

Almost immediately thereafter, Gandalf excused himself so that Emmett could get changed in private before the evening meal. As the scientist set about exchanging the dressing gown for more public attire, he noted with mild disappointment that the clothing Elrond had provided was considerably more drab than he might have chosen. He suspected the brilliant palette of colors produced by the artificial dyes of his own time and place might not be available here, and he knew that the Elves of which Tolkien had written tended to favor muted, natural tones, but even the plain drapes and hangings and bedclothes of this room were rendered in brighter hues than the outstandingly dull and pale blues and greens and greys of this particular set of clothes. If anyone ever bothered to ask, he would have to mention that his personal tastes were at least a shade or two more colorful than this.

As he put on the tunic and trousers and other items (noting the distinct differences from those of his own time, especially in the matter of closures), it occurred to him that the chooser might have based his or her decisions upon the borrowed clothes Emmett had been wearing when he'd arrived in Rivendell. An understandable error, he admitted. And upon reflection, he realized how subdued garb might actually be more advantageous, for the time being. He was still very much a stranger here, despite the flood of raw information the wizard had just poured into his head. It might be wisest if he did his best to "disappear" into the background, at least for tonight. He wasn't worried that any of his hosts might view him with hostility; rather, in his travels through time, he had always found it useful to remain inconspicuous until he had gotten the lay of an unfamiliar land. He had tried to do so in Hill Valley of 1885, and it had done much to help him be accepted by the locals, despite his comparatively sudden and unexpected appearance in town.

When he was finished — happy to find that all the clothes fit well, including the half-boots — he finally realized that Gandalf had not said if he should wait for him to return or leave when he was ready. Arriving with the wizard would, of course, all but guarantee his acceptance to anyone in the house, but Emmett felt it would be a mistake to always rely on his presence. Even before he had received the rather startling message concerning his present situation, he'd had a sinking feeling that he was going to make quite a long stay here in Middle-earth before his family was able to find him, and sooner or later, he would have to find out how well he could fit in on his own. Ever willing to tackle new challenges, the inventor decided that sooner was as good a time as any. He checked his appearance in a small mirror over the wash basin to make sure he was presentable, then headed out.

It was odd, he thought, feeling so very at home and familiar with this large manor of which he personally had seen so little. The information about it which Gandalf had given him, however, was surprisingly unneeded, at the moment; his ears alone could have led him to the Hall of Fire. He had chosen that as his first and most logical destination, since it was a major center of activity at virtually all hours of the day and night. In references he recalled from the books, it had been described a rather quiet and dimly-lit place, where people came to talk or sing or simply meditate. But when he arrived, he saw that the large room was well-lit and quite busy; indeed, there appeared to be some sort of celebration in progress, as everyone was in a merry mood, and all were arrayed for the festive occasion.

The latter situation was noted by Emmett with some concern. If the dress code for the evening was to be in a party spirit, then he would be conspicuously underdressed, and made an object of notice by the very blandness he had thought would provide anonymity. Suddenly uneasy, he looked for a dark corner where he could settle; when he found one, he vanished into it and remained seated there, listening to the conversations bubbling around him.

While he observed the ebb and flow of sound and motion, he wondered if Gandalf had known about this, if today was some sort of holiday or special occasion of which he might have been forewarned. He knew that the hobbits apparently celebrated some winter festival they called Yule, but to the best of his knowledge, it was something peculiar to their culture and not shared by any other inhabitants of Middle-

earth. As he listened, he eventually realized the wizard must have been nearly as much in the dark as he. The hubbub centered around the betrothal of two of Rivendell's younger Elf-folk, Galadhon and Mirwen. It had been announced only a few hours ago, when Gandalf had still been outside the manor and Emmett had still been sequestered in his room, well after his new clothing had been provided. That erased any potential annoyance he might have felt over his apparently inappropriate attire.

