Through the rain curtain

by Eledhwen

Summary

Crossover between *The Lord of the Rings* and *Doctor Who*. A soldier at the Somme is whisked away from the trenches by a stranger, to a world where a new, fragile peace is being built.

Notes

Disclaimer: How I wish I owned them! Anyway, I don't; they're the property of the BBC and of the Tolkien Estate.
Chapter 1

It's raining, again. It always seems to be raining, here in northern France. But it's not the grey curtain of drizzle like home - it's torrential, unrelenting, turning carefully-built trenches to pools of mud.

Even inside the shelter it's wet, and Ronald has given up trying to keep papers dry long ago. If you write with pencil most remains legible. He's keeping the radio to his ear, listening for orders from behind the lines. Concentrating is becoming harder; a headache moved in behind his eyeballs last night and it doesn't seem to be shifting.

The clicks of the code come in over his earpiece; he scribbles down the order and passes it to the nearby runner. What good it'll do he doesn't know. Nobody's winning this war, but every day more bodies litter the open ground between the trenches and slump lifeless against the sandbags.

A fellow officer comes to take over at the radio.

"Busy?"

"Moderately," Ronald says, fishing inside his tunic for his cigarettes. "Just off outside for a smoke before I turn in, all right?"

The other man nods, already busy taking down the latest communication. Ronald jams on his ugly metal helmet and goes outside, into the pelting rain. His cigarettes are damp and so are the matches, and even huddled into a corner of the trench they don't seem to be lighting until a hand comes into his vision. A buzzing noise, and his cigarette is lit.

"Thanks." He draws deep, hoping the smoke will help the headache, although he's not hopeful. "Want one?"

There's a dry, humourless laugh, and Ronald looks up. The man with the light turns out to be bareheaded and wearing an odd leather jacket without sign of rank or insignia.

"They'll kill you," the man says.

Ronald gestures with his free hand at the rain and the mud and the flashes from the mortars and machine guns. "A smoke won't kill you, unless you wave the light at Jerry."

"You'd be surprised," says the stranger, leaning against the wall of the trench with his arms folded. "How're things going?"

Blowing smoke out, Ronald snorts. "As they have been. I used to think, when I was a boy, that war would somehow be heroic, magnificent turns out it's mud and rain and monotony."

"Or flame and destruction and death," the other man agrees, his eyes shadowed.

"Sure you don't want a smoke?" Ronald asks.

"Yeah. Thanks."

Ronald takes another drag, and watches the other man. He's certainly a newcomer; could be a Jerry spy, of course, except what German would come from Manchester? The lack of uniform is strange, but these days half the troops are in some sort of scavenged, makeshift uniform. He holds out his hand.
"Ronald Tolkien. Signals officer."

"I'm the Doctor," says the stranger, shaking. "Tolkien? Really?"

"Surprisingly enough it's a good English name," Ronald says; after all it's hardly the first time someone has questioned it.

"Of course it is." The other man grins. "Fantastic name."

"So, a new medic, eh?" Ronald observes. "You'll be busy. You don't happen to have something for a headache, do you?"

The doctor gives him a piercing glance. "Headache?"


His companion looks around, and seems to come to a decision.

"I might have something. You off duty?"

"Yes."

"Then follow me!" says the doctor, heading off around the corner of the trench. Ronald drops his cigarette, which fizzles in the mud, and follows. But the man does not lead him to the medics' station, instead taking him down a little-used side trench. At the end, large and blue, is a wooden box.

Ronald stops and looks at it. The doctor is taking a key from his pocket.

"Um," Ronald manages.

The door swings open, and the doctor goes to step inside the box. "Coming?" he asks, as though big blue boxes in trenches are an everyday affair. Ronald wonders, for a moment, if the stranger has gone mad - it happens, all too regularly. "Well?" the doctor says, and Ronald thinks that little can be worse than the mud and the rain and the death, and follows him.

Behind him, the door swings shut with a click. Ronald stands just inside and stares. The box - no, it's a room, a hall, a chamber - is lit with a gentle, warming golden light. It is dry and clean and feels like a different world.

The doctor is standing by a kind of cluttered desk in the centre of the chamber, watching Ronald closely.

"What is this place?" Ronald says, eventually, the words coming out a whisper.

"This is the TARDIS," the other man responds. "This is my ship."

"And you're"

"I'm the Doctor," the man says, and now Ronald realises it's not a title, or a job description, but a name - or as good as. "I'm a traveller."

"Travelling where?" Ronald questions.

Ronald takes a few steps, further into the room. "If you can go anywhere," he says, "why now? And why here?"

The Doctor turns away. "Long story. I promised you something for that headache."

"It's it's almost gone," says Ronald, and it has, in the wonder of the Doctor's ship. He gestures back towards the doors. "What happens, if I go back out there?"

"Nothing," says the Doctor, with raised eyebrows. "You'll eat your rations, go to sleep, do your job. Go on, if you want to."

Ronald takes off his helmet, puts it on the floor. "Only a madman would want to go back out there."

The Doctor begins flicking buttons on the desk in front of him, which, Ronald sees now, is some sort of machine. It's unlike anything he's ever seen before and he thinks that it is, in its disorganisation, utterly at odds with the graceful shapes of the rest of the chamber. At the same time it reminds him rather of his tutor's room at Oxford, packed with books and papers in no sort of order.

"Fancy going somewhere else?" asks the Doctor, still pressing buttons and pulling levers. "I know the perfect place!"

"The box moves?" Ronald says.

"She flies!" the Doctor answers. "My TARDIS. Best ship in the universe." He pats the desk. "Lieutenant Tolkien - hold on tight!"

The tall column in the centre of the room begins to move, emitting a strange, compelling sound. At the same time Ronald's feet are jerked out from under his legs and he lands in an undignified heap on the floor. The Doctor is clinging on, bracing himself as the juddering continues.

Finally, they stop moving. Ronald picks himself up and straightens his uniform, while the Doctor unclenches his hands from the edge of the desk.


"Love what?"

"Where we are," the Doctor replies, looking critically at Ronald. "You ought to change. Can't go outside dressed like that."

Ronald follows him down three corridors, up one flight of stairs and down two more, into a vast room filled to the brim with clothes. There are clothes that could be picked up on Oxford Street, clothes that would be more suited to a theatre, and some clothes the like of which Ronald has never seen. He marvels, while the Doctor disappears among the racks, occasionally calling out questions about Ronald's height and size and shoe size. Eventually he returns with an armful of garments - some loose, dark blue trousers, high boots of supple leather, and a sort of tunic to go over the top that is not so far removed from Ronald's own Army tunic. But everything is clean, not muddy, and it's made of soft, luxurious material.

The Doctor directs Ronald to a bathroom where the water runs hot from taps and there are soaps and shampoos. Ronald strips off his filthy, itchy uniform and luxuriates for a while under a jet of hot, clean water. He dries himself, and dresses in the clothes the Doctor brought. He feels a little odd, and perhaps a little stupid, but he also feels comfortable. The face looking back at him in the
clear mirror is whiskered and older than it had been a few months ago; Ronald turns from it in search of the Doctor's mystery.

For some reason the Doctor has not changed, and is still wearing his leather coat, but he nods with approval on seeing Ronald. "Off we go!" he says, striding purposefully towards the doors and swinging them open.

Ronald is still expecting to walk back out into the rain of the Somme, but instead he steps on to springy grass. All around there is a sweet, fresh smell, and he stops and breathes it in deeply. The sky is blue above their heads and there is a canopy of tall trees; small flowers are growing around their bases. It's as different from the trenches as anywhere could be.

"Where are we?" he asks, softly.

The Doctor has closed his eyes and is standing still, but at the question he opens them again. "This is the planet of Arda - a long way from Earth. In about the seven-thousandth year of inhabitation, although of course it's a lot older."

"Arda." Ronald rolls the word around his mouth. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah." The Doctor nods. "Not bad." He puts his hands behind his back. "C'mon."

