

West of the Moon, East of the Sun

Crossover between Back to the Future and Lord of the Rings

by Mary Jean Holmes

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*Still 'round the corner there may wait
A new road or a secret gate,
And though I oft have passed them by,
A day will come at last when I
Shall take the hidden paths that run
West of the moon, east of the sun.*

J.R.R. Tolkien

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I

June 21, 1902
via
December 20, 2012

Up until the point that all hell broke loose, it really *had* been a perfect evening. Even in the midst of the mind-numbing, ear-splitting chaos now all about them, Clara Brown still clung to that opinion (not to mention the nearest solidly anchored object in their time-traveling locomotive).

She had even predicted that something unexpected would happen before the night was over. After all, the outing *had* been planned by her husband, the eminent, if eccentric, Doctor Emmett L. Brown, now twice Nobel Prize-winning physicist and inventor, and to some, still the Crackpot-in-Residence of Greater Hill Valley, California. The occasion had been their 30th wedding anniversary, celebrated on the 20th day of December, 2012, although their evening's activities took place in 1902, in one of the more opulent night-spots in New York City, on the much warmer evening of June 20th.

Clara had, of course, been delighted by the prospect of an evening spent with dinner and dancing in the calmer, less hurried times of over a hundred years past. No synthesized substitutes for everything from sugar to fats, robbing the exquisitely-prepared foods of the tastes they were meant to have. No irritating whispers and disapproving sidelong glances from the less open-minded members of Hill Valley society, some deriding her for her choice in husbands, others condemning him for "robbing the cradle," or simply for being what he was. No intrusive inquiries from people who recognized Emmett as the inventor of practical, clean, and cheap fusion power and other surprisingly useful bits of technology. No sucking up from people who knew the scientist was wealthy, the major owner of an extremely successful technology firm, leeches who wanted a part of it. No blaring rock bands or over-synthesized jazz or blandly soporific pop music. Just a wonderful, quiet dinner in a beautiful place with just the right balance of desired privacy and excellent entertainment.

Clara couldn't have asked for more -- indeed, this was exactly what she *had* asked for as a way to celebrate their anniversary, though she hadn't expected to get it. And when the evening was finally over, the last bite of dessert

eaten, the last dance done, and the time well beyond the midnight hour, she looked forward to going home with a host of pleasant memories to warm her all through the chilly days of the deepening winter.

But then, as so often happened despite Emmett's best efforts to avoid it, something went wrong. They had taken the time machine -- the locomotive rather than the highly-modified gold-plated Jaguar or its most recent successor, one built not from a pre-existing car or a train or any other vehicle, but designed from the ground up for the specific purpose of being a time machine -- from where they had hidden it in plain sight: the rail yards, where many other private trains and coaches waited for their owners. Once into the countryside, Emmett had dropped the holographic projection which had disguised the rather outlandish-looking Machine so that it seemed like much any other private train-car, shifted the disguise to invisibility, took to the skies, and started them on their way to the wee morning hours of December 21, 2012. It had been a perfectly smooth transition from rail to hovercraft, a perfect acceleration to the requisite 88 miles per hour, and a flawless entry into the stream of the space-time continuum.

And *that* was where they found that they had entered not the door through time and space, but the door into Hell itself.

As Clara had already noted, it was a turbulent, horrifying, incredibly noisy place in which they now found themselves, and though she was at a complete loss to understand what had happened, after some quick study, Emmett had at least a partial answer.

"We're in n-dimensional space, caught at an intermediate point between the entrance and exit to the fourth dimension," he had to postulate in a shout, to make himself audible over the cacophony assailing their ears.

"I thought the transition is supposed to be instantaneous!" his wife shouted back, wishing there was some way to turn down the volume of Chaos.

"It *is*," the inventor insisted. "But even the smallest fraction of an instant takes *some* amount of time to occur."

"But -- this shouldn't be possible! You've told me that a person can't function in n-dimensional space, that simply being there will overload all your senses and ultimately kill you!" Which, she felt, was something she would certainly feel happening in only a minute or so, if this din continued.

"I've altered all three of the different energy fields I use to surround the time machines to help deal with that problem," he hollered back. "Ever since Marty accidentally stumbled across a viable solution to interdimensional incompatibility, I thought it would be a good idea to incorporate similar protection into the time machines' flux dispersal, weather shield, and holographic imaging systems. At least one is always active during all parts of the time travel process, and would shield the passengers from the deadly effects of n-dimensional space, just in case something like this ever happened. I've been here before, after all. I didn't ever want to get stuck and not be able to get out again because just being here drove me out of my mind in a matter of seconds!"

He glanced at the readouts, then at the visual turmoil all too visible beyond the usually semi-opaque stained-glass windows of the cab. He successfully suppressed a shudder. "It's almost like we're inside a flawed computer program, where an error in just one line of code sets up a repeating loop and you can't get past it to the rest of the program until you find a way to fix the mistake."

Still clinging to the passenger's seat to which she was firmly strapped, Clara tried to present a face of staunch bravery. "Can't you just shut down the time travel program, then? Wouldn't that at least drop us back into normal space so we can find the problem and repair it in peace?"

Unhappily, Emmett shook his head. "Once the flux capacitor kicks in and the process begins, the only way it can stop is by completing temporal transition. As a safeguard, I designed the system so that if transition *couldn't* be completed, the process would abort. Whatever happened must've happened during the micro-second between the flux dispersal and the end of transition. If it can be fixed, we have to do it from here."

She asked the question she really didn't want to ask. "Can it *be* fixed?"

Emmett shrugged, not in feigned casualness, but because he simply didn't know. "I hope so. But I won't know until I try."

"Then, please, try!" she urged, covering her ears, which were starting to hurt from all the noise. "Before both of us go deaf, or insane from all this racket!"

The scientist smiled wryly in appreciation of her sentiments, then went straight to work. Before long, he had more of an answer. "Well, it's not the programming -- all the diagnostics show the system's clean. It must be a hardware failure."

Clara's heart wanted to fall like a stone at that announcement. She knew as well as he did that if the failed hardware was in the computer circuitry, they were quite likely trapped here for eternity. Though some of the bits of silicon and metal running the Time Machine were available at any local Radio Shack, most were handmade and so highly customized, it could take weeks to make another, even given the proper equipment (which, of course, they probably didn't have at hand). She took a deep breath and mustered her courage before replying. "Please, dear, don't tell me it's something inside the computers..."

To her immense relief, the white-haired head shook. "If it was, the diagnostics would've showed it, they wouldn't've run at all, or they would've crashed without finishing. No, it's got to be something simpler than that. Maybe a worn connection or a crack in the glass, something that could've broken under the extreme stress of the gigawatt dispersal...." His speculations faded as his fingers flew over the computer keyboard, summoning up the programs that could provide detailed sensor readings of all the time-ship's operating systems, inside and out. He sighed as he ran the tests. "I wish I'd put Angel back on-line here. He'd have this figured out already, but I honestly didn't think we'd need him on such a short trip. Even *he* didn't think so, and that's what he was designed to do."

Also regretting that choice, Clara did her part to help, examining all the panes of glass for the smallest crack or gap (at least as best she could without leaving the security of her seat). Her search quickly revealed nothing.

Fortunately, Emmett's was more successful. "It's definitely nothing in the programming or the computer hardware," he announced just after his wife reported the results of her search. "Which increases our odds of managing repairs with the resources we have on hand. If I can just pinpoint the problem and its precise location...."

Of course, Clara knew that things were seldom that simple, but her thoughts whispered a quick prayer that just this once, it might be so. Then lo and behold! A few tumultuous moments later, Emmett loosed a triumphant, "Got it!" and she sighed back to the heavens her thanks.

"What is it?" she asked, now praying that her worst fears about repairs would not come to pass. "Some vital part didn't rattle loose and fall off when we made the temporal transition, did it?"

Again, she could not be anything but grateful when her husband shook his head. "No, and it isn't something we don't have the tools or supplies to fix, either." His wife was grateful he was looking intently at the computer and didn't her blush in reaction to his apparent mind-reading. "It's just a minor short in one of flux dispersal lines -- one of the most important connections, granted, but nothing I can't fix in a few minutes with a pair of insulated gloves and a little electrical tape. The strength of the current running through the line must've made a weak spot pop at just the wrong moment, but repairing it'll be a piece of proverbial cake."

Knowing how much power was involved in deploying the field that made time travel possible, Clara was concerned that her spouse was making too light of the matter. "Are you sure? I don't want you electrocuting yourself, Emmett, especially not on our anniversary...."

But the inventor merely turned away from the computer with a grin. "Now, Clara, after all these years you should know that I'm not foolish enough to work on this stuff without making sure I'm *not* a source of ground. Actually," he continued as he crouched down beside her to collect the required repair items from their storage beneath the passenger bench, "what worries me more is having to work on the outside of the cab under these circumstances." The wave of one hand indicated the chaos around them.

His wife's brown eyes turned to perfect circles of horror. She released one hand from its death grip on the seat's edge and clamped it instead on her husband's shoulder. "Emmett, you *can't!*" she cried, hoping to stop him. You've told me time and again that making transition with a door even slightly ajar can be tremendously dangerous -- and that any contact with the flux dispersal field would be fatal! You'd have to open the door to get outside, and with the whole vehicle shaking like a leaf, you'd be killed instantly!!"

Emmett, however, appeared much less concerned. "No, not really. For one thing, we aren't making transition; we're *caught* in it, and opening the door might actually present a solution to our problem."

Clara was unconvinced. "But what if it doesn't? You know how much energy we've got crackling around us, and Lord only knows what other possibly lethal powers might be making those dreadful noises...!"

"The dispersal really shouldn't be a problem, as long as I stay inside of it. I'll have to crawl along the engine's surface, but that shouldn't be difficult; there are plenty of things to hang onto. Given the shape of the locomotive and the field configuration required to accommodate it, there's about a three-foot high 'safe' zone between the vehicle and the dispersal field. Being inside it will actually protect me from the other negative side-effects of n-dimensional space. I promise I'll be as careful as I can, but if one of us doesn't try this, we'll probably be stuck here forever. I don't find that especially appealing, do you?"

His smile was meant to be reassuring, but it couldn't completely erase Clara's doubts and fears. "No -- but are you absolutely *sure* this is the only way?"

The scientist shrugged. "Of course not, but I don't think we have forever to spend looking for alternate solutions." He motioned with his head in the direction of the machine's computers. "There're some unhealthy indications that the arrested dispersal field is the *only* thing keeping us together in all this chaos, and other even healthier indications that the interaction between the field and whatever's beyond it is causing it to decay."

He put a hand over the smaller one gripping his shoulder; his expression softened with sympathy. "I don't like the idea of going out there, either, Clara, but I like even less the idea of the two of us dying here, leaving the kids to wonder what happened to us."

The former teacher hadn't wanted to consider that possibility; hearing her husband say it made her realize how much she shared his feelings. She released her other hand, laid it on his cheek for a moment as she studied his puppy-dog earnest face, then kissed him soundly, as if it would be her last opportunity. When she drew away, she leaned her forehead against his and fiercely whispered, "*Please* be careful, Emmett. If you don't come back, I'll never forgive you."

He laughed softly, not mocking but reassuring. "Then I have no choice but to come back, don't I?" So saying, he kissed her lightly, stood, and headed for the cab door.

Rather than let the door and ramp swing fully open -- the movement of which might penetrate the energy fields protecting them with disastrous results -- Emmett slid open the large window on the upper part of the door. As he laid one hand on the window latch, he paused, as one does before doing something that could have a very bad outcome, but when he opened it -- not fully, just enough so that he could hike himself up to the sill level and slip out -- nothing happened. Both he and Clara sighed, partly in relief at disaster averted, but also mildly disappointed that this had not been the quick fix it might have been, as it had been for Marty during his accidental interdimensional travels in 1999. Before stepping out, the inventor stopped to remove his white tailcoat, and called back to his wife, "Close it up again, once I'm out. No sense in taking a chance that in all this chaos, something might be knocked out of the cab, through the field, and collapse it in a way that'll strand us here permanently."

Clara saw his point at once and nodded vigorously. With that, he took a deep breath, braced himself to face the unknown, and carefully pulled himself up onto the lower edge of the window, then turned about and maneuvered himself out onto the outer skin of the Machine.

Clara watched him even after she had risen and sealed the cab, again confirming that the cause of their dilemma had nothing to do with a portal left ajar. Emmett moved slowly and clung as close as he could to the locomotive's surface, lest some unpredicted jostling cause him to stumble and move beyond the dangerous three-foot limit. Each deliberate movement seemed to take an hour to Clara's eyes, but each successful step brought him closer to his goal and their return home. She prayed in urgent supplication for his safety every time he moved, and prayed again in earnest thanks every time he stopped. She made a mental note to apologize to the Lord for so battering the gates of heaven for His attention, but she felt sure He would understand, under the circumstances.

Finally, after what felt to both of them like an eon's labor, Emmett reached his destination. Clara could not see what he was seeing, nor could she hear his mutterings over the din of the unplace in which they were stranded, but one

word came through loud and clear, bringing with it wry understanding of their predicament: "Pigeons!" The omnipresent feathered vermin of New York City were well known, in both the century of her birth and that of her current residence, and Clara knew that they considered any available perching place as their own. They also tended to view anything that remotely resembled nesting material as theirs for the taking, and it was simple for the former teacher to sum up two and two, and realize that the myriad of semi-exposed wiring on parts of the outer engine had captured some nest-building bird's eye as ideal for their construction.

Odd, Clara reflected, how something so insignificant and yet so unfortunate could have such catastrophic and unpredictable results. It reinforced her belief that, plan as one might to avoid disaster, bad luck could strike at any time, from virtually any corner. The best laid plans of mice and men oft gang agly, she mused, so it was only to be expected that the most meticulously laid plans of eccentric scientists would go even farther awry, once in a while.

After his exclamations concerning the cause of their trouble, however, Emmett at once set to work on its resolution, and in less than a minute, he had the damage repaired. Immediately, the space surrounding the time machine began to scintillate with the familiar glow which always preceded the actual traverse of time and space. Both travelers gasped in horror. There would be no time for him to return to the safety of the cab, and they had no notion of what would happen to a person caught in Emmett's position when transition occurred. Hopefully, the energy fields would continue to shield him from danger.

Well aware of his predicament, the inventor pressed himself as flat against the engine's surface as he could and hung on for dearest life, praying that all his theories about this never-tested event would prove true. The first sonic boom shook the timeship hard, but Emmett's grip held. The second bucked it even harder, but still he managed to hang on. He and Clara were about to sigh with relief that this was going to work, when, in the split second between the second boom and the last, something in the unstable space around them struck the Machine like the clenched fist of a giant. The impact caused the engine to tilt precipitously to one side and sent a shudder through the entirety of its metal structure. A jolt almost electric in nature hit Emmett's hands; the muscles spasmed, and his fingers opened involuntarily.

His horrified cry of, "*NO!!!*" was drowned to nothing as he reached in vain to find a new hold on the Machine now tilting away from him. The third boom sounded; time and space opened to allow the Machine passage.

Within the smallest particle of time, a deathly-white Clara saw her husband thrown from the engine; she desperately looked for some way to stop the effect already in progress, but it was too late. "*EMMETT!!!*" she shrieked, but the echo of her own voice was instantly swallowed up by the blackness of the early winter night into which she had suddenly arrived.