But as he continued to watch the joyful talking and singing all around, the inventor felt an involuntary sadness settle and grow in the pit of his stomach. He looked at the happy couple and their equally happy parents, and thought of his own wife and children so unimaginably far away. He thought of Jules and Verne, both of whom were now happily married with families of their own. Though Chris was still too young to be thinking about such things (even though Marty's daughter Marlene was still head-over-heels for him, and he was beginning to enjoy her unflinching attentions), he thought of Emily and her recent engagement to her childhood friend, J.T. Beckett. He imagined her yet-to-be wedding day, of how beautiful she would undoubtedly look, and how emotional Clara would be over watching him give away her only daughter to the worthy young man. He wondered if he would even live to see that day as the weight of every one of his ninety-nine years of life suddenly came to roost upon his shoulders. Here he was, surrounded by ageless immortals, befriended by a being who looked and was older than he, but who would never really know the true burden of mortal age, and he could not help but feel more ancient than all of them put together.

Abruptly, he wanted to be somewhere else, anywhere else. He was about to rise when, just as abruptly, a lithe figure clad in silver and blue stepped before him. It was a woman, clearly of Elvish blood, since her flawlessly beautiful face spoke of unending youth. Her long black hair hung down her back like a river of sable caught in a long single braid and done up with a cord of silver and crystal. A quarter-sized faceted disk of vivid sapphire crystal held in an intricate setting of silver hung around her throat, suspended from a fine chain. Her simple gown of deep blue flowed to her slippered feet, and a belt of links in the form of silver leaves graced her slender waist. She smiled at Emmett as she stopped before him; her grey eyes sparkled with the gleam of starlight on still water, and she spoke in an equally lovely voice.

"Welcome to the House of Elrond, honored guest," said she, inclining her head in a gesture of polite greeting. "You are Master Emmett, the friend of Lord Mithrandir, are you not?"

For what seemed to him a ridiculously long stretch of time, the inventor felt himself sitting there with his mouth hanging open, staring at this incredibly beautiful young woman who had deigned to approach him and, more importantly, seemed to know who he was. But after what was really only a handful of moments, he regained his composure, closed his mouth, stood, and said, "Ah... yes, I am." He took her offered hand and bowed politely, as he somehow knew was the tradition hereabouts. "Emmett Brown at your service..." He hesitated briefly, too briefly for the woman to step into the lapse. "...Lady Arwen — or am I mistaken?"

The her laughter was pleasantly musical, and kind. "You are not, sir," she replied with a smile, confirming his conclusion that she was indeed Elrond's only daughter. "And so it appears we are not entirely strangers to one another, though we know no more than each other's name and face! My family and I and all our household are at your service as well, and we thank you greatly for the aid you gave Lord Mithrandir in his skirmish with the orcs."

Emmett had to chuckle in return, though his was less musical and more rueful. "To be perfectly honest, you give me far more credit than is due. My help came in the form of simply falling into the right place at the right time, and I wasn't even conscious long enough to realize my accident had helped anyone."

The light in her eyes and her expression showed her opinion that he was exaggerating. "Nonetheless, help when it is sorely needed is still help, no matter the manner of its offering." She gracefully seated herself in the chair beside his, and gestured for him to resume his place. "If I may be so bold, Master

Emmett, tell me, how did you know me? I was not present when you arrived last night, and although I saw much of you when I assisted my father in attending your hurts, I am certain you have never before seen me.”

“Quite so,” the time traveler easily agreed. “But I’ve heard you described by others, and who else but the lovely Lady of Rivendell would have so graciously welcomed a perfect stranger to this house?”

Once in a while, Emmett really amazed himself with this seldom-called-upon and thus erratic ability to say exactly the right words at the right time in the right way. He wondered if it was the result of reading so many description-heavy adventure novels as a boy. Arwen accepted his explanation with another bright laugh. “You do me an unwarranted honor, sir, and I thank you for it. Indeed, I can see now why Mithrandir chose you as a friend: You have a keen eye, a sharp mind, a humble manner, and a courteous tongue. Few such persons can be found in this world, and one who has a staunch heart and does not flee in the face of danger is worthy of friendship. But is it true what my father told me, that you are but recently come to our lands? If so, your speech does not betray you.”