Ronald falls into step beside him. "Where are we going?" he asks.

"Questions, questions!" says the Doctor. "You lot and your questions. For a walk. How long's it been since you just went for a walk?"

"Months," Ronald says.

"Well, then." To the Doctor, this clearly ends the debate. But Ronald is more than content to walk amid the scent of the forest, and he catches the Doctor up and strolls by his side.

For a while they walk in silence, but the questions are multiplying in Ronald's head and eventually he has to ask.

"Are there people here?"

The Doctor turns a sideways glance at him. "Good question. Yes."

Ronald opens his mouth to ask another question, but they are halted by an arrow slamming into the ground in front of them and, from the trees, a cry of "Halt!"

His automatic reflex is to go for the pistol at his hip - but there is no pistol. The Doctor, meanwhile, has his hands raised but a smile on his face, as if he's enjoying himself. After a second, Ronald copies him and raises his own hands.

To his astonishment, a group of men dressed in faded green and brown outfits, and carrying either naked swords or longbows with the arrow on the string, emerge from cover. They are all tall - taller even than the Doctor, who is on the lanky side - and dark-haired, and undeniably handsome.

One of the men steps forwards. He carries the sword in his hand easily, as though it is just an extension of his arm, holding it loosely and ready as he examines first Ronald and then the Doctor closely.

"Who are you?" he demands, the inspection evidently over.
The Doctor lowers his hands. "I'm the Doctor. That's Ronald. Just passing through!"

"Nobody passes through Ithilien without leave of the King," says the man, sternly. "And those are strange names that you give, and a strange accent you speak them in, though indeed these are strange times."

"We come in peace," the Doctor says, apparently at ease with the situation. "We're travellers, that's all. Unarmed." He wiggles his fingers, as if to demonstrate the lack of weapons. "Which King would this be, by the way?"

"The King Elessar of Gondor," the other man responds, a glint in his eye. "Newly crowned, but there is little of his realm he does not know."

The Doctor nodded, as if calculating something. "And you are?"

"I am Faramir, Steward of Gondor and Prince of Ithilien," the man says. "And, though I do not think you mean harm, I am ordered to take all strangers found abroad to Minas Tirith. Our peace is too new to risk breaking it."

"Minas Tirith!" says the Doctor, turning his grin on Ronald. "Fantastic!"
Chapter 2

There is a camp nearby, with horses, and they are given the spare mounts. Ronald has ridden a little before, but he soon realises his horse is far better than anything he has been entrusted with in the past. The Doctor, meanwhile, appears perfectly comfortable on his bay mare, although she had backed away when he first approached her and had to be talked to gently before she would let him mount. The men who had captured them are equally comfortable, and they make good progress. Ronald listens to the men talk, and wonders - not for the first time since this peculiar adventure began - just how he can understand the language of another world.

He reins his horse in, dropping back to the Doctor, and asks the question.

"Why?" the Doctor says, one hand on the reins and the other resting lightly on his thigh.

"I'm a linguist!" Ronald says. "That's what I am, really; not a soldier."

"War makes people soldiers," the Doctor responds.

"Quite," agrees Ronald. "Before the war, I was a linguist - I hope I still will be, when it ends. I know they cannot be speaking English."

"No, they're not," the Doctor says. "It's Westron. What you might call the lingua franca of Arda."

Ronald digests this. "Why can I understand them, then?"

The Doctor smiles. "The TARDIS. She translates for you. Saves me having to learn all the languages of the universe. Most people don't think of that question."

"I'm interested," says Ronald, shrugging. "Can you stop it?"

"You won't be able to understand what's going on," the Doctor points out, as if Ronald had not thought of this.

Ronald shrugs. "But I'll be able to hear the language. Find out what it sounds like, what its structure is, whether it resembles anything well, anything on Earth. Goodness, I can't believe I just said that."

Digging inside his jacket, the Doctor pulls out a slim, cigar-shaped device. "If you want to reverse this, shout up." He points the device at Ronald's head; there is a blue light, a buzzing noise, and it is as if a switch clicks off. Suddenly the men around them are not speaking English.

"Did that work?" the Doctor asks. His accent is somehow subtly different.

"I can understand you," Ronald says. "Should I be able to?"

"Oh, I got the hang of English years back," the Doctor says airily. "Pretty easy language, really. What about them?"

Ronald finds himself smiling. "Can't understand a word they're saying."

The Doctor slips his device away. "Well, if that's what you want."

He rides, and listens, and gradually the structure - if not the sense - of the language begins to form in his head. There is a more formal pattern used when the men are addressing the leader, Faramir;
it slips somehow when they talk amongst themselves. The language is faintly musical to Ronald's ears, with an edge that reminds him, slightly, of German. Now and then there's clearly a word in a different language, or possibly a different dialect, thrown in. Names come through too - the name of their King, this Elessar; that is a different language, certainly. And another, a word that could almost be Anglo-Saxon.

"Who are they talking about?" Ronald asks the Doctor.

"The girl he's going to marry," says the Doctor.

Ronald thinks of his own Edith, and another thought hits him. "How far away from Earth are we?"

"Far," the Doctor says, shortly. "Five and a half galaxies. Don't worry, I'll get you back safe and sound."

Ronald returns to listening to the talk, picking up the repeated words, enjoying hearing something completely new for the first time.

They ride all day, pausing when the sun is high for food. The Doctor fiddles with his device again and turns the translation back on in Ronald's head. For a while he misses the mental processes of trying to work out the new languages, but when they begin riding again it is good to understand what the men are saying.

"Damrod, when we reach Osgiliath I want you to take a fresh horse and ride to Minas Tirith," Faramir says, halfway through the afternoon. "We'll camp in Osgiliath - I need to see how the repair work is progressing."

"Aye, Captain," the man addressed as Damrod agrees. "What'll be the message?"

Faramir glances across at Ronald and the Doctor, and Ronald catches a glint in his eye. "I'll write it down for you."

Osgiliath, which they reach before dusk, turns out to be a ruined city with the evidence of recent battles. Men are hard at work removing rubble and propping up walls in danger of falling down, and they ride past an area of cleared ground with the fresh earth of newly-filled graves. The Doctor's face, as they pass, is grim - no sign of the wide grin now.

Faramir is greeted with warmth and respect, his party shown to a half-ruined building with canvas spread as a roof. Some of the men disappear with the horses, and other settle down to preparing a meal, producing some kind of bird from saddlebags. Ronald offers to help, and after a moment they agree. They pluck and bone the birds in companionable silence, putting them into a pan to stew along with a bunch of herbs.

"Our thanks," one of the men says, when the birds are cooking. Wiping his hands on the proffered cloth, Ronald nods. This is something he understands; the camaraderie of a troop of soldiers evidently does not differ, whatever world you happen to be on.

The Doctor is sitting watching them, and watching Faramir, who is busy scribbling on scraps of parchment with a quill pen. He folds two of the pieces up and hands them to Damrod, who is standing ready. Damrod bows, and disappears, and Faramir writes for a short while longer before putting the quill down.

"How are those birds coming along?" Faramir asks.

"Fifteen minutes, perhaps."
Faramir stands, and looks at the Doctor and Ronald. "Will you walk with me?"

He takes them a short distance away from the men, to a spot overlooking the wide river flowing through the city.

"We'll be in Minas Tirith tomorrow morning," he says, gesturing southwards, the way the river is flowing. Following his gesture, Ronald sees, faint and silhouetted against the setting sun, a tall tower. "The White Tower of Ecthelion," Faramir murmurs. For a moment there is silence, and then Faramir turns to them. "Where the King awaits; and what am I to tell him about the two strangers who I met wandering in Ithilien?"

Ronald looks at the Doctor.

"That we were lost?" the Doctor suggests, inscrutable.

"Lost, indeed; but from where did you come?" asks Faramir. "You," he nods at Ronald, "could almost be one of us, save for the fact you are not of Gondor. But you - Doctor? - you I cannot place."

"Like I said, we're travellers," says the Doctor, easily. "Unarmed, and harmless."

