Tlazolteoh crowd won't take pity."

Questions welled up in confusion, a wandering queue, but only syllables escaped, unordered. Tlaloc gave no time for the luxury of answers.

"Don't ask. Shut the fuck up. Do as I tell you..."

Something cracked above them violating the night air. Pushed away by the scrambling hands, Nemed kept running to the safety of the night, dodging tree trunks, plunging into the soft earth and it clung to his breath in revenge.