So, then, he *didn’t* speak with an accent. Interesting. Emmett again wanted to deny her praise, but there was no point in starting an argument that he couldn’t finish with an honest explanation. He chose instead to answer her question as best he could. “Yes, it’s true, I’ve never been in these parts before. But I’ve learned much about them, from various sources, so it’s not wholly unfamiliar. Still, there’s a big difference in hearing something described to you, even in the most exacting detail, and seeing it for yourself. I recognized you from descriptions I’ve heard from others—“*In a book, to be exact...*” —but they don’t do you justice. This is a beautiful place, and I’m very happy to be here.”

Arwen’s smile remained on her face, though a shadow seemed to pass over it, like thin clouds passing before the full moon, dimming its light. “Truthfully?” she asked, the question gently skeptical. “If you will forgive me, Master Emmett, I would not have said you appeared happy when I first approached you.”

“It was nothing,” the inventor answered too quickly, even for his own comfort, for he knew it to be a lie — and moreover, he knew that the Elf woman could hear it in his voice. “Well, not entirely nothing,” he corrected before she could utter a word or favor him with a glance of deeper and less understanding disbelief. “Listening to the conversations and watching everyone here made me think of my own family, my wife and children, and my friends.”

Puzzlement creased Arwen’s brow. “And to think of them saddens you? Have you lost them?”

“Not in the sense I think you mean,” he said, since he guessed that by *lost* she meant that they had died. “It’s just that I’m very, very far from home, so far that I’m afraid I may never see them again. Gandalf told me I needn’t worry on that account, and I suppose I believe him, but it’s difficult not to have *any* doubts.”

The woman nodded; as she moved, lamp and firelight glittered off the crystals in her hair and made the sapphire pendant gleam like a tiny blue star brought down from the heavens for the sole purpose of enhancing her natural beauty. “Lord Mithrandir seldom gives counsel concerning the future, it is true, and he is less seldom in error when he does, but I myself have found it difficult to maintain unflagging hope as easily as he. By your eyes and voice, I see that you hold great love for your family. If it would ease your heart to speak of them, I would be honored to listen. I know little of Mithrandir’s home or kindred, and though it may not be so, it seems to me that you and he are somehow akin.”

At that, Emmett laughed, the first whole-hearted laughter he’d felt since the accident. Arwen’s grey eyes widened in surprise at his unexpected reaction; several others nearby glanced in their direction, made curious by the sudden outburst from the corner. For the sake of his hostess, the time traveler stifled his mirth, once he noticed people were starting.

“There may be some *very* superficial resemblance,” he said to his companion in a more subdued voice, causing the onlookers to lose interest, “mostly in the fact that we’re both old men and we both have white hair, but that’s about all the kinship we share, I swear! We don’t come from the same country, and it’s only by an *extremely* peculiar twist of fate that we’ve become traveling companions. My home *is* somewhat different from yours, but not all that different, in the most essential ways. And my family is no more or less extraordinary than anyone else’s. Perhaps I love them a little more deeply and openly than some might, but that’s only because to me, they’re the fulfillment of a dream I’d once lost hope would ever come true. *I* see them as exceptionally precious because to me they *are*, but I don’t imagine others hold the same opinion. Of course, they don’t see them through my eyes, or my heart.”

When he stopped speaking, Emmett was startled by what was coming out of his mouth. Something about this place, Arwen’s presence, or perhaps the musical tongue they were using, not only made more poetic language seem natural, it also encouraged one to speak more candidly. Probably the company, he reflected, though he did not regret it. But he also knew it would be a mistake to say too much about those he had left behind. “Forgive me. I’m sure your offer of a sympathetic ear was genuine and well-intended, but there’s no reason for you to listen to me rattle on like this. There isn’t much to tell, above and beyond my homesickness, and I was really only sad for a moment or two.”