She was home, back in Hill Valley, 2012, but her husband was lost in a somewhere she had no idea how to find. Overwhelmed by a flood of disbelief, dread, and near-hysterical grief, she struck the control to activate the Machine's automatic landing systems, and let it berth itself while she fell to the floor and wept.

Time & Place Unknown

Even before he regained consciousness, Emmett could feel his head and ears pounding like the deepest and brassiest section of the Kettledrums from Hell. Was he still caught in that cosmic maelstrom of nothingness and noise? he wondered as coherently as he was able. He was disinclined to think so, as everything in that awful unplace seemed to be in constant motion, and he could sense (even though there was a faint dizziness in his head) that he was quite still.

Was he dead, then, disintegrated by passing through the power of the flux dispersal field, or by the maelstrom of n-dimensional space? Another moment of rumination led him to a second negative conclusion. A disembodied spirit would have no reason to feel physical pain, and that was something he perceived all too well. The sharp ache that reached from behind his eyes and into his arms and shoulders and back end convinced him that he was in a very tangible place, and whenever and wherever he had fallen, he had not done so with exceptional grace.

But as more and more of the waking world settled in to his muddled brain, he began to realize several important things: first, and most importantly, that he was alive; second, that alive did not mean undamaged, for some of his aforesaid aches and pains were quite substantial; third, that it was sunlight warming his face, not the heat of electrical sparks or the flux dispersal field; fourth, that the drumming was not the din of the Unplace he had just been; most was coming from outside his cranium, more distant than he had thought, but ominously loud, nonetheless; and fifth, that something exquisitely uncomfortable was digging into the small of his back.

He squirmed, seeking a less painful position but still only half-awake when the sound of a voice prodded him toward full consciousness. The pounding both inside and outside his head made hearing a bit difficult, but the last words, which seemed clear, were no more intelligible than those which had come before.

"Manályë polda farea lelya?"

Male, his ever-scientific mind reflexively analyzed the voice. *Baritone, I think -- but who is it -- and what is that language he's using?*

Insatiable curiosity opened his eyes, especially when the words were repeated with greater urgency. Emmett looked up in the direction of the voice, and found certain aspects of his analyses correct. The speaker was of the male persuasion, amply proved by the strong, sharp features of his fair-skinned face and the flowing silver-white beard that swept almost to his waist. From the lines and creases about his eyes and mouth, he was plainly much older than his vigorously resonant voice would have led the scientist to believe, but from his posture, that age was clearly not manifested by crippling physical frailty. Emmett smiled to himself; in that, the two of them had something in common. To most of the world, he had reached his ninety-second birthday, but in truth, he was now less than one year shy of a hundred, though the benefits of future medicine and rejuvenation allowed him to retain the vitality of someone well less than half his age.

But the man was no one Emmett had ever seen before, a certainty reinforced by his distinctly unmodern clothing. The inventor had learned a lot about costume history in order to make his travels through time as unobtrusive as possible, and his youngest son Chris' on-and-off fascination with the theater had taught him even more. This fellow's attire he placed as being considerably pre-Renaissance, perhaps late Twelfth or early Thirteenth Century. He was also no man of means, as he was clad in simple peasant garb rather than the finery of nobility, not perfectly clean and well-worn.

The hood of a fur-lined silver-gray cloak was pulled up over the fellow's white hair; a long, worn scarf of white with a faint blue design was wrapped around his head and throat, keeping both warm and the hood securely in place. His black leather belt held a stained suede pouch and a knife in a plain sheath; it also cinched in the waist of a long, loose tunic of thick gray homespun. The pale gray of a fitted woolen chemise was visible only at his wrists. Darker and heavier gray woolen trousers were tucked into scuffed boots of black leather. A small satchel was slung over his left shoulder; the right hand, covered with a worn leather glove, gripped a rather plain staff of pale ash wood. And he was armed with more than the knife and stick; Emmett could see the outline of a sword hilt pressing against the drapery of the cloak at his left side.

It was a very convincing outfit, in its own way, but something about it left Emmett with the feeling that his dating was off -- or, rather, that the costume itself was off. It had elements of designs belonging to the ancient Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Britons, even a little bit of Germanic and Scandinavian influence, stirred together with something completely alien to all. It was almost like a Hollywood costume shop version from an old Errol Flynn movie, or -- more accurately, he felt -- something that had been put together by a member of a medievalist society who had gotten his period research mixed up with imagery out one of those fantasy novels that had become obnoxiously ubiquitous and unimaginative in recent decades.

Was that the answer, then? Had he fallen into the middle of an SCA event, and was being addressed in Old English or some equivalently ancient tongue?

Off-hand, the time traveler had to say no. Linguistics was one of the non-scientific pursuits that he found quite fascinating, and although the fellow's words seemed to contain traces of several ancient European tongues, the combination was one Emmett had never before heard, and he knew enough of Old English, Mercian, Latin, and more to know that this was none of the above. Either this language was wholly invented, had been cobbled together from existing tongues into a peculiar medievalist version of Esperanto for use by a recreationist group, or was completely foreign to any linguist on Earth.

Unhappily, given the circumstances of his presence in this time and place, he was most inclined to believe the last possibility.

When the man repeated his uninterpretable question for a third time -- this with an unmistakable snap of impatient command and a lowering of the remarkably bushy white eyebrows above his equally remarkable coal-dark eyes -- Emmett curtailed his curious ponderings and gave him an answer. "I'm sorry, I don't understand you, so there's no point in barking at me." Chances were if the man was speaking in his native tongue, the lack of comprehension would be mutual, and would thus illustrate the problem that had delayed his reply.

To Emmett's satisfaction, the fellow got the point at once. His bristling expression softened back to mere urgent concern; he glanced away for a moment, toward something beyond the physicist's head and out of his sight, then turned back to him again, now with deliberate concentration.

He looked directly into the scientist's eyes, and for a moment, Emmett thought that he might be one of those people who had the mistaken notion that if you stared someone straight in the eye and spoke slowly enough, you could somehow work a linguistic miracle and make them understand a language they simply did not know. But suddenly, a thought sprang into Emmett's mind, one he hadn't initiated. It wasn't in words so much as in the *feelings* of words, crystal clear and perfectly comprehensible. If they had had an audible language, they would have said, with genuine concern, "*Are you fit to travel? We must get away from here.*"

The inventor blinked rapidly, astonished by the unexpected mental communication, but delighted by it as well. He had always been fascinated by telepathy, and being able to experience the real thing without the peculiar distortions of a technological medium was both a scientific and personal delight. It was both like and unlike the experience of using his mind-reading device at home, in ways he somehow knew he didn't have time to ponder at the moment. He toyed with the idea of thinking back in like fashion, but he settled for simply speaking his response normally, suspecting that his thoughts, if they were being read, would convey the proper answer.

"I think so," he began, wriggling his toes, then testing his legs to see if they were broken, strained, sprained, or otherwise incapacitated. Both appeared fine. He sat up and started to rise. "Of course, I may be wro--eeeyouch!" The squeal of pain came as the result of trying to lever himself off his knees with his left arm. Only now did he notice that it was in a makeshift splint and sling, and that his movements had wrenched it out of the latter. The splint was made of curls of stiff bark bound by strips of some denuded woody vine; the sling looked to be a sash of some sort impressed into service.

The old man immediately helped him to his feet. He expertly slipped the arm back into the sling, and at his touch, the stab of pain abated. "*Your arm requires a more secure dressing,*" came the wordless explanation, "*but my resources are fewer than my skills, and there isn't time now. Your surprising arrival frightened the orcs away just before dawn. You have remained unconscious ever since, and with enemies so near, I was loath to leave you unguarded to search for better supplies. It is past noon, now. Nightfall is coming -- much too swiftly, for my peace of mind. If you can travel, we must move quickly. We must put as many miles as possible between us and the orcs before the last ray of*

sunlight has faded, when they will surely come out to resume the pursuit."

"Orcs?" Emmett echoed, his only failure in comprehension. The term seemed very familiar -- so familiar, he was easily able to put an English word to the image in his mind -- but he didn't know how or from where he knew it. The vision looked like something he would have expected to find in one of those uninspired fantasies, but with vastly more depth and believability. Images of old folktales and myths with some foothold in reality bubbled up in his brain in response, shoring up his hope that he was still somewhere and somewhen on Earth. He had not dared to let himself think it for long, but it had occurred to him that the bizarre accident which had thrown the Time Machine into a space-time limbo might also have expelled him into a world entirely not his own, which, without the proper protective equipment, would mean he had perhaps four days to live before the incompatibilities of being in another dimension caused the most vital functions of body to shut down, permanently.

He had no more than an instant to think of it or of ancient legends again, for his apparent benefactor was most anxious to depart. *"Yes, orcs. I had thought this country to be free of them, but I appear to have been in error. Come, now, hurry, and I will tell you more once we are on our way."*

Emmett hesitated. The advice he'd so often given others when traveling through time -- if you get lost or stranded, stay put, or help may not be able to find you -- came to mind, but was tempered a moment later by the sobering reality of his situation. He had been here for probably eight hours or more, had not moved one inch, and rescue had not appeared. He could stay here and make it easier for Clara or the kids to find him, but given the circumstances, if he did that, what they were likely to find was his corpse. He still couldn't remember where he had heard the term *orcs* before, but between the image in his head, the sound of the distant drums, and the evidence of a recent scuffle nearby -- including several disturbing lumps in the shadows of the pines that he was certain were dead bodies -- he knew that the wiser course of action would be to seek protection, and shelter. Shivering with that realization and the chill of a sudden breeze, he was more than happy to flee this unpleasant site.

The old man moved much more swiftly than he had expected, especially in light of the fact that he was several inches shorter than the tall inventor and apparently older. He led Emmett on a path through the woods that followed a winding stream through a narrow valley. The ground was dusted with patches of light snow, and a skin of ice was visible in places where the waters were still.

Here, fully beneath the shadows of the trees, Emmett suddenly realized how cold it really was, and that the only thing that had kept him warm was the pale winter sunlight in the sheltered dell they had just fled. That it was also winter back home encouraged his hopes of being found by his family, but it made him regret having removed his dinner jacket before attempting to repair the broken Time Machine. The light woolen tailcoat wouldn't have offered much in the way of protection, but there was now nothing between him and the cold but a thin dress shirt, a definitely non-thermal undershirt, and a red silk vest that was worse than useless. To top it off, he didn't even know how to ask his companion if there was something in his satchel that he might borrow to keep warm.

Fortunately, he soon found that he didn't really need to. After perhaps a mile or so of brisk walking along the stream bed, the old man changed direction and took them up a hillside and out of the valley. Before long, they encountered a broad, open path that was either a natural road or the long-decayed ruins of one man-made. It led due west by the sun, away from the hills and the mountains beyond them. Here, his benefactor began to run, a modest pace which Emmett could match with no difficulty. With precious little wind to speak of, the exercise was enough to keep him reasonably warm while the sunlight lasted, though he hated to think how quickly frostbite would set in once they stopped or the sun went down.

As they jogged along the road-like flood-plain -- keeping a good speed, but not one that would agonize Emmett's injured arm -- the scientist tried to place the time of day by the position of the sun. Clara had made him promise not to wear any watches before they'd gone on their anniversary trip -- not because his fascination with timepieces annoyed her, but because for once, she didn't want either of them worrying about how late the night might be getting. The kids were old enough to take care of themselves, and if they ended up dancing the night away, she hadn't wanted anything to spoil it.

He'd given in very easily, and now felt a small twinge of regret that he hadn't at least persuaded her to let him wear a decorative pocket watch. The twinge, however, was only that, since odds favored that his clock and this place's time of day would be totally out of sync. For one thing, he presumed that the lowering sun was headed toward the western horizon, but if this wasn't Earth, it could be north, south, or east, for all he knew. And for another thing, even

if he *did* permit himself to assume that he hadn't left his own world, any estimate he might make would depend entirely on the hemisphere and latitude, neither of which he knew. At best, he calculated that if this was winter, that the time of year was still late-Decemberish, and they were in the northern latitudes, then it was nearing three in the afternoon, which would leave them with only about an hour's worth of full sunlight. At this pace, he had to wonder if they could possibly run far enough to outdistance whatever it was they had left behind.

Almost as if in answer to his ruminations, the bearded man slowed to a mere walk after another fifteen minutes or so had gone by. By then, they were both experiencing quickened breathing -- Emmett's much quicker than he would have liked -- but the local still had enough breath in him to let loose a piercing, almost bird-like whistle. He cocked his head for a moment afterward, listening for something Emmett could not hear over his own wheezing; then, he gestured for the inventor to follow him into a copse of trees on the north side of a small but rocky hill.

Emmett didn't have time to ask where they were going before the answer was volunteered. *"We cannot stay here for long,"* came his companion's unvoice, *"but there are things we will need before we move on."*

"Where?" the scientist wondered aloud. He was feeling a peculiar need to hear an audible voice rather than just thought-words in his head. Telepathic communication was very intriguing, but he guessed he was still too human at heart to be wholly comfortable with it, especially when it was a gift he did not possess himself. "This hardly looks like the place for a general store, or even a supply shed."

The old man laughed softly. *"It is not,"* he agreed, the thought-image colored with amusement. *"But there are ways to keep things hidden from even the worst of scavengers."* He stepped into a small clearing amid the trees, where the inventor could see signs that this place had recently been used as a campsite. Beyond the cold ashes of a dead fire, his benefactor crouched beside several leaf-bare bushes and whispered something Emmett couldn't have understood even if he'd been able to hear it. It seemed that the shadows under the shrub branches shifted; the old man reached into them and brought forth a worn sack that might as well have been made of camouflage cloth, given how well it matched the drab surroundings -- though Emmett could have sworn there had been nothing there only a moment before. Strange, the effects light and shadow could play on one's eyes.

The scientist wasn't sure which was more surprising: the sudden, almost magical appearance of the sack, or the fact that he had been understood. He decided to go for the latter, for the time being. "Wait a second," he said, putting his good hand on the fellow's arm as he began to reach into the bag. "Do you understand me? I mean, obviously, you do, but are you just reading my thoughts, or do you know my language?"

"Both, and neither," his benefactor replied, resuming his rummaging after favoring Emmett with a smile of reassurance. *"What you speak is on the surface of your thoughts, and thus easy enough for me to read, so long as you do not resist the intrusion. I have not looked farther, and will not, without your permission. But the ability to hear your thoughts and your spoken words together is making it easier for me to learn. Your language is both strangely familiar, and unfamiliar -- yet, I think it will not take long for me to learn it well enough to converse with you in a normal fashion, which I would prefer."*

"The feeling's mutual," Emmett replied, shivering as a cold breeze wafted through the copse and he felt the first real sting of sweat hardening to ice against his skin. "There's something familiar about your language that I can't quite place. Not that you've given me much of an opportunity for comparison, mind you. I never thought telepathy would feel so strange, but I suspect it's a reaction to me doing all the talking and you being a mute that's bothering me."