"The last person who said that to me," Faramir says, "saved us all."

"Hope it won't come to that," the Doctor responds.

Faramir nods. "I hope - I believe - there is nothing, for the moment, to save us from. The evil is defeated, and you do not strike me as beings of evil."

Ronald is fascinated by his words, and longs to find out more, but he senses this is not the time, nor the place. Faramir turns away from the river.

"I will not have you bound while we sleep - I will trust you not to attempt an escape."

"You have our word," the Doctor says, solemn.

"Good. Time to sup, and then early to bed. I would be in the City early, before the King is swamped with counsellors and requests and tasks."

Before they eat, Faramir's men all stand and face the West for a moment's silence. Ronald resolves to ask the Doctor about this as well, at some point. His list of questions is growing longer by the minute, and when it is time to sleep - wrapped up in a woollen blanket - they run through his head over and over again. But he sleeps, eventually, though lightly.

As Faramir has promised, they wake early the next morning. Breakfast is bread and warm, flat ale of some kind, and then it is back on the horses. They cross the river on a new, makeshift wooden bridge, and then canter along a wide road running down towards the great city in the distance. Even though it is yet miles off Ronald can see it is of some size, and the sun now catches the spire of the tower and makes it glint.

"Beautiful, is it not?" Faramir says, coming alongside.

"Magnificent," Ronald agrees.

"I am sorry you will not see the City at its best," Faramir continues. "It will be many months before we have fully restored it."
"What happened?" asks Ronald.

Faramir sighs, deeply. "War. We were besieged by the forces of Sauron - thousands of orcs, goblins, all manner of fell creature, arrayed against us. They had weapons of metal and fire. We would have lost the City were it not for the arrival of the King and of the Rohirrim." A small smile crosses his face. "Together they tore apart the besieging forces - though I do not remember." At Ronald's look, he touched his shoulder. "I was injured."

"What's your King like?" the Doctor puts in.

Their captor's face lights up.

"A man of great worth and dignity," he says. "A healer and a great swordsman; one men follow to the very gates of doom. You will see for yourselves, soon enough."

After an hour or so of riding, they pass between two mounds of fallen stones, some blackened and burned. Parties of men are busy by the mounds, working in a chain to pick up the unblemished stones. They pause as Faramir and his party ride by, some bowing.

"The Rammas Echor," says the man closest to Ronald. "Our great defence."

"Doesn't look like it defended you very well," the Doctor observes, as they ride away from the broken wall.

The man acquiesces with a shrug. "It delayed the enemy somewhat. We will rebuild it."

Ronald scarcely hears them; all his attention is on the great city now before them. It rises up from the plain like the bow of a ship; a tall tower surmounting the rows of white buildings and a mountain rising majestically from behind the city. From the top of the tower a black flag is flying - he wonders, for a moment, if it is a flag of mourning, but then the wind catches it and even from this distance Ronald can see it bears some kind of emblem. Although the lowermost walls of the city are marred with great scorch-marks, and the plain is in places more mud than grass, pitted with gashes, the sight is astonishing. Somehow, in this instant, the full marvel of what he is seeing hits Ronald hard. He is far, far from home, but even on a different world people are creating things of beauty and wonder.

He does not notice that his horse has come to a halt and is placidly picking at grass until there's a voice close by.

"Oy. Ronald. You're getting left behind."

Ronald glances sideways at the Doctor. "I'm sorry. I was " he waves a hand at the city. "It's beautiful."

"Yeah," says the Doctor, unexpectedly. "One of the glories of the universe, this place. Keep up, or you'll be stuck."

Ronald gives his grazing horse a kick, and they rejoin the rest of Faramir's party.

The signs of recent war are ever-more evident as the city grows closer. In particular, there's an enormous bare patch of ground which reeks of something hideous. Close by, a mound has been built and the first tips of new grass are growing.

Ranged along the city walls there's another city, a city made of tents and rough shelters. Ronald realises these are barracks, of a sort; men are sitting outside the tents scrubbing at armour, sharpening swords, fletching arrows. Some have their arms in slings or are bandaged. The men are
mostly tall and dark-haired, like Faramir and his men, but some are fair, and some have darker skin and different clothes.

The city has a gate, manned by guards in tall silver helms with spears; they push the gate open and stand aside as Faramir and his troop ride through. And then it is up and up, and up again, through more gates. The buildings they pass change as they ascend through the city, from workshops to shops to dwellings. Ronald has lost count of gates by the time they have to dismount from their horses, but they're still not at the top.

The last bit of the way has to be done on foot, he discovers. Up here, there are fewer signs of war and the houses are richer. Some of the men peel off, evidently heading back to their barracks, and only three accompany Faramir, the Doctor and Ronald as they enter a wide courtyard. In the centre there is a fountain, babbling merrily away in the morning light, and a young tree beginning to bud. Against the white stone of the buildings it is beautiful, and somehow awe-inspiring.

Faramir pauses, straightens his tunic and brushes somewhat ineffectually at his hair.

"This way," he says.

The Doctor shoots a grin at Ronald, and follows close on Faramir's heels.
They enter the building before them, and walk down a long, empty passageway. A pair of metal doors swing silently open. Before them there is a vast hall, with a lofty ceiling, tall pillars, and statues lining the walls on either side. It is almost cathedral-like in size and solemnity, but darker, with the light coming in from windows set high. At the end of the hall there is a dais, with a canopy above and a throne; a black chair is set at the bottom of the steps of the dais. Both throne and chair are empty - instead, a table littered with papers and books is set before the dais, and a small group is gathered around it.

As Faramir leads the way towards the dais, the group stops talking, and one man steps forwards. His clothes are simple, but well-made, and he has a thin circlet of metal bound about his brow. Faramir bows his head, respectfully; the other men go to their knees. Ronald exchanges a look with the Doctor, and opts for copying Faramir. The Doctor seems to be merely observing, with one eyebrow raised.

"My lord King," says Faramir.

"My lord Prince," the King returns, with a smile in his voice. "It's good to see you, Faramir. Damrod brought your message yesterday. Are these the travellers?"

Faramir straightens. "Yes, my lord."

Ronald finds himself under the gaze of a pair of stern grey eyes, which scrutinise him for a minute before moving on to the Doctor.

"Well," says the King, eventually. "I think you are right, Faramir; they do not seem evil."

"Definitely not evil," the Doctor puts in. "Your Majesty. I'm the Doctor."

"A healer?" asks the King. "You arrive too late. We could have made use of you only a few weeks ago."

"I do not believe he is a healer," breaks in another voice - deeper and more sonorous. Its owner gets up from a corner, using a tall white staff but, Ronald notices, not really needing it. "It is more of a general title, I think."

"You might say that," agrees the Doctor.

The old man in white comes forwards to stand by the King. "I also do not believe these two are a threat, Aragorn." He turns a warm glance on Faramir. "But you did right to bring them to the City, Faramir."

"Well, then," the King says. "I will, as ever, trust to your judgment, Mithrandir. Welcome to Minas Tirith, Doctor, and "

"Ronald," Ronald says, in answer to the King's look. "Ronald Tolkien, your Majesty. I'm I am a student of languages."

"You are most welcome," the King responds. "I'll have some lodgings prepared for you."

The old man - Mithrandir - nods approvingly. "I will show them the way. I would rather like a word with your guests, if I may, Aragorn."
The King assents, Faramir bids them "farewell - for now", and they are walking out of the great hall again with the old man, his staff tapping rhythmically on the stone floor.

Mithrandir takes them to a quiet garden, where early flowers are blooming. There is a stone bench, and the old man sits down, twitching his cloak out of the way. The Doctor stays standing, but Ronald finds a patch of dry grass and sits. He hasn't smelt the scent of summer grass for more than a year, and it is wonderful to breathe it in.

The Doctor and Mithrandir are regarding each other closely.

"I believed this age had seen enough miracles," Mithrandir says, eventually. "But apparently I was wrong."