If she felt that he was lying for her sake, she did not reveal it. “Perhaps,” she allowed, though the scientist couldn’t tell which specific thing she was allowing. “But you have already said a good deal, about them and yourself. I have seen many great Men visit these halls, mighty warriors and kings of legend and noble lords who have, perhaps, rank and strength and power you do not. Their concerns have always centered upon battle or trade or other matters of worldly importance; never have I heard them speak so earnestly and affectionately of their wives and children. I know all the ancient tales of love between the Eldar and Edain, but I have often been prompted to wonder if Men in these latter times have lost the capacity for great love in their need to learn the colder arts of commerce and war as they struggle to survive against the growing Darkness in the world. You give me hope for that part of my heritage, Master Emmett, if—” she added, eyes twinkling, “—Man you truly be.”

The inventor laughed again, this time more quietly. “Is *that* one of the ridiculous rumors Gandalf was talking about? That I’m not human? I’d wondered what he’d meant. But if you want it straight from the horse’s mouth, as we say, yes, I’m human. Maybe not precisely like the humans you know, but close enough. And I *am* very glad to be here, especially given the other possible alternatives! Everyone I’ve met in Rivendell has been more than kind to me, and I hope to have a chance to get to know both your house and your people better before I must leave.”

Arwen was content with his reply. “Then I hope so, too. You may stay here as long as you wish, and tonight, you will have an excellent opportunity to begin your quest for knowledge. A feast has been prepared to celebrate the betrothal of Galadhon and Mirwen. All the household and guests will attend, and there will be much to see and hear. My Father asked me to make certain you did not go astray, since you are new to this house. He himself would have come to guide you, but he needed to speak in private with Lord Mithrandir before the banquet begins. And for myself, I would be honored if you would deign to be my escort for the evening.”

“Happily,” the inventor blurted out without thinking; after he had a moment to do so, he reconsidered. “Then again, you might find yourself more comfortable with someone...” He could hardly say what he was actually thinking, *a little nearer your own age*, since although he appeared older, he knew she had a few thousand years on him. “...more appropriately dressed for the occasion. I don’t think whoever picked out my clothes knew there would be a party tonight.”

This time, Arwen’s soft chuckle was regretful. “Very true,” she confessed, “since *I* was the culprit, and did my choosing long before Mirwen’s father made the announcement. If you will better acquaint me

with your tastes, I will see to it that our craftspeople provide you with more suitable attire. I beg your pardon for my error, which I should have repaired more quickly. But for now, let me make some small amends, as best I am able with so little time to spare.”

With that, she rose and removed her sapphire pendant. “This was made by one of our most skilled jewelersmiths, and was given to me as a gift when he became a Master in his art, many years ago. The stone is without flaw, cleverly carved so that it takes the light and gives it back twice over again, and the chain and setting are of mithril, that most precious of metals which is now so very rare. It would please me and greatly assuage my guilt if you would now accept it as my gift of welcome.”

Something inside Emmett winced a little, thinking that his hastily-formed excuse had been taken far too seriously, but he knew he could refuse neither the gift nor her earnest gesture. “If that’s what you wish, Lady Arwen, of course I accept it, and your apology, but really, neither is necessary. I hardly expected to be provided with the best finery in the house when I asked for a change of clothes — and aren’t you being just a bit *too* generous? What you’re offering is beautiful — and probably priceless. What will the person who gave it to you think?”

“Nothing,” she said simply. “It is mine to keep or give as I choose, and—” Her voice dropped to a near-whisper. “—to be fully honest, I believe he gave me this gift in hopes of winning my favor. We have been friends since childhood, but I am not yet ready to give my heart to any man. Today, I think, is a perfect time to surrender his gift, since Galadhon was he who made it for me, and I rejoice to see him give his heart to another. Take this as a token of hope for reunion with those whom you love as deeply, and as a gesture of my offered friendship.”

Even though he remained self-conscious, the inventor did his best to hide it after hearing her story. He surrendered to her wishes — and right on time, for Arwen had just finished closing the clasp when a symphony of clear-toned bells sounded.

