Bagenders

by Bagenders

Summary

And it came to pass that the Fellowship were granted immortality for they had saved Middle Earth; and so they went their separate ways...

But some fellowships were not meant to be broken...

History has become legend; legend has become myth, and myth has become merchandising: A three-bedroom semi in a town in the north of England, 2001.

(These are the original Bagenders stories, not new ones - I found the old files deep in my computer and thought I would upload them as a tenth anniversary edition sort of thing. These were written between 2001 and 2004 and are certainly showing their age in places, and the early ones aren't that great, but I thought that some people may still enjoy them.)

Notes

By Lady Alyssa and Random Dent

Disclaimer: JRR Tolkien owns all the characters used here: have just borrowed them, will be returned in almost working order. Hope they left plenty of room for him to turn in his grave.

Debt to 'Father Ted' in the characterisation of Gandalf. General situation debt to the 'Young Ones'.

Story notes: An AU where the fellowship become immortal, and end up living together in the house share from hell (story is semi-autobiographical, so help me god). Based on both movie and books, hence strange attempts to write Merry and Pippin's accents.
The Long-Awaited Psychotic Incident

And it came to pass that the fellowship were granted immortality for they had saved middle earth; and so they went their separate ways...

But some fellowships were not meant to be broken...

History has become legend; legend has become myth and myth has become merchandising: A three-bedroom semi in a town in the north of England, 2001

"Beer!"

Gandalf was sat in his chair, an empty can of Tennents in one hand, wizarding staff in the other, an overflowing ashtray balanced on the arm of his chair and his hat adorning the top of the television.

"Beowulf you idiot!"

This comment was addressed to the television, or more specifically, 'The Weakest Link'.

"Beowulf was a pansy anyway, I drank him under the table after 3 pints. Where's my beer!"

"I don't see why you can't get it yourself, what with being a wizard and all," commented Sam, bringing in another can.

Taking the can wordlessly, Gandalf raised his staff with his other hand and pinned Sam to the ceiling without taking his eyes off the screen.

"You haven't washed your hands after working in that garden again, have you? This can's covered in muddy hobbit fingerprints. You can learn everything about the ways of hobbits in a month, but after 6000 years they're just bloody annoying."

"You chose to live with us, we most definitely did not choose to live with you, if you don't like hobbits, go live somewhere else."

Legolas wandered in, took one look at the scene and just said "Gandalf". Gandalf reluctantly lowered Sam to the ground with a graceless bump. Legolas politely enquired about Sam's day.

"Well, it's so terribly hard, what with the garden being on such a steep slope and all. How was yours?"

"Well, fabulously interesting, I pushed the trolley up the train, I pushed it back down, I pushed the trolley up the train, I pushed it back down and we stopped to restock in Newcastle. Any more excitement and I may have exploded. The highlight of my day was when one of the passengers recommended a good plastic surgeon who could do something about my ears. Have you seen Frodo since you got in?"

"He's been really well recently, but I suppose that just means we're heading for a bad one. He's in the kitchen cooking dinner."

"Again?" whispered Legolas. Sam nodded. "Hi Frodo," He shouted into the kitchen.

"Hi, how was work?"

"Fine, what's for dinner?"
"Grilled herrings with a hazelnut crust, roast apple and horseradish cream with sauteed Mediterranean vegetables."

"Someone's going to have to have a word with him about that," whispered Legolas to Sam.

"Why?" asked Sam.

"This is getting towards the point of, well, obsession."

Sam shrugged, "Well, it keeps him occupied."

Most of the time Frodo, was well, just Frodo, a well adjusted house hobbit, who kept things together, the bathroom clean and prevented inter-housemate homicide. However, bearing a ring of ultimate evil takes its toll on the mind, as does 6000 years of blatantly misguided psychiatric care. The 'episodes' varied in frequency and severity, from mild gibbering which passed quickly to full on Sauron hallucinations and mental hospital admissions. Anti-psychotic drugs have little effect on the aftermath of the power of a dark lord.

Enter Merry and Pippin stage left in Sainsbury's uniforms.

"Managed to retain your jobs?"

The nods signalled that for once they had.

"Impressive, if you keep this up you'll beat your Kwik-Save record."

"That's no fair, ah'm trying for employee of the month ah'll huv ye know," said Pippin.

"But when were the last time you kept a job for t'month," replied Merry.

Pippin opened his mouth to object when he was interrupted by the crash of pots in the kitchen and a small hairy blur which dived into the sideboard.

Legolas sighed, "Not again. Sam, go see what it was this time."

Sam stuck his head round the kitchen door and sniffed.

"Red wine. I think he spilled it on the ri-hob. It must have flash-burned."

"Merry, Pippin, you go finish the tea," said Legolas (this being the only job around the house that he would trust them to finish without burning it down).

Sam was in the corner, kneeling next to the sideboard, was trying to coax Frodo out of the psychotic world inside his head and of course, for practical reasons, the sideboard, the rocking tended to break glasses and at the moment they couldn't afford to buy any more. However, there was no alcohol at stake as they had long since discovered that it had to be hidden much more creatively to keep it out of the clutches of a wizard as wise, powerful and above all cunningly alcoholic as Gandalf. The only noise coming from Frodo was a strange high-pitched keening.

"Shall I ring Julie?" asked Legolas awkwardly.

Julie was the local psychiatric nurse, who after taking a personal interest in Frodo's case had abandoned the usual on and off call system and given the fellowship her mobile number for use in emergencies. It saved the business of explaining Frodo's vastly complicated psychosis to other people. (Post-Ringbearer syndrome would not appear to be curable and the rest of the fellowship had to feign ignorance about what had actually happened in case they got carted off as well)
they needed it quite a lot anyway. Julie was generally there to help Sam persuade Frodo that no flaming eyes were in fact watching him, and that getting out of the sideboard/ off the top of Legolas' wardrobe / out of the central heating cupboard, was a good idea.

"Give us ten minutes," mouthed Sam.

"Confound it all Samwise Gamgee, you make a better door than a window and they're on to sudden death. Anne Robinson's looking like Saruman in a rage. And a fetching trouser suit and glasses come to that."

Sam sighed knowing there was no arguing with Gandalf when he watching 'The Weakest Link' and shifted position, making a mental note to ask Aragorn to move the sideboard later.

Gandalf, in response to the increasing volume of Frodo's gibbering, shifted in his chair to reach for the remote (the only exercise he ever got these days), resulting in the hideous straining of his beer-stained robe and Legolas looking the other way very quickly. There was a banging from upstairs, and when this didn't achieve the desired effect, Gimli gave his customary battle cry of "Some of us are on the night-shift", which in the worst scenario would be followed up with a stream of dwarvish swearing; none of the others knew what this meant, but on one occasion it had actually made Gandalf turn the tv off.

Eventually Sam managed to extract Frodo from the sideboard and was taking him upstairs to continue calming him down. Frodo got a little, well, tactile after his flashbacks and if Sam didn't humour him he'd only end up being sectioned again and then there'd be all the questions (And how exactly do you know Mr Baggins? And you're sure you have no idea what the 'correct' details of his 'experience' were? And you're sure he was taking the medication? Is the elderly gentleman in the reclining chair alright? Could you ask him to let me down off the ceiling please? Please?). Now he had his head buried in Sam's chest, arms round his neck and legs round his waist and was being half carried, half dragged towards the Hobbits' bedroom.

Halfway up the stairs the weight seemed to mysteriously be lifted and he looked up to see Aragorn catching Frodo under the arms. Sam really wished he wouldn't do the stealthy ranger-of-the-north thing in the house, it really creeped him out, especially when Aragorn wore clothes to blend in with the wallpaper, and most worryingly they had never worked out how he managed to change his clothes between rooms. And the occasion when he had mysteriously appeared through the locked bathroom door to use the toilet when Sam was in the shower had been really too disturbing for words.

"Again?" mouthed Aragorn over Frodo's head, then started to try and make conversation to cover it up.

"Yeah, work was fine," answered Sam. "Apart from," Sam tried to nod downwards, but it was rather difficult to do without hitting his chin off the top of Frodo's head.

"The slope, I know, you've mentioned. I've tried working on land like that, but from now on I'm sticking with the flatter areas, really, I don't know how you manage to put in the extra effort day after day."

"Well, you know how it is."

Aragorn nodded. The ranger of the north turned park ranger of the north was not really in a position to comment. Sam didn't know if he behaved like this at work, but it added a new dimension of fear to Forestry Commission walks.
"But it is good being out there, in the woods again. And I do get my own land rover. I'm working on a new walk, putting in all the coloured markers. Not like the old days. Not like when I knew Richard Coeur de Lion."

Frodo, even in this state, could read the signs of an impending military anecdote and quadrupled the volume of his whimpering, causing some interesting dwarvish swearing to emit from one of the bedrooms.

Having left Sam to comfort Frodo in their set of bunk beds (and if you thought anything more of that statement, get your mind out of the gutter), Aragorn headed back downstairs to the living room where the rest of the household were sprawled across the furniture apathetically. Merry was looking particularly depressed and was making a spirited attempt to take up the entire sofa.

"What's up with him?" Aragorn asked Pippin who was perched on the arm.

"Oor new boss made him wear a name tag wi' 'Dave' on it. Apparently 'Meriadoc' doesnae fit, and even if it did he cannae pronounce it."

"Doesn't Peregrin give them a problem?"

"Nah, I just put Pip."

"Doesn't that, you know, get you beaten up?"

"Hey, these days ma reputation seems to go ahead o' me. The last two are still on crutches."

Legolas sat at the table in the corner of the sitting room. It was his turn to do the house accounts, but then it was always his turn to do the accounts, the only other person who ever seemed to be able to add them up right was Frodo, but recently the accounts book was bringing on his psychotic episodes. He'd thought about drawing everyone else's attention it this 'coincidence', but the other three hobbits tended to get a bit defensive. The sight of 3 little angry heads coming in at groin height bypassed the sensible elvish part of his brain which insisted that the contents of his trousers weren't that important and terrified that essential core maleness which insisted that he should really get round to buying one of those protective boxes that cricketers use. He sighed. "Do you know how much this household spends on beer?"

"Wouldn't know. It's not like we ever get owt." Grumbled Merry.

Both Legolas and Aragorn shot warning looks at Gandalf who was reaching for his staff. "Being alive since the creation of the world gives one an appetite for alcohol!"

Legolas looked at the accounts again. "Well at least this month you two haven't got into trouble." He glared at Merry and Pippin. "Do you have any idea how much a ticket back from Bad WuNtremburg costs" It's a good job we could persuade them you were both 6 years old."

Pippin looked hurt "Look, we tried our best when woke up in Cologne tae to get home ourselves but we dinnae speak German."

Merry got up. "Tea should be ready. Pip, go see if Frodo is sane enough to eat"
Gandalf had stopped now, and were waiting for what would happen next.

"Precioussssssssss" They heard the word from under the table and as one ran for the door into the hall, whilst Gandalf used his staff to barricade himself into the sitting room, managing to panic without ever leaving his chair. Frodo could be very, very precisely violent when he was like this. Aragorn had been forced to wear a kilt for three weeks once after not reading the warning signs.

"They want to take you away, preciousssss"

They waited in the hall with the door open a crack.

"What's he got now?" asked Merry

"Looks like his fork," said Pippin.

Sam whispered, "Now you can call Julie, Legolas, but tell her to come in the front door."
"And of course the advantage of this over other types of milking machine..."