"No miracle about someone travelling," the Doctor responds.

"That rather depends on the traveller," says Mithrandir, with a twinkle in his eye.

The Doctor grins. "Fair enough. Maia?"

"Here, they call me a wizard," Mithrandir says, but he seems to be agreeing. Ronald is not sure if he can believe his ears.

"Humans and their magic," the Doctor says, and Ronald digests that for a moment before his brain forces him to recognise what he had known all along; the Doctor is not human, whatever he may look like.

Mithrandir laughs, a joyous sound. "If it gives hope but why did you choose Arda, Doctor, and why now?"

The Doctor turns away and examines the tree behind him. Mithrandir looks at Ronald.

"I don't know why we're here," Ronald says. "Really." He frowns, considering the situation. "I followed him as an escape."

"From what?" asks Mithrandir, gently.

"War," Ronald says, the word itself somehow conjuring up an image of the hell he left behind.

"Thought you might appreciate a spot of peace," the Doctor cuts in. He waves a hand. "This will be one of the great kingdoms of the universe. We're here right at the beginning. If you don't like it, I can take you back."

Ronald shakes his head. "No. Thank you." He looks up at Mithrandir. "But what happened here, sir, to cause the war? And how was it won?"

The old man laughs again. "It was won by courage," he says, "and some luck, and I am the wrong person to tell you about it." He looks around, and waves at a boy who is passing with a sheaf of papers. The boy comes running over, and bows.

"Lord Mithrandir?"

"I want you to take this gentleman," says Mithrandir, "to see the Periannath. Tell them I asked them to tell him their stories."

"Yes, my lord." The boy bows again, and examines Ronald curiously.

Mithrandir nods at Ronald encouragingly. "Go with the lad. He'll take you to some dear friends of
Mithrandir nods at Ronald encouragingly. "Go with the lad. He'll take you to some dear friends of mine, and heroes of the war. Ask them to tell you all about it."

Ronald gets to his feet. "What about you?" he asks the Doctor.

By his tree, the Doctor folds his arms. "I'll see you later. Go on. Go and talk. I won't go without you." He flicks a hand at Ronald. "Go!"

The only thing to do seems to be to obey, so Ronald - with a backwards glance at the garden and the two still figures - follows the boy.

They go through passageways and down staircases and along several corridors. By the time the boy knocks at a wooden door, Ronald is breathless. Clearly too long sitting behind a radio.

A cheerful voice calls out a "Come in!" and the boy pushes the door open.

"The Lord Mithrandir has sent you a guest, masters," he says, sounding a little nervous, "and says you should tell him your tales."

Ronald follows the boy inside the room and, not for the first time in this decidedly strange day, finds himself lost for words. Looking back at him with interest are four people - he thinks, for a second, that they are children but realises they are not. They are, however, short; the feet of the one perched on the window seat are dangling well off the floor. They are evidently occupied in breakfast, for a low table is cluttered with dishes and plates and cups. The boy withdraws, closing the door behind him.

One of the very small occupants of the room stands up, brushes his clothes off and bows.

"Peregrin Took, at your service, sir."

"Ronald Tolkien, at yours," says Ronald, because it seems to be the right thing to say. "Am I intruding?"

Peregrin Took shakes his head. "No. Have you had breakfast? Sit down and join us - there's plenty left. They're still working out how much a hobbit can eat and we've got more than enough this morning." He sits down again, on a cushion. "Please."

Ronald finds another cushion and does as he's asked. In any case, it's easier to be on eye level with this odd quartet.

"So, you're a friend of old Gandalf?" Peregrin Took continues, picking up a piece of bread. "Mithrandir, I mean."

"I've only just met him," Ronald admits. "He thought I would like your tales."

"Haven't you heard them yet?" asks another of the four - hobbits, Ronald supposed they must be. "I thought the whole city had, by now, what with the minstrels and all."

"We only arrived here today," says Ronald. "I mean we were brought here today, by Faramir. Prince Faramir, I mean."

"We?" The speaker is the thinnest of the quartet, and looks as though he were recovering from an illness.

Ronald wonders how to explain the Doctor, when he does not really understand him fully yet.

"I came with another traveller," he says, after a moment's thought.
Peregrin Took pauses in demolishing his bread. "Where from? You don't look like you're from Gondor "

"Or Rohan," puts in the second hobbit.

"And you're definitely a Man, though on the short side," Peregrin concludes. They all look at him.

"A long way away," Ronald says, knowing this is woefully inadequate. "Truthfully, I don't actually know how far away it is. I study languages, and stories."

"We've heard a lot o' both," the fourth hobbit says. "And none of us are remembering our manners."

"Sam, you're right!" exclaims the thinnest of the four. He stands. "My apologies, Master Tolkien - do I have it aright? I am Frodo Baggins; my cousins, Meriadoc Brandybuck, Peregrin Took," his voice softens, "my dear friend and companion, Samwise Gamgee."

"Pleasure," says Samwise Gamgee, nodding. "You must've come from a long way not to have heard the stories. They're all round the city, how Mr Frodo carried that thing all the way to the mountain."

Frodo, Ronald noticed, looks abashed and takes refuge in his cup.

"I've come from so far," Ronald says, "that I must confess I've never heard of hobbits."

There is general uproar, led by Meriadoc, who begins to talk.

The tale does not come in order, by any means. It is told chiefly by Meriadoc and Peregrin - or Merry and Pippin, as Ronald is soon urged to call them. Frodo puts in e odd word here and there, mainly to correct something, while Sam adds observations and agreements. After an hour or so the hobbits lead Ronald outside, still talking, and they carry on with their tale in one of Minas Tirith's gardens. Lunch is brought to them there, and Ronald watches in astonishment as the four small hobbits devour a feast that would have daunted the same number of soldiers.

Their story gets darker, and more astonishing, as the day grows longer. Ronald learns of the role played by the King, by Mithrandir, and most of all by these four lively creatures, and marvels. He wishes he had a pen to write it all down.

"Oh, don't worry about that!" says Pippin cheerfully. "We plan to lock cousin Frodo away until he has it all down."

Frodo looks slightly pained at the thought, and after the story he has heard Ronald cannot blame him.

"Or we'll get Bilbo to do it," adds Merry. "When we're back in Rivendell. Have you met an Elf yet, Ronald?"

He shakes his head. "Then come to dinner!" Merry says. "Legolas and Gimli should both be there. And maybe Gandalf will bring your friend, what's he called, the Doctor. Sounds like an interesting fellow; I should love to meet him."

"Interesting is one word," Ronald agrees. "I wonder what he and the lord Mithrandir have been talking about all day?"

But the Doctor is not at dinner, and neither is the wizard. Instead, Ronald is introduced to Gimli the dwarf - who turns out to be slightly taller than the hobbits, stout, and blessed with a raucous
laugh and an impressive beard - and Legolas the Elf, tall with sinewy strength and eyes Ronald cannot look into. With the hobbits leading the way, the evening turns into one of tales, song, and laughter. Ronald is encouraged into joining the singing and contributes a ditty composed at college - a bit of nonsense, really, but it goes down well. In this cheerful company it is easy to forget the war and the fact he is far, far from anything familiar.

The six of them take him back to his lodgings, and he bids them a tipsy farewell amid promises for the following day.

The rooms he and the Doctor have been assigned are clean and simple. Exploring, Ronald finds a balcony looking out over the city. The Doctor is there, motionless, gazing up at the clear night sky and the stars.

"Doctor?" Ronald says, from the doorway, his tipsiness dissipating. But the Doctor does not answer. Ronald turns, and falls into bed and into a deep sleep.
In the morning he wakes late. On the small table in the room there is a loaf of bread and a dish of what proves to be honey, together with a cup of ale. Ronald eats the bread and honey on the balcony, drinking in the sight of the city in the morning sunshine; but he leaves the ale.

He washes in the bowl of water also provided, dresses, and heads out of the room. It does not take long for a servant to spot him and come running up.

"Master Tolkien!"

"Yes?"