“That is the signal for all to gather for the feast,” she said, motioning for him to rise and accompany her. “Come. There will be much talk with the food and drink, and perhaps in the words you will find sustenance for your hopes as well.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The customs concerning gracious social behavior between men and women were only marginally different here than they had been in Emmett’s youth, when men still did things like open doors and hold chairs for women out of politeness, not because they couldn’t do those things for themselves. He would have expected such manners here to be a little more on the order of medieval courtliness, but they were really more akin to the customs he knew so well. That was something of a relief, not because he had not been supplied with the appropriate information about local traditions, but because the sensation of familiarity was genuine, not something recently acquired through highly unusual means.

The last chime of the bells was still rolling through the corridors when he and Arwen, along with many others, arrived at the Great Hall. Emmett knew that if he had attempted to picture the destination before reaching it, he would have been able to call up an image of it in meticulous detail, down to the smallest thread on each wall hanging and the finest grain of polished wood on every chair and table. Instead, he waited to see it with his own eyes, so that their arrival might at least hold some small bit of surprise. Even before he had been supplied with information about this world, as with Arwen and her father and Gandalf, he had seen renditions of the Hall based upon Tolkien’s descriptions, and he wondered in what way this new discovery would vary from those images.

He was not disappointed. Given that he had seen the Great Hall of Elrond's house depicted as everything from a grand ballroom of opulent splendor to a pleasant but almost rustic chamber recalling images of common rooms in Viking or even Amerindian lodges, he had thought he would be prepared for just about anything. To an extent, he was, but the things he had *not* anticipated struck him with the hoped-for, if mild, surprise.

The tapestries on the wall, for instance, he had quite expected, but he had *not* expected their breathtaking realism. Though not as immense or lavish as the hangings displayed by the more ostentatious rulers of latter days in his own reality, the brilliance of the colors was striking and the renderings so precise, one half-expected the images to come to life at any second. And the floor, which he had thought would be made of the same beautiful woods as all the others he had seen throughout the house, were inlaid with colored patterns so exact and glossy of sheen, the inventor could not tell upon quick inspection if they were made of ceramic tiles or of cunningly carved and stained wood. Moreover, the room was brightly lit with lamps that neither smoked nor flickered as would normal oil or candlelight. There was no sign of soot among the rafters, no scent of burning fats or petroleum or resins, not even the smell of melting wax.

Though the mystery of the lamplight intrigued him, Emmett suddenly felt that for the moment, he would really rather not know what was producing it. Instead, he turned his attention back to his hostess, saying in answer to her question that he found the place remarkably beautiful, a combination of the startling and the familiar. Arwen seemed pleased by his reaction; she nodded courteously to those who bowed and parted before them, opening a path through which they could reach a dais on the far end of the room.

Halfway to their destination, someone fell in step with them. The inventor sensed the presence just beyond Arwen and knew who it was an instant before the wizard spoke. Intriguing, he mused. Had he subliminally glimpsed Gandalf's approach out of the corner of his eye, or had something in the knowledge he had been given enhanced, as a side-effect, his natural senses? He tended to suspect the former more than the latter, though he wasn't quite ready to dismiss either possibility. In either case, the wizard spoke before the time traveler had a chance to look in his direction.

"I see that you have not wasted time in acquainting yourself with one of the most genteel delights of this household, my friend," the elder man said with a sparkle in the eye that touched his voice with warm humor. "Had I not already known of your devotion to your wife and family, I might have felt honor-bound to warn Elrond of a potential threat to his daughter!"

Emmett knew he was joking, and was prepared to respond in kind when Arwen answered more quickly. "If by *threat*, Lord Mithrandir, you are implying designs of a nature beyond mere courtesy, then I would have to confess that it was I who was responsible for incurring the first impropriety. I approached Master Emmett first, and will readily admit that my intentions were not wholly those of simple civility between a host and a guest. You seldom bring strangers to this house, and even more seldom do I have a chance to speak with them before they leave again, beyond the occasional polite exchanges required of my position. I have long suspected that you and my father have been collaborating against me in this matter, to protect me from dangers — some of which, I think, exist only in your over-protective imaginations!"