Gimli had had a bad nightshift, and that meant 'Farming Today' (5am on BBC Radio 4 for those of you not familiar with that hour of the day) at full volume from the kitchen. Aragorn awoke and realised that while he had been deprived of sleep his knowledge of agricultural technology had been increased without his consent. Legolas was already sat bolt upright and looking about as disgruntled as an elf can; elves may not need sleep the way humans understood it, but they most definitely did not need 'Farming Today'. Legolas looked exasperatedly at Aragorn "Its not even as if he's a farmer."

A few hours later when Aragorn sat down at the breakfast table he was already not having a good day, so when Frodo cheerfully put a full fried breakfast with all the trimmings (black pudding, white pudding and haggis) down in from of him he had to fight the temptation to stick various parts of it where the sun didn't shine. This was not helped by the fact that Frodo, having recently recovered from his last psychotic episode, was in an unusually good mood and bouncing around the kitchen humming hobbit walking songs.

After taking three attempts to start the landrover Aragorn eventually got to work where things were not going to get any better. The most over-excited class of seven-year-olds were waiting to be shown the wonders of nature and pull its legs off. Orcs, he could deal with, Uruk-hai, and on a good day even the Nazgul, but a school trip was beyond even the former king of Gondor. By the way they were acting he managed to deduce that they had been given large amounts of sugar on the bus journey because it was either that or hard drugs, and most primary teachers don't carry hard drugs (except for personal use, obviously).

Aragorn was relieved to have successfully shepherded them around the forest, managing to stop them from stepping on or killing anything too rare and got the same number back onto the bus as got off it. This was not out of any parental instinct, but the forest was his territory and having lost hyperactive children in it worried him about as much as the time in the Middle Ages when Evil Harry Dread had taken up residence in his cow byre after one of his Stupid Lizard Men burned down the Shed of Doom. It was quite embarrassing for an ex warrior for the forces of good to have one of his outbuildings turned into the Evil Byre of Terror, but Aragorn felt so sorry for Harry that he didn't have the heart to move him on. And there was definitely room for the cows in one end of the great hall. Arwen hadn't been terribly happy though...

So now he was going to give up. He found his thermos in the back of the landrover and using his ranger powers to their full extent he hid in the forest, hoping that there were no squirrels intent on making his life any worse. Not that that would have been an easy task.

Back in the house the hobbits were coming home from work (shockingly, Merry and Pippin still seemed to be on course for holding down a job long enough to get paid) and found Frodo sat on one of the kitchen chairs very still, staring at the table. They paused inside the door; Sam cautiously approached him and in a soft and above all non-threatening tone of voice said "Frodo...? Are you feeling alright?"

Then their eyes followed his gaze to the object on the table. An airmail letter. With a New Zealand postmark.

"Oh no," murmured Pippin.
"We've got to hide," said Merry.

"Sideboard," said Frodo blankly without taking his eyes off the envelope.

The four hobbits slipped into the sitting room being careful not to wake Gandalf who had reclined his chair and was asleep in it, snoring like the fires of Mount Doom when Sauron was in residence. There was considerably more room in the sideboard now as Sam had removed all the glasses, reasoning that the best way to save the money they often spent replacing them was to put them somewhere else.

Legolas arrived home a few minutes later dressed as Mr Darcy from Pride and Prejudice post-swim. Well, no, that's a blatant lie, but it's a lot more fetching than his polyester work uniform. He went into kitchen and was confused by the fact that in a house which at this time of the day should have four hobbits in it, none of them were either cooking or eating. Then he listened, his elven hearing picked up voices coming from...the sideboard? (This of course was over, or indeed under, Gandalf's volcanic snoring) He went into the sitting room and addressed the relevant piece of furniture.

"It's alright, I'm fine. Sam's in here with me."

"And me."

"And me."

"Wh - " began Legolas before the hobbits replied "Look on the kitchen table" in whispered unison. Legolas looked back into the kitchen and cursed his elven eyesight as he saw the envelope.

"Room for one more?"

At this point Merry burst out of the sideboard gasping "No, there I'n't room for one more and there i'n't enough oxygen for the four in here already. We need another plan."

The other end of the sideboard opened and Frodo stuck his head out suggesting: "There's always behind the sofa."

When Aragorn arrived home later (and later than was usual because of the roadworks) that afternoon there were four hobbits and an elf hiding behind the sofa and Gandalf in a different position from before, snoring a little more quietly but drooling onto the carpet. Aragorn, however did not see any of this as he headed straight for the kitchen to make some coffee. This didn't help much as the kitchen was designed for the members of the household who did most of the cooking: the hobbits. After doing creatively painful things to his back he sat down at the apparently oversized table and saw The Letter.

He stormed into the sitting room and sat down in the sofa, causing everyone who was cowering behind it to yelp. He stood up again and looked behind it into the five terrified, pointy-eared faces.

"I think you should leave."

They nodded gratefully and headed for the door. As they reached it Merry shouted back "Gandalf? Tha comin t'pub?"

"FECK OFF!"

"Fine, on your head be it. Aragorn just got a letter from Arwen," said Legolas.
He shut the door and turned round to see Gandalf at the front gate complete with hat and staff.

"Which pub?"

Aragorn stared at The Letter, but The Letter didn't stare back. Arwen. It had all gone horribly wrong. Well, the relationship had worked well for a few thousand years, but you know how it is. People change and drift apart. Or rather Aragorn had drifted apart. Arwen saw it somewhat differently, and now there were issues. Emotional blackmail from three continents away, dredging up things that happened 5 1/2 thousand years ago is unreasonable. Using the remains of their children as pawn in this was not fair. He was really never going to forgive her for donating two of them to the British museum. They were two cases along from bodies preserved in peat bogs. It was just so undignified. And train tickets to London are not cheap (Legolas had refused to claim that Aragorn was his live in lover to get a staff discount). There was nothing for it - he was going to have to read it.

Inside the 'Dog and Rocket' (one of the few pubs none of them had been barred from). Pippin was standing on a bar stool attempting to get served.

"Look, its no a fake ID. Jeest because I'm only 4 feet tall doesnae mean I'm ten years old. Have you got a problem wi' that?"

Pippin was looking threatening, so Frodo hurried over to prevent them being barred from yet another pub.

"Is there a problem?"

"Yeah. Fake ID. You can all take yerselves back to playgroup, not down the pub."

"Discriminating against those with genetic disorders could be construed as something we could sue for. Look, we both have ID; do I look ten to you?" Frodo was aware of not having the barman's full attention, and turned round to see Legolas wrestling with Gandalf to prevent him using his staff in public. There was a thump as they both fell off their chairs. Frodo improvised hastily. "My friends are not terribly happy with this you know. He hardly ever gets a day out you know, are you going to deny him his pint as well?"

Gandalf started cursing, in various dead languages. Amid streams of elvish that were making Legolas gape and blush the word "Drink!" was being repeated in an increasingly desperate tone of voice. The barman looked sympathetic. "He's with you?"

Frodo nodded. "He lives with us. I'm his, his..." he cobbled together a story, aware that Pippin was looking at him with his mouth open. "Carer. Yes, I'm his carer. He's... an old professor, of, of Philology. It gets to them all in the end."

The barman sighed, "Anything for a weird life" and began to get the drinks. Gandalf visibly calmed down. Legolas looked at him sideways and realised at that moment there was only way he was going to keep his sanity. He was going to have to get Gandalf put into a home.

Back in the house Aragorn was on the phone. Arwen had lost her latest modelling job and was trying to get maintenance money. Aragorn's argument that she had already in the first part of the year earned more than he was likely to earn over the whole of the year was not cutting much ice. Incoherent elvish screaming was coming down the phone at him. The latest threat was Anduril was going to be left out in the rain to get rusty and then used as a poker. When they had separated Arwen had taken the precaution of acquiring everything Aragorn owned (with the exception of his clothes, but only because they were the wrong size). Previous financial woes of Arwen had led to the Palantir being sold to a 'Madam Gypsy Rosie', a fortune teller who had unexpectedly got a hell of a lot more
accurate, and his relics of St.Francis (a personal friend) to TV evangelist. After 10 minutes of elven screaming from both ends Arwen slammed the phone down. Aragorn sat staring into space. It was at times like this he could really do with going to hunt some orc.

In the pub several drinks have been consumed. And then several more. The company were now being seen as some kinds of floor show by the rest of the pub - except not too close. Gandalf had over the long years developed an unusual smell, which was not exactly offensive but was unaccountably disturbing. The Fellowship, through close contact had grown immune, although when Gandalf first moved in it was particularly distressing for Legolas' elven sense of smell. His gift of bubble bath had been totally ignored. Pippin was singing an obscene song about a hedgehog being the luckiest of all the animals. Merry was having issues with the floor and the concept of 'vertical'. Sam was having issues with Frodo, who was declaring to all and sundry "You're my best friend you are". Despite Legolas' best efforts Gandalf had moved onto the whisky chasers after the first pint and was now propping up the bar and attempting to chat up anything with breasts. Gandalf was being surprisingly successful - but then he did have magic powers. Legolas just wanted to be swallowed up by a hole in the ground: flock wallpaper was one of the few things elves could not camouflage themselves against. It was time to take action.

"I think that it's time to go home."

Sam nodded in relieved agreement. Gandalf objected, and Pippin stopped mid song and said "Oanly if we can go back via the offie and the kebab hoose."

Legolas sighed. If that was what it took to get them out of the pub, so be it. Next time he would leave them at the pub and go to the cinema. More specifically the Art house theatre, for un-subtitled foreign language films. The one place he knew he would never meet any other members of the Fellowship. Well, if he avoided the ones involving deshabille (of course, being lovely and intelligent he can use long foreign word like this. Naturellement). Not understanding a word of the dialogue did not seem to put Merry and Pippin off those films.

They arrived home with bags clinking with strong cheap alcohol, which bore a close resemblance to drain cleaner. The hobbits and Gandalf were attempting to eat kebabs, but mainly failing to eat kebabs. Frodo, for reasons best known to himself had one arm round Sam's neck and had given up on his own kebab and was attempting to eat Sam's. Gandalf took advantage of this situation to pinch Frodo's kebab.

"Hey!" Frodo was finding focusing that high up somewhat of a problem. "You stol' m'kebab, bassard!"

"Do you take me for a stealer of cheap Kebabs!" Gandalf attempted to make himself look tall and scary, but the effect was lost with the amount of swaying that both he and Frodo were doing. Sam, ever conscious of Frodo's somewhat fragile mental state kicked Gandalf hard in the shins. Gandalf raised his staff "I think it is high time I finally turned you into something... unnatural, Samwise Gamgee!"

This would have all gotten very nasty had Merry and Pippin not chosen that moment to simultaneously be violently and noisily sick over the next door neighbour's prized garden gnome collection. A silent mutual decision was made to forget their differences and get inside before they were on the receiving end of a ballistic, vomit covered garden gnome.

Merry and Pippin were sent to clean themselves up, while the others went into the sitting room, where they found Aragorn on the sofa, clutching an empty bottle of cherry brandy, which was the only alcohol which had been left downstairs, being too disgusting even for Gandalf to drink. Gandalf resumed his chair and turned the TV on to his customary late night Channel 5 soft porn. Legolas sat
down beside Aragorn, took away the brandy bottle and put his arm gently around his shoulders. Aragorn threw himself at Legolas, buried his face in his chest and started wailing and sobbing. Legolas somewhat at a loss of what to do patted him worriedly on the back, and looked meaningfully at Sam who dragged Frodo out of the room.