The local glanced up briefly, as if one of the English words was utterly incomprehensible to him, even as a thought. *"I am being unfair, I suppose, not extending you the same courtesy,"* he said both in Emmett's mind and in his own tongue. Though the inventor truly understood only the former, it was comforting to actually hear a voice other than the wind's. *"It's a habit of vanity, I'm afraid, presuming that as the eldest person around, I am also the most leamed and intelligent. I beg your pardon. I should give you an equal chance to learn. Here,"* he continued, pulling items of folded cloth from the sack and handing them to his standing companion. As he took them, Emmett recognized items of clothing similar to the old man's, and all in varying shades of silver-grey or greyed blue. *"They may not have the length you require, but they should serve to keep you warm, 'til others can be found. I have long since learned the wisdom of carrying more than just the clothes on my back when on long journeys, especially in the winter. I made camp here two nights ago, and left some of my supplies behind when I went to attend to other matters, intending to return before nightfall. I hadn't anticipated encountering a band of orcs with an apparently overwhelming desire to separate my head from the rest of me."*

Emmett only half-heard his latter commentary, so eager was he to get into anything that would provide him with better protection from the cold. His half-sighed, "Thank you," was unneeded, for his gratitude shone from him like light from the sun. He tested his injured arm to see if he could slip it from the sling long enough to dress himself; happily, he could, and did so while the other man removed a few other small articles from the sack before pulling its drawstring to close it again.

Emmett slipped the loose tunic of nubby homespun over his head and maneuvered his arms out the sleeves. It fit fairly well, although he suspected the sleeves had been designed to fall fully to the wrists, not a few inches above. He sighed again, more softly. "Well, I guess I can't expect a custom fit, can I? Unless you happen to be some sort of traveling tailor...."

Again, his companion chuckled. From the sound of it, the inventor received the impression that the man wanted very much to laugh, to be happy and see others happy as well, but was given the opportunity far too seldom. *"Unfortunately, no,"* he admitted. *"I have many skills, but needlework is definitely not one of them. I manage, however, since my needs tend to be small. I carry most of what I own with me in my travels, as I have no permanent place to truly call home."*

Something about that explanation stirred a faint feeling of recognition in the nether reaches of Emmett's mind, like a story he had heard before but couldn't remember through the cobwebs of distant memory. While he allowed his companion to help him replace the sling and don an older wool cloak that had also been in the sack, he thought back to his own garage-house and how close he himself had often been to homelessness. He sympathized, seeing how worn the fellow's things were, and how little he apparently owned. He decided it would be most comfortable all around if he didn't pursue the topic. "I understand," was all he said, changing the subject. "Do you also have no permanent name?"

The innocent query elicited a much stronger reaction of merriment than before. The old man may have been poor in possessions, but he was clearly not impoverished in spirit. *"You might say that,"* he said when he had gotten the better of himself. *"I often think I have entirely too many, but the one you might know would depend on where you call home. Are you from a settlement here in the north, or have you traveled from the south, or east...?"*

The unwords of the inquiry struck Emmett in such a fashion, he could not help but think he had managed to land not only on his own world, but somewhere in the North American continent at some time in the past. Studying his benefactor with a quick glance, he wondered if he might have fallen into some part of what was called Canada in his day, with an explorer who traveled among the various native settlements of the far north. He knew nothing of those languages and dialects, and if the man had been raised here, he might seldom, if ever, have heard English. Of course, that didn't explain the telepathy, but it had often been suggested that such things had once been more common among less sophisticated cultures, where they still believed in magic and thus would have encouraged rather than condemned such an ability. That would probably place him somewhere in the Eighteenth or Nineteenth Centuries -- a hope Emmett almost didn't dare permit himself to think.

"The west," he finally answered, a little hesitant to name the state or any city, just in case this time predated them. "At least, I'd suppose that's what you'd call it. Given the way I was just dropped in here, I'm still a little muddled about things like that."

The old man had been replacing the knotted roots that had been used to bind the splint with strips of cloth he torn from something he'd brought out of the sack when Emmett spoke. He abruptly froze -- why, Emmett couldn't begin to guess. *"The West?"* he echoed, in surprising doubt. *"The near west, of course."*

But the inventor shook his head, supposing he meant the frontier settlements east of the Rockies, possibly as far east as the Mississippi, depending on the time frame. "No, the far west -- and yes, I'm sure of it," he chastised when his companion made a face of undeniable disbelief. "Don't you think I know where I was born and have lived all of my life? You can't get much farther west than where I'm from -- not unless you want to fall off the face of the Earth and into the void."

Emmett had no idea what he'd said, but something in his comment caused the local to start, and to regard him with puzzlement rather than skepticism. He hoped it wasn't the crack about falling off the face of the Earth. He'd really only meant that as a jesting reference to the people who had told Columbus such would be his fate when he set sail to the unexplored West. But even in his own time, there were wackos who still believed in a Flat Earth, and a couple centuries ago, the superstition wasn't all that uncommon, especially among the elderly. Even more, he hoped the

reaction wasn't an indication of another dreadful possibility: that he really *wasn't* on Earth, and his accident had somehow sent him to another planet in an entirely different stellar system, or even another galaxy.

But the fellow didn't fall apart or offer any continued denial; after a second, he seemed to swallow whatever was disturbing him, and simply accepted it with a nod of his head. *"I beg your pardon. It was rude of me to think there would never be others, and presumptuous of me to believe I would naturally recognize any newcomer. Your confusion is understandable, if you have never been here before. It can take a great deal of time to acclimate."*

The inventor's snort was expressive. "I'll say. I'm Emmett, by the way, Emmett Brown. And please don't ask me to explain any more about where I came from or how I got here. I don't think I entirely understand it myself."

The man nodded his agreement, even though that weird ripple of perplexity crossed his face again. *"One seldom does. I am also from the West, and if you have heard of me, you would know me as Olórin -- though I shall not be at all surprised if you do not remember the name. There are many things about home which I, too, can no longer recall."*

Emmett turned it over on his tongue a time or two, thinking hard before replying. "Olórin," he repeated, wondering if that was his first name or last, sampling the syllables to see if he recognized their taste. Oddly enough, he did. "Actually, I *do* think I've heard it before -- but you're right, I can't remember where. I'm sure it'll come to me, in time."

"Don't concern yourself with it -- it's a trivial matter, and we have more important business to attend." He handed Emmett something else he had taken from the bag and unwrapped; it looked like some sort of flatbread or shortcake. "Waybread," he explained as he took the remainder for himself. *"Not fresh, any longer, but it will suffice to sustain us for the time being. Fortunately, we won't have to run any farther."*

The misplaced scientist hoped he wasn't about to suggest they camp here for the night, and his wish was granted. Behind him, from the direction of the natural road, he heard the sound of an approaching horse.

"We will have to ride together, I'm afraid," Olórin told him as he led the inventor out of the woods. *"But it will not trouble Gaeleroc. He has carried greater loads for much longer distances, and in far greater haste. Today, he need only take us both as far as a safe haven, where friends will shelter us."*

Emmett watched as the chestnut colored horse approached. It was a large and sturdy beast, well tended and bright-eyed. From the fact that it was still wearing a saddle -- clearly not western-style, nor even English-style -- the inventor suspected that the horse and its owner had been separated unwillingly, and that whatever had caused it to flee was the same unpleasantness Emmett's unexpected fall from the sky had handily ended. Well, if he had to get blasted off his own Time Machine into God-only-knows-where in the space-time continuum, he was glad that the event had prevented some sort of calamity for this obviously benevolent person.

Mounting the beast -- *Gaeleroc*, Emmett corrected himself, since he had heard the name clearly spoken aloud -- was difficult, with his broken arm, but once Olórin had slung his belongings at the back of the saddle and mounted, he was able to help pull the physicist up behind him, with astonishing ease. The time traveler marveled at the old man's unprecedented physical strength, but it really was no more remarkable than what had happened to him after years of being an honest-to-goodness blacksmith in a time without modern conveniences. Still, with the shoe on the other foot, he now had a better understanding of what Marty had felt, on similar occasions. With him aboard, they were soon on their way.

Emmett had noted earlier that the cloak he had been loaned was not a simple cape. It had a front closure of horn buttons, a hood that was held in place by a long dove-gray scarf, and loose sleeves into which he could withdraw his good arm to keep out the chill wind caused by the horse's swift pace. The wind on his face was keen, but not freezingly so; there was a scent in the air which he could not place, at first. Eventually, he recognized it as *no* scent, the complete lack of pollutants, the gases and emissions, particulate residue, and chemical effluvium to which just about every resident of California grew accustomed. This wind smelled as if it were wholly fresh and new, never before aspirated by living lungs or botanical cells. It was young, untainted, and free -- and for a few moments, it made Emmett feel as if he could take on the universe, broken arm notwithstanding. Of course, that was probably more the result of their quick snack of waybread and water, which had done a great deal toward improving his overall strength, since he had apparently been unconscious for at least eight hours, and his last meal was now long since digested.

It might also have had something to do with the presence of his benefactor, which seemed to be every bit as

invigorating in its reassurance that he was not alone and entirely abandoned. Olórin was an excellent horseman, and right now, Emmett felt as if they could keep riding like this all through the night, and he wouldn't mind in the least.

They talked at times, mostly about the terrain, which was wild and beautiful. It was not at all unlike Emmett's boyhood recollections of the mountains beyond Hill Valley, of the Sierra Nevada before the poor judgment of people with too much money and too little conscience had spoiled so much of what had been pristine wilderness. He found their two-leveled conversation most helpful, since the vast majority of Olórin's audible words were swallowed up in the rushing wind around them and the pounding hoofbeats below.

When the sun actually went down and they continued their flight unabated, Emmett finally began to have second thoughts about riding all night. The temperatures plummeted rapidly without the sun's fire, the effects of the waybread wore off, and his freezing toes and feet reminded the inventor that he was wearing only thin dress socks and leather dress shoes, not the warmer boots of his companion. He suffered in silence for a time, but eventually, the bite of the cold, the jostling of his broken arm, and the irritation of his already sore backside prompted him to ask when and where Olórin planned to stop for the night.

With a subtle signal to Gaeleroc, the elder man slowed their flight from a near-full gallop to a more gentle pace. The open plain had not lasted for long, and now they were moving in an area where the footing would be less certain. "It shan't be much longer, I promise," he said aloud, in plain, if accented, English.

Emmett's surprise was understandable. He couldn't place the lilt precisely, but it definitely had a British flavor about it. "You learn fast," he acknowledged, not without a twinge of envy that passed in less than a nanosecond. If he had possessed the gift of telepathy, he, too, would probably be talking like a native, right now. "But then, you have advantages I don't. I hope it won't be more than another hour or so, if that much. I'm afraid I've got bruises in more places than my arm, and I don't know how much longer it'll be before I lose my feet to frostbite."

Olórin laughed softly, as if he was also unfond of the cold. "I apologize if I've set too brisk a pace, my friend, but it was necessary. My original plan had been to head south, toward Tharbad, but my encounter with the orcs and the worsening weather changed my mind. If I read the signs correctly, I will be needed more in the North, this winter."

That wasn't quite the response the inventor had wanted, but he accepted it. "North? I thought we were heading west."

He could hear more than see the rustle of the old man's nod. "We are, more or less. The haven of which I spoke lies northwest of where we met. Even before the orcs appeared, I had considered making a brief detour there to consult with my friends, but your unexpected arrival and the need for a healer convinced me that this was indeed the right course to take. We should be there very soon. The mountain heights are well behind us, now. See how the land falls away before us? It is the valley of the River Bruinen, where we shall find our rest and recovery."

The moon was only a thin crescent (a shame, Emmett thought, since getting a look at it in full phase might provide consoling proof that he was still on Earth), but the stars were preternaturally bright. He could see their light reflected off snowy slopes and the silver ribbon of a river seemingly far, far away. He tried to get a look at the stars' positions, to see if there were any constellations he recognized, but the jostling of the horse and the mist of his own breath made it difficult, and made his neck ache. He gave it up, and concentrated on other matters.

"Bruinen," Emmett whispered to himself, aware that he had not been given a single precise answer to any facet of his question, but sufficiently intrigued by this new, familiarish word not to care. Why did these places and names tickle so strongly at the edges of his memory? It felt like childhood images being stirred: thoughts made so vague with the passing of time, they had almost vanished, but were in truth awaiting a stronger link to bring the whole back to life. He wondered what that key would be – if one existed.

At length, the horse's pace picked up, having come to what appeared to be a well-tended, if somewhat obscure, path. Emmett could feel that they were moving down along the winding road; even though Gaeleroc did not resume a full gallop, the apparently distant river quickly drew near. Just when the lost scientist was beginning to think his backside couldn't take one more bump, they took a turn in the path, and *voilà!* They were suddenly within less than a mile of a settlement, comprised of several smaller buildings and one huge mansion. Lights glowed from all the windows, but even at this distance, Emmett could tell they were neither electric nor gas.

That probably kicks it back a few more centuries, the inventor sighed to himself, hoping Olórin wasn't "listening." The farther back he might be, the more likely it became that anything he said or did to change history would build into a tsunami of catastrophic effects by the time the ripples of change reached his natural place in the continuum.

Thus far, he hadn't actually seen anything to convince him he was no longer on Earth (not so long as he discounted the mental image of orcs he'd received from his benefactor), so while he reminded himself to be extra-cautious, he also felt optimistic. Hope sprang eternal, and Emmett was quite possibly the most determinedly hopeful person ever born. Years ago, he had postulated several ways in which a person lost in time might be located; if any of his family had been listening and thought to check his scientific journals, they might yet come across his variously fleshed-out theories and find a way to make one work, a job he had never quite been able to finish. It was the only realistic hope he had, and he wasn't about to let go of it until he had no other choice.

At the moment, however, his more immediate hopes concerned food, a hot bath, fuzzy slippers, comfy pajamas, and a warm bed. If he was lucky, he'd wake up in the morning, and would happily find that this had been nothing but a dream. A trifle cliché an ending, perhaps, but one with which he could easily live.

For the present, it was still a very solid reality, the outlook of which was growing more pleasant as they drew near the large house, if one could call it such. Emmett had seen smaller hotels and palaces in his travels; his own large home back in the future would have been a mere gatehouse beside this structure. Olórin reined Gaeleroc to a gentle walk as they approached the main entrance; a voice speaking yet another language called to them in timbres of greeting.

To Emmett's shock, he actually understood the first clear word he could hear:

"Mithrandir! Mithrandir!"

Something in the inventor's head suddenly went *click!*, the sound of the lock being opened at last. Like a cascade of self-assembling Legos tumbling out of the recesses of his memory, all the hints and half-remembered flotsam and jetsam fit together, forming a foundation upon which many, many other items of information quickly built a clear and comprehensible structure of exquisite complexity -- and exquisite disquiet.

Several other voices joined in, one calling out a phrase; to his dismay, Emmett was able to translate the first few words. *"Mae govannen!"* Hail and well met.

He really didn't want to believe he'd heard that. *Really* didn't, because all the data which had just flooded into his head told him one extremely disturbing fact about those words: They were invented, wholly, utterly, and completely. This was no language that had ever been spoken in his own world, except by the person who had conceived it.

But as the figures of several tall -- *very* tall -- man-shapes approached to help them dismount, Olórin answered them in the same language. Emmett grasped a word here and there (his name among them), which didn't bother him nearly as much as his improved view of the newcomers, who became more visible as they stepped into the light spilling from the many windows around the great main door. They were all dressed in clothing he would also have called *medievaesque*, and not a one of them stood an inch under 6' 4".

So much for the theory of gradually increasing size between generations.

No, Emmett didn't want to believe what he was seeing, not one little bit. Not because he wasn't fascinated (which he was) but because if he *did* believe it and it was true, it meant he *wasn't* on his own Earth, wasn't even in his own version of reality, was probably in an entirely different dimension, and even if he somehow miraculously survived the prolonged exposure to it, he would never see home again.