Gandalf nodded slightly, admitting at least partial culpability. "Perhaps so, but though I beg your pardon for my own part in this conspiracy, you must forgive Elrond his. He remembers too keenly the torments of your mother, and shields you from such things as he is able, for you *are* his only daughter."

Arwen laughed softly. "You need not apologize, my lord, for either yourself or my father, since I know well the love that compels you both. But I have felt the restrictions of protection more often than I like, and I was delighted when my father asked me to see to the needs of your friend. I trust it has not been an unpleasant companionship, Master Emmett?"

The inventor had been only half-listening to their conversation, his attention divided between the intricacy of their surroundings and the musical sound of the Elven language, which captivated him more than the meaning of the words. He was thus slightly startled when Arwen spoke to him directly. "Oh, no, of course not," he more or less stuttered after taking a moment to catch his breath and collect his suddenly scattered wits. "That is, I'm happy to be up and around again, and I couldn't have asked for better company."

Now that he was paying attention to the people he was with, he noticed that the wizard, like everyone else in the hall, was more appropriately dressed for the occasion. He grimaced faintly. "On the other hand, I *might* have asked for more complete information about what was going on around here today before I left my room. I'd like to think that you didn't know about this celebration any more than I did, Gandalf, but something tells me you already knew about it when we last spoke."

"Not as much as you might imagine, but yes, I was aware of it before I came to see you," the wizard admitted as they neared the dais. "But if I read the cause of your irritation correctly, there was nothing to be won by telling you of it, except, perhaps, to make you feel even more uncomfortable with your present attire, which could not have been remedied without more time, which we did not have. Though I see Arwen has done something to amend it."

Emmett mumbled a positive response, figuring an obscure answer was better than a confession that he felt like a thief, brazenly wearing something he felt he had all but stolen by whining about his absurd predicament to a person who would feel responsible for it, even though it *had* been offered as a gift, and he'd had no idea Arwen was even unintentionally at fault. He immediately changed the subject. "I suppose there's a specific place I'm supposed to sit?" he asked, watching several opulently-dad persons move to seats on the opposite side of the long table on the dais. He hoped fervently that he wasn't assigned a seat anywhere within twenty feet of them, preferably in a dark corner on the other end of the hall. He had never considered himself a vain person, but the discomfort he felt in comparing himself with them was something of a revelation.

"Yes, indeed," Arwen replied, accepting both gentlemen's help in ascending the dais, since she had long skirts with which to contend. "My Father, as always, will hold the seat of the Master of this House. Lord Mithrandir will be upon his right hand, for that is the place of greatest honor, which he is always accorded upon his visits to Rivendell. You shall sit beside him, as his friend and an honored guest of our home, and I shall sit beside you, as your companion for this evening. My brothers usually sit upon our Father's left, but tonight they have surrendered their accustomed places to Galadhon and Mirwen and their parents, Galamor and Luinil, and Elimbor and Athilmir, and Mirwen's sister Melioth. Ellandan and Elrohir will instead sit beside me. There will also be another guest of this house seated beside my brothers. Those are the arrangements as I know them."

Emmett chuckled softly as he held out Arwen's chair so that she could stand between it and the table, imitating the others in the hall. "That's a more complete account than I'd expected — but thank you. At least I'll know everybody's names, even if I haven't the slightest idea who most of them really are."

He glanced about the huge room in an attempt to get comfortable with the fact that he was probably sticking out like a sore thumb amid the more notable persons at the table, like someone not even a friend of the family dressed in casual grungies and seated at the head table at a wedding. Fortunately, nobody appeared to be taking note of him at all, for which he was grateful. Nobody was sitting down yet, either, doubtless awaiting the arrival of Elrond and the persons whom the banquet was meant to honor. As he looked around, he supposed he really shouldn't feel awkward about something as silly as his appearance. He'd never been particularly concerned about it before, and it wasn't as if the person who had brought him to Rivendell and was now standing beside him was a picture of fashion, however it was defined in this world. Even Arwen, beautiful as she was, was dressed simply, as were her twin brothers, whom Emmett noticed

as they took their places at the table beyond their sister. In fact, some Man who moved into the place beyond Elladan and Elrohir looked positively gaudy in the company surrounding him, and even he was far from lavishly dressed. Realizing this, Emmett had to admit that his feelings of appearing out of place were undoubtedly due to his knowledge that he was out of place, literally, a stranger in a strange land who wanted very much to just go home. Having recognized this, he suddenly felt less awkward, and allowed himself to become more comfortable with his situation, both current and in general.