"All elves are BASTARDS!"

Legolas decided to let this one pass.

Aragorn did yet more wailing and sobbing, but began to calm down a little. He looked up at Legolas with red eyes and a runny nose. "Where di' it all go wrong? How di' m'life end up li' this? I used to be a king y'know, now look at me. You w'there. Coronation. Pretty. Coronation pretty, no' you pretty. Arwen pretty. The bitch! Where di' it all go wrong?"

"For you, about the year 1700 I think."

"Shut UP Gandalf" said Legolas. "Aragorn, you're too drunk for this. You're going to bed." This was at least partly to stop him wiping his nose on Legolas' uniform which he was going to have to wear again tomorrow.

The Morning After The Night Before:

There was no bouncy Frodo at breakfast that morning. In fact there was no Frodo. Or Sam. Or Aragorn for that matter. Merry and Pippin, hangover free, therefore used this opportunity to have breakfast, second breakfast, elevenses and lunch all in the one sitting. Legolas came in and looked for the muesli, one of the few foods safe from hobbits. "Where's Sam?"

"Frodo." Answered Merry indistinctly through his fried egg and dorito sandwich.

"Uhuh. I'll phone in sick for him. When you go back upstairs tell him if anyone asks he's got flu. As has Aragorn, but I think it would be better to leave him a note...

Upstairs Aragorn, former Ranger of the North, former king of Gondor, Isildur's heir, employee of the Forestry Commission dreamt of elven genocide...

NOTE: For people not speaking French deshabille means not wearing anything. Nudge nudge wink wink.
Concept of the Lasagne Sandwich invented and eaten by Lady Alyssa (Random Flatmate entirely denies responsibility. Lady Alyssa would like to take this opportunity to say that, as the inventor and sole known eater of tikka masala cheese on toast, Random Flatmate is in no position to comment.).

It began with a simple thing. A knock at the door, but it bred a much more complex evil. The kind of evil that takes a long time to get rid of. The kind of evil that uses your bath towel and borrows your socks. The evil of uninvited guests.

The knock came during teatime and the task fell to Frodo, former ringer bearer and Hobbit of not inconsiderable bravery to answer it.

"Oh hel-"

The friendly greeting was cut off by a horrified piercing shriek and the sound of large hairy feet running at full speed up the stairs. Legolas sighed, Frodo's hiding places around the house were limited and if he had headed upstairs he was probably on top of Legolas' wardrobe and it always took ages to get him back down. Usually he had to stand with Sam on his shoulders for a few hours. And Sam was most definitely not the lightest of the four Hobbits.

Aragorn got up to finish the business of answering the door before whoever was there became concerned enough about Frodo's welfare to decide to call social services. That would mean filling in all of those forms again.

"Celeborn. How...nice to see you."

Legolas and the three remaining Hobbits simultaneously sat bolt upright and stared at each other. There was an unspoken agreement between them, and that agreement was 'sideboard'. As one being they got up from the table, silently laying down their cutlery (although Pippin had the foresight to try and grab all the ingredients for a lasagne sandwich as he left) and crept into the sitting room. Gandalf had already reacted to the news and like lightning had rammed his chair into recline, spread a copy of The Sun - open on page three - over his face and was snoring unconvincingly.

"It's been such a...long time since we've seen you. Just a flying visit?" The note of hope in Aragorn's voice was mirrored by the desperate hand clasping and upward gazing of the new inhabitants of the sideboard.

Celeborn put his hand on Aragorn's shoulder. "I seem to have fallen on rather hard times, dearest Grandson - because that is how I still see you, even after that dreadful business with Arwen - but would you mind terribly if I were to impose myself on you for a few days."

Aragorn squirmed away. "I don't really know, I mean, we've only got the three bedrooms and it's a little crowded as it is."

The sideboard sighed with relief and offered up thanks to anyone who had heard their earlier pleas.
"Oh, don't worry about me, Arrie, I can bunk in with Legolas, I'm sure he won't mind," said Celeborn, pushing his way into the house and mincing into the kitchen.

The Hobbits in the sideboard became aware of Legolas tensing every muscle in his body. And the way he appeared to beginning to hyperventilate was not helping their rapidly depleting oxygen supplies. The situation was starting to get desperate, but just as they were about to make their escape upstairs they heard the door open again.

"Ooh, I do love what you've done with this room. It's so wonderfully retro, I had no idea 1940s utility furniture was back in fashion."

Foiled again, and the situation inside the sideboard was starting to get really desperate. Frodo was really starting to be a bad influence on the rest of the group; they should have tried to get upstairs, where there were at least windows to use if necessary, but here they were trapped like animals. Just when they thought they would have to announce themselves to their new guest Sam came up with an idea of such simplistic brilliance that Legolas was ashamed not to have come up with it, but then he was an Elf and they were not the most practical of beings, he reassured himself that his mind was designed for higher thought and went back to feeling smug (the natural state for an elf). The idea which Sam had had was to remove the hand-drill from his tool belt, which had still been around his waist when he came in for dinner and to drill upwards into the surface of the sideboard. As one by one the little holes appeared the Hobbits shoved each other around in the hope of getting closer to them; although they were immortal the idea of near-asphyxiation in a sideboard did not seem like a productive way to spend their Thursday evening, and Merry could be unmanageable for days if he was denied his weekly dose of 'Peak Practice'.

With the door open just a crack Legolas could survey the scene in the room. Gandalf was still feigning sleep and ignoring Celeborn, who mercifully had his back to the sideboard and was somehow managing to chatter insipidly to Aragorn and devour the entire contents of the biscuit tin at the same time. Even the 4-month-old Garibaldi biscuits that had been bought by accident. It took a well placed pre-emptive kick to the nearest available part of Pippin's anatomy to stop him making verbal protest when he peeked out of the other end, to see the last of the Caramel Wafers disappearing into Celeborn.

"Well, I could hardly stay there after the incident with their dog; you know what gerbils do to my allergies, and then there was the whole problem with the fact that I'm legally Belgian. And with my financial situation being what it is, you know dear, since I lost all that money in my investments I simply couldn't get a ticket to New Zealand to stay with Arwen. Oh, I'm so sorry. How terribly insensitive of me to go bringing that up again."

"Think nothing of it," Aragorn forced out past his clenched teeth. "Incidentally how is Galadriel these days?"

Celeborn seemed oblivious to this none-too-subtle dig at his personal life; it couldn't have been terribly important, as he hadn't said it. At this point in the proceedings Aragorn noticed the drilling from the sideboard and started to try and fight his giggles and his annoyance that he hadn't taken the hint from Frodo's disappearance and tried to get in there with them. Then again he took into account the size of the sideboard, and the number of people in the sideboard and felt that he was probably better off out here. But only probably.

Then it all went pear shaped inside the sideboard. What Sam hadn't taken into account with his hand-drill plan was the sawdust, which was beginning to get up all of their noses, and into Pippin's lasagne sandwich. It was Pippin who finally lost control and sneezed and Merry's rather uncharitable response to this was to shove him out in an attempt to protect the other three by detracting attention
from the sideboard. Pushed into the spotlight and with the gazes of Celeborn and Aragorn on him he began to wildly improvise and, as so often seemed to happen in the company of Celeborn, lose complete control of his wrists.

"Celeborn!" Pippin dropped the remains of his sandwich on the floor as his legs seemed to be carrying him forward to present him for a hug at arm's length and a kiss on both cheeks. "So bona to vada your dolly old eek again," he enthused, making faces at Aragorn over the Elf's shoulder as he fussed over Pippin's hair, and seemed completely unaware of Pippin's sarcasm overdrive.

"What do you wash this in, Peregrin?"

"Well, generally ah don't." Celeborn hastily let go and tried to lean backwards in a manner contrived to communicate inoffensiveness, while radiating polite disgust.

Behind him, Pippin heard Merry and Sam pull the sideboard door closed just a little too late. Caught in the grip of Celeborn's stare and camp persuasion they were forced to reveal themselves and were subjected to a similar humiliating display of affectionate greeting. But there was worse yet to come as they were then expected to sit making polite conversation and listening to long rambling accounts of Celeborn's activities over the last three centuries. It was only when Gimli came in from the nightshift and tactfully ran in terror upstairs claiming that his bedroom was on fire and he had to deal with it, that Celeborn finally relented and let them all go to bed, feigning guilt at having kept them up so late when they had to go to work the next morning. He really shouldn't have worried though because Merry, Pippin and Sam had all nodded off on a number of occasions, but had been kicked awake by the other two when they noticed out of a bloody-minded desire to see that each of them suffered equally.

Upstairs in the bedroom, Frodo was still on top of Legolas' wardrobe, as he was asleep and looked quite peaceful they decided to leave him where he was, although Aragorn and Legolas grudged him his peace and quiet; if being insane was what it took to avoid his in-laws, Aragorn was quite happy to put underwear on his head and pencils up his nose.

In deference to their now modernised sensibilities, Aragorn and Legolas faced opposite corners of the room to change into their pyjamas while Celeborn stood right in the middle and stripped entirely, leaving his clothes in a heap where he had stepped out of them and jumped into Legolas' bed. Legolas looked round and shuddered.

"That's my end of the bed."

"Eaww, but I do so like having my head next to the window so I can see the stars. Don't they so remind you of the... old times?" Celeborn threw Legolas the thin, lumpy pillow and a pleading look. He relented and got into the other end.

Legolas tried to stretch out into his bed, but soon met with a problem, Celeborn's feet. "He's a bloody toenail biter as well," thought Legolas. Elves do not sleep in the same way as the other races of the world, and all that business with kicking and snoring and sleep talking was considered unnecessary. By every Elf Legolas had ever met except for Celeborn who seemed to make up for his complete and utter lack of activity during the day by causing as much of a disturbance as possible at night. He was even keeping Aragorn awake. The only person getting a decent night's sleep was Frodo. So eventually Legolas decided to go stand in the hall for half an hour before his alarm clock went off in the hope of catching a few minutes.

He stirred as Celeborn went past with a large bag of perfumed bottles, heading for the bathroom, but wasn't properly awoken until the rest of the household were queued noisily outside the door. It was not until Gimli did his Jack Nicholson impression with his axe (heere's Gimli!) on the door and then
threatened to do the same thing to Celeborn that anyone else got to use the bathroom. This was one of the few days that even Merry and Pippin were glad to go out to work, and muttered something about volunteering for overtime. Unpaid overtime.

Legolas came through the door that evening with a due sense of dread. The second thing that struck him was that there was something subtly missing from the house; he really could not place it, just a sense of there being something wrong. The first thing that struck him though was Kate Bush. Apparently being played at full volume somewhere in the house, and being sung along to with a deeply inappropriate harmony. Even though he knew that with his elven hearing the act was pointless he stuck his fingers in his ears. He went into the kitchen and found Frodo preparing tea. Salad again. It had taken several severe warnings from the fire brigade ("I sincerely 'ope this is not a desperate attempt to get onto '999 Lifesavers', cos we've warned Michael Burke about you lot"), social services ("who was doing the cooking at the... aha, could you please ask the elderly gentleman in the reclining chair to let me down off the ceiling?"), the local Accident and Emergency Department ("not you again Mr. Aragorn, are you trying for squatters rights?") and Mrs. Wainthrop ("if my washing's smoke blackened again the council will hear of this, you mark my words!") to persuade Frodo that actual cooking whilst he was a little, how shall we say this, shaky, was bluntly stupid. In retrospect letting someone with a terror of being watched by a giant flaming eye try his hand at flambeL was a little misguided. But no-one could have really foreseen about the seared tuna, or the char grilled peppers. Well, except that is for Gandalf, who was found by the fire brigade on both occasions still sat in his chair, wearing a gas mask, holding a fire extinguisher and with a fan turned on so the smoke was clear enough for him still to be able to see 'The Weakest Link'.