Thus, it was with considerably less than his typical enthusiasm for new experiences that he accepted one of the newcomers' help in dismounting. He barely heard Olórin say, "For once, they actually weren't expecting us -- or rather, they weren't expecting *me*, since they could hardly have known you would be with me. But the watchmen spotted us coming into the valley, and Elrond is inside, waiting for us."

Emmett heard the name and could not conceal a wince. *No, I really really really don't want to believe this....* With even more atypical reluctance, he followed his benefactor into the house.

The inventor tried his very best not to look at anything around him, for fear that it might seal his fate by providing irrefutable proof of what he suspected. He kept his eyes focused downward, so that he could watch Olórin's feet and follow him to wherever they were going. But when they at last stopped, and his companion spoke briefly with someone beyond his sight, he suddenly heard himself being addressed directly. Boyhood reflexes and his wife's constant reminders wouldn't let him be so rude as to ignore it; he had to look up.

He tried not to shudder. *Okay, it's not as bad as you thought*, he consoled himself as he looked into the face of the tall and handsome dark-haired man who had spoken to him. *He looks pretty normal. So what if he's half a foot taller than you and doesn't look a day over thirty? He's nothing but an ordinary man. A good draft prospect for the Lakers, but just an ordinary man....*

...with pointed ears. Not the extremely exaggerated sort that had been pasted on to Mr. Spock in *Star Trek*, but definitely not the normal ovoid shape of an ordinary human being. Other than that, the man's features were what he would have called normal, but there was also a strange agelessness about him, and a disconcerting depth of perception in his dark eyes. To make matters worse, Emmett couldn't help but see the rest of the room and the others in it, no matter how hard he tried to focus on the person standing in front of him. Damned curiosity; it always got him into the worst fixes. But he couldn't deny the obvious any longer.

Elves. He was in a household of elves. The greeting outside had done it, triggered the memories. Only they weren't recollections from his own life, or anything he had seen or experienced, and they weren't even his personal imaginings from the pages of history. He knew it from the words he had heard spoken outside and recognized, as well as the name the locals had used to address his companion. The dark-haired man before him was Elrond Half-Elven, his house was known as Rivendell, the fellow who had rescued him from orcs -- *orcs!* -- was what the locals called a wizard, but who was really an immortal something-or-other in disguise; his real name was Olórin, his Elvish name was Mithrandir, and he was generally known to everyone else as Gandalf the Grey. The monochromatic color scheme of his clothing should've given it away right from the start, but without the pointy hat to clue him, it was an easy thing to miss.

The scientist shuddered at both his situation and the unintentionally flippant manner in which he seemed to be taking it. This was *very* serious, more serious than he had dared imagine. He hadn't been thrown from the Time Machine into a distant point in Earth's past; he'd fallen into *Middle-earth*, and into a work of fiction popularly known as *The Lord of the Rings*.

Elrond said something to him that Emmett knew had to be a Tolkienesque version of "Hello, how are you?" It was bad enough that he knew it; it was worse that he remembered exactly how to respond, from a line he somehow managed to recall from one of the books.

"Elen síla lúmen omen tielvo," the more-than-timelost inventor replied with an extremely watery ghost of a smile. He then gasped, "Great Scott!" and fainted.

III

Place, Rivendell Time, Still Unknown

As he started to wake — again — even before he achieved consciousness, Emmett's senses went to work, trying to assess his surroundings before he opened his eyes and saw things he did not want to see. The first sensations, of being snugly under warm sheets and blankets in a comfortable bed, were not in the least bit distressing. He woke to these feelings on many mornings, especially when they were cold mid-winter days. There did not seem to be a second presence in bed with him, but that, too, was not uncommon. Clara often woke before he did, slipping out ever-so-quietly to prepare breakfast or otherwise start her day. And it was morning, he knew, since he could feel the sunlight coming through the nearest window and falling across his legs, just as it did in his own bedroom.

The next of his senses to bring him useful information was that of smell. The scent of a birchwood fire was easily detectable, and the quiet crackling sound that came with it indicated a lit hearth somewhere to his right. This was definitely encouraging, as that was the precise location of the fireplace in his and Clara's bedroom, and she often liked to light it on winter mornings. Other than that, he could hear nothing, nothing at all, which was only mildly surprising. Most days when the kids were all home from school (as Chris and Emily were now, for the upcoming holidays), he could hear distant echoes of the television, or of their music playing, or of computer games being played. But if he'd overslept, it was possible they had already gone out for the day, or that their mother had warned them against making too much noise and disturbing their father. In any case, Emmett had detected nothing yet to convince him that he was anywhere but at home.

With this to fortify him, he finally came fully awake and decided to take the plunge. He opened his eyes.

He groaned.

This wasn't his house, or his bed. He was still in the same world in which he had been before passing out. The distinctive Elvish letters carved into the elaborate designs on a wooden lintel surrounding a door directly opposite the bed were all the proof he needed.

The dreaded now confirmed, Emmett closed his eyes again, tightly, and burrowed back under the covers. Briefly, he tried to wish it all away, but his scientific training and years of dogged experience had taught him that wishing never makes it so. He was where he was; that was the long and short of it, and he would simply have to accept it, then try to undo it.

Trouble was, the accepting part was achievable; the undoing part was not. He wasn't simply adrift in a time or a place not his own; he was in an entire *reality* not his own. This wasn't just a quaintly antique house or even a stately mansion of long heritage, built in another era or another country, perhaps populated by ancestors of his ancestors. It was home to an enclave of what Tolkien had called Elves, a race of immortal physical beings brought into existence before the creation of Man, at least in this version of the universe. Like so many other things in these tales, it had different names in different languages, depending on what race or group of people was talking about it, but the name he recalled best was Rivendell, the last of the Elvish settlements west of the Misty Mountains.

Bits and pieces of the stories came back to the inventor even as he tried not to think about them; he knew the whole story of Middle-earth, its creation, its history, and its inhabitants fairly well, as Jules had discovered the writings of Tolkien about a year after his family had returned to the 1990s. Emmett had been familiar with the stories even before his son had found the books for himself. He had been working on and off as a lecturer at Hill Valley University in the late '60s when the book had become *de facto* required reading for every college student across the country. Intrigued by his students' fascination with the tale, Emmett had read it and enjoyed it, though not with as much passionate intensity as Jules would display over twenty years later. The eldest of the inventor's four children had devoured the trilogy and gone looking for more; he had even named his horse, Shadowfax, after a noted steed that had been Gandalf's after the unexpected plot-twist of his resurrection. To Jules, they had been the kind of inspiration the writings of Jules Verne had been to young Emmett, pointing the way to an eventual career in literature. Through Jules' interest, the lore and legends of Middle-earth had eventually become as much of a staple in the Brown library as the works of Verne and other imaginative classics. After the main trilogy had been made into movies over ten years ago, all of the kids had added them, and the books, to their lists of perennial favorites. About once a year for the past twenty, someone in the house was reading the books and re-infecting everyone else with their enthusiasm, so by now, whether

he'd wanted to or not, Emmett had absorbed almost as much about the history and legends of this world as he had about his own.

Aside from being in a strategic location between a pass in the mountains and a ford of the River Bruinen, Emmett recalled that Rivendell was one of the few remaining settlements of the Eldar, the Elves, during the Third Age, the period of local history in which the older powers and races began to fade while the cultures and civilizations of Man grew. The master and founder of Rivendell, Elrond, was noted as the greatest healer in the world, so the inventor supposed that if he had to go and get himself hurt while falling into this world, he had at least fallen into the right place.

But the whole idea that he was here at all seemed too fantastic to believe. Perhaps he really *wasn't* here, he reflected; perhaps he'd hit his head and was now hallucinating in some kind of injury-fed delusion, brought on by Chris' viewing of one of the movies only the night before — but somehow, Emmett knew it wasn't so. He was where he was, in a world that was utterly not his own, and he was here without any means of returning and no way to be found by those he'd left behind.

The very thought frightened him. If this was not his own dimension, no healer in the world would be able to help him avoid the inevitable result of his presence here. Stranded in a place where the very particles of matter resonated to a different sub-atomic harmony than that of his dimension, in less than a week — probably four or five days at most — the incompatibility between his bodily atoms and the world around him would cause his nervous system to deteriorate, more and more seriously, until his body and brain could no longer function, and he died. It was not a pleasant way to go; he knew that much from having experienced only the mildest seizures brought on by the condition, but there was no way he could avoid it, lacking any of the sophisticated technological devices necessary to protect an interdimensional traveler.

Moreover, even if he'd been incredibly lucky and this *was* somehow the Earth he knew, or even just another far-flung planet somewhere in his own dimension, a place thus able to be survived for more than a few days, the ability to construct a new Machine was beyond his reach, given what he knew of this world's technology, or lack thereof. He was in the position of needing to make the tools to make the tools to make the tools to make even the simplest of the items he would need to build a time machine, and he was well aware that doing so would take longer than the longest possible span of years he had left to live, especially in a world in this state of advancement. Accepting his current situation was the only true choice he had.

With pained resignation, he did so, then rolled over, pulled the covers over his head, buried his face in the pillow, and let himself cry, unrestrained. He almost never did that (save in the occasional moments of sentimental happiness), not because he'd been brought up with the absurd notion that tears were a sign of weakness or unmanliness, but because his was such a determined and optimistic nature that he usually found ways to change unpleasant circumstances so that there would be no reason to cry. The last time he remembered shedding such uninhibited tears of misery was after Clara had greeted his admission that he was a time traveler with a powerful slap and an angry rejection.

In a way, this was much the same situation. Then, he thought he'd lost her forever because of an inevitable and unfortunate misunderstanding; now, he *knew* he had lost her forever because he'd become stranded in a place that he could not leave, and where she could never find him. He'd never had a chance to finish the device or even the programming that would make tracing a timelost person possible. Accepting the reality of his situation meant accepting the fact that he would never again see his home or his family or anything or anyone else he had known and loved. It was a matter worthy of tears, and he saw no reason not to shed them.

After a while, when the initial grief was spent, the inventor unburied his face from the pillow and took several deep, almost gasping breaths, trying to steady himself. As he inhaled, a new scent tickled his nostrils, that of pipe tobacco being used somewhere nearby. Emmett didn't even have to puzzle over a possible source; he knew. He wondered how long the wizard had been in the room, and quickly decided he didn't want to know.

"You know, smoking is bad for your health," he said without so much as a cursory effort to glance at the person he knew was nearby. "Medical research has proven that it significantly increases the risk of many lung diseases, not to mention heart disease, atherosclerosis, cancers, glaucoma, birth defects, and elevated blood pressure. Where I come from, it's been declared a dangerously addictive and highly carcinogenic substance. You really ought to think of setting a better example and give it up."

The soft chuckle he heard in response came from the right side of the room, in the direction of the hearth. Emmett didn't really want to look at Olórin (*Gandalf, whatever*), but he figured that continuing to refuse to do so would be disgustingly childish behavior, unworthy of a Nobel Prize-winning man of science, or of even a simple gentleman. After all, it wasn't the fault of this world or anyone in it that he had landed here, and so long as he was doomed to stay, he might as well try to make the best of it. He moved just enough so that he could turn his face toward the fire and peer out from under the covers.

Gandalf was seated in a comfortable-looking chair beside the hearth; the cheerfully flickering flames within indicated that it had been tended recently, to keep the room at its currently pleasant temperature. The wizard himself was wearing yet another set of grey and blue clothing, though this was in much better condition than his stained traveling clothes, and far better suited to the indoors. In it, with his long white hair and beard combed rather than wind-blown and travel-tangled, he looked much more the part of a wise and powerful mage. He held in one hand a clay pipe, and the gentle smile on his bearded lips was ever so slightly softened by a thin veil of smoke, but the piercing gleam in his dark eyes was not dimmed in the least.

"I confess I don't quite grasp everything you just said, my friend," he replied amiably, "but if you are concerned for my welfare, as I presume from your tone, you needn't be. Others with less noble intent than you have told me it is a childish habit, a mere toy for my amusement and their annoyance, but I have found nothing harmful in it."

Emmett flipped onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, not to admire the craft of those who had carved the beautiful beams or to face the nightmare more directly, but because he found his right arm was falling asleep from being pinned under him for too long. He sighed. "No, come to think of it, I don't suppose you would. Things like cancer and emphysema probably wouldn't come into question. I don't imagine people like you ever get sick, do they?"

The wizard was not offended by his blunt manner. "That would depend entirely on what you mean by 'people like me.'"

The scientist snorted softly. "Wizards," he elucidated with a vague gesture toward the ceiling, "or...what is it you're really called? *Istari*? No," he said to himself when Gandalf began to agree. "The term's correct in a general sense, but it's not the one I'm looking for. It's been years since I read any of the supplementary books, but I know there's something more specific, I think it came up in the movies, Chris just mentioned it last night... Minor? Mayor? Mylar? No...mm mm Maiar, that's it. Maiar. The lesser children of Iluvatar's thought, what Judeo/Christian tradition would call angels, as opposed to the Valar, which they'd call archangels. People who can't really die wouldn't have any reason to worry about habits that would make ordinary mortals sick, would they?"

For what seemed a very long time, the only reply Emmett received was the quiet crackling of the fire. Intrigued by this lack of response, he turned his head back toward the elder man and was mildly gratified by the expression of genuine — and obviously speechless — astonishment on Gandalf's face. He almost laughed aloud. "Well, don't look so surprised," the inventor suggested. "I *am* right, aren't I? Of course, I might have the words mixed up; there was an awful lot of detail to remember, and I'm probably remembering this mostly from vague references in the movies. The Ainur — I think that's the word — were two groups of beings brought into existence before the creation of the physical world. After the world was made, a bunch of 'em left the non-physical world to live in a place called Valinor or Aman or something like that — maybe both. They supposedly came to help with the evolution of the world, and to protect the people in it from some of the other Ainur who wanted to ruin everything, out of spite. You're one of 'em, and I'm pretty sure you weren't — aren't — one of the Valar."

Yes, a perverse little imp in the back of Emmett's mind decided, there was something distinctly satisfying about seeing Gandalf left speechless for so long. From what he recalled of the character in *The Lord of the Rings*, it was very seldom that anyone, even his best allies and worst enemies, were able to startle the wizard into complete silence for more than a few seconds. Catastrophic accidents in space and time *could* have their entertaining moments, he mused.

At last, however, his tongue-tied companion spoke. "No," the wizard said softly, "I am not a Vala. And I am beginning to think that what I had first thought concerning *your* origins is not at all correct."

Emmett looked up toward the ceiling again and closed his eyes, bitterly amused by the understatement. "You could say that," he agreed, rather more flippant than was his general habit.

Once more, Gandalf took no offense. "Which leaves me even more puzzled than before. If you *don't* come

from Aman, then I am completely at a loss to explain how you managed to literally fall into the middle of an orc skirmish, out of a clear blue sky!"

He meant what he said, which made it Emmett's turn to be perplexed. He blinked, then looked back toward the wizard. "You mean you don't already know? You didn't see any of that when you looked into my mind?"

"Of course not!" came a crisp reply that was very much in the manner of the Gandalf the inventor remembered from Tolkien's books. "As I already told you, I have respected your privacy. Your thoughts are your own, and I would not presume to invade them unless I had good reason to believe such an intrusion was warranted and urgent. Besides, if you *do* know what I am and from whence I came, you would also know that I am forbidden to use such power save in the most dire emergencies."

