

The Problem with Elders

I had just finished lunch with an Elder and started on my way home. That is, an Elder me. It started like most of those meetings. I sat down in the cafe, looked at my phone, memorizing the time and place. A few minutes later the Elder me walked in, put the chessboard on the table, set up the pieces with me playing white and prompted me to play. After 18 moves black had a considerable advantage so I resigned. So I talked to him. I only talk to them if they beat me. A future me should be better than me at something, and chess is a relatively easy test.

He wasn't very helpful. I told him that she was in the ICU, has been for several days, and things were not looking good. I didn't have to tell him who she was. He would remember. He just cited the "no spoilers, no interference" rule. Made some comments about the danger to the timeline. I only cared about preserving the life of a dear friend.

"A few years ago," he reminded me, "you rode a bus. The next bus on the same route had a suicide bomber on it. Did you benefit from a miracle?"

"Of course not." I snapped. "People were killed on that other bus. That's no miracle. And I'm no more deserving than they are."

"Good. Now you seem to be asking for a miracle."

"No." I replied, "Unlikely events can happen. I'm appealing to the medical science of your time to increase that likelihood."

"Bad things happen," He said, "The only difference here is that it might happen to someone you care about."

"That makes all the difference."

We went on like that for awhile longer, and then I paid for lunch and left. That's another thing. Elders never seem to carry contemporary cash. And they all have the same line "Consider it a long term investment." That joke was born old.

They started showing up a couple of years ago. Used to show up 3-4 times a year. Then, during the last couple of months they started showing up a lot. And that's just the ones who approach me and talk to me. Once in a while I think I see one in the crowd. As long as they don't approach me, I have no reason to speak to them.

So I was surprised to see a second Elder that same day. I spotted him on my way home. It took me a moment to realize he was an Elder me. He looked more unkempt than they usually do. More unkempt than I usually do. He carried a small backpack. Getting two Elder me visits on the same day is unprecedented. Then he spotted me and called out to me. When I did not immediately respond he started waving. I stopped and let him catch up with me.

As soon as he did, he asked for the date, and then he asked how she was.

I filled him in on the current status.

He said : "We still have some time, then. But we need to hurry. I'll need a quick shower and a shave. I can do that at your place."

I said: "Aren't you forgetting something?"

He paused, and then seemed to realize something: "I don't have a chess board on me, and we don't have time for that. I'm here to fix things. I'm here to help."

"Help? How?"

"I'm here to help her."

That was new. But if there was a chance, I had to ask: "All the Elders that showed up until now refused to interfere. Although the one that was here the day before yesterday did have some interesting ideas on adapting the taabbiyat to Modern Shatranj."

"Can we talk on the move? And why are still talking about chess?"

I pondered for a moment and offered: "Ok. We'll play while walking. No board. Show me something I don't know in 10 moves and we can talk. "

Back home, he took the backpack with him into the bathroom, took a quick shower. Then he called out : "I'm going to need some clean clothes, too."

I replied: "Just take what you need. You know where everything is."

“Good. I'll just finish shaving and looking half way decent, and then I need to rush.”

I still had some questions.

“The other Elders warned me against damage to the timeline. Explain.” I said.

“Black holes warp spacetime, orders of magnitude stronger than anything I could do. For the universe it's a minuscule local phenomenon. Why the questions? This is what you wanted.”

“It is.” I agreed, “I want nothing more than that. I couldn't bear the thought of a world without her.”

“Neither could I.” He replied.

He came out of the bathroom, backpack in hand, walked briskly to the bedroom closet and started pulling out clothes.

“I worked for twelve years to get back and fix this. Trust me!”

Now I could see that he was the youngest Elder I had ever met.

I wanted to trust him. I wanted some advanced cure from the future to fix the situation.

“Twelve years is a long time to spend on just this one thing.”

“It is.” He agreed, pulling on trousers.

“For all I know,” I said, “After twelve years on this, you could be delusional.”

“I'm not. I'm gonna need a plainer shirt. I don't want to attract attention at the hospital.”

“The other side of the closet. Or maybe you're conducting something that from your POV is a repeatable experiment. You go back, try something, if it doesn't work you just go back again, and try something else.”

“No. I've only got one chance of this. I want to make this count. I'm going to need a few items” He buttoned up a shirt, plain blue, then walked briskly to the next room.

“Couldn't you bring them from your own time?” I asked.

“I was in a rush.”

“You work on something twelve years, and you're in a rush?”

“The less you carry with you, the better.”

“I want to believe you. I can't you let do whatever it is that you want to do unless I'm sure.” I couldn't protect her from getting ill, this is the little protection I could offer. Then I let him see the keychain, with the front door keys in my hands.

“Isn't what you want?” He questioned, “Didn't you just tell me how frustrated you were with our Elders who refused to do the same thing I'm here to do? They get more cynical with age, you know. The older ones are downright nihilistic. And anyway, how would you stop me?”

“You figured out how to get here. I can figure out how to send you back.”

“It could take you twelve years to figure that out.”

It probably would.

“Look,” I said, “You come here do whatever it is you do, and then you go home. I have to live with the consequences. It's not about trust. I see how obsessed you are and it scares me. You scare me!”

He was silent for a moment and then :”If this works, I'll have no home to go back to.”

“I thought you said it was a local phenomenon.”

“It is. The universe holds. My version of the world, my timeline, if you will, not so much.”

After a short pause I ask :”What happens to you?”

“I have no idea. I didn't do the math. I only figured how to get back and do something. Maybe I'll fade out. Maybe I'll get stuck here. Maybe nothing. But this is something I need to do. Each according to his ability, each according to his needs.”

I nod and say:”It's an unusual application of the concept. ”

He looks at me and says:”And your world will be one step better for it. This time she lives!”

He gets up and adds:”By the way. I have my own keys. I will need cab fare, to get to the hospital.

Oh, there's your wallet there.” They never carry contemporary currency. Then he pulls out a few bills from my wallet and says :”If I do get stuck here, don't try to find me. I'll make my own way.

Audentes Fortuna Iuvat.” and then he's out the door and he's gone.

And then she lives.

And I have no idea if this was something he did, or may just random factors working in our favor,

or perhaps another Elder, one of those who don't talk to me, and I'm pretty sure the next time I'll see an Elder me, he won't tell me anything.