The main difference to normal was that Frodo was wearing a pair of industrial ear defenders. He turned round to Legolas and nodded and passed him another pair of ear defenders. He picked up a dry wipe marker and wrote on the board on the fridge (normally used for the shopping list).

/ It's been like this all afternoon. I phoned Aragorn to ask him to borrow some more ear protection from work, but I don't know if he could hear me /

He wiped this off and passed the marker to Legolas.

/ Gandalf? /

/ Shed. /

Well, that explained what was missing. Gandalf's peculiarly disturbing smell had gone, along with the sound of daytime TV punctuated by swearing. Frodo was looking close to another episode, and Legolas knew he had to do something.

/ I'll try and talk to him. /

/ I tried. He only wants to talk about the 'old days' and I could feel my brain going all tight and thobby. Good Luck. /

Legolas went upstairs, to find Celeborn in his room, using his stereo. He turned it off, and only then took off the ear defenders. Celeborn initially looked surprised, but then went back into full on camp mode. "Legolas! I only saw you last this morning and it seems like an age away already. How was work my dear? Kept all those wonderful passengers happy?"

"A baby was sick on me, I had my ears abused by a group of schoolchildren, and had to deal with the hatred of an entire train full of commuters directed at me when we broke down."

"Oh, wonderful darling." Celeborn was not listening. "If I could just put my music back on again?"
"NO. I don't even know why you came here. You know we all hate you, we established that the last time you turned up."

Celeborn started blubbing. "It's true then. You do hate me. I thought there would be something left for me, the loyalty of my in-laws, or even some fellow feeling from another elf. But no. You all hate me. Galadriel hates me you know. Everybody hates me. What did I do wrong Legolas, darling, to offend everyone? Oh, sweetie, tell me how to be loved!" At this Celeborn burst into tears and threw himself onto the bed and sobbed. Legolas began to leave the room, knowing it was either that or deck Celeborn, but then darted back, threw the Kate Bush CD out of the window and then stormed out of the room.

Downstairs, the other hobbits and Aragorn had arrived home, and Frodo was giving them the full rundown of exactly how irritating Celeborn had been throughout the day. Gandalf had only gone out into the shed after Celeborn had attempted to join in with his game shows with wildly inaccurate guesses, made irritating and constant questions about what was going on in 'Crossroads', but the very final straw was his persistent and drawn out wailing over how "terribly, terribly cruel" 'The Weakest Link' was. Gandalf had tried his usual trick of pinning him to the ceiling, but this had only caused him to make a most irritating squeaking noise and continue his comments so Gandalf had given up and left.

Aragorn squared his jaw. "I'm going to get Gandalf out of there. He's not abandoning us here to torture and torment."

"Can't we just leave him out there?"

"Remember what happened last time Samwise? When he stayed down there two weeks? And took the phone with him? 'The Gandalf Modelling Agency'? I don't want to have to pay out that amount of money again to stop people going to the papers."

The hobbits followed him outside, knowing when to expect a good show.

Aragorn did his 'king of Gondor, kneel before me' stride across the garden, full of purpose. That was until he hit the invisible barrier.

"We have got tae get oorselves a camcorder." Said Pippin to the accompaniment of maniacal laughter from the garden shed.

"Yeah," Agreed Sam. "That would definitely have got us 200 quid"

"Definitely. That were a classic, would ave been repeated. It were the way he fell over wi'out bending."

"Masterpiece, that expression of complete and utter surprise."

"Not forgetting the impressiveness of t'way he managed to get 'is whole arm sliding under t'compost heap as ee went down."

"His heed bouncing off the flagstone was really just the finishing tou-" He tailed off to see Aragorn staring at him.

"Did you think that was funny?" Pippin found himself being picked up by an arm covered in the drippy decomposing bits found in the bottom of a successful compost heap.

"Master Took, I think YOU should be more cautious in future." Pippin was terrified but managed to nod. "You four are going to have to find a way to get him out of there. I am going to have a shower
and when I get back I expect both Gandalf and the TV in their usual place. UNDERSTOOD?" The hobbits nodded in mute fear.

Aragorn squelched inside, and bumped into a seething Legolas. "He won't leave. He says we hate him."

"We do hate him. And we've managed to put up with Gandalf. Surely he wants to leave, if he knows we hate him that much."

"Apparently not. He's a complete, complete..."

"Twat?"

"Yes. Why don't you try and talk to him? Is that smell coming from you?"

"Yes," said Aragorn and stomped upstairs.

He found Celeborn still weeping melodramatically on the bed. He decided that an ultimatum was the best way to go.

"You're leaving. Tomorrow."

Out in the garden the hobbits had hit upon a subtle psychological plan to get Gandalf out of the shed. And their TV back before 'Buffy' started.

"What a shame."

"Such a terrible waste."

"All Gandalf's beer. Wasted."

The hobbits were opening cans of beer loudly and emptying them into the compost heap. This had gained them some reaction, in that the volume on the TV had gone down considerably.

"If he was to come back of course..."

"Bringing the TV with him..."

"Naturally, and his chair of course..."

"Yeah, back into the sitting room..."

"Then maybe we wouldn't have to be doing this."

"He can't even do the pin us to the ceiling trick cos we'll spill it."

"And there isn't a ceiling, of course."

"Of course."

Dinner was somewhat more normal. Gandalf was back in the sitting room, and Frodo was back under the table. The message of 'house meeting in cupboard under the stairs when Celeborn's in the bath', had been successfully passed around without his noticing.

"Such a lovely salad! How nice that Frodo can still manage to cook in such a state!"

"Ooooooooooooh but he's a fantabulous cook!" Merry had gone into full on sarcasm mode, and both
he and Pippin were flapping their wrists as if they were trying to take off. This made no impression on Celeborn.

"Its soo nice that he's down there under the table, little Frodo, it's like having your own little pet."

Being labelled mentally ill has a great number of disadvantages, and a tiny number of advantages, so when a chance to use one of the advantages came along Frodo grabbed it with both hands, or in this case his teeth, which he sank into Celeborn's ankle. Celeborn howled in anguish, and nearly upended the table. He was eventually calmed down by Legolas who suggested that he had a nice relaxing bath.

The household convened, (with the exception of Gandalf who'd already had his monthly exercise going out to the shed and back and had fallen asleep) in the cupboard under the stairs. The plan was formulated, the tea was drugged. Legolas was volunteered and had to deal with getting Celeborn to shut up for long enough to actually drink it.

Celeborn woke up the next day on the Hull-Rotterdam ferry, in possession of a one way ticket and a passport stapled to his lapel.

That evening they were sat having dinner. Merry had something on his mind. "Legolas?"

"Yes?"

"Well, you know 'bout elves."

"What about elves?"

"They're not s'pposed, y'know, to like that sort of thing."

"What sort of thing?"

"Y'know." Merry made an extravagant arm gesture.

"Oh! You mean sex. What about it?"

"You don't have, y'know, urges?"

"Noo.." Legolas was worried as to where this was going.

"Then why on earth is Celeborn so camp?"
"Merry, Pippin, Frodo, Sam!" yelled Aragorn. "Get out of bed, we should have left the house 15 minutes ago!" Gimli and Legolas wandered past him, muttering something about coffee. Legolas was not a morning elf. Aragorn turned to him "Could you see to levering Gandalf out of his chair?"

"Why me? And why do we have to take him with us? And hang on, it was me who got him up last time!"

Aragorn just looked at him. "This was your idea."

"My idea? It was your idea that we should do something as a Fellowship!"

"I most certainly did not. I merely commented that I had not seen Gimli in person for about three months."

"Auch, now you've got me out of bed we're going to the bloody seaside, OK?" He turned to Legolas. "I'll give you a hand with Gandalf." They went downstairs.

Aragorn resumed hammering on the Hobbits' door, to have it opened by Frodo, who had quite stupendous bed hair. Being that he was only wearing boxer shorts there was also quite a stupendous amount of bed hair going on. It was only after Aragorn had known hobbits for some time that he had managed to stop being amused buy the state of their foot hair in the morning. Frodo glared at him, "Wha' time d'you call this? We're going to the seaside, not on another bloody quest."

There was a muttered comment from inside the bedroom.

"I heard that Meriadoc. Going to the seaside with me is not a quest and you are getting up, or you are going in your pyjamas."

Pippin stuck his head out from under the duvet and grinned. "I'm no wearing any pyjamas."

Aragorn was shaking with anger, and used the best comeback he could find. "Well, you'll be going to the seaside like that then." He started to storm off, and then shouted back "Remember that you and Merry are doing the food!"

Breakfast. Merry was involved in the preparation of enough food to feed about 3 Mongol Hordes, and for once they had managed to get Gandalf to the table to eat real, solid food. A diet of slim-fast milkshakes, kebabs, deep fried pizza (he had an arrangement with the local chippie) and beer does not count as real solid food. Pippin was standing on a stool to reach a shelf, but what was truly disturbing was that to prove a point to Aragorn he was naked. Aragorn gripped his cereal spoon and said through gritted teeth, "Pippin, please put some clothes on."

"But you said ah'd be going tae the seaside like this, so ah am."

Sam blushed and studied his breakfast in detail. Frodo and Legolas had made accidental eye contact across the table and were having a losing battle with the giggles. Merry looked vaguely exasperated, "Please, Pip, just put some clothes on. Before that Mrs. Wainthrop from next-door sees. You know she's on t'resident's association, and after t'business with 'er garden gnomes she's been lookin' to get dirt on us."
"On the contrary ah'm quite clean."

"Yes, preventing those of us who actually make some money for the house from getting into the bathroom," growled Gimli.

Four arguments, a terrible amount of bad language, Pippin having to be held down and forcibly dressed by the other three hobbits, problems loading the vast amount of food into the roof box (involving Merry, Pippin, a ladder and a crowbar), Legolas using all his diplomatic skills to persuade Gandalf that his staff was safer strapped to the roof rack, and there really wasn't room for him to wear his hat inside the car, and Legolas also going into full on maternal mode ensuring all members of the Fellowship had visited the bathroom, taken travel sickness pills and were fully dressed; later and they actually left the driveway, pausing only to go back when they realised they had forgotten Gimli.

Immediately after assuming their positions in the car, they assumed the appropriate roles. Aragorn, the only one in possession of a driving licence was hunched over the steering wheel, knuckles white, muttering about how they should have been gone hours ago. Legolas, in the passenger seat, was navigating, trying to keep the peace and acting as Hobbit riot control. In the next row of seats back were said hobbits. Frodo, chin in hand was looking out of the window, while Sam (who had been deliberately sat between Merry and Pippin to split them up) was playing on a Gameboy and trying to ignore the bickering between Merry and Pippin. In the two seats in the very back were Gandalf and Gimli who were very deliberately looking out of opposite windows and ignoring each other.

Pippin began arhythmically kicking the back of Aragorn's seat.