"Orders, sir, to take you to the King," the servant says.

"Oh," says Ronald.

He is relieved to find that the servant is not leading him back to the great hall, but instead takes him to what appears to be a small study. It is cluttered with books and parchment, and smells strongly of tobacco. The King and Mithrandir are both sitting wreathed in smoke from clay pipes; the Doctor is perched by the open window.

The servant announces him, and retires. Ronald makes a clumsy bow, but the King laughs.

"No need, Master Tolkien. You're not one of my subjects. Have a seat. Do you smoke?"

"Occasionally." Ronald finds a chair, moves some papers off it, and sits down. From somewhere Mithrandir produces a spare pipe, fills it with brown leaves, and - with a sideways look at the Doctor - lights it, apparently with a flick of his fingers. Taking the pipe, Ronald breathes in. The tobacco is sweet, strong and pungent, and very unlike his cheap Army-issue cigarettes.

"The Doctor and I had a long talk yesterday," Mithrandir goes on, leaning back in his chair and puffing out three smoke rings, entwined. "And I thought it best to tell Aragorn that you truly are travellers, and mean no harm. These are precarious times."

"And so I discovered," the King puts in, "that I have two guests from another world." He smiles warmly at Ronald. "Something I do not really understand, especially as Mithrandir tells me you're a Man, as I am."

"I don't understand it, either," Ronald admits.

The Doctor turns from the window. "Same basic form. A few modifications."

"Such as?" asks Ronald.

"Well," says the Doctor, "your average lifespan back on Earth's considerably shorter than that of Aragorn's people. Otherwise, your standard-issue human."

The King leans forward in his chair. "And you're a soldier, Master Tolkien?"

"I'm a linguist," Ronald says. "A soldier because I have to be. Not because I want to be."

"None of us choose to be soldiers," the King says. "Sometimes it is forced upon us. Take Faramir, for instance. He'd much rather be reading a book, but when pressed he wields a sword as well as
any man."

"Better," Mithrandir puts in. "So, Ronald, did the hobbits tell you their tale?"

Ronald nods. "Yes. It took all day."

"Well, it's a long tale," says Mithrandir.

"They're remarkable," Ronald says. He looks at the Doctor. "They wanted to meet you, Doctor."

"Me? Can't think why."

"There will be a chance, this evening," the King says. "I am holding a quiet dinner; our Fellowship, and Faramir, and I would be honoured if you would both join us. In the meantime, Gandalf has offered to show you the city, while I slave over the business of the realm."

"From top to bottom," Mithrandir adds, getting to his feet.

"I would love that." Ronald stands too. "Thank you." He taps out his pipe in the bowl on the King's desk, and passes it back to the wizard.

The Doctor unbends from his perch. "Why not?"

Mithrandir leads the way, his staff tapping on the stones beneath their feet, taking them first to the great throne room where they had been brought the previous day.

"Who are the statues?" Ronald asks, gazing at each one; at the stern, stone faces.

"Old Kings of Gondor," Mithrandir replies, leaning on his staff. "This is Gondor, the kingdom in which we stand - the greatest kingdom of Men since Númenor sank beneath the waves."

Ronald turns, and stares at him. The name resonates inside his head, and he knows that if he closes his eyes he will see the dream that has plagued him since childhood; a great wave, rising up, up, up, and crashing down on a solitary green island. The Doctor is giving him a hard look.

"Númenor?" he says, testing the word.

"Your legends call it Atlantis," says the Doctor. "Legend, of course, merely being a word for something you can't prove happened. In that case, it's because it happened here, but rumours of that sort of cataclysm reach far across the galaxies."

"I've dreamed of it," Ronald says, looking from Mithrandir to the Doctor. "I've dreamed of it."

"Low-level telepathic ability," the Doctor says. "Some people pick up stuff like that more easily than others."

Mithrandir shoots the Doctor a severe glance. "Talk to Faramir," he says, more gently, to Ronald. "I know he has dreamed of the wave too. It would comfort him to know he's not alone." He turns. "Now, on with the tour."

They head outside, into bright sunshine and a fresh wind which clears Ronald's head. As Mithrandir talks, he listens and tries to absorb the information; the Doctor is silent by their side. Using his staff as a pointer, the wizard sketches out the major points of the recent battle, indicating where the wall broke, where the King and his fleet of commandeered pirate ships came ashore, where the reinforcing allies rode in.

Down the levels they go. Mithrandir turns out to be a good guide, with plenty of lively anecdotes
and historical snippets. Ronald drinks it in - the strange and beautiful buildings; the people, rebuilding their lives.

The bright day is marred as they reach the third level. Mithrandir pauses to greet a middle-aged lady escorting a group of boys and girls along the street. From their conversation Ronald works out these are some of the first children to return to the city after the war; the lady is their teacher.

The conversation takes a few minutes, and Ronald spends the pause looking around the street, turning to take it all in. Completing his turn his eyes fall on the Doctor. Hands in pockets, the Doctor's face is stony, his gaze fixed on the children.

Mithrandir bids the group farewell, and they troop off down the street. But Ronald is watching the Doctor, who turns on his heel and disappears back the way they had come.

"Ah." The wizard takes Ronald's elbow. "Come."

"He's not said much all day," Ronald says, following Mithrandir into a small, quiet square. "What did you talk about yesterday?"

"Much," says Mithrandir, sitting down. "What have you talked about, with him?"

"Very little," Ronald realises, sitting too. "I well, I don't even know where he comes from. What race he is."

"Until yesterday, you did not know there were such things as different races," Mithrandir says, gently. "Did you wonder why he brought you here, now?"

Ronald shakes his head. "It all happened so quickly. I was there, in the trenches, and then I was here."

"I think he was searching for peace, too," Mithrandir says. "You and I, Ronald, have much to be thankful for. Your Doctor has, I think, lost everything and everyone dear to him."

"How?" Ronald asks. "When?"

"Recently," Mithrandir replies, sighing. "He would not say. But time is a funny thing - the Elves always say a year for a Man is but a flicker of an eye for them. Every world has its own time. I have long known of the rumours of the Doctor's people and of the destruction of their world in a furnace of flame." The sunlight catches the great red stone of the wizard's ring. "I think there was a war, and I think he is alone amongst the survivors."

"So the children Gondor has a future," Ronald says, thinking out loud.

Mithrandir nods. "Yes."

Ronald digests the information; it makes sense, of course. He remembers seeing the stricken faces of those bereaved by the trenches, before he himself left for France. The anguish as newly childless mothers watched their sons' comrades return - injured, more often than not, but alive. He imagines that anguish multiplied. "My God," he murmurs, to himself.

"He wanted a world at peace, one that's survived," says Mithrandir. "You too, are a survivor of war - he could justify to himself that he came here for you."

Ronald shakes his head. "I'm not a survivor. Not yet. Our war isn't over."

"Are you winning?"
"I don't think anyone's winning," Ronald says. "We sit there, shooting at each other, and nobody appears to be gaining anything."

"Then you are surviving," Mithrandir says, "and that is something to be thankful for. Now - do you want to see the rest of the city?"

They spend the rest of the day exploring the city's streets. Mithrandir is greeted warmly and respectfully wherever he goes, and Ronald pushes thoughts of the Doctor out of his mind in favour of absorbing the atmosphere.

Much later, back at the citadel, Ronald finds their rooms empty. There is time before the evening meal, so he goes in search of the Doctor.

It takes several questions to the servants, a number of wrong turns, and a borrowed lantern to find him. He is deep in a pile of dusty documents in the citadel's archives, the angles of his face lit by a single candle - he does, Ronald realises, look distinctly alien.

Ronald crosses to the desk where the Doctor is working and picks up a piece of paper. In smooth, elegant handwriting, it is headed, "The Oath of Cirion and Eorl".

"How old are these?" he asks, in a hushed voice.

"Some hundreds of years, a few older," says the Doctor. "By your reckoning. Could do with some cataloguing. They'll have time, now." He lifts up a paper and examines it.

