

Lord of the Rings, as written by James Crumley

By Bernie Mojzes

When I finally caught up with Frodo Baggins, he was drinking ale with an alcoholic bulldog named Samwise Gamgee in a ramshackle joint just outside of Bree, near the old forest, drinking the hell out of a fine spring afternoon.

Baggins had been on this wandering binge for nearly three weeks, and the little man, dressed in rumpled leggings and a stained cloak, looked like an old soldier after a long campaign, sipping slow beers to wash the taste of death out of his mouth. The dog slumped on the stool beside him like a tired little buddy, only raising his head occasionally for a taste of beer from a dirty ashtray set on the bar.

Neither of them bothered to glance at me as I slipped onto a stool between the bulldog and the only other two customers in the place, two out-of work half-orcs. Their knotty faces and guttural voices belonged to another time, another place. As I sat down, they glanced at me with piglike eyes, looking me over carefully as if I were an abandoned wreck they planned to cannibalize. I nodded blithely to let them know that I might be a wreck, but I hadn't been totaled yet. They returned my silent greeting with blank eyes and thoughtful nods that seemed to suggest that accidents could be arranged.

Already whipped by too many miles on the wrong roads, I let them think whatever they might. I ordered a beer from the middle-aged barmaid.

The larger of the two half-orcs shifted one seat over, next to me. Obviously I had violated some code in this rundown shit-hole, or maybe he fancied himself a fashion critic. He sported winged dragons and skulls on the bulging arms hanging out of his muscle shirt, spiked rings on his fingers that would permanently readjust the good looks of any face they met, an oversized switchblade in his right hand, and the slobbery leer of a true critic. Whatever, he played with the clasp of my elven cloak until the switchblade pressed into the soft fabric.

"What the fuck you doing here, old man?" he muttered in a downer-freak's growl. "What the fuck?"

I hadn't even had a sip of my beer yet, my first beer in almost ten years. I tried to turn away peacefully again, smiling tensely without speaking, but the big jerk recaptured my attention with the point of his knife. Goddamned Gandalf. He'd love this shit. But he wasn't here. As far as I knew, he could be dead. *But what the hell*, I heard him think, *nobody lives forever*.

"Kid, you touch my suit with that blade again," I said calmly, "I'm going to shove it up your ass and break it off." Maybe he'd think it was a joke.

At least he laughed, throwing his head back with a high-pitched gurgle that erupted from deep in his gut. He moved the knife away from my throat, at least, pressing the tip into cheek. I had enough scars: Viet Nam, countless barroom brawls, three ex-wives, and my next-door neighbor Debbie, a fellow refugee from multiple marriages, who drank tequila like a Mexican fish and screamed and bit and scratched like a Balrog when she came. So I wasn't anxious to let this asshole add to my collection. Two shots, machine gunned: left forearm blocking the knife up and out, ridge of the right hand striking the throat just under the adam's apple. Should have dropped a normal man, but this hopped up kid hardly noticed. He smiled and slipped off his barstool, dropping into a fighter's crouch.

Goddamn kid. I hadn't even had a sip of my beer, my first goddamn beer in ten goddamn years, before I smashed it against the bar, splashing it across the bar and onto my boots. The kid came in high and low, a long, slow roundhouse to the temple and a slash to the gut. I blocked both, and felt it, heavy, bruising, bone-jarring blows that rattled my teeth. I'd been stone cold sober for ten years, worked out, pumped iron. I thought I was in good shape, for my age. But this kid was a monster. Six foot something and almost as broad in the shoulders, fists the size of my head. The impact of the blows almost dropped me, even without connecting. One more like that and I was finished. I dropped the bottle down, slicing across shoulder and down, through the straps of his muscle shirt, through skin and pectorals. The whole thing peeled off, nipple and all. He stared at it, then giggled. Pipeweed addict. I wondered how hard it would be to score in this town. As an outsider.

When he shifted his grip on the blade for a killing strike I drove the bottle into his throat and left it there. He pulled at it, and the blood began to flow, and then, still giggling, he collapsed. His friend stood up and I squared off against him, but he lifted his hands.

"I'm just leavin', old man," he said. "Just leavin'." Good friend.

I took the knife. Looked like I was gonna need a blade until my I could get my own re-forged.

The bulldog had perked up, lifting it's narrow haunches and trotting across three rickety barstools, to lap at the beer on the bar. I pulled broken glass out of his way. He looked up at me and belched like a dragon, then licked my face in thanks, leaving long strings of drool on my shoulder, down my arm, and onto my sunburned elbow. Baggins barked an order, and the bulldog looked at me with long-suffering eyes and went back to sit next to his master.

"Sorry about the disturbance," I said to Baggins. "Name's Strider. Let me buy the next round."

Goddamn Gandalf.