"Please stop that," Aragorn spoke levelly but had never taken such a threatening tone with orcs.

Pippin ignored this. "Ah'm booorred."

Legolas turned round. "Sam could you let him play with your gameboy for a while."

Sam did not look up from his game of Tetris. "No. It's mine."

Legolas looked desperate. "I know, lets play 'Queen Beruthiel's Cat'. Lets everybody play Queen Beruthiel's cat. Remember, everyone has to think of an adjective beginning with each letter."

Aragorn groaned. "I can't play, I'm concentrating on driving."

Legolas looked huffy. "Well everybody else is playing. I'll start. Queen Beruthiel's cat is an ambitious cat. Your go Merry."

Merry gave Legolas a death stare but gave in. "Queen Beruthiel's cat is an awful cat," trying to pronounce 'Beruthiel' as close a possible to 'brothel'.

"Queen Beruthiel's cat is an awestruck cat," said Frodo staring out of the window in a spaced fashion.

Legolas was wearing the fixed, immobile grin of someone who knows this is going to be an extremely long journey. "Gandalf, your go."

"ARSE!"

That about finished it for Queen Beruthiel's cat as the hobbits collapsed into laughter, which kept them occupied for all of two minutes, ignoring Legolas' injunction that swearing was neither funny, nor clever.
Pippin started squirming. "Ah'm uncomfortable. This shirt doesnae fit." He pulled the collar round to look for the size, "See, its no mine. Its got Merry's nametape in it." Pause. "Hey, why've you been going roond putting nametapes in yer clothes?"

"I bleeding well did not put a nametape in it. What's tha doin in my shirt anyway? Legolaaaaaaass, he's wearing me shirt, s'not FAIR!"

Legolas turned round. "Look, you can wear one of his shirts when we get back."

"All 'is clothes are 'orrible."

"What do you mean, you dress like twins anyway!"

"Yeah, but heeeeee's been wearin them. Yeuch."

Sam butted in, "Hey, my shirt's got a nametape in as well!"

"You wearing one of me shirts an all?"

"No, it's my nametape. But who the hell's been name taping our clothes?"

Frodo turned round, looking confused. "What's wrong with name taping your clothes? I thought I was being helpful. You're always having arguments about whose clothes are whose, I had some time on my hands yesterday so I put nametapes in them all."

The other hobbits stared at him. "Look, we're all over 6000 years old. Aren't we a little old for nametapes?"

Legolas butted in, "We'll treat you like you're 6000 years old when you ACT like you're 6000 years old." Spoken as only an elf with a couple of millennia on them could say. Legolas's attention was however distracted by a scuffle from the seats behind the hobbits.

"You're a dwarf, you don't need legroom!"

Gimli had his axe raised to Gandalf's throat and it was weaving in a way that suggested homicidal intent in its wielder.

"And Ah suppose I won't need headroom either, so why don't we even things up a little."

It took such a stretch of Legolas' diplomatic skills to calm both of them down and to eventually confiscate Gimli's axe that he was even a little impressed himself. He sunk back down into the passenger seat rubbing his temples. His increasingly frequent stress headaches were starting to unnerve him because that sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen to Elves, but then they were supposed to live out eternity in peaceful forests, in the company of other Elves, not in overcrowded people-carriers with childish halflings and loony old men. He definitely had to get something done about putting Gandalf into a home.

At the point when he had just begun to relax in what wishful thinking made more than just a temporary silence there was a loud thump and a scream from the middle row of seats. He turned round to see Merry and Pippin laying into Sam with feet, hands and anything within reach.

"What just happened?" enquired Legolas with all the composure he had left.

"Sam tried ter 'it Pippin," shouted Merry.

"Only because he tried to take my Gameboy. And I missed and hit the door. And then he hit me and
made my nose bleed."

Aragorn glanced up at the rear-view mirror. "Put your head back, Sam."

"Isn't it supposed to be forwards?" asked Frodo.

"Not in my car," Aragorn replied. "If he gets blood all over the seats I'll kill him."

"Just settle down in the back, we'll soon be there, we're taking a shortcut across the moors," said Legolas as the car turned off on to a side road.

"But I think I broke my hand on the car door," moaned Sam.

There had been an impressively loud noise when Sam punched the door. "Move your fingers," commanded Legolas. "See, you can move your fingers, you can't have done too much damage, so you're just going to have to grin and bear it. Well I heard you, up till all hours last night, so you'd better ALL try and go to sleep, otherwise you won't enjoy it when you get there."

Although there was much grumbling they couldn't deny the inherent logic of this, and tried to settle down to sleep. After a while Legolas was relived to hear the sounds of sleep. But a little later he found that hobbits can even be vexing in their sleep. Gandalf and Gimli were merely snoring, although the word 'merely' is not really suited to their snoring. It's like saying it was 'merely' a force 9 gale. The hobbits were somewhat more... active. Frodo was thrashing about so much in his sleep he looked like he was in an aerobics video, but did not seem to be distressed so probably was not having a nightmare. The other three had fallen asleep in a tangled heap and were mumbling. Legolas' elven hearing was picking up such random comments as 'not t'mushy peas!', 'Welcome to Gardner's question time' and 'oh yeah, Gail Porter, ah'm yer baby!'. This lasted all of half an hour. Legolas vaguely wondered, as the hobbits awoke, if Merry knew it had been Pippin nibbling his earlobe but decided, on balance, not to say anything.

Pippin sat up, still bleary eyed. "Need the toilet." The other hobbits and Gandalf chorused in agreement.

Aragorn looked yet more exasperated. "Look, there's nowhere to stop."

Sam said "I feel sick and all."

Aragorn said, "Open a window Pippin."

Pippin wound down his window. "Ah'm cold." He squirmed in his seat. "And ah really need the toilet now."

"I already told you, there's nowhere to stop."

Pippin squirmed some more. "Don't care, just stoap."

Legolas sat in the car alone valuing the peace and quiet after the rest of the Fellowship had disappeared to 'stretch their legs'. After much grumbling, swearing and comments about thistles they eventually started off again. Legolas wondered why everyone was looking at him until he realised he was humming Cliff Richard's 'Summer Holiday'. Then he wondered why on earth he was humming 'Summer Holiday'... it was a cold, damp day in April, and as much as he would have liked it (as a lifelong fan of Cliff's work...that is Cliff's lifetime) the fellowship could not afford such a spacious mode of transport with hobbit and wizard segregation opportunities as a double decker bus.

Legolas was staring into space when a thought struck him about Sam's punching the car. He may
have been the most muscular of the hobbits but Legolas was fairly sure he wasn't that strong. And another thing - there hadn't just been one loud noise but several, and each one had sounded quieter and further away than the last... "Aragorn, stop the car!"

They pulled over on to the entrance to a farm track and Legolas, followed by the rest of the Fellowship, got out to check on the roof box. Or rather the complete lack of roof box. However, Gandalf's staff was there and seemed to have a suspicious number of fasteners attached to it. Legolas decided to chalk this one up to the cause of Gandalf going into a home because with the wizard in such a foul mood he didn't dare accuse him of anything, although he would probably have enough time to run out of range before the staff was retrieved. Aragorn refused to go back and look for the roof box, he said they didn't have time and anyway, they'd still been on the A-road then and if it hadn't already been salvaged by someone it had would probably have been run over by a lorry.

"Ach weell, look oan the bright side," said Pippin.

"And why should I do that, pray?" Legolas asked through gritted teeth.

"Because it was only the food." Legolas was confused; this was an unusual response from a Hobbit. "It was a lot of food, mind you, but at least none of the deckchairs, buckets and spades or other stuff was in it."

"And would you care to enlighten me, master Took, as to why they were not?"

"Because we emptied it into t'shed t'make room f't'food," said Merry.

"You took everything out of the roofbox?"

"Not quite."

"Not quite?"

"Well, there were this long bent thing wi'sort of a knob on the end. We left that in."

"What long bent thing with a sort of a knob on the end?"

"Dunno. There were instructions in there wi'it. We'll never know now though."

Legolas and Aragorn had returned to the car, and were staring fixedly out of the window. Legolas let out a heartworn sigh. "We'd better be going then." He yelled out the door. "Everyone back here!"

"Heeeelp!"

Legolas got of the car, to see Merry being pursued by a sheep. And the other hobbits sat on the ground, doubled up with laughter. "Come HERE Merry!" Both Merry and the sheep stopped and looked confused. The sheep, seeing Legolas' expression decided that there were sheepy things she needed to be doing. Elsewhere. Probably in Kent, or, for safety, Shetland.

Eventually, everyone was back in the car, and they were moving once more. Legolas felt a tap on his right shoulder, and looked round to see Merry holding a tape out with a hopeful expression. "Just one song? Please?"

Legolas took it, with bad grace. "One song only." And rammed it into the machine.

As the strains of House of Pain's "Jump Around" came out of the stereo he realised the car was bouncing, and turned round to see all 4 hobbits attempting to mosh whilst sitting down and bopping
left and right to the music. More worrying Gandalf and Gimli appeared to be doing the same, Gandalf having his own somewhat inventive hand gestures for the lines 'Jump up, jump up and get down'. All that could be seen of Gimli was his helmet, bobbing. Legolas quickly looked forwards before he completely lost it and burst out laughing, and hoped they were far enough away from civilisation for there to be no CCTV for them to appear on 'Police, Camera, Action'. However, Aragorn did not appear to be amused.

At the end of the song he wrenched the cassette from the stereo and hurled it randomly behind him. "You're listening to some of my music, before you completely bugger the suspension."

The sound of Glenn Miller produced dejection among the hobbits. That was until half way through 'In the Mood' the music suddenly stopped, there was the sound of muffled swearing in interesting languages, a burst of static and a cry of 'Wimmin's Knickers!' then came, at twice the volume of the previous music...

"Ahhm a lumberjack and aahm OK...

Aragorn hit the off button, but it was too late. Gandalf was in full song "I sleep all night and I work all day." The hobbits, both liking singing and keen to get in on Gandalf's 'little prank' obediently joined with "He's a lumberjack" and so forth.

Gandalf directed the singing, adding two new verses, directly attacking the Forestry Commission and Aragorn's facial hair. Aragorn's shouts, abuse and eventual pleas for mercy went unnoticed. They continued singing random snatches of Monty Python, culminating in an unending 5 part round of the 'Spam Chorus'. After this had gone on for ten minutes Aragorn did an emergency stop and left the car, closely followed by Legolas. They both began to walk back the way they had come. Frodo shouted after them, but they ignored him. Only when Gandalf got out of the car and headed for the driver's door, with a cry of "I'll drive" did they stop, look at each other and in mutual agreement sprinted back to the car. Aragorn wrestled Gandalf out of the driver's seat and said "Sod Whitby. I'll drive, but we're going HOME."

Epilogue: In a Little Chef near Pickering a family is sat at a table, holding a long bent thing with a sort of a knob on the end.

"It's a pity the instructions blew away before we could get to it. It looks really useful for something."

Chapter End Notes

(Note: even though they never got there Whitby's a nice place to go. A Seaside town with 33% extra Goths free (it's the Dracula connection). Last time I went there it was on the bus, so I take no responsibility for any geography mentioned in this story.)
Chapter Notes

Why do the sane ones put up with the rest of them? (answer: they don't), and Can we have Legolas in only a towel? (answer: yes!) For non-Brits WI = the Women's Institute; jam, jumble sales etc. Mrs. Wainthrop clones make up most of its membership.