"What are you looking for?" Ronald questions, reading further down the page he is holding.

"Not sure," the Doctor says, squinting at his parchment. "I'll know if I find it." He gives Ronald a hard, appraising look. "Not going to ask me where I went?"

Putting down his page, Ronald shakes his head. "It's not my business."

The Doctor leans back in his chair. "You've been talking to the wizard."

"Er ..."

The Doctor taps his forehead. "Telepathic, me."

"Yes," Ronald admits. "And it really isn't my business."

"I brought you here. You never asked why."

"Perhaps I've grown too used to not asking questions," Ronald says. "I can't pretend to understand why we're here, how we got here; but it is nice. Peace, I mean."

The Doctor nods. "Yeah. I was aiming for a little further into this Age - the TARDIS is being a tad temperamental at the moment, since " He falls silent, leafing through the pages before him. "Aha!" His face splits in a wide grin.

"Found what you were looking for?" Ronald asks.

"Yes. Bit of early history." The Doctor folds the paper up and tucks it into his jacket. "Right then. Isn't it about dinner time?"

Ronald can see a change of subject when it's there; so he agrees it probably is almost time for the meal. They go back to their rooms, where there is a change of clothes for Ronald. The Doctor
washes his face and seems to be content.

The dinner is being held in one of the rooms in the Citadel - smaller and less imposing than the great hall, and hung with tapestries. Only Faramir is there when Ronald and the Doctor arrive, and he seems pleased to see them both. They make idle talk about the day and the city, and Ronald asks what the tapestries depict. One of them turns out to show the oath sworn between Faramir's ancestor Cirion and the king of neighbouring Rohan, and Ronald listens, fascinated, as Faramir tells the story that had been written down so long ago and abandoned in the archives.

The four hobbits are next to arrive, chattering about the possibilities of pie and lamb; Pippin and Merry appear to be having an argument about the best way of cooking a chicken.

"Roast," puts in the Doctor, with his widest grin. "With potatoes."

"Exactly what I said," Sam agrees, "only Mr Merry thought stewed is better."

"With carrots," Merry adds. "And onions, and so on. I suppose you're Ronald's Doctor."

"Pleased to meet you!" the Doctor says, with a wave of his fingers.

The discussion about the chickens continues after Legolas and Gimli arrive; it turns out every race has a different preference. Sam and the Doctor seem to be winning the argument when the party is completed by Mithrandir and the King. They go to the table, and as before everyone turns to face the West for a moment's silence.

"What is that for?" Ronald asks Faramir, his neighbour, as they sit down.

"We look towards Númenor that was, and beyond to Elvenhome that is, and to that which is beyond Elvenhome and will ever be," says Faramir. "You do not?"

"Er, no," Ronald admits. "At college, we stand silently before dinner, and someone says grace. A sort of blessing," he adds, at Faramir's blank look.

Servants bring food to the table, and Ronald waits until the plates are loaded and the hobbits have already begun to eat, with exclamations about the dishes.

"I think we share a dream," he says. "About Númenor. Although, that is, I didn't know it was Númenor until today."

Faramir has put down his knife and is looking at Ronald steadily. "The wave," he says. "Yes."

"They can't escape," says Faramir, softly. "It rises up, engulfs the land. I can't escape."

"I wake up as I drown," Ronald says, and the other man nods.

"Our forebears escaped," the King breaks in. "Yours, and mine, Faramir. Not everyone perished."

"Genetic memory," says the Doctor, wiping his mouth with a napkin and twirling his finger near his forehead. "Event like that, not easily forgotten."

Ronald looks at Faramir. "Somehow it helps to know someone else shares the dream," he says, and Faramir agrees with a smile.

After that, the dinner becomes livelier. The hobbits pause long enough to congratulate the King on the food, and he responds by teasing Sam about camp cooking. That sets Gimli off on a rhapsody
about something called, so far as Ronald can work out, lembas. There is a lot of laughter and the wine is flowing steadily. The Doctor and Legolas are deep in conversation about something, and Ronald finds himself discussing the history and literature of Gondor with its king.

"If you're interested in books, you should visit Rivendell," says the King, who has instructed Ronald to dispense with titles and call him Aragorn. "My foster-father has rooms and rooms of the greatest writings of Men and Elves, in all the tongues of Men and Elves."

"It's those that I'm really interested in," Ronald returns, swallowing a piece of beef. "We're speaking Westron now?"

"Aye, and you speak it well."

"Not really," admits Ronald. He gestures at the Doctor. "He has a well, it's a "

"It's a thing that translates any language," says the Doctor. "For Ronald there, it means he can understand what you're saying, and speak the same tongue."

Frodo has put down his fork. "Can it be turned off?"

"Yeah," the Doctor says, "but you won't understand him and he won't understand you. Bit of a conversation-killer."

The hobbit looks up at Ronald. "I'm quite interested, though," he says.

Ronald nods at the Doctor, who sighs dramatically and pulls out his little gadget again. A buzz, and he is blinking away blue light and unable to understand what Frodo is saying to him.

"He's asking if you can understand," says the Doctor, that hint of accent back again. He turns to Frodo and talks quickly. "And I told him no, you can't."

The King, looking at Ronald, asks him a question - Ronald can tell that much by the intonation.

"Can you sing a song, or something, in English?" the Doctor translates. "Can you sing?"

"Not very well," Ronald says, thinking. "I could say a poem." He stands, clears his throat, and Pippin, down the table, calls for quiet.

"Love is enough: though the World be a-waning," Ronald begins, his voice echoing in the silence of the room. "And the woods have no voice but the voice of complaining,
Though the sky be too dark for dim eyes to discover
The gold-cups and daisies fair blooming thereunder,
Though the hills be held shadows, and the sea a dark wonder,
And this day draw a veil over all deeds passed over,
Yet their hands shall not tremble, their feet shall not falter;
The void shall not weary, the fear shall not alter
These lips and these eyes of the loved and the lover."

The Doctor nods approvingly. "William Morris. Dreary bugger, but a knack with words." He speaks to the King. "They said they liked it, but couldn't understand a word," the Doctor reports back.

"Can I hear something in one of their languages now?" Ronald asks. "An Elvish language, maybe?"

Legolas and the King hold a brief, intense discussion when the Doctor relays the request, and it is
Aragorn who stands to speak. His voice is soft and the words lyrical and moving although Ronald cannot understand their meaning, and to his astonishment he finds himself blinking back tears.

When the King falls silent, the Doctor says quietly, "that was part of the tale of Beren and Lthien, whose love triumphed over evil."

"Can you turn me back?" Ronald asks. A moment later, he can understand the conversation again. "That was beautiful," he tells the King.

"It's a sad tale," Aragorn responds, "but one close to my heart."

"I think I'd like to hear, or read, more of your languages," Ronald says.

Faramir leans in. "Take some books. There are plenty in my father's library, and I can always obtain more. Come and get some, tomorrow."

"Thank you," Ronald says. "I'd like that, very much."

The dinner breaks up, eventually. Aragorn and Mithrandir head out for an evening pipe, but the hobbits, Gimli and Faramir all announce they are going to bed.

"Don't wait up," says the Doctor, as Ronald decides he too is aiming for sleep. His headache - the headache forgotten since he was swept away from the trenches - is back, and he just wants to sink into the soft mattress. "Legolas and I are off to look at stars."

*The poem is "Love is Enough" by William Morris.*
The headache is not gone by the morning. In fact it is worse than ever, and it takes effort to eat the fresh bread left out for him. There is no sign of the Doctor, and after managing half the bread and sipping a cup of water Ronald pulls on his clothes and heads out into the city. It is another lovely spring morning, and his spirits lift somewhat - though the headache does not - as he makes his way through the citadel.

He finds the Doctor in a garden, talking plants with Samwise Gamgee, both of them on their hands and knees with dirt all over. Sam is gesturing excitedly, and the Doctor seems to be arguing about whether it would be possible to transplant flowers from Gondor to another part of the planet.

