

On one of the thinner streets off the steep main road he could see a staying place: the Quare Geg Inn. Inside was cooler, though the triumphant thrips still buzzed. Buzzing too, a small boy in the back room, mimicking the daily fighterplane sweeps. Completely spent, Borrada could hear his own footsteps shuffle along the wood floor to the counter. So too could the innkeeper.

At the counter, Borrada spied rows of coffee mugs though the percolater was fuzzed with mould, and he assumed that this was a one-time shebeen though the custom had gone with the fruit. Still, the roast tang of poteen had impregnated the wood of the tables and chairs. "Sir," he asked, "have you a room for me to just clean myself up?"

"Pah!" The innkeeper ushered Borrada out with both hands flicking.

Borrada turned to leave. Though his vision of the future maintained some clarity, his footsteps shuffled heavier. But the young boy had tugged the man's brown gown and whispered. And the man – the innkeeper – had come into the thinner street after the inquirer. He took Borrada by both shoulders and looked at him. People passed, wondering. The innkeeper touched Borrada's rough beard and held his face. He stared into Borrada's eyes without flinching and without blinking. And then took Borrada's hand in both of his and shook it vigorously. "Prime Minister," he said, "forgive me. I didn't recognise you, even though my ears have been tweaked listening to you on my radio. Oh sir," he said, "I've never been blessed like this." He put his hand to Borrada's back and ushered him. "Come on right ahead, I've got lodgings for you. Please..."

The innkeeper showed Borrada upstairs, and the boy insisted on carrying the satchel and the heavy Harmonic Node.

"I've no money," said Borrada. "I've nothing to..."

"Ah! Ah!" he said, begging a quiet. "Having you here's more dues than I'm due. This room's alright for you?"

Borrada noted no windows but a pyramidal skylight, a sink with soap and a mirror, a picture of The Holy Dolour Emperor that hung askew, and a folding bed. "More than fitting," he said.

"And a blade for shaving," the man said. "And Lorcan, bring Mr. Borrada some shave cream."

The boy sprang out.

"And my brush, Lorcan! And Lorcan, a clean shirt and vest. And trews, Lorcan!"

The man and his boy give blessings as they left. Borrada took the blessings but felt a greater uplifting at the avidity and wondered about the rest of his countrymen. He felt impelled to speak again. But graced with soap and water to wash, he indulged the whimsies of cleanliness and grooming and shaving, and took as long to clean the sink of grey silt afterwards.

And he looked at himself in the spattered mirror. Water dripped from his mahogany ringlets. He stood up, letting the grey beads fall on him. For moments, he watched himself, trying to remember who he was. But memory was not the tool to give a good account.