Legolas stormed towards the sitting room, just out of the shower, wearing only a very small towel. Although the 'dripping wet sex god' effect was somewhat undermined by the towel wrapped like a turban round his hair. It was also spoiled by the expression on his face and the way what may at first have been mistaken for a sexy scowl became a mask of rage as his whole body began to shake with anger. Gandalf sat in his chair, seemingly oblivious to the display not four feet away from his chair.

"What. Have you done. With my uniform." It was not so much a question as a series of short statements spat out with the greatest amount of venom that Gandalf had heard from someone who hadn't later turned out to be in league with the dark powers of Middle Earth. Gandalf played what was his usual card in these situations and pretended to be deaf, turning up the volume on the TV to combat the 'annoying background noise'. Seething, Legolas decided to admit defeat once again and go searching through the ironing basket for his spare uniform - if he was quick he might just have time to iron most of the creases out before it was time for work.

Although Gandalf had just won that small battle, what he was not aware of was the much larger war about to be fought.

"Frodo, sideboard, five minutes." That evening Legolas began to put his plan into action by organising meetings with all the members of the fellowship.

Frodo looked confused. "But I'm fine today, I haven't even been close to having another episode since Celeborn left."

"I know, but you're pretty good at faking it when you want to," Frodo tried to look innocent. "You thought no one would notice? Look, I won't give you away, just meet me in the sideboard in five minutes."

The meeting was held, the plan was formulated and Legolas moved on to the next conspirators. As arranged he met Merry and Pippin in the bathroom at exactly seventeen minutes past eight. Just as discussions were getting underway there was a knock at the door.

"Who's in there?" called Aragorn.

"Only me, can I no have a bit of privacy?"

Aragorn looked taken aback. "Pippin? But I thought I saw Legolas go in there?"

"Yer seein things."

"Yeah."
"Who the hell's that then?"

"No-one, yer hearin things now."

"No I am not. And you are all going to have to come out of there eventually. I can wait."

There was some fast thinking in the bathroom.

"Okay. I lied. There's Merry and Legolas in here wi' me, but I didnae say anything cos we're having a discussion aboot hair care, and I didnae want ye to know. Getting in touch wi' oor feminine side and Merry doesnae want tae admit he's got one."

Merry seethed quietly as they sheepishly emerged from the bathroom some time later. The overall negative image was not enhanced by Merry re-adjusting his clothing, and the fact that Legolas was pulling his hair out of pigtails. There were only two conclusions open to Aragorn; either Legolas had just discovered that elves did in fact have a sex drive and was attempting to make up for the last 8000 years or they were all plotting to kill him. Both of them conjured up disturbing images.

Legolas sidled up to Aragorn.

"I need to talk to you. Meet me in the shed in 10 minutes?"

"What about?"

"You'll find out then."

Aragorn was left worried. All he could think about were the erotic or lethal uses of the tools in the shed, although he tried very hard not to consider the possibilities inherent in the lawnmower. He knew he had to go armed, but wasn't sure whether to go for a kitchen knife or attempt to borrow some iron underwear from Gimli.

Ten minutes later he was standing outside the shed, Ranger instincts on full alert, when he was completely surprised to be bumped into by Sam in the dark, with a strange 'bong' noise.

"Aragorn!" He whispered. "What are you doing out here?"

"Me? What are you doing out here?"

The discussion was cut short by them both being dragged into the shed, where they both grabbed the first thing to hand to use as a weapon. Sam was attempting to do an Indiana Jones impression with the garden hose, which was somewhat stymied by the hose being, like all garden hoses, knotted around itself. Aragorn had honed warrior responses, but was not trained in The Path of the Plastic Watering Can, and frankly felt a bit of an idiot. Legolas looked at them bewilderedly.

"Am I missing something?"

"Why did you ask us to come here?"

"I wanted to talk about Gandalf. But before we get onto that, Sam, why exactly are you wearing Gimli's spare iron underpants?"

Sam looked at them. Being 3 sizes too big and held up with braces did not really help the image. Aragorn was glad he hadn't taken Sam's precaution - iron underpants 3 sizes too big are one thing, 3 sizes too small quite another. Sam shifted uncomfortably and changed the subject. "Never mind that, lets talk about Gandalf."
"I want to put Gandalf in a home."

"Fine."

"Suits me."

"And I need your help."

"Ah, well, there's a lot of gardening needs doing."

"Yes, and it's busy in the forest too," Aragorn started wildly improvising. "Lots of thefts."

"Thefts?"

"Yes, of, of trees, yes trees. Never can catch the bastards at it. So I'm needed. A lot."

"You two would happily face the depths of evil, sorcerers as powerful as Sauron and Saruman, the evil of orcs, uruk-hai and Iluvatar knows what else, and you will not help me put Gandalf in a home? Aragorn, you've gone soft in your old age."

"Have not."

"Have too."

Sam interrupted. "Look Aragorn, he has a point. If we all get together we get rid of him. Permanently."

"Will they take Merry and Pippin too?"

Sam did a distinctly feminine hip swing and whacked Aragorn's kneecap with the iron underpants, causing him to fall over the lawnmower and swear loudly.

"Is that agreed then?" said Legolas, taking advantage of the confusion.

They both agreed, and Sam and Legolas helped Aragorn up. Aragorn remembered something; "if this is what you were doing in the bathroom, why was Merry so dishevelled when he came out?"

"When Pippin said he was getting in touch with his feminine side Merry took a swing at him, Pippin ducked and Merry fell in the bath."

"And the pigtails?"

"I like pigtails."

They left the shed, only to be accosted over the fence.

"Excuse me!"

It was Mrs. Wainthrop. Sam looked around to see that both Legolas and Aragorn had melted in to the shadows. He, through years of practice could just make them out, sneaking back towards house. He would have his vengeance later (in this life or in the Undying Lands). Mrs. Wainthrop was not one to be put off by people disappearing in front of her eyes. Not when there were rumours of 'that sort of thing' going on next door. Her neighbours were the bane of her life, the very antithesis of respectable. She knew it was all going to be truly terrible when she went round next door to visit them the day they moved in and the elderly gentleman shoved her into a corner and tried to sexually assault her, only to be pulled off by the worryingly effeminate one and the worryingly masculine one.
(according to Mrs. Heathcliffe down the post office they shared a room you know). Goodness knows what Mr. Wainthrop (may herestin peace) would have made of it. She didn't want to think what the bearded one got up to, but he was out all night every night. Mr. Gamgee and Mr. Baggins were almost respectable, if it wasn't for his 'incidents', but as for the other two short gentlemen, well! The stories she could tell, and quite frequently did, except for the ones which would not be believed. They'd become a bit of a spectator sport to members of the Women's Institute.

"Are you having problems in your shed?"

"Oh, um, sorry Mrs. Wainthrop, I dropped a spade onto the lawnmower."

"Only I thought I saw the other two gentlemen?"

"Oh, well, you know, I need help, um, lifting big things."

"It must be such a trial for you, with your condition."

"Condition?"

"You know, why you're not normal, Mr. Baggins explained it when he came round for one of my WI meetings."

Sam chalked up 'not normal' for future reference. And made a mental note to ask Frodo about the WI meetings later. "Um... thank you?"

"You're ever so welcome. Oh, by the way, how do you keep the caterpillars off your geraniums?"

Sam did not feel that Mrs. Wainthrop was ready to be let in of the secret of what a great organic insecticide elf pee was, or how they had discovered this. The Fellowship, however, did and refused point blank to eat any of his cabbages, including Legolas, which he found confusing.

"Can't go giving away information like that. Family secret that is. I've got to be going, supper'll be ready soon."

"You're eating awfully late."

Sam just smiled and ran away.

*****

After a week of waiting by the letterbox, the brochure and application form from 'Sliver Trees Retirement Community' (motto: *vae puto deus fio*) arrived and was quickly hidden by Frodo on the off chance that Gandalf might get up on one of his occasional strolls around the house and find it. That evening, the other members of the Fellowship convened in the cupboard under the stairs; even Gimli got up an hour earlier than usual to take part.

"I'm not so sure about this any more," said Frodo after looking through the glossy leaflets. "I think I'd just end up feeling guilty about it."

"What?" asked Legolas. "This is Gandalf we're talking about. We want to get rid of him remember."

"Oh I don't feel sorry for Gandalf. It's the people who work there, they all look so friendly. Sending him to them wouldn't be fair. It would be like putting a tiger in a petting zoo."

Frodo was quickly silenced by the others and they moved on to the forms. There seemed to be rather a lot of them, most of them attempting to politely enquire about their financial status. As Legolas was
considered by the rest of them to have the best (i.e. most legible) handwriting, he got the job of writing Gandalf's details down.

"Surname? I know he has a lot of names, but he only ever used one at a time. We'll go for 'Grey', will we?"

There were nods of agreement from all of the Fellowship, except for Frodo, who asked "With an 'e' or with an 'a'?"

Sam kicked him. "Does it matter?"

"First name?" continued Legolas. "Well, mostly he answers to Gandalf these days."

"He also answers to 'beer' these days." Sam had to kick Aragorn as well.

"Date of birth?" The questions were starting to get a bit more difficult, so Legolas just made a random guess based on how old he thought Gandalf looked.

"Current address, fine. What about medical history? Let's just put nothing serious."

"But there was that time he died."

"Yes but he got better."

"I'll just put that he's delusional. That should take care of some of his more obvious eccentricities."

"What about 'molests anything with breasts'?"

"I think they see a lot of that, they probably think of it as an occupational hazard. It's called being a dirty old man."

"Previous occupation?"

"I'm not sure when the last time Gandalf was occupied was."

"What about that business with Mrs Wainthrop the day we moved in?"

"I'll just put conjurer and firework manufacturer, shall I?" There were more nods of agreement.

"What about his staff?"

"We'll take it off him and break it."

"But we've tried that before, you know he can just make another one."

"When he gets into the home he's their problem. Let's just hope they don't let them do any woodwork."

*****

A few days later there was a telephone call.

"'Silver Trees Retirement Community', may we speak to Mr. Grey please?"

After the first syllable Frodo had dived with the phone to the cupboard under the stairs, closely followed by Legolas, who listened in to the conversation.
"Ahm, no, er, no sorry. He's busy." This was broadly true, since the last time anyone had got between him and 'The Weakest Link' they had suffered. Lots.

"Well, it is normal for our prospective residents to look around before they arrive."

Frodo decided to go for honesty. "The thing is that we're putting him into the home because we can't look after him, and he's really not very happy about it."

"Well, in that case we shall have to make an assessment visit."

"Really? Is it necessary? He really can't look after himself." This was also broadly true, with the substitution of 'won't' for 'can't'.

"I'm afraid so. Mr, um?"

"Baggins."

"Ah, yes, you'd be the one listed as his carer wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can reassure you that our assessment visits can be quite discreet. We really do not advise people being put into homes who don't want to though."

"We really can't look after him. It's that or," Frodo briefly flirted with the truth which would have been 'or kill him, and we couldn't even be sure then that the old sod wasn't going to come back again', but settled for the less controversial "or hand him over to Social Services."

"As bad as that?"

"YES." Possibly with a little too much vehemence in the voice.

There was a pause. "You have actually told him about this?"

"Yes, of course."

"Hmmm. You are going to have to tell him at some point you know."

"We already have told him."

"Yes, and I'm the head of the Royal College of Nursing."

"We have told him."