"It's not warm enough!" says the Doctor, sitting back on his heels.

"Keep 'em covered in the winter, and they'll bloom in spring all right," Sam argues. "I had a notion about a sort of cover for them, keep the frost off."

"Not a bad idea," the Doctor says. "Not bad at all. Morning, Ronald."

"Good morning," Ronald says, picking a bench and sinking down on to it. "How were the stars?"

"Fantastic. Should've come. All different to yours."

Ronald rubs his brow. "I had a headache. Have a headache."

The Doctor gets to his feet and comes across. "Let me have a look?"

"You're the Doctor," Ronald points out. "Are you?"

"I'm the Doctor, not a Doctor," says the Doctor, "but I've picked up a bit of medical knowledge in my time." He puts a cool hand on Ronald's brow and peers at him.

Sam tenderly pulls a few weeds out from around the plant he is examining. "You should ask Strider, the King, I mean," he says. "He's good at tending folk."

"Hands of a king!" exclaims the Doctor. "Of course." He pauses. "Though I don't know that even Aragorn'll be able to help here, Ronald. I think you've got trench fever."

The words echo in Ronald’s ears. He has seen many men invalided out of the trenches with the fever - some have returned, others have not. And it's true, many complained of a headache before they fell seriously ill.

"Oh," he says, the headache pounding. "Don't you have something you can treat me with?"

The Doctor nods. "Yeah. But I can't give it to you. I'm sorry, but that would be messing with time. They won't invent a treatment for it for a while yet. It won't kill you."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." The Doctor smiles. "And I can't say anything more about that. But come on, we'll see what the King can do."

Aragorn seems pleased to have an excuse to break away from papers, and makes Ronald sit down and servants bring hot water while another is sent to the Houses of Healing for something called
athelas, which Ronald's mind does not translate.

"That's because there isn't an equivalent in English," says the Doctor, watching.

"It's a herb, of sorts," adds Aragorn, rolling his sleeves up. "It's not the only healing herb, but it is soothing for aches and one of the more potent." He thanks the servant who has brought a bowl of hot water. In a few moments the other servant returns with a folded cloth containing a few green leaves, which Aragorn throws into the water. Almost immediately there is a sweet, aromatic smell in the room, calming and getting to work on the headache.

Aragorn soaks a cloth in the water and bathes Ronald's brow with it, his sword-calloused hands lingering on the temples. The headache is now subsiding.

"That stuff's incredible," says the Doctor, picking up a leaf and crushing it between his fingers.

The King dries his hands. "It has helped many people."

"Got any seeds?" the Doctor asks. "I've got this garden. At least I hope I've still got it, haven't seen it for a bit, but a bit of athelas wouldn't go amiss. Might not have the hands of a king but occasionally I'm called upon to be a healer."

"Most soldiers are," the King agrees.

"I'm not a soldier," the Doctor says, all the lightness going out of his tone.

Aragorn looks at him silently for a moment, and then turns away. "I can find you some seedlings," he says. "Ronald, how are you feeling now?"

"A little better," Ronald says. "Thank you."

"I suggest you spend the day inside," says Aragorn, "somewhere cool and shady. Faramir's library would be ideal, although you must promise me not to over-exert yourself by reading too much."

Ronald finds himself laughing. "I promise."

"Good."

"I'll come with you," the Doctor adds. "I'd like to see what's in the collection."

Faramir's "library" is airy and cool and stuffed with books and papers. There are some comfortable chairs and desks for writing on, and the Doctor instantly begins browsing the collection. He pulls volumes out and stacks them in a pile. "Try these," he suggests.

Pulling one of the books towards him, Ronald has an idea.

"If I make notes about these, will they be in English?" he asks.

"Good thinking." The Doctor flips through a book. "Yeah."

Ronald selects a quill, checks the nib, and opens the book nearest to him.

The day passes in peaceful silence, broken only by the rustling of pages and the scratching of quill on parchment. By the window the Doctor reads voraciously, getting through three volumes before lunch. Ronald works more slowly, jotting down notes about names and places in the hope that this will help him decipher languages when he is back home. A part of him is beginning to wish he could stay in Gondor - work as a clerk, perhaps, or offer to sort out the jumbled and dusty archive. But another part of him is missing even the trenches and the knowledge that friends and family are
But another part of him is missing even the trenches and the knowledge that friends and family are just a letter away. He feels different and very alone in this great stone city, magnificent though it is and generous as its people have been.

During the afternoon Faramir comes in, looks through the books on Ronald's desk, and divides them into two piles. "I have two copies of these," he says, pushing them forwards. "Please."

Ronald thanks him, looking through the books in his pile. There are several he has barely had a chance to touch and he is grateful not to have to speed-read them, particularly because his headache is returning full-force. As servants come and light candles, the Doctor gives him a look, strides across the room and takes his pen away.

"No more. You'll make it worse. I think I'm going to have to take you back, Ronald; you need more medicine than athelas."

Ronald leans back in his chair and closes his eyes. "How long do I have before I develop the fever properly?"

The Doctor lays a surprisingly cool hand on his forehead. "How long have you had the headache?"

"A day or so."

"Then you've got a couple of weeks to incubate, before it hits you. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. It's all right, they'll invalid me out. I might even get to see Edith." The thought of Edith is cheering.

"I'll get them to take us back to the TARDIS tomorrow," the Doctor says.

The evening is spent with the hobbits, who are solicitous of Ronald's headache but good fun nevertheless. The Doctor tells some outrageous stories about outrunning monsters and Merry anecdotes about the Shire, their home. Only Frodo is quiet, watching the merriment with a slight smile.

The Doctor walks with Ronald back to their rooms, pointing out some of the different stars in the heavens. "That one's a man," he says, indicating a particularly bright star. "Erendil, his name was. He's Aragorn's ancestor. Built himself a ship and left Arda in search of salvation." His mouth twists.

"Salvation?" Ronald asks.

"An end to the fighting that was splitting Men and Elves," the Doctor says, his eyes veiled and distant. "They believe in a kind of god, here - more powerful beings, really, but men will always give the name of 'god' to something they don't understand. Erendil found them, but once he'd left he could never come back. So they gave him the job of sailing the heavens, forever."

Ronald looks up at the star. "It sounds similar to an ancient story we have," he thinks aloud. "About a star, too. Actually I wrote a poem about it - from a line in Crist, by Cynewulf."

"Don't think I've met him," says the Doctor.

"He lived a long time ago," Ronald explains. "He wrote - hang on, will this make sense?"

"You're speaking English now, to me," the Doctor says.

"All right, then." Ronald casts his mind back for the right phrase. "Cynewulf wrote this. 'ala
"Hail Earendel, brightest of angels, over Middle Earth sent to men," the Doctor translates. "Like I said; some legends are universal."

Arriving at their rooms, Ronald sits down on his bed with a sigh. The Doctor gives him an appraising look.

"Will you be able to sleep?"

"I don't know."

The Doctor frowns. "All right. I'll only do this once. Shoes off."

Ronald obeys, swinging his legs on to the bed and eyeing the Doctor as he approaches. "Will it hurt?"

The Doctor grins. "Not unless I've got really bad at this in the past couple of decades. Just relax."

He leans forward, puts his fingers against Ronald's temples, and there is blackness.

By morning all is ready, and Ronald finds all he has to do is bid farewell to the hobbits, Mithrandir, Legolas and Gimli. To his delight both Aragorn and Faramir are riding with them, although he gathers from the way courtiers are buzzing around the King that this is not a popular decision.

"I will be gone three days, four at most," Aragorn says eventually, turning on the courtiers with a gaze that could have torn stone asunder. "I am leaving Mithrandir here in my stead. Surely he will suffice as Regent?"

"But, my lord, there is so much to do!" a courtier says, helplessly.

"And Mithrandir will take advice and give orders," Aragorn says, patiently. "I need to see Osgiliath." He picks up the fine scabbard and sword belt leaning by the wall and buckles on the weapon with the quick ease of long practice. "Come, Doctor, Master Tolkien."