Until he saw someone pouring ruby red liquid into a goblet set on the table before him.

It didn't take very long for the inventor to figure out that stewards around the hall were pouring wine for all the guests, and it took only a moment longer for him to suspect that he might very well be required to drink it as part of some tradition. There was nothing specific concerning such matters among the information he had been given, but a lot of the local customs concerning eating and drinking at celebrations had been in Tolkien's stories, and most of them were exactly like older European and Scandinavian traditions on his own Earth. Refusing to drink to the health or happiness or whatever of persons being honored was usually considered an insult — but how *could* he?

Gandalf apparently sensed something of Emmett's rapidly rising panic, for he turned his attention away from whatever he had been watching to look at him with concern. "Is something wrong?" he asked quietly, not wanting to be overheard.

The scientist nodded quickly, almost frantically. "Ah... yes," he said even more softly, in English. "By any chance, is there a local custom for drinking to the health and happiness and whatever for a newly engaged couple?"

"Yes," the wizard answered in kind, his voice still kept low, since he grasped from Emmett's use of his native tongue that this was a private matter. "From what I have been allowed to know of your world, it is little different from your own traditions of this kind."

Emmett groaned. "I was afraid of that."

Gandalf's dark eyes widened slightly, puzzled and surprised. "Why?"

"Because I can't."

The dark eyes narrowed again as he tried to make sense of this. "You cannot wish others well?"

Emmett shook his head rather frantically. "No, no, I can do that, no problem, even though I don't know them. What I can't do is drink wine, or anything else with alcohol in it. If I swallow even a little bit of it, my whole body short-circuits, and...."

He grimaced, trying to find a better way to explain his predicament, since the wizard made a peculiar face at his use of the term *short-circuit*. "It's... what we call an allergy, I guess, an extreme physical sensitivity to something you eat or drink or get exposed to in your environment. What makes normal people who drink too much get drunk and sick affects me even more strongly with much, *much* less of it. Even a thimble-full of anything alcoholic will make me pass out or fall asleep so suddenly and deeply, I can't stay on my own two feet and it takes hours before I can shake off the effects enough to wake up. I'm not afraid of making myself look like a fool — Lord knows I've done that often enough before — but I don't want to embarrass you, or Elrond or Arwen or anyone else who's been so kind to me. But if I have to drink the wine, I *will*."

Whether or not Gandalf truly understood his predicament went unrevealed, as Elrond and the newly betrothed couple finally arrived. After glancing in their direction, the wizard turned back to Emmett for a moment, his expression clearly telling the inventor not to worry. Emmett supposed that he was overreacting to the situation; he could probably get away with pretending to drink from the goblet, though he had a sinking feeling that local custom demanded the vessel be drained. And if he didn't, the fact would be obvious through the clear crystal. It occurred to him then that he might tell his host the truth so that he could avoid the situation and not give insult to anyone, but he had no sooner thought to do so when a hush fell over the room and Elrond spoke.

Emmett knew he was talking about the young couple and their future and other things people in his position did when members of their community got engaged, but the words didn't register in his mind. His thoughts were too full of the concern that no matter what he did now, he was somehow going to offend someone, or wind up looking like an utter fool, passing out in front of so many people two days in a row.

He vaguely heard the words of doom announcing that the moment was upon them. He realized his hand was shaking as he reached for the glass and lifted it...