"We can send an assessor round this week, do you have a time preference?"

"The evening would be best, everyone's home."

"Wednesday evening? Around 8?"

"Fine."

Frodo ended the call and looked at Legolas. "They want to assess him."

"Oh. That might be a problem."

"Yes, but if we can persuade him just to be a dirty old man, it'll be OK. It's the first step to being rid
Legolas smiled. Rid of Gandalf! He couldn't help but hug Frodo. At this point the door opened to reveal Gandalf.

"Sneaking in corners, conspiring against me? Oh."

The sight of Gandalf's expression sliding from vengeful to leering was not one Legolas wanted to see ever again, so he slammed the door shut. Frodo whispered in his ear. "What now?"

"What do you mean?"

"He thinks we're, you know."

"We'll just wait a bit and then leave."

"What if he's listening?"

"No one would be that sick - no, wait, this is Gandalf." Legolas' elven senses knew that Gandalf was still stood outside the door. "What shall we do?"

"Tell him I'm a respectable hobbit and wouldn't do that on a first date?"

"Why would we be in the cupboard then?"

"We could tell him we're trying to develop photos."

"We're just putting off the inevitable aren't we?"

"Yes."

"We're going to have to pretend... to have sex."

"How would that be possible in here anyway?"

Merry and Pippin were somewhat disturbed to come down the stairs to the noise of Frodo slapping the sloping roof of the cupboard with his hands and moaning, while Legolas kept to the same rhythm banging against the ironing board, alternately sucking his hand and gasping. The sight of Gandalf wheezing and leering outside the door only added to the disturbing image.

"Frodo pulled an elf! That's a 1000 pointer."

"No it's bloody well not. Pulling Galadriel's a 1000 pointer, any other elf it's 500 points."

"Good job he's no playing the game then. We've only scored 72."

"Yeah, but we did come to the agreement that anyone coming under the heading of 'complete slut' didn't count and they're our kind of women."

*****

Wednesday came, and Gandalf was confused as to why the rest of the Fellowship were wearing their 'respectable' suits. The look was somewhat odd. Merry and Pippin's suits dated to the 1950s (the last time they'd felt the need to look respectable, and that was only an attempt to dodge National Service). Both Frodo and Aragorn's suits had 1970's flares, pointed collars and were made of nasty synthetic material. Legolas had looked at his good suit and decided that turning up in a full Edwardian...
Morning Suit was going to arouse suspicion, and had decided to keep wearing his uniform since it was reasonably smart. However, he would have had to have been wearing a mink bikini to look suspicious next to Gimli, who was wearing what looked like a combination of an ill fitting Marks and Spencer suit and 14th Century tournament armour. But the armour looked a lot more sensible when the assessor arrived, was let in and swept into the sitting room, trailing a short and slightly built man in her wake.

"My name is Miss MacBeth, but you can call me Matron." The Fellowship found themselves backing into a corner. "They send me out for all the Difficult cases. This is Mr. Penfold. Where is the gentleman in question?" They mutely nodded towards the chair. The penny dropped with Gandalf.

"You are attempting to put me into a home are you not?"

The Fellowship nodded. For once Gandalf was not the person in the room they were most afraid of.

"I can assure you all of MY residents are perfectly happy." The Fellowship felt that was probably the case, the other option probably being a long, lingering death.

Gandalf began to reach for his staff, but found Miss MacBeth's hand had clamped around his wrist. "And I DO NOT take kindly to any kind of misbehaviour." She turned to the other members of the Fellowship. "I can quite see why you can no longer take care of the gentleman. I think I have seen quite enough for my assessment. Mr. Grey will be at the 'Silver Trees Retirement Community' at 8.00am sharp on Monday morning. Good day, gentlemen."

The Fellowship felt as if they had survived some natural disaster. They awaited vengeance from Gandalf, but none was forthcoming. He seemed to be giving it consideration and this was even more worrying.

*****

Sunday. They knew Gandalf had to be separated from his staff before going into the home. Aragorn had been 'persuaded' into doing this, with Legolas as backup. The hobbits were to wait in the kitchen. The plan was to take advantage of his customary sleep in the middle of 'Antiques Roadshow' to take and break his staff. Aragorn had gone into full Ranger mode, and looked quite fetching in his cloak which matched the 70's clashing orange floral patterned curtains. He had blended into the sitting room and was waiting to be sure that Gandalf was asleep.

Then Julie turned up. "Afternoon Frodo, 'ow's it goin', I were just off t'Asdas so I thought I'd drop in and 'ave a luke at you. Bin OK recently?"

"Yeah, fine, no problems." Frodo knew he had to get Julie out of there, but had no idea how.

Aragorn saw that Gandalf was asleep and took his chance and went for the staff. However, Gandalf was not really asleep, and seized his staff and aimed it at Aragorn. Aragorn expected to find himself pinned to the ceiling, but was not. There was something worse going on. His underpants were shrinking. Aragorn started pulling at his trousers and yelping, at an increasingly high pitch.

"Underpants shrinking!" He yelled to Legolas as he fell to the floor. Legolas tried to help with the removal of the pants, kneeling between Aragorn's legs and grappling with them.

"Is everythin alright in there?"

"Yeah, fine?"

"Sounds like someone's in pain. I've got baaasic medical trainin I'll pop me head round the door."
"Nooooooooo!" But Frodo and the other hobbits were not enough to stop Julie in full determination mode.

The sight of Legolas and Argorn bucking together on the floor, then with a 'Yes!' of triumph from Legolas, holding up a pair of very, very small 'Captain Scarlet' boxer shorts, did something strange to Julie. It made her shut up. But not for long.

"Eee, I 'ad no idea you two were a couple." Aragorn had curled into the foetal position, but Julie didn't seem to notice, "Cos I were going to set you up with me mate, Stacey, I showed her that picture of you out in t'garden, she really fancies you, she's gonna be dead disappointed when I tell her. 'Ere, are you alright?"

Gandalf began to laugh. Aragorn managed to squeak, "I'm fine."

"Dunt sound like you are." She looked at the boxers. "Wearin' them boxers I'm not surprised. Tracy's little brother'll be disappointed an all. Said you looked like you had big feet." Gandalf had progressed to near hysterics.

"Ere, laughing at other people in pain's not nice y'know." She started to go over to remonstrate with Gandalf, but tripped over Aragorn's leg and fell onto the staff. Which broke in two.

I'm really, really sorry about that. Dun't look expensive, was it? Can get you a new one if it wan't expensive."

"Oh, no that's fine, we were going to be throwing it out anyway," said Sam.

****

Monday. Aragorn could barely walk and could definitely not drive, so Gandalf was delivered to the 'Silver Trees Retirement Community' by taxi, with Frodo as chaperone. Well, 'prison guard' would be a better term, ensuring Gandalf was not going to escape on the journey, because they knew he would turn up back home sooner or later. He was safely given over to the care of the formidable Miss. MacBeth, who, judging from the flying tackle she gave Gandalf as he tried to escape, would have a promising career as prop forward on the Scottish International Rugby squad, should Gandalf get too much. Frodo then went home, to savour having the house to himself without the sound of daytime television. Well, that is with the exception of Aragorn sat on the sofa with his legs a very, very long way apart.

Will Gandalf stay in the retirement community? Will Aragorn regain the ability to walk? Why exactly has Frodo joined the WI? Join us for the next exciting episode.

Chapter End Notes

Latin motto 'vae puto deus fio' is the dying words of the Emperor Vespasian; 'Alas, I am becoming a god'. Ah, yes and we know that no-one as daft as Julie could get to be a psychiatric nurse, but we liked the character, so sorry.
I sing of wizarding staff and of the wizard, who, forc’d by fate,
And haughty Legolas's unrelenting hate,
Expell'd and exile'd, left the Semi's shore.
Long labors, both by sea and land, he bore...

"Mr. Grey, Let go of the banister!"

Gandalf had wrapped the top half of his body around the banisters, and was swearing, but was careful not to be loud enough for Miss MacBeth to hear.

"You are only making this harder for yourself."

"Feck off."

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

Gandalf went quiet. Miss. MacBeth had gone onto his list of 'creatures to avoid'. If it had been her in the Mines of Moria he would have carried on over the mountain, Saruman or no Saruman.

Miss MacBeth switched into 'good cop' mode. "Mr. Grey, won't you at least say hello to Mr. Brown? He's been terribly lonely since his last roommate died, find it in the goodness of your heart to talk to him? He's only got the stuffed cat for company."

Gandalf considered this, as being a godlike creature he was unsure of his biology - did he in fact have a heart? This slight confusion, and the related loosening of his grip on the banister was enough for Miss MacBeth to strike. Gandalf found both his arms wrenched from the banister and pinned behind his back, and he was frogmarched upstairs.

"Your room is at the end of the corridor."

As they approached the room Gandalf could hear a strange sound, as if someone was attempting to play the 'Moonlight Sonata' on the ukulele. Miss MacBeth pushed open the door to the room. There was, in fact someone playing the 'Moonlight Sonata' on the ukulele. Gandalf looked at the bearded 'musician' in shock.

"I shall leave you two to get to know each other. You will, I trust, become friends." The Commandant left the room.

Gandalf stretched out his arms and said "Radagast!"

"Gandalf!"

They hugged, with much butch backslapping and calling of old nicknames.

"Haven't seen you since that nasty business with Octavian and Mark Antony," said Gandalf. "How did Cleopatra take that business with you, and you know."

"Oh, that! About as bad as you can. Killed herself with an asp."
Gandalf looked horrified. "Wha-"

"Asp, you deaf old fool, with a 'p'. You know the poisonous snake?"

Gandalf looked visibly relieved. "You kept a snake then I recall?"

"Look it was suicide. It's not my fault if she used my snake. She asked if she could borrow it, she never said she was going to kill herself. How would you like it, being thrust into a woman's bosom?" Gandalf started to snigger. "Alright, so you would enjoy it, but Horace was never the same again."

Gandalf nodded towards the stuffed cat. "See you're still useless with your pets."

"Oh, forgot about that. Its alright Brute, he's a friend." The 'stuffed' cat relaxed and began to wash itself, deliberately ignoring Gandalf. "We're not allowed pets you see, but Brute's very good at playing dead. In fact, when he does kick the bucket, I probably won't notice till he starts getting whiffy. Speaking of which Gandalf, ummm...?"

"The Smell? Good isn't it?"

"What? It's deliberate?"

"Of course! Annoys the hell out of the rest of the Fellowship, and its good at deterring social workers. You should have seen the look on that poncey elf's face when I first moved in, gave me bubble bath as a present as well."

"What did you do with it?"

"Drank it."

"Any good?"

"Not really, it was mandarin flavour and I can't stand mandarins."

"Don't suppose you could give me some tips on acquiring a Smell? I have this problem - the Silver Trees Knitting Circle. Women only and they're out to get me."

"Why?"

"They started it."

"How long have I known you? Who was it that restyled Saruman's hair into a mohican and put pink streaks in his beard while he was passed out drunk at that terrible party Galadriel had in the second age?"

"I started it. But even the Elves were pissing themselves laughing at Saruman in the morning. Galadriel never even noticed you'd shaved her eyebrows off."

"So what did you do to the Knitting Circle?"

"They said I slandered them to Miss MacBeth. Told her about all their goings on."

"In a Knitting Circle?"