They ride out through the City accompanied by a small group of Faramir's men and cheers from the people. Aragorn acknowledges the cheers with a raised hand, a smile, occasionally nodding his head at someone. But as they exit the main Gate he gives Faramir a broad grin, his horse a sharp kick, and bends low over its neck.

Faramir laughs, and follows. The Doctor exchanges a shrug with Ronald, and they're off too, their horses racing to catch the others, the grass rushing underneath the hoofs. They gallop until they are past the outer wall, and Aragorn reins his mount into a trot.

"That felt good," he says. "Just to ride, for the sake of riding. I've been cooped up too many days."

"Not one for stone cities," remarks the Doctor.

"No more than you are," Aragorn agrees. "I'm more used to sleeping under the stars and having the freedom to journey as I will."

They ride. It is a beautiful spring day once more, and the breeze blowing past Ronald's face takes some of the headache with it. As they ride Aragorn and Faramir exchange stories. It seems so normal, somehow, and yet Ronald is sure that when he leaves this place it will be like a dream in
his mind, just a fading memory.

The journey, again, takes the rest of the day, and a night, and a morning, and at noon they arrive back in the woodland clearing where everything began and Faramir walked out of the trees. The Doctor, Ronald thinks, is happy to be back with his strange machine; he leaves his horse grazing to go up to it, patting its wooden sides.

Aragorn and Faramir are staring in open amazement, and stare more as the Doctor pulls a key from his pocket and opens the door.

"What wizardry is this?" asks Aragorn.

"Oh, come on," the Doctor replies. "You know better than that. It's not wizardry; it's just something you don't have on your world." He lays a tender hand on the side of the TARDIS. "Something no worlds have, now."

"Thank you," says Ronald, lifting his bag of books out of his mount's saddlebag. "I I wish I could stay."

"You can't," puts in the Doctor from the door of the TARDIS.

Aragorn nods. "You must return to your world, Master Tolkien. But I'm sure you too will have peace." He looks across at the Doctor. "And to you, Doctor, I extend a permanent invitation. You have the freedom of Gondor as long as my house endures."

The Doctor returns the King's nod with his own, serious and formal. "Then I thank you for such an honour," he says. "Better write that one down, y'r Majesty; save me having to explain it later to a descendant. Well, we'll be away. C'mon, Ronald."

Ronald follows him inside the machine and the doors close. The Doctor is hurrying around the central column, pushing buttons and winding things and wielding a hammer with enthusiasm. He pulls down a lever with a flourish.

"And we're off!" he says, turning to Ronald with a grin.

"You look remarkably happy, considering I am going back to a war," Ronald replies, his headache suddenly hitting him hard. He feels exhausted.


His stained, filthy uniform is where he left it, and Ronald strips off the comfortable boots and fine tunic with regret. Putting his old things back on feels, somehow, like closing a book. He folds the clothes he has taken off and leaves them in a neat pile.

Back in the main control room, the Doctor is flicking through the books. "Good selection. They'll be useful."

"Useful? I doubt it. I'll put them aside; I can't go writing my thesis on - what was it? Quenya?"

"Maybe not a thesis," the Doctor says, with a grin. "Don't rule out the writing, though. Where there's a gap, fill it. Use your brain - you've got a good one. A good myth always has a nice dash of imagination. Trust me."

Ronald puts the books back in the canvas bag given him by Faramir. "Strangely, I do," he says. A thought strikes him. "Doctor - can you tell me will I have to go back to the trenches, after I get
better?"

His attention on the controls, the Doctor shakes his head.

"No, I won't have to go back, or no, you can't tell me?" Ronald pursues.

"Can't tell you. Sorry."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't trust you not to mess up your own timeline because of what I tell you," the Doctor says. "And you would, you'd try and change it." He twirls a dial. "You humans always try and change it."

Ronald nods. "All right. I'll accept that. What of you, Doctor? What will you do now?"

"Keep travelling."

"Where?"

"Wherever the TARDIS takes me. That's the joy of it." But the Doctor does not look especially joyful. The spaceship judders to a halt. "Here we are. 1916, and just a few minutes after you went out for a smoke."

Picking up the book bag, Ronald holds out his hand. "Thank you, Doctor," he says, meaning it. "Generally, we shake hands, on Earth," he adds, when the Doctor doesn't take the hand.


Ronald turns, makes for the door, opens it. He looks around, once, at the Doctor standing alone and strange in his incredible machine, and steps back out into the mud.
Epilogue

Blackwell's Bookshop, Oxford, 1956

It's been a long afternoon and Ronald's hand is cramped from the signing. He hates signing - it takes time away from writing, and marking, and there's a lecture he's supposed to be preparing too - but he's under orders to help promote the book and at least Blackwell's is a convivial sort of place.

The readers have been mostly students; even, Ronald has been surprised to see, some of his own. He's pleased, but wishes they would pay as much attention to Beowulf.

Towards the end of the queue there's a tall thin man in a truly ridiculous long coat and a red-haired woman who appears to object to being here; she's muttering something about elves under her breath.

Ronald stretches his fingers and looks up at them. "Hello."

"Hello indeed!" says the man, grinning a mile-wide grin. "Absolutely hello. Lovely to see you, Professor!" He puts the book down. "Well done, too. Excellent work. Of course I always expected that, but still, good to be able to tell you. Brilliant!"

Ronald smiles politely back. "And who should I inscribe it to?" he asks.

The man sticks his hands in his pockets. "Oh, that's a shame." He lowers his voice, leans over. "Come on, have a guess."

"How should I be able to guess?" Ronald says, glancing round to see if there's a shop assistant to hand.

"Sorry, he gets like this sometimes," says the red-haired woman. She raises her eyebrows at the man, who sighs deeply.

"Regeneration's such a nuisance. I should carry a little book or something, like a passport. With pictures." He leans over to Ronald. "How long did it take you to get over the trench fever, Ronald?"

Ronald looks up, meets the other man's eyes dark eyes, but suddenly he recognises the expression in them, despite the face, despite the changes. "Doctor?"

"Told you he was good, didn't I?" The man - the Doctor - grins again. "Yup. Oh, this is Donna Noble. Donna, Professor Tolkien."

"Charmed, my dear," Ronald says, feeling a little swept away. "Doctor - did you know I would write this book?" He lays his hand on the open flyleaf.

The Doctor nods. "Of course. Couldn't say anything - against the rules - but I sort of encouraged it along a bit. And now I can tell you how brilliant it is. They'd be pleased, you know, if they could see it."

Ronald picks up his pen again. "It seems like a dream, most days," he says. "But then I close my eyes and sometimes I can still see it, Minas Tirith rising from the plain."

"And the wave?" the Doctor asks.
"Occasionally." Ronald thinks for a moment, and writes quickly on the flyleaf in his crabbed hand. "And you? How are you?"

The Doctor meets his gaze, and Ronald is taken aback by the weight of what is suddenly revealed. "Oh, same old travelling," he says. "Same old TARDIS. Not quite same old me." He picks up the book, reads the inscription, and smiles. "Thank you." The book disappears somewhere inside the coat. "Well, we've got to go and deal with a plague of alien piranha thats about to appear in the Isis, so we'll be off." He holds out his hand. "Generally, I understand you shake."

Ronald finds himself returning the smile. "Indeed, generally that is the case." They shake hands again. "Doctor - there's rather a lot of material I haven't yet put into order. Even some of the material I began work on while I was convalescing with the fever. Gondolin, and so on. Should I continue?"

He's rewarded with another of those blinding grins. "Oh yes," says the Doctor. "Keep on writing, Professor. Keep on writing as long as ever you can." And with that, he's gone, Donna Noble in tow.

Laying down his pen, Ronald rubs his brow. No dream after all, then. He thinks of the piles of papers back in his study, and tucked away in a safe corner, the books brought out of Gondor. He resolves to settle down to it now with a vengeance - because the Doctor's advice had been good before. Surely it would be again.

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