The wizard spoke in earnest and, being himself an almost scrupulously honest person, Emmett knew he was hearing the truth. He was just being so damn cranky over his unexpectedly disastrous circumstances, he was taking it out on the poor people who hadn't asked to inhabit this... whatever it was. He knew better than to irritate those upon whom his survival might depend — especially a someone with the stature and potential influence of what amounted to a semi-incarnate angel, and one who had very likely saved his life at that, protecting him from the orcs — hideous creatures made by one of the renegade Valar — while he lay unconscious and helpless.

Sighing, he sat up, and apologized. "You're right, of course. I *did* know about the restrictions, that you're not really allowed to use all the abilities you really have while you're here; I just didn't remember 'em 'til you mentioned it. Look, Olórin — Gandalf—" His mobile features screwed up into a face of singular peculiarity. "What *do* you prefer to be called, anyway?"

The wizard's expression in ways mirrored his own. "Why do you ask?"

"Because for most of my adult life, the only persons to call me *Emmett* have been my wife and my business partner. Even my best friend calls me *Doc* — which I don't mind, since I can understand his discomfort with anything else, given the disparity of our ages. But I happen to *like* the name Emmett, and sometimes, I feel it would be nice to hear it a little more often, just so I don't forget it's mine."

Gandalf understood, but he made an equivocal gesture. "I see. You may call me whatever you wish, Emmett. To me, it matters very little."

The scientist nodded, recalling with startling clarity a passage from one of the books. "Quite so, quite so," he said, mostly to himself. "You've got so many of 'em, it's only natural that they *would* eventually become equally important or unimportant. *'Many are my names in many countries. Mithrandir among the Elves, Tharkûn to the Dwarves; Olórin I was in my youth in the West that is forgotten; in the South Incánus, in the North Gandalf....'* That could tend to make one very liberal-minded when it comes to the subject of names — so long as none of them were an insult."

It took the cogitating inventor a minute before he realized that he was talking to himself in front of an interested audience, and that this audience was staring at him in a manner just shy of open-mouthed amazement. "Forget I said that," he suggested, but he knew the wizard would not. "I suppose I should really call you Gandalf, or Mithrandir, if that's what they use around here. I can't imagine you'd want me carelessly broadcasting your real name to people who might make bad use of the information."

"An astute observation. What *are* you, Emmett Brown?" the elder man asked, his tone that of one seeking a totally elusive answer rather than demanding an explanation. "It's obvious you are not from any part of the Far West I know, but neither are you quite like any other living creature I have ever met, in Aman or Arda. Yesterday, you seemed a complete stranger to Middle-earth, a visitor who had landed on utterly foreign shores; today, you tell me you *are* no inhabitant of these lands — yet you know things many who have lived here for countless years do not! You are not Valinorean, that I can plainly see now, but neither are you Elf or Dwarf, and you are certainly unlike any Man I have met during my long travels. Where do you come from, and how do you know these things?"

For a moment, Emmett looked away, toward the window and at the snow-covered pine trees beyond. He now realized the accidental impression he had created when he'd said he came from the far west. In his thinking, that meant the land west of the Rocky Mountains; here, it referred to the home of the Ainur guardians of the world, Valinor, aka the Uttermost West, the Undying Lands, Aman... (Lord, but he wished Tolkien had been able to settle on just one name

for things instead of two or three or four or five — this could get so confusing!) It was a place that had once been part of this same physical world — Middle-earth, or Arda — but the two had been separated and Valinor had been moved, probably through some kind of intra-dimensional gate, so that mortals could never again think to gain immortality by attacking and conquering it (a foolish notion which had been attempted once before, by mortal Men under the sway of the renegade Maia Sauron, the same being now causing trouble for the inhabitants of Middle-earth). The home of the immortal Elves, Eldamar, was an island still off the coast of Valinor, and by some means, they knew how to construct ships that could take them across the sea and then beyond it, through that intra-dimensional portal that led into the plane of existence where the guardian Ainur still lived. That Far West certainly wasn't *his* far west, but the coincidentally similar references had been enough to be misleading, especially when combined with his undoubtedly unusual entrance into this world.

His head was hurting a bit from all this attempted thinking and remembering when at length, he sighed again. "If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," he said quietly, turning back to the wizard. "And if you *did* believe me, you'd think I'd gone mad."

Even if he hadn't seen it, the scientist would have felt Gandalf's dark eyes studying him intently. He supposed that he'd really been incredibly lucky, falling into the company of the one person in this reality who was in the best position to understand and assist him, but he rather doubted that even a deliberately dwindled Maia could help him get home again, much less grasp Emmett's view of this world's entire existence.

Still, after his long scrutiny, there was no doubt in the wizard's expression, or in his voice. "You do not appear to be so, nor have you behaved in any manner that would incline me toward that conclusion. As for the question of my belief, I cannot judge any matter which I have not yet heard or seen."

He was willing to be open-minded, then: a positive sign. Still, the inventor couldn't just blurt it out without considering the ramifications of anything he said. Even though this was, to him, a fictional reality, it was obviously very real to those inhabiting it, and in this world as in his own, Emmett knew that any foreknowledge of the future could be very, very dangerous. Absurd, though, to realize that even here, he knew too much about the future and thus held the potential of destroying it.

Thinking of this intensity required pacing if he wanted to avoid a skull-splitting headache. He got out of bed to do so, and only then noticed that his clothing had been exchanged for a sort of very long nightshirt made of a soft and warm blue fabric woven in a fascinating geometric pattern, and that his left arm was no longer splinted or in a sling. Sensation told him it had been made whole again, which surprised the inventor only until he remembered that Elrond was renowned as the greatest healer in Middle-earth. *Magic — or powers that can be mistaken for them — works in its own country*, a little voice whispered at the back of his thoughts. He would have to ask about this later, when there weren't so many other more important issues to involve him.

First things first, then. He would have to start by figuring out just when he was in the grander plot. Gandalf was still wearing gray; that at least settled some part of it. Pre-Moria, possibly pre-*Fellowship of the Ring*, thus pre-war with Sauron. Which left an awfully big scope of possible times. If he remembered correctly, the wizard had been in Middle-earth for something like two thousand years prior to the War of the Ring, and had only begun to realize it was still in existence and had been found about eighty years before that.

The problem, however, was easily solved. "What year is this?"

One of the wizard's bushy eyebrows lifted in ever-so-mild puzzlement, but he answered the question plainly. "As the men of Arda reckon it, 2911 of the Third Age. I believe in your tongue, the month would be called December."

"2911," Emmett repeated to himself. He had to think hard to remember any of the years associated with the novels; it didn't help that the books talked about two entirely different kinds of reckoning that gave different calendar years to the same events. Bilbo's 111th birthday — a remarkable event that wasn't all that far off for the inventor himself, as he had reached his 99th birthday five months ago — had been in 3001, he seemed to recall, seventeen years before the War of the Ring began. That put the current time well before events in both *The Hobbit* and the epic trilogy, but well after Sauron's minions had started making trouble, and, if he remembered right, also after another wizard, Saruman, had started setting himself up to become a rival Power by settling in the citadel of Orthanc. There was something else about the year 2911 that felt significant, but for the moment, he couldn't recall exactly what. In any case, he knew now what events he needed to avoid mentioning: just about everything he was familiar with concerning the history of the

Third Age in Middle-earth.

While he was thinking about what to say next, Gandalf spoke. "Is the date of some hidden significance?" he asked, the query a gentle prod urging the time traveler to get to the point.

Emmett stopped pacing. "Only to me. All right. I don't know how to say this in a way you'll understand, so I'll just be as blunt about it as I can."

"Forthright honesty is usually the best course of action."

Not when it comes to the space-time continuum! "Usually," was the inventor's only audible comment on the subject. "I come from a city called Hill Valley in the state of California in the far west of a country known as the United States of America on a planet called Earth. Not *Middle-earth*; just Earth. I was in an unprecedented accident that stranded me here, and to my point of view, you and everyone and everything in your sphere of existence are nothing but fiction. I know what I know about you because I read it in a book that, as far as I know, is wholly the work of someone's imagination, not reality as I or anyone else know it."

From the look that rippled across Gandalf's expressive face, that wasn't the best wording he could have used. But the wizard made no immediate response. Emmett could almost see his thoughts at work, measuring what he had just been told against the scientist's assertion that he was not insane. He sifted it with other thoughts and knowledge the lost human couldn't begin to decipher, and eventually formed a reply.

"What sort of accident?" he asked quietly, thoughtfully, unjudgmentally.

Emmett was frankly surprised that he was being given this much slack after his not-so-good and almost-insulting illumination, but he was willing to take whatever leeway he could get. "That's a little difficult to explain, given what I know about this world. I don't remember if you're at all familiar with the concepts of science and invention."

The wizard's glance held a plain statement of, "What do you think we are, total idiots?" Nonetheless, he smiled. "Of course, if I have the proper grasp of what the words mean to *you*. Invention is the study of the ways in which things work and can be done, applied to create methods and devices that will achieve the desired goal most easily and effectively. Fëanor, for instance, was the greatest inventor in all Eä, and Celebrimbor of Eregion was a most worthy successor. Between them, they crafted artifacts the like of which will never be seen again. And science, as I have perceived the definition in your thoughts, is merely the study of various facets of the world around us, and a scientist one who uses that knowledge to many different and hopefully beneficial ends, with or without the necessity of invention. Am I incorrect?"

Emmett shook his head. "No, you're exactly right. Where I come from, science and invention have advanced in ways very unlike anything you have here. In a sense, it's to us the kind of power that magic — or whatever you choose to call it — is to you. It allows us to do things that simply wouldn't be possible without it, both good and bad. Some of my people would call you primitive because you aren't surrounded by the products of technology — all those devices and gadgets and other things our inventors and scientists make — but for myself, I sometimes think we're the ones who messed it up, too often using the knowledge we discovered toward the wrong ends."

A soft sigh whistled past Gandalf's lips along with a thin stream of white smoke. "In that belief, we are the same. There was nothing even the greatest and most well-meaning of our scientists and inventors could achieve that Melkor and his minions could not turn to destructive ends."

"Which is why *you* are here," the younger man agreed, recalling things about Melkor, the fallen Vala, and his servant Sauron, who had used Celebrimbor's knowledge to make the deadly Master Ring. He said nothing of this, however, and tried to get back to his original topic. "Where I come from, I'm both a scientist and an inventor. My attempts at invention haven't always been successful, but I did make several major discoveries. Some I was able to reveal to others and use to genuinely help my entire world, but one I've had to keep secret, since if it was wrongly used, it could result in unimaginable destruction."

Gandalf was clearly intrigued; he leaned back in his chair, dark eyes aglow with the reflection of the firelight and his own curiosity. How long had it been, Emmett wondered, since the immortal had encountered something or someone so utterly beyond his sphere of knowledge, even the diminished knowledge that was all he'd been allowed when he had

agreed to come to Middle-earth in human form? And how long had it been since he himself, Emmett, had enjoyed such a rapt and genuinely interested audience so completely free of preconceptions, good or bad? Ages, it seemed.

“How so?” Gandalf asked simply.

The inventor sighed softly and took a seat on the edge of the bed, facing the wizard. *Time to get to the point.* “I found a way to travel through time and space, to anywhere and anywhen I wanted, and I built a machine to do it. Its potential as a learning device was almost unimaginable, but I soon realized that if its existence became common knowledge, people would use it for the wrong reasons and wind up unraveling our entire history, obliterating our world. Some by accident, some intentionally — and some by their desire for power or wealth, or both.”

The wizard absorbed this proclamation with apparent ease; he seemingly had no difficulty grasping the concept of such a device and its potentially negative ramifications. “And *your* accident was in making this secret known?”

Again, Emmett shook his head. “No, the secret’s still safe. But sometimes I use the Machine, anyway. It’s pretty reckless, I know, but I’ve tried to be very, very careful.” He shrugged, an oddly bitter gesture. “This time, I wasn’t careful enough. My wife and I took a short trip to the past to celebrate our wedding anniversary, just wanting to go back to a time and place that was quieter and simpler than the time we live in, and when we headed for home, I didn’t check everything I should’ve checked. The Machine malfunctioned, and we ended up in the limbo that exists between one time — and one reality — and the next. I had to crawl onto the outside of the Machine to make the needed repair, and just after I’d fixed what was wrong, before we could get out of that awful limbo, something shook the Machine like a leaf. I was thrown off, and ended up here.”

The sound he made was one of eloquent self-deprecation. He resumed his anxious pacing. “It was just plain stupid of me! I *knew* I should’ve used a safety line, especially in that kind of chaos, but I was too over-confident and in too big of a hurry to do it. And while I know other dimensions exist, I never thought I’d be tossed off my own time machine in the middle of n-dimensional space and wind up stranded in one by accident! *That’s* why to me, this—” His arm swept the room, indicating it and everything beyond. “—is all imaginary. Where I come from, it *is* nothing but a work of fiction, a set of books written by an aging Oxford don in his spare time. It’s not even legends or mythology; it’s all nothing but a story he made up, and that other people read and enjoyed. And if this isn’t my own dimension....!”

He shuddered, closing his eyes for a moment as he tried not to think of that unthinkable matter he could not avoid. He took a deep breath before continuing. “If it isn’t, I don’t have more than a few days to live. I don’t know why, but one thing I’ve discovered is that there’s a very fundamental difference between one dimension — one version of reality — and the next. I suspect we were never meant to move between them, and though one dimension’s version of a world may *look* exactly like another, they’re so different on the most basic level, simply *being* in a world where you don’t belong will kill a person in a matter of days.”

“Do you know this for a fact?” Gandalf asked quietly, probably not wanting to sound as if he thought Emmett had lost his mind.

Figuring he had nothing left to lose, the inventor was honest. “Yes. I experienced the phenomenon myself, once, and even the mildest symptoms of it are extremely unsettling. I’ve never actually had to watch someone from another dimension *die*, but I’ve seen and felt enough to know that it’s inevitable. There *are* ways to protect yourself from the harmful effects, but none that I could use here, not now. I didn’t bring the proper equipment with me, and I’m sure your world doesn’t have what’s necessary for me to make what would be needed, not without a good hundred years or more to work on that problem and nothing else. And if I’m not in the dimension I belong in, I won’t even have a hundred *hours* to work on it.”

The wizard nodded slightly, as if he genuinely understood what Emmett was talking about. Perhaps he did, in his own way, the scientist mused, though given the probable circumstances, he needed more than sympathetic understanding if he was to survive. “From what you said, your wife at least is aware that you are lost. Is there a way for her to find you again and take you home?”

Sadly, Emmett shook his head. “My wife and children know the basic emergency procedures I’ve developed in case one of us accidentally became lost in time, how to initiate a temporal search, but those procedures presumed that the lost person would have used a time machine and still be within the same continuum. It *didn’t* allow for the stranded person being in an entirely alien reality — and it certainly couldn’t have expected that he got there *without*

taking a time machine with him!”

Gandalf listened to his increasingly impassioned diatribe with quiet attentiveness. When Emmett was done, he puffed on his pipe for a minute or two, then said, “I can easily understand your feelings of disastrous dilemma, if what you believe is true, and you have become wholly separated from the circles of the world you know. Knowing that I had become lost in a place where my mere presence meant I could not live for more than a handful of days would certainly frighten me as well. But have you considered the alternative?”