...and in the strangest synchronization he had ever witnessed, Gandalf reached for his own, raised it, and ever so subtly — and yet also so deliberately — moved in such a fashion so that his arm collided with Emmett's before he could finish his own motion, spilling the contents of both goblets all over timelost scientist and coincidentally causing him to stumble backward just far enough so that he collided with Arwen's cup and emptied it down his back.

"Forgive me, that was incredibly clumsy of me!" he heard Gandalf saying through his surprise over this turn of events and the sudden unpleasant chill of wine saturating his clothing, not a drop of which had struck either the wizard or Arwen. From what he could feel slithering between his clothes and his skin, there appeared to be at least five times as much of it on him than could have been held in the three goblets, though as with a trickle of blood in a pool of water, he supposed it was merely an exaggeration of perspective, amplified even further by his shocked sense of embarrassment.

Whatever the case, Gandalf sounded genuinely contrite as he turned to their host. "I beg your pardon, Lord Elrond, for so rudely embarrassing a guest in your house, especially on such a festive occasion."

Elrond appeared to accept the apology both graciously and with mildly disguised humor. "I am certain it was nothing more than an accident, Mithrandir, which can surely be pardoned for one of your... station." If he had intended to say "age," he may have thought better of it, since he himself had been born during the First Age, many thousands of years before. The Elf lord looked squarely at the wine-soaked scientist, who fervently wished he would look anywhere else. "But it would be best for you, Master Emmett, to change into drier clothing. You are but recently healed of the injuries you suffered in the wild, and it is not wise to encourage chills and other such discomforts while the body is still regaining its full strength. Do you require an escort...?"

Emmett shook his head immediately, feeling uneasy enough with all the strange eyes upon him, doubtless thinking thoughts he didn't want to hear. "No, no, I can find my way back to my room, thank you. If you'll just excuse me...." When Elrond inclined his head in permission, the inventor just barely retained enough presence of mind to offer a brief apology to Arwen before hurrying out of the hall. Unfortunately, the nearest exit was not the one he needed, and he needed to pass along the full length of the room before reaching the proper door, dripping and squishing all the way. As he stepped out of the hall and into the dimmer shadows of a corridor beyond, he wondered if fainting mightn't have been less mortifying than *this*, until he caught the clear sound of voices from within the room he'd just left.

“If you were about to attribute my appalling clumsiness to a failing of old age,” he heard Gandalf saying to the master of Rivendell, “I am afraid you may be right, my good Elrond. This unfortunate situation certainly was my fault, entirely, and I hope no one holds it against the poor victim...”

Emmett suddenly stopped and looked back just as someone closed the door behind him and any response was lost beyond the thick slab of polished wood. Everything Gandalf had said since the accident suddenly managed to sink in past his feelings of shocked discomfort, and he realized that the wizard was deliberately making sure that any real embarrassment or blame would fall squarely on *himself*, just as he had doubtless made sure every single drop of the spilled wine fell onto Emmett.

The inventor grimaced, abruptly and acutely aware of what he'd been doing: feeling sorry for himself when there was absolutely no reason for it. He had asked — practically *begged* — for a way to avoid making a fool of himself or disgracing his hosts, and Gandalf had given him as perfect an out as could be managed with only a few moments to spare. Though he could have attempted to make it look as if they shared equal guilt for the accident, the wizard had not; he had accepted full responsibility for his choice of action, and had indeed gone out of his way to shoulder the blame. There was no reason for Emmett to feel annoyed; he should be feeling *grateful* instead.

For a moment, he considered going back to apologize, but before he could do more than think the thought, he realized it would be a very bad idea. Not only would he then make others wonder *why* he had returned while still in such a sorry state, he might very likely undo what had been done to help him by putting himself back into the situation he had been trying to avoid. No, apologies would have to wait until later, by which time he could hopefully come up with an explanation as to why one was needed. As he continued on toward the room in which he'd been staying, shivering between the dampness of his clothes and the chill air of the corridor, Emmett decided it would definitely be best if he stayed away from the feast and instead spent the rest of evening giving himself a bath, along with a clearly needed refresher course on common courtesy.