The inventor stopped his pacing mid-stride, frowning in puzzlement. “*What* alternative?”

“Why,” the wizard began, as if it were obvious, “that my reality and yours are one and the same.”

Emmett didn’t have to think about it. “Impossible,” was his crisp and flat reply.

Gandalf smiled slightly. “Why? If your Machine was designed to take you through the barriers of time, is it not possible that you have simply been thrown back into your own distant past?” He did not even suggest that this might be a part of Emmett’s future, and the inventor knew why: The wizard, being a Maia, knew from personal experience *exactly* what had happened since the beginning of Time, and that history did not include anything even vaguely resembling what Emmett had described of his own time.

“No,” was the blunt answer.

“Why not?” was the equally blunt rebuttal.

“Because it’s just not possible!” the scientist declared, articulating each word for emphasis. “Archaeologists and paleontologists and geologists and Lord only knows what other ologists have been studying the physical history of our planet for centuries, and there is absolutely nothing to support even the remotest chance that even one culture with this high a degree of sophistication and technological advancement ever existed on Earth prior to the earliest anthropologic records of *homo sapiens*. And there certainly isn’t the slightest bit of evidence that any of the countries or societies or even some of the people, like the Elves, ever existed, before or after the beginnings of recorded history. Which, in plainer English, translates to this: The *only* record of your existence, to us, is in a work of fiction written by a single man. It wasn’t based on legends or myths that were part of any real culture, not any more than in the sense that Tolkien was influenced by the general mythic and legendary concepts of Germanic and Scandinavian and British folklore. We’ve looked back as far as we can into the depths of our planet, and if this *is* part of our distant past, it’s so distant that it precedes any record of life as we know it.”

Despite the lengthy and heavy-worded explanation, riddled with words that meant nothing to him, Gandalf was not at all confused by the general implications of the younger man’s statements. “And you believe that isn’t possible.”

Emmett blinked at his comment, which bore no hint of inquiry. “Of course not! For that to have happened, there would have to have been some period — probably tens of thousands of years, from what Tolkien wrote — in which Earth existed more or less as we know it in *my* time, with virtually all the same flora, fauna, climates, and such, and was inhabited by several apparently *very* sophisticated civilizations that rose and fell but left absolutely no physical evidence that they’d ever existed. Given what we know of the geological and biological history of the planet, that would be extremely unlikely.”

“But not wholly *impossible*.”

The inventor rolled his eyes in exasperation at Gandalf’s persistence. “Not wholly,” he grudgingly conceded. “But damned nearly. So damned nearly that I’d be willing to wager you’d have a better chance of waking up one morning to find you’d turned into a toad overnight. I suppose it’s possible, but still unlikely, that I fell out of n-dimensional space onto a planet outside my stellar system but still in my own continuum, where parallel evolution created a world identical to the one Tolkien wrote about in his stories.”

The wizard’s seemed inordinately pleased by that rebuttal. “Which means, then, that a chance still exists that you *are* in the same sphere of existence as that from which you came, and thus your family *will* be able to trace you here, and take you home.”

This time, Emmett sighed, not irked by the constant rejoinders, but acutely aware of his tenuous situation. “I suppose. But it’s not a very good chance.”

In return, Gandalf smiled. There was something of gentle amusement in the expression, as well as something of unflagging optimism. That was one of the wizard’s most defining characteristics, Emmett suddenly recalled, his determination to carry on and maintain hope under the most impossible and hopeless circumstances — again, something they had very much in common. It shook him a little to see it so powerfully exemplified, as if the wizard was somehow able to take even the smallest shred of a possibility of hope and turn it into a much-needed lifeline. Emmett could see it in his eyes, though there was only a mild echo of it in his voice. “Well, then, if you have difficulty holding out hope against seemingly insurmountable odds, I shall do it for you. I shouldn’t like to think that you will die in a only few days, and nothing can be done to prevent it, not after your timely arrival here helped save *my* life. I have seen many things even more unlikely come to pass — and in this case, I somehow feel that all is not as black as it might appear.”

Emmett could sense that there was more to that particular feeling than just an idle wish for things to be better. He found it both reassuring and unsettling, but couldn’t think of how to respond to it.

In the silence, Gandalf stood and disposed of his pipe embers in the fireplace. The flames rose for an instant, consuming the sparse new fuel, then quieted again. “In any event, Elrond has suggested you spend the day resting, as even his healing powers cannot restore strength lost to weariness and injury. A convenient prescription, since it will also keep you separate from the household, for the time being.”

Emmett had a more definite reaction to that remark: He found it disturbing. It made him feel as if the wizard had suddenly appointed himself his jailor. He frowned. “Then you don’t *really* believe me, do you? You think it would be better if I stayed locked up here, and kept my lunatic ravings to myself.”

But Gandalf was unruffled; he spoke calmly as he made certain the last ashes were cleaned from his pipe. His casual manner betrayed no hint of wariness or doubt. “Quite the contrary, my friend. I have no better explanation for your remarkable entrance into this world, and I have heard no lie in your words nor seen it in your eyes. Moreover, even the most skilled tale-weavers of Middle-earth — in this Age or any other — haven’t the ability to spin a story that rings so true yet speaks in such precise detail of matters totally beyond the comprehension of any Elf or Mortal — and, if truth be known, almost nearly beyond the understanding of this humble wizard! But even though I believe you, I do not think that others would be so readily accepting. Many would think you a servant of the Enemy, or one who has designs of his own which would bode ill for those of us who seek to preserve Middle-earth. It is for your own sake that I deem it best for you to remain in this room, at least for today.”

The scientist easily saw his point. “So how *do* you plan to explain me? I don’t believe for a minute that Elrond took me into his house and went out of his way to heal me just because I happened to faint in front of him.”

The wizard chuckled, his pipe almost magically disappearing into some inevident pocket of his flowing tunic. “That was an unusual first impression, I do grant. But Elrond would have helped you for that very reason alone: because you were injured and unwell and approached him in peace. It is not without reason that he is held in great esteem. I told him you were my traveling companion, and had been injured while helping me escape from a band of orcs, and he did not question it.”

Emmett’s wide eyes widened all the more. “You mean you *lied* to him? Aren’t you the person who wouldn’t snare even an orc with a falsehood? Or was that one of the other characters...?”

Gandalf prudently eschewed requesting an explanation. “What I said is the truth, whether or not you realize it. We have traveled together, and your timely, if unusual, arrival not only caused your injuries, it was of great help in driving off the orcs who had besieged me. Terrified them out of their wits, I suspect, since there were several tremendous claps of thunder and flashes of light heralding your arrival. It was enough to startle even me, and was doubtless a large part of why I first concluded that you must have been sent from Aman — though I and the other Istari arrived *much* more quietly. I should have realized from that alone that something more unusual was afoot. At the time I spoke to Elrond, this was all the more I knew of you, other than the fact that you do not come from Arda, and speak none of our languages. And unless I am mistaken, it will remain the truth, for I sense that our journeys together have not yet done.

“But they will go no farther for today, at least. I can see that Elrond’s suggestion was wise: You haven’t yet

recovered your full strength, and would do well to spend the day resting. Besides," he added to the younger man's half-begun denial, "until you are able to speak one of our languages, how would you be able to communicate with anyone, save me?"

The inventor plopped back onto the edge of the bed. "That's true," he admitted, also admitting to himself that he really *wasn't* quite up to par; he was beginning to feel a little weak in the knees just from his relatively brief burst of pacing. "And I don't suppose I helped things by using an Elvish greeting last night, did I?"

"Not unless you know more of the tongue than a few phrases, which I perceive you do not. But do not worry! I shall seek guidance on these matters, and perhaps I will devise a solution sooner than you think. For now, use the time to regain your strength. I will see to it that meals are brought to you, along with whatever else you might wish for your comfort."

IV

December 21, 2012

11:05 a.m.

Although he did not voice his feelings on the matter, Emmett knew that the one thing he needed most for his personal comfort was the surroundings of home, with himself and his family safe and sound. But he knew that for the present, not even the greatest of wizards could grant him that wish.

Even so, back in the where and when in which he belonged, persons who might eventually provide him with that oh-so-desired resolution were already at work, doing what they could to achieve it. Not all those efforts, however, would have fallen within the range of even the eccentric inventor's wildest imaginations.

When the worst of the tsunami of panic had passed and she had calmed enough to regain her power of motion, Clara gamefully pulled herself together and took what she felt was the best course of action: She consulted the Machine's time-tracking controls. Before glancing at them, she felt a moment's hesitation. What if they showed a blank in the *Time and Place Last Departed* readout? She shuddered at the very thought, but bravely managed a peek. To her relief, she saw that the thing still read *New York City, June 21st, 1902, 4:25 a.m.*

That ordeal completed, she left the hangar/barn and headed for the garage, where Emmett's newest and much smaller Time Machine was currently berthed. Within minutes, she had it airborne and on its way back to the time and place she had just left. After all, logic indicated that the first place to look for someone who had fallen off a Time Machine was in the last place they'd been, and with any luck (and a positive answer to her unceasing prayers), she'd find her stranded husband in the middle of the wheat field over which they had left 1902. Prudence had inspired her to take the new machine; until someone more technically competent than she had a look at it, she didn't trust the locomotive not to repeat its recent unfortunate performance.

Unhappily, the matter was not as simple as she'd hoped. Emmett was not where she'd prayed the accident had left him, and she had no idea how to begin a search for someone completely lost in time and space. Her distress fed on itself and grew until, when she at last returned home to wake her children and give them the horrible news, she was in no better a state of mind than when she had last arrived.

It took the foursome the better part of an hour to get the whole story out of their distraught mother, another hour or so for them to get her to show them what and where the malfunction had been, and a portion of a third for them to persuade her that they'd somehow find a way to bring their father back home, alive and well. While Jules and Emily and Chris tried to convince Clara to get some rest while they looked into the problem, Verne excused himself and headed out to the lab in the barn to get started. It was late morning by the time all four rejoined in their father's private workshops.

"She's asleep, finally," Jules told Verne when they were together. The eldest at 29, Jules had been married for several years, was the father of a two-year-old daughter named Erica, and was happily settled into his life as a full-time novelist and the home-maker of his household, in a quiet neighborhood in the nearby town of Emdale. He and his family had gone with his parents to Sweden early in December, for the presentation of their father's second Nobel Prize in Physics. Since then, life had been quiet in the Brown family — until Chris had called late last night with the frantic news about their father's disappearance. Jules had come over right away to do anything he could to help, as had his other siblings. "Though it wasn't easy. I've *never* seen anyone that hysterical before — especially not Mom."

Verne, seated before the lab's most powerful computer amid a sea of floppies, CDs, and other removable media, glanced up without raising his head. He was the second eldest at 27, and of the four took most strongly after their father, in many ways. After spending the last four years working in the labs at his father's company, EPB Technologies, he had finally been promoted to the head of one research division, a fortunate turn that had come shortly after his recent marriage to Maggie Banning, the daughter of Emmett's business partner, Peter. They already had a young son, Michael, who was due to turn two in April. "What'd you do?" he asked curiously. "Have Em or Chris distract her while you snuck up from behind and clobbered her to sleep?"

Emily shook her head. The second youngest at 22, she was also the most "normal" of the Brown children, in most respects. She had just received her undergraduate degree last June and was currently at work on her graduate work to pass the Bar, on her way to becoming a lawyer. She was bright, exceptionally pretty, and completely smitten

with John Thomas Beckett, whom she had known since childhood and to whom she had recently become engaged. She was home from school for the holidays, and had been as startled by this nasty turn of events as her brothers. "I slipped her one of those muscle relaxants left over from when she hurt her shoulder back in August, snuck it into her orange juice when she wasn't looking. She'll probably be hacked at me for doing it, but at least this way, she has a chance of getting enough sleep to really calm down."

She stepped behind the second of her brothers to peer at the large LCD screen. Verne had the computer in file search mode, and had been scanning disk after disk after disk, seeking a specific file. "What's up?"

The blond explained. "Not much, yet, but if we're lucky.... You may not remember this, Em, 'cause you weren't much more than a baby, and you weren't even around yet, Chris, but when Jules and I were getting old enough to understand what you could do with time travel, we tried sneaking off with the Train."

Jules snorted. "Yeah, and we weren't a whole lot more'n babies, either, thinking we could 'sneak off' with a flying locomotive."

Verne agreed with a nod. "One time, we actually managed to get to it before Mom or Dad could stop us. We were lucky — nothing happened, except that we nearly totaled one side of the barn trying to get it out. Dad put a whole raft of safety interlocks on the barn and the Machine to keep it from happening again, but he knew that if we'd managed it once, we'd find a way to do it again — and that maybe the next time, we'd pull it off, in a bad way."

The eldest concurred. "I remember it, all right, just like it was yesterday. I don't think Dad was *ever* that mad at us, before or since. Between that and the way he and Mom were so worried, they scared us out of trying it again for at least two years."

"And by then," Verne went on, "Dad had started working on the next Machine. I heard Mom try to talk him out of it, once. She said she thought the locomotive had a lot more charm and character than the Jag, but I knew why she was *really* worried: Once we figured out how to drive the car, it'd be a piece of cake for us to figure out how to get around Dad's security and take it out. But Dad was already two steps ahead of her, and us. He was working on a program that would make it possible to trace time travelers and pin down their location in space and time, so someone could go after them and bring them back home."

"Didn't he tell us all about that, years ago?" Chris wondered aloud. At seventeen, he looked astonishingly like a dark-haired version of his father at the same age, though he also had remarkably clear green eyes inherited from one of his maternal ancestors. He was exceptionally bright, fascinated by a very odd combination of astronomy, medicine, film-making, and acting, and was currently enrolled at UCLA, until he decided which career he wanted to pursue in earnest. There was still a strong streak of innocent mischief in him that occasionally got him into trouble, and he was the unflagging light of love of fifteen-year-old Marlene McFly. "After Emmy and J.T. and Marlene and I stole the Jag and wound up stranded in 1666, without leaving any real clues about where we were going?"

Emily shivered slightly in remembrance. "Yeah, he did. I remember him saying that if something like that ever *did* happen again, that if we accidentally got stranded in another time, we should keep calm and stay put, because he was working on something to make it easier to find us."

Again, Verne nodded. "Yes — and you'll note he was already pretty sure we wouldn't listen to his hands-off rules, even though there was really no way any of us could get around all the security systems he built into things after you guys stole the Jag. I still can't figure out some of the things he did to make sure the barn stayed off-limits. A while back, maybe a year after you guys made that mess in 1666, I got a look at the part of the program he'd been working on, and it was specifically designed to trace someone who was lost in time without leaving any indication of when or where they were going."

Chris picked up the CD his brother had just dumped onto the steadily growing "no luck" stack. "Only a *part* of the program?" he queried with concern. "Didn't Dad finish it?"

This time, the blond shook his head. "I don't think he had a chance. All of that happened right after he'd found out about the terrorists who were going to try killing all of us on his and Mom's twenty-fifth anniversary, and between taking precautions for that and then going through all the headaches to build the newest time machine, he never really would've had time to complete the program."

Jules digested this for almost a full minute before loosing a large sigh. “Okay, Vernie, I’m gonna be honest with you: I know you inherited more of Dad’s genius than me and Emmy and maybe Chris put together. Bottom line: If you can find Dad’s files, can you finish writing the program?”

Verne stopped what he was doing, put his hands on his lap, and looked his elder brother straight in the eye. “I *have* to, Jules, that’s all there is to it. I know all about Dad’s theories of time travel and his designs for the machines and the way he writes programs, especially with the microprocessors he invented. He explained to me the general way this program was supposed to do what he wanted, and if you put it all together, it’s more than we could make anyone else understand without a few years to tutor ‘em. If I *can’t* finish it, no one can — and do *you* want to be the one to tell Mom that we’ve haven’t a snowball’s chance of ever seeing Dad again?”

His siblings shook their heads. “No,” Jules finally sighed. “Cause even if we can find what you’re looking for and you can finish it, there’s no guarantee that it’ll help us find Dad again, not if he wound up stranded in n-dimensional space.” In unspoken concert, each of them collected an armload of disks, went to the nearest terminals, and started to help their brother sift through the thousands upon thousands of files that might hold the key to their father’s salvation.

December 21, Third Age 2911
4:30 p.m.
Rivendell

Elsewhere, other persons concerned with Emmett's future were turning equally intense, if somewhat differently motivated, thought to the matter. The folk of Rivendell were all intrigued by Gandalf's unexpected and unprecedented companion, since the grey wizard's habit was to travel alone, or with persons somehow involved in achieving the same goal as he. As far as they knew, Gandalf was on no specific errand at present, other than his usual gathering of information concerning their Enemies, and the man who had come with him did not look to be any sort of Ranger or explorer or even simple woodsman that they had ever seen. Some whispered among themselves about the unthinkable possibility that the wizard had taken himself some sort of apprentice — a speculation fostered by the fellow's appearance and the manner in which he had been dressed — but Elrond was certain it was not so, though Gandalf himself could not be found to support or deny the rumor.

It was true, however, that the Master of Rivendell was also intrigued by the stranger, who bore scant resemblance to any Elf or Man he had ever known. That he was not a child of the Firstborn was easily discernable to one of Eldar blood. It was more difficult to tell what sort of Mannish lineage he might possess, but to one such as Elrond, whose father had been the first King of Númenor, it seemed fairly certain he was not one of the last Men of the West, a Dunadin. Yet he also lacked the stouter earthiness common to the lesser races of Men, and certain parts of his attire, which Elrond had seen while attending his injuries, were completely alien to the Elf. Even his name, Emmett, did not sound as if it had roots in any tongue with which he was familiar, not even the Common Tongue, Westron.

Though he said nothing of it to his peoples' not-so-idle inquiries — replying instead that Gandalf's affairs were his own to keep, and he would not presume to so much as offer speculation concerning them — he did indeed wonder if this Emmett had come from the Far West, for his appearance held that strange mixture of age and youth which none outside of Elvenkind, save the Istari, showed. That morning, Gandalf had admitted to his host that the fellow was newly come to Middle-earth, but he would say nothing more specific about him, and shortly thereafter had gone off to meditate in private on all the matters currently occupying his thoughts.

Elrond knew that, great as his own responsibilities were, the wizard's were far greater and a vastly heavier burden, so he had not pressed for further explanations. If his understanding of the situation was required, he would learn what he needed to know in due time. If not, so be it. Elrond had known Gandalf long enough to understand that when he was unusually unresponsive on a subject, it was because he had chosen to keep to himself the tremendous onus of carrying what was always very dangerous knowledge. Elrond respected and admired him for it, and never questioned his decisions.

And as he meditated upon the subject of his unexpected rescuer, Gandalf himself quickly realized just how perilous indeed was the knowledge Emmett had given him, not only the information concerning his origins, but also his remarkably detailed understanding of *this* world. The wizard knew, though he had not said so, that his chance companion's awareness of the history of *Ēa* was vast — even vaster than his own, in ways, for in his heart, Gandalf could sense that Emmett, being a time traveler, knew much of their future, and the eventual outcome of their struggle against Sauron.

The wizard's powerful curiosity wanted to go to the inventor and beg him to tell all that he knew of what was to come — but fortunately, his even stronger wisdom and common sense told him that to do so would be their undoing. If, for instance, he were a general who learned of a bloody battle in their future and was able to win it by moving sooner than predicted, he might lose more of their men and resources than would have been lost had he let fate take its own course; thus, he might unintentionally set the stage for a far greater defeat to follow. By the same token, if he took this information and, knowing that many lives would be lost, avoided the battle entirely, he might save some lives of his allies, but also spare the Enemy a drain of strength at a key moment, a turn which would ultimately end in total disaster.

No, it was far better to know nothing, and to let history unfold as it would by virtue of their actions or inactions, unhampered and unconfused by the niggling demons of what might prove to be foreknowledge far too clear for their own good. Eru Ilúvatar, Who had created all worlds, had His own greater designs, and Gandalf had always believed that a person — mortal or immortal, human or Elf, dwarf or hobbit, Maia or Vala — would do best to not even try to second-guess their Creator.

Still, he did have stirrings of his own dimmed foresight on this matter, a very strong feeling that this unexpected turn of events was also somehow a part of Ilúvatar's greater plan. He could sense that mere chance had not literally thrown Emmett Brown into his path — or, more accurately, on top of the Orc captain who had been coming uncomfortably close to lopping off the besieged wizard's head. There was a *purpose* to Brown's presence here and now, and though he did not presume to seek any precise details of that purpose, Gandalf knew, in quiet humility, that he needed guidance beyond that at hand in Middle-earth in order to make his next decision.

And so, for the remainder of the morning and much of the brief winter afternoon, the wizard wandered alone in the pine forests above Imladris, seeking some answer, however small, that might give him a clue to lead him on the proper path. And he did indeed find an answer, though in a way he had not expected.

That evening, before the meal-summons had been given, when the sun went down behind veils of thick clouds and snow began to fall, gently, on the shoulders of the mountains and the eaves of Rivendell, the wizard returned to Elrond's house. Though he was invited to join the others in the Hall of Fire before dinner, he politely declined and headed straight for Emmett's room.

There, he found the inventor seated at a small table, using writing implements he had been given to set down some lengthy but indecipherable version of whatever had been going through his mind. He had asked for a bath and a change of clothing before the wizard had left, but while the former had been used, the latter had not been touched, except for the warm, ankle-length dressing gown his hosts had provided along with the bath. From the stack of papers already covered with his rather attractive, if alien, script, he had not budged from the table since he'd sat down and started writing. The room was beginning to chill, as the fire had not been stoked or tended for some time.

The sound of the wizard's entrance first elicited only a cursory glance from the scientist; immediately thereafter, he looked up again, a much more focused and attentive doubletake. "You're back," Emmett said, a statement with the barest frosting of surprise. "When I didn't see hide nor hair of you all day, I'd started wondering if your search for guidance meant a pilgrimage to some wise man of the mountains."

Gandalf smiled slightly at the remark. "Not quite," he admitted as he saw to rekindling the hearth. "It is easiest to meditate when one is not besieged by constant distractions, which can be many in this house, and as you guessed, I chose to leave it for a while in order to find adequate privacy. But I did not require seclusion so great that I would have wandered farther than I could return before the sun set. We are in the midst of a bitter winter, and I have no love of its biting cold, especially at night."

The inventor raised one curious brow. "So you *didn't* take this up with Elrond? I expected you would."

"Under other circumstances, I might have. But wise and learned as Elrond may be, the matter of you and your presence in Middle-earth is of a depth beyond even his wisdom and understanding." He sighed softly, setting aside the fire-irons as a merry blaze once more danced in the hearth. He took off his cloak and other protective outdoor garments, then settled himself in the chair he had used that morning, to soak up the welcome warmth.

Emmett put down his writing tools and took a seat on the edge of the bed nearest the fireplace, only then realizing how cold the room had gotten. After warming himself for a minute or so, he broke the silence. "I see your point. If the fact that I came here through time and space and consider this a wholly separate reality was enough to stretch the limits of *your* belief, it probably would be completely beyond anyone else's comprehension."

He pulled his long legs up onto the bed and crossed them, to tuck his bare — and chilly — feet under the folds of the thick robe. He sighed. "You know, I really *am* very grateful that you believe me. While I had so much time to myself to think about it, today, I realized my behavior this morning was only one step short of deplorable, and I'm sorry. It isn't *your* fault that I'm stranded here, and I don't even think I properly thanked you for helping me yesterday. It's no excuse for juvenile manners, I know, but I hate being in a position where I can't do anything to change what's happened. I've concluded that moping over my circumstances is even more counterproductive. All I can do is have faith in my family, hope for the best, and try to make the most of whatever might happen to me while I'm here, even if it's for the rest of my life — and even if that turns out to be only a few days."

Gandalf watched the inventor as he spoke; when he was done, the wizard responded with gentle sympathy. "You need not apologize, Emmett. I myself have been known to be less than a model of grace when faced with needless stupidity and constant frustration. It's gratifying, however, to know that you have made your peace with these

matters — although I must tell you that all is not as dark it might seem.”

Emmett laughed softly. “Thanks for the encouragement — but there’s no reason you ‘must’ tell me anything.”

The wizard crossed his arms and looked into the fire for a moment, then turned his dark-eyed gaze to his companion. “Actually, there *is* a reason. My meditations today were not fruitless — indeed, they were far more productive than I could have hoped.”

The inventor frowned, puzzled. “How? If you didn’t talk with Elrond—”

“Elrond is by no means my only source of counsel, my friend. The guidance I sought was not from any of the Wise in Arda, but from those in whose service I came to Middle-earth.”

This time, Emmett blinked. “The Valar?”

Seemingly hesitant, the elder man nodded, turning back toward the fire. “Yes. Even before I left the house, I knew that this was a matter far more profound than I had originally believed. The implications of your presence here and the possible repercussions resulting from it are such that I felt I could not speak of it to anyone in these mortal lands, not even the greatest of those who sit upon the Council. As a rule, I cannot hold any but the most tenuous communication with those in Aman, a form you would probably call prayer, but when I find myself in great need of guidance, I am sometimes answered by moments of insight, signs pointing to the path I must take, words whispered into my heart, or other meaningful but indirect response.”

His eyes shifted to Emmett, their expression intense, but not troubled. “Today, the answer I received was more than enough to convince me that I had become entangled in a very important matter, perhaps more important than anything I have ever before encountered.”

The scientist swallowed uneasily. “I’m not so sure I like the sound of that...”

The wizard nodded, comprehending the feeling. “Yes, I also was suspicious, at first. Many times in the past have our Enemies adopted fair and helpful guises to lure us away from vigilance when vigilance is most needed. Sauron did so when he came as Annatar to the house of Celebrimbor, to learn from him the art of Ring-making. Even my own lord, Manwë, was once persuaded to release his brother Melkor by such deceitful means, and the result, you may know, was disastrous.”

Emmett knew indeed; that much of *The Silmarillion* and other fragmented tales had stuck with him. Melkor, aka Morgoth, was this universe’s counterpart of Lucifer, the most beautiful and powerful of the angels who had fallen because he was not content to be the greatest creation of God; he wanted to *be* God. “So, you think someone with bad intentions might be trying to trick you now?”

But this time, Gandalf shook his head. “No. Allowing one’s self a false sense of security by accepting all one sees at face value can be dangerous; but there is an even greater peril in allowing one’s prudent wariness to become over-vigilance, so thus you distrust a genuine helping hand when it is offered in an hour of great need. Also, there is no way in which any of our Enemies could have known of the nature of your unprecedented arrival, since neither you nor I have spoken of it to anyone outside this room. Even had they understood precisely what happened, the orcs could not have taken word of it very far in one day, and I strongly suspect they were too frightened by the strangeness of your sudden appearance to want to leave their caves, after we had fled the vicinity. Vengeance against an injured foe requires no act of bravery, and making noises designed to trick us into thinking them strong and unconquerable while in the fastness of their own home was much easier than mounting an actual pursuit against adversaries still capable of action. No, I have no reason to believe my Enemies are attempting to deceive me. My uneasiness, I think, comes from the nature of the answer itself, for this time, it was no indirect whisper, but a very clear and well-aimed shout. And although it seems to me that the respondent was the Lady Varda — one of the Valar whom I serve — but it also seems plain to me that she was merely a messenger.”

He took a long, deep breath, then slowly loosed it as he cleared his throat and gathered his thoughts. “At any rate,” he continued, “an answer was given, largely in these words I was instructed to convey to you:

“My child Emmett, son of Everett and Eleanor: Do not fear for your future, nor for that of your kin, for your

coming to this time and place was not without greater purpose. I am aware of your plight, and also of your family's concerns for your welfare. Do not despair! Already they have begun their journey down the paths which will in the proper time lead them to you, and you shall all be reunited in safety.

"For now, I bid you to set aside your concerns about this place to which you have come; your presence here presents no danger to your life. The truth will someday be known to you, and you will not be displeased in the discovery, for as this world was brought into being, so, too, have many other worlds and times been fashioned. I know them all, from the largest stars and galaxies and most powerful singularities to the smallest grains of sand and the sub-molecular particles of which all things are fashioned.

"And I know you well, Emmett, as I have known every being who has or will walk in the light of day or the dark of night. In the world you know, the gifts which have been yours since you first took breath have been both your greatest joy and greatest burden. Here, you will find them to be not a burden but a benefit; you may indeed find your time in this place to be of service to the greater good, for both yourself and those whom you encounter. Do not look for a swift departure from this place, but do not be afraid that you will be left alone and rudderless. My servant Olórin has agreed to be your guide while you are stranded here. Heed his counsel, but do not fear to take your own, and much good may come of your visit to these foreign shores, for both of you."

The wizard paused for a moment as he finished repeating the message. He noticed then that Emmett was sitting with his elbows on his knees and his face covered with his hands. The posture puzzled him. "Are you feeling ill, my friend?" he asked quietly. "Perhaps I should have waited until you were more fully recovered..."

The scientist looked up at the comment, passing one hand across his long face as he did so. "No," he answered with a shake of his head, "I think I'm about as fully recovered as I'm going to get. I'm just finding this a little... overwhelming."

A wry expression flickered across Gandalf's features. "Because this time, *you* are the one who has difficulty believing *me*?" he speculated.

But again, Emmett shook his head. "Actually, I *do* believe you. I never told you the names of my parents, and since I don't believe you lied when you told me you didn't pry into my thoughts, someone else had to tell you. Not only that, but as intelligent and knowledgeable and powerful as you might be in ways I don't understand, I'm positive you, and probably the Lady Varda, too, don't have the faintest idea what was meant by *singularities* and *sub-molecular particles*. And *that's* what I'm finding unsettling."

This time, the mage's brows drew together as his face creased with perplexity. "I don't quite understand," he admitted.

"I'm not surprised. You see, Olórin — or would you rather I called you Gandalf? You never gave me a definite answer, one way or the other."

The wizard smiled. "Actually, Emmett, upon reflection, I find that, like you, the experience of hearing my proper name from one who truly understands it is rather refreshing. But your instincts about using it only in private are quite correct. If it were to come to the Enemy's ears, he might have cause to re-evaluate the true nature of the Five Wizards, and may reach conclusions that could eventually prove disastrous to all Middle-earth. I trust you to exercise discretion on the matter. Otherwise, call me what you will. Each of my given names has its own place in my heart, and whichever you choose will give it a new blessing."

The inventor's expression alone was his pledge to be circumspect. "Then, getting back to the original subject: In my world, the time I come from is considerably after the Creation of the universe as we understand it, no matter which theory of creation you subscribe to. For those of us who still believe in the existence of a Supreme Being — and the more I see and understand of the universe and the way it works, the more I become convinced that it wasn't all just some absurd accident — our relationship with our Maker is vastly more abstract than yours, or even the most skeptical mind in Middle-earth's."

"Yes, there are some who doubt the existence of Powers greater than themselves," Gandalf acknowledged. "Most are pitifully uneducated, unconscionably self-centered, or somehow became lost to the knowledge concerning their own Creation — usually through the workings of the Enemy, or their own excessive pride."

Emmett nodded. "Quite so. What you have to understand, however, is that in *my* world, having a close relationship to the Creator — God, most of us call Him — means you live a good life, pray on a fairly regular basis, and maybe go to church, once in a while. If He ever talks to anyone directly, that person is usually considered insane, and locked away in an asylum. It's been a long time since anyone had a face-to-face or even mind-to-mind conversation with Him and was readily believed by others. And though you haven't come right out and said it yet, you think Varda was passing on a message from God, don't you?"

The wizard was unruffled. "Yes, although we name Him Eru Ilúvatar. Are you saying, then, that you doubt what I have told you is genuine?"

"No! And *that* gives me the willies, if you'll pardon the colloquialism! I mean, it's one thing to know, in an abstract sense, that there may be other, superior forms of life in the universe, and that some of them might be considerably farther up the evolutionary ladder, able to do things humans can't, and are immortal, for all intents and purposes. I always thought — probably out of total arrogance — that I'd be able to tell the difference between an ordinary person and someone like that, if I ever met him, but up until now, the only thing that's made you seem at all unlike any other human I've ever known is your ability to communicate via telepathy, and maybe the speed with which you picked up my language. But this...!"

Gandalf grasped what he was trying to say, and empathized. "I do understand your feelings. There is a great difference between studying a thing, to know what can be known of its existence, but quite another to finally meet and experience that which you have only seen in your imagination. There is not a one of the Ainur who has not felt this, Emmett. We sang of the world before it was brought into being, and saw it in our minds and hearts in wonderful detail — but none of us could not have understood what it would be like to at last see it made manifest, real and solid and not merely a creation of thought. It was both a delight and a distress, and it took some time to grow comfortable with the reality of it."

"Yes," the inventor all but sighed, grateful to know that his current state of mind wasn't beyond comprehension. "And I guess it's going to take me a little while to get comfortable with *this* reality. I think something in the back of my head wasn't quite ready to let go of the notion that maybe because you look and act pretty much like an ordinary human being, that's what you really *are*. But ordinary people don't go around passing on messages from the Almighty, and if I don't want to start thinking you're crazy, I have to let go of the notions that would make me more comfortable and accept the truth."

"But is that truly so difficult?"

"Accepting what *you* really are?" Emmett shook his head. "No. What's difficult is realizing that God Himself is apparently taking a personal interest in *my* welfare, to the point of almost direct intervention! It's...."

His voice stopped, frozen for a moment with his expression of flawless astonishment. "Well," he continued at length after his voice had thawed and his face had returned to its normal mobility, "all I can say is I'm shocked and touched and *extremely* grateful, and I *know* nobody at home is going to believe it, if I ever work up the nerve to tell them. I just hope it doesn't go to my head!"

Gandalf laughed softly, now grasping in full the inventor's bewildered situation. "I doubt it will. You appear to have both feet quite firmly planted in whatever ground from which you sprang, at least in regards to yourself, and I'm sure you won't be getting any delusions of... what would you call it? Sainthood?"

A quirky smile twitched at the time traveler's lips. "Yeah, that's the word, and you're right, I won't." He paused long enough to take a deep breath, then let it sigh out again. "So, I take it whatever He's got in mind for my near future, you're in on the plan?"

The wizard made an equivocal gesture. "To a certain extent. As you have already heard, He believes we can both derive something of significant benefit from a continued relationship, although I've not had time enough to devise even a vague notion of what that benefit might be. But the next actions I should take were very clear, and quite sensible. If we are to be companions for an unspecified length of time, there are things you will need to know — and things against which you must be warned."

Emmett held up one hand in polite interruption. "Wait, don't tell me: Number One on the warning list is: *Don't*

tell anyone who you are, where you came from, and what you know about the future."

Gandalf's eyes widened in genuine surprise. "Almost those exact words," he admitted. "Did He speak with you as well?"

A brisk shake of the inventor's head was answer enough. "No. But after traveling through time as much as I have, and having stumbled so close to ultimate disaster more than once, it doesn't take long to learn the rules of the game. And the biggest Rule of Time Travel has always been, *Don't do anything that might change the future and create a paradox*. It's only logical that the same would hold true here — all the more so, if this isn't even my own continuum."

If there were words in Emmett's reply that he didn't understand, Gandalf hid it quite well. "Then you also realize that while you are here, we must find a way for you to fit in, as best we can. In order to accomplish that, I must ask your permission before we can continue."

The inventor shrugged. "I think a subtle approach like this is probably as good a plan as any. If that's the kind of permission you need...."

"Not precisely, although your approval is appreciated. No, I said before that I would never look beyond the surface of your thoughts without asking leave, and since I was instructed to make certain things known to you as quickly as possible, I find myself in need of that permission."

Once he realized some form of more profound telepathic communication was what was being suggested, Emmett didn't pause for so much as a split second to think about it. "You've got it — on one condition."

"Which is?"

"If you see or sense or whatever anything in my head that in any way could tell you even a tiny bit of what I know about the future — *this* future, specifically, Middle-earth's — you'll ignore it and never look back, or ever ask me to tell you more."

The wizard touched one finger to his lips for a moment, a gesture of reflection, then smiled. "If you had not asked that, I would have hesitated to continue, fearing that you did not fully understand all of what my request might imply."

One corner of Emmett's mouth lifted in impish humor. "And if you hadn't asked my permission, I would never have trusted you again — which I'm sure *you* knew very well. Unless the source of my information is completely incorrect, I know quite a bit more about *you* than you do about *me*. And one of things I know is that you would never give in to the temptation of trying to catch more than a glimpse of the future. You know better — better than I do, if comes down to that, since I *have* had the temerity to try it, again and again. So there was really no need for me to ask, but I knew you wouldn't have trusted my sense of discretion or anything else about me if I didn't mention my conditions out loud."

Gandalf laughed. "Yes, you know that I know that you know that I won't trust a person who cannot keep a confidence, or does not understand the need for some thoughts and information to remain private, is that it?"

They laughed together at the convoluted absurdity of it all. Then Emmett added, "Exactly. Were you warned to expect my prerequisites?"

The elder's head shook, firelight lending a golden-red glow to the strands of white hair as they danced back and forth. "Not specifically. But I was told that you are an honest man, one who will do his best to uphold and merit the trust of others, and who in turn is himself worthy of trust. I believed this of you before today's events — or, rather, I *wished* to believe it, but needed the confirmation to ease my suspicious and wary old mind."

"And has it?"

"Most definitely. You have my word that I shall do nothing in discord with your wishes, and moreover will not attempt to see beyond any other veils you may choose to place before me. Is that satisfactory?"

“More than. So,” the inventor sighed, shifting to a more comfortable position on the bed in preparation for whatever came next. “What do I have to do?”

Gandalf simply settled his hands on the arms of his chair. “Look at me, and do not be afraid.”

Emmett briefly toyed with saying that being afraid was the farthest thing from his mind (since the emotion he could barely contain was really eagerly unbridled curiosity), but he decided to just keep quiet and do as bid. When his own dark eyes met the even darker eyes of the wizard, he felt the smallest shiver tremble up his spine, as one might start when not unpleasantly surprised by the sudden appearance of an old friend. He then had the strangest sensation that he was shrinking, metamorphing into a small bird that was being lifted by the gentle hands of a kindly keeper.

The impression swiftly rippled away, replaced by a far stronger perception that he was a young child gazing up into the trusted face of a beloved parent. That, too, lasted only for the tiniest instant, as a tide of which he had never before felt the like rose up around him, the current too strong and swift for any one drop of water to be seen, but nonetheless warm and gentle and strangely safe.

He didn't know if he closed his eyes during that time, but his vision of the solid world around him fell away, as if he had succumbed to sleep with both eyes still open. For a while, he caught bright flickers that felt like half-remembered dreams, soothing beyond words, piercingly clear as new sunlight on glass-hard ice, gentle as a mother's caress, more beautiful than a thousand poets could describe. He had no sensation of time's passage or of anything else occurring outside the strange and magnificent rhapsody in his head, but when he next was able to perceive the waking world, the fire had waned, the lamps had gone out, and he could feel drops of warm water falling on the backs of his hands where they rested in his lap.

The inventor's rational thoughts told him that his eyes were tortured and watering, either because he'd been crying, or because he hadn't blinked for an hour. He really didn't care which was the answer. He was far more interested in what was slowly but persistently settling into his mind and taking firm root: volumes of information concerning this world, its beginnings, its people, its history, its customs, its languages. Some of these things had already been written by Tolkien, and he recognized them well enough, but the detail and depth went far beyond even the best and most complex of the old Oxford don's writings.

He now could bring to mind actual images — some vivid, others out-of-focus and unable to be fully grasped, undoubtedly memories from Gandalf's point of view, now blurred by the results of his current embodiment in human-like flesh, the decree of the Valar which both clarified his understanding of the peoples of Middle-earth and clouded his knowledge of what he truly was and had been. But some of those images remained striking in their clarity or emotional impact. He saw echoes of what it had been like in the uncounted ages before and after the physical world had been shaped and time had begun. He could remember great battles that had turned the tide of history with catastrophic results, smelled the scent of the very first flowers ever to blossom, felt the warmth of a light that was created before the sun. He watched the age of Elves begin its long rise and fall, and perceived the gradual development of the first human nations. He saw from afar, sadly, the fall of Númenor, and an age later witnessed the growth of hobbit civilization in the North of Middle-earth.

He knew what it was like to walk in the guise of an Elf, among the greatest people and realms of their kind. He understood, albeit rather dimly, what it was to be an Ainu, a creature of pure thought with senses totally beyond anything mere mortal minds had ever imagined. He heard the greatest swell of music ever made as he sang his own small part in the *Ainulindalë*, the music of Creation. Kingdoms rose and fell, great leaders were born and died, whole worlds changed in the most awesome cataclysms ever known; Powers both mortal and immortal struggled constantly for dominance. This encyclopedic information he had been given was even more impressive than the half-dozen new languages that had suddenly and fully joined the several others he already knew with the fluency of English, down to the understanding of certain dialects, colloquialisms, and idiomatic speech.

Emmett had no way of knowing how long he sat there, staring blankly into space while his mind reveled in the results of this “teaching” experience. Presently, however, he was drawn from his reverie by the almost-forgotten wizard who had given him this splendid gift.

“Are you all right, Emmett?” the now-familiar voice asked in gentle concern. “I was as careful as I could be, and I know nothing I did was sufficient to break your mind....”

“Break it?” the inventor croaked with a laugh of complete dismissal. “Trust me, I have never felt less broken in my entire life! Of course, I’m sure this in no way reflected a hostile invasion of my mind, but even so...!” He had no words to describe it properly.

“I’m glad you found the experience pleasant,” Gandalf replied. “Others have not — but then, they themselves were hostile or bitter persons, with guarded and shuttered minds. Yours is surprisingly unso.” He folded his arms, expressing his puzzlement. “But if such is the case, why are you weeping?”

Emmett’s laughter turned toward himself as he wiped his face on the soft sleeve of his robe. “Not out of discom fort! Where I come from, I’ve often been accused of wearing my heart on my sleeve, as we put it, although I find I have a greater tendency to cry when I’m at my happiest instead of vice-versa. Some people think it’s a sign of weakness in a man, but I’ve never been able to understand why, unless you’re using it to snivel your way out of something.”

He sniffled away the last of the dampness and deliberately quelled his eagerness to simply sit there and examine the gifts of information he had been given. He looked back at his companion. “Since I presume this wasn’t just to satisfy my personal curiosity, what’s next?”

The wizard leaned back in his chair, not precisely from weariness, but merely as one stretching his back after a brief but difficult task. He took out his pipe, considered indulging in it for a bit, then changed his mind and put it back. “Next... The evening meal will be called soon, and I see no reason you should not attend. Indeed, it’s time you showed your face and put to rest some of the ridiculous rumors that have been circulating among the households since last night. When I told him your gear was lost at the skirmish with the orcs — not at all untrue, since that is presumably the point at which you lost your world! — Elrond promised to have new attire made for you at once, though I see you have been provided with adequate things, for the time being.” He gestured to the neatly folded stack of plain clothing and the pair of soft boots at the foot of the bed.

He spoke in Sindarin Elvish, the local language, which Emmett now recognized and understood to perfection. It was so *different*, so beautiful and almost lyrical, hearing it this way rather than listening to it without comprehension, or merely imagining the sound of a few disjointed words and phrases read from a lifeless page. Delighted, he had to try out the new gift by responding in kind. The words simply came, as easily as if he had known and studied them all his life. “Yes,” he said, wondering if he spoke with an obvious accent, “but are you going to have to continue explaining my presence with half-truths and evasions? I’m not really very comfortable with that.”

Gandalf inclined his head. “I understand your feelings, but sometimes, when a greater purpose hangs in the balance, one must adopt disguises to protect both himself and his quest. Not all people wear clothing or adopt new appearances to deceive others; often, it is for genuine protection. Here in Middle-earth, I myself appear not as I truly am, yet I took on this guise of flesh so that I could help the peoples whose lives are bound to the material world to raise resistance and hopefully defeat one of my own kind. The explanation I have given Elrond of who you are is extremely simple, yes, and it does not tell the whole tale of you and your origins, but neither is it a lie meant to deliberately misdirect others into presumptions that will cause them harm. If Lord Ilúvatar sees in the larger fabric of Eä’s future some benefit that might be derived from your adoption of protective camouflage while you are here, do you truly believe it to be of wicked intent?”

The time traveler sighed. “When you put it that way, no. But I still am what I am. You can give me all the information there is to give about your universe and everything in it, but when everything’s boiled down, I’m *still* really an inventor and scientist, and not much of anything this world would understand.”

“Not true,” came the swift reply. “Have you already forgotten that you spent almost ten years of your life laboring as a blacksmith and tradesman? Or that you passed at least as many years employed as a teacher? I have also seen in your memories proof that you would make a more than adequate woodsman or explorer, that you know much about the care and riding of horses and even certain other animals, that you have considerable knowledge in the drafting and comprehension of maps, a remarkable understanding of healing herbs and how to tend those ill or wounded, and that you even have quite respectable skills as an artist and musician. Do you think no one in this world would understand those trades? No, for the time being I believe we need say nothing more of you than that you are my traveling companion, encountered accidentally but most fortunately in the wilds, and have many and varied skills which you ply at need. No more could be said of the Rangers who guard the Northlands, and they are held in great respect by those who truly grasp their purposes.”

Emmett blinked three times, then sighed again. "I take it back. You seem to know almost as much about me as I do about you, now. Fair's fair, I guess. But I hope we won't get caught in a web of our own making."

A smile lit the wizard's aged face, a merry expression that erased many marks of his long years. "If we do," he said conspiratorially, "the web will not be of our making, but Lord Ilúvatar's. And I trust He has far greater skill at constructing such things than you or I."