"Just wait till you meet them."
Back in the house the ownership of Gandalf's chair was under dispute. Merry, Pippin and Sam were squeezed uncomfortably into it and locked in a battle of wills - or possibly knees. Aragorn was standing in the style of John Wayne on the side of the room, still wearing a kilt, since the after-effects of the shrinking boxer shorts would last a while yet.

"Why are you all so keen to sit in that chair?" asked Frodo.

"It's Gandalf's chair!" answered Pippin.

"That's what I mean, it's had Gandalf sitting in it." Frodo shuddered.

"But it's got the reclining mechanism and the best view of the telly." To demonstrate this, Pippin started to shift the ornate brass handle backwards and forwards. "See, chairgoesup, chairgoesdown, chairgoesup, chairgoesdown, chairgoes - oops." As the chair came back up Sam shot out from between Merry and Pippin and skidded across the room on his back, coming to a halt just underneath the kilt.

Sam screamed. Merry looked at Aragorn. "Is tha wearing owt under that kilt?"

Aragorn looked as if he was going to be sick. "The kilt's bad enough, do you honestly think I can wear anything under it after what Gandalf did to me?"

Sam had curled up in the corner and in a twisted role-reversal situation, Frodo was trying to calm him down. Pippin looked at Sam in confusion. "It no' like ye huvnae seen things like that before."

"Not like that, definitely not like that," said Sam, before returning to gibbering in Frodo's arms, a few words such as 'throbbing' and 'bruises' could be heard.

Legolas came in from work, cheerfully swinging a plastic bag and singing in elvish.

"You do remember that me and Frodo speak elvish, don't you?" said Aragorn.

Legolas stopped. Then started again in English. "The road goes ever on and on, taking Gandalf further away from us."

"But that doesn't scan, rhyme or fit with the tune."

"I don't care."

"But you're an Elf, you're supposed to care about things like that."

"Nope, Gandalf's gone and that's all I care about at the moment. Now, I have to ask your opinion on a very important matter." Legolas emptied the contents of the bag onto the coffee table. "Which should I use first on Gandalf's chair? Disinfectant or Febreeze?"

*****

Dinner that evening was Gandalf's first encounter with the Knitting Circle. He and Radagast were sat opposite Dora, Nora and Flora, the unholy trinity. It was not an experience he wanted to repeat any time soon because they seemed to be conspiring against him even more than the fellowship. They whispered to each other over the teacups and gave each other Looks, and Gandalf was sure he'd seen one of them produce a hip flask from somewhere inside her expanses of undergarment (and the concept of elderly female undergarments was not something Gandalf liked to consider. Thongs, well that was another matter - except not on old ladies. Gandalf pulled the emergency cord on this train of thought, and evacuated with no thought about oncoming trains.). But worst of all they'd had
photographs of their grandchildren and they'd made Gandalf and Radagast look at them. Until this point Gandalf had been unaware exactly how ugly a three month old baby could look, and how much uglier the addition of teeth would make it.

Back in their room Gandalf and Radagast formed the Provisional Popular anti-Knitting Circle Front. Gandalf was somewhat distracted by Radagast's hat. Radagast had discarded the normal pointy hat in favour of a Davy Crockett hat. The problem was that this was less of a hat and more of an actual live racoon, which since it knew Gandalf was a friend shifted about on Radagast's head and right now was staring at Gandalf, waiting for him to say something interesting. Or there was the possibility that was now occurring to Gandalf, that his Smell resembled that of a female racoon. He cursed his lack of attention to nature programmes because then he'd know what a horny racoon looked like.

"So you see what I'm up against."

"I do, but what on earth do they get up to in there?"

"You do not want to know. Trust me. But tonight is the night they are going to condemn me and think up a way to punish me. Gandalf, I need a favour."

"Anything for a fellow wizard. Well, one who hasn't gone over to the powers of darkness, or is still speaking to me after Galadriel's party. Which leaves just you then."

"Excellent." Radagast got the razor and began to shave Gandalf's cheek.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Well, we've got to shave all of this off, and the rest," he indicated Gandalf's bushy eyebrows, "We'll have to pluck."

Gandalf moaned and shuffled, shaving did not come naturally to wizards and he was rather concerned about how good Radagast was at this. Had he done this before? The situation was becoming more and more suspect by the minute. Gandalf demanded an explanation.

"Isn't it obvious? The only way to infiltrate the knitting circle is to send a woman in, and since I don't have one handy, you'll have to do."

"Why can't you do it?"

"They know me too well. You'll look completely different without the beard and they'll assume you're just another new resident; they come and go here like nobody's business. My old roommate, died as soon as look at me..."

Gandalf resigned himself and allowed Radagast to finish shaving him. With a flourish, Radagast produced a mirror.

"It's not me," moaned Gandalf. "It's Dale Winton!"

Radagast produced a dress from one of the drawers in his bedside table.

"I'm not wearing that! Green's for elves, the smug bastards, and anyway, it clashes with my eyes."

Radagast produced a second, yellow dress.

"You don't have anything in white or grey?"

Radagast shook his head.
"I'll go with the yellow then."

Radagast also produced a pre-filled bra to go with the dress. At this, Gandalf felt moved to comment.

"Radagast...?"

"What?"

"Where'd you get that?"

"Well, maybe elves don't get those urges, but you know we sometimes do?"

"Radagast, I've known you all my life, you were the one stood next to me in the choir kicking my ankles, I know when you're lying."

"Alright, you know how we have to keep on moving round and changing our identities to stop people finding out we're immortal? Well, I decided to find out what life's like for a woman."

"So what is it like?"

"Terrible, I kept getting catcalled by these GI's, and at my age too."

"You spent the second world war as a woman?"

"Yes, there's a picture of me in a history book somewhere being lovable and cockney on the London Underground during the Blitz. Oh, and we've got to do your hair too."

"My hair."

"Yes, I would give you the blue rinse and perm, but there's no time, so we'll just have to go for the Ena Sharples look." Radagast produced a set of rollers and a hairnet.

When the look was completed, Radagast handed over the knitting bag. "Now Gandalf, this is your knitting bag, look after it. It looks like an ordinary knitting bag, but it contains the largest amount of alcohol outside the nearest branch of Odbins. See here how the knitting lifts up to reveal three bottles of gin and one of vodka."

Gandalf reached out to touch one of the balls of wool.

"Don't touch that one!"

"Why not?"

"It's my hamster, and he's rather excitable."

Radagast removed the offending rodent and pushed Gandalf gently towards the door. When Gandalf seemed unwilling to comply he pushed him more forcefully towards the door, where he assumed the starfish position, attempting to hold onto the doorframe with his hands and feet. "I'm not going unless you promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"You'll come and rescue me if I get into trouble."

"What? You want me to watch what they get up to again?"
"Hang on, what is it that they do in there anyway?"

"Never mind. They're going to start soon, and alright, I'll watch and I promise to come and rescue you if it gets out of hand."

*****

Meanwhile, back at the semi, the fellowship were sitting peacefully watching a documentary, which unlike the ones Gandalf watched didn't have a title like 'Streetwalker: My Life as a Prostitute' or 'When Boob Jobs Explode'. Legolas, out of sheer joie de vivre had put his hair into two plaits and was being called Heidi by the rest of the fellowship, who he was studiously ignoring. Merry and Pippin had retained control of the chair by cunningly forming a coalition, but were both shifting uncomfortably because neither of them had enough faith in the other's loyalty to go to the bathroom. Sam had calmed down, but was still unable to make eye contact with Aragorn.

With much trepidation, Gandalf approached the Chamber of the Knitting Circle and knocked on the door. A dread voice answered "'Ello!"

Gandalf stuck his head round the door. "I'm here to join the Knitting Circle."

"Come on in then. What's your name?"

Gandalf panicked and began to search through his limited vocabulary of female names. "My name's, um, Buffy, yes, hello everyone, I'm Buffy."

"You must first be initiated into the Knitting Circle, Buffy." Nora, the leader, motioned to her acolytes, Dora and Flora and they pulled a poster out from behind one of the chairs and proceeded to stick it on the wall. "This, is Sean Bean. We of the Knitting Circle worship he who is called Sean Bean."

The rest of the Knitting Circle joined in the refrain, half sung as if in church. "Richard Sharpe."

"And what do we say unto Richard Sharpe, sisters?"

"Get them off," they intoned.

"And what do we say unto those of the Crochet Society next door who worship the false god Horatio Hornblower?"

"Ioan Gruffudd's a poof." This last response was given with somewhat less decorum, but much more vehemence.

The blinds on the windows were drawn down, each one bearing upon it an icon of mighty benefactor Richard Sharpe and Nora turned to 'Buffy' saying, "To be initiated into the Knitting Circle you must repeat after me: I will not stray from the true path of Sharpe to that of Hornblower. I will keep to the Word of Sean Bean, the Word that is Sheffield United. I will not be tempted by crochet or sherry, but stay loyal to knitting and gin."

Gandalf managed to repeat all of this, impressively, without cracking up.

"And now place your hand upon the signed photograph."

Gandalf reached out his hand and placed one finger on the edge of the photograph, they seemed to mistake his utter terror for reverence and looked pleased with it. Then the first bottle of gin was opened, Nora took a drink and passed it to Dora and Flora who daintily wiped the top with
embroidered handkerchiefs before taking a gulp, then it was passed round the rest of the congregation who did likewise. Next, Nora produced a plate of battenburg cake, sliced it, took a piece and passed it round.

"And now, Dora, Flora, bring forth the video."

As Dora and Flora brought forth the video, Gandalf was introduced to the rest of the group. Most of them came under the heading of filthy-minded, hard-drinking, old ladies, except for the identical twins Cora and Clarice, who worried him. They didn't seem to have any kind of separate identity, and this was from someone who usually lived in the same house as Merry and Pippin.

"We like his trousers." said one of them.

"Do we?" asked the other.

"Yes, we do."

"We want trousers," they chorused.

"I thought we wanted power?"

"Yes, power and trousers."

"Because if we had," said one.

"Power," they said together

"Then we would have," said the other one.

"Trousers." This word was also spoken in unison.

After the video Nora stood up. "And now we come to the most important part of our meeting, apart from Richard of course." Gandalf glanced at one of the pictures concealed in the blinds. He was pretty sure that Sean Bean didn't pose for that sort of magazine, and definitely not with those sorts of implements. "What are we going to do about Mr Brown?"

The old ladies started booing and shouting comments like 'rip 'is nadgers off' and 'make 'im eat 'is liver with baked beans'.

One of the old ladies who had been introduced to Gandalf as Adelaide rose from her big comfy chair to give a speech for the prosecution. "Ladies, Radagast is a slanderer." They cheered. "An uncouth oath-breaker and that hat he wears all the time really smells. He is in league with Miss MacBeth in her attempts to squeeze the life out of us and stop us in our devotions to the one they call Richard." The old ladies all made the sign of the holy trousers, cupping their hands, putting them side by side and raising them upwards. "Why only last week after our meeting she frisked me for drink." There were cries of 'no!'. "It was only by the swift actions of Cora and Clarice, confusing her as to which of them was which that I managed to get away with my litre bottle of gin intact." They cheered again. "And he has informed her of the posters, yesterday my personal favourite was confiscated as an affront to taste and decency! Ladies, I rest my case."

There were more cheers and cries of 'rip 'is nadgers off' from one of the more enthusiastic members of the group.

"So," said Nora. "This is what he has done, the question now, is what we should do to him. Who else, apart from Maureen, is in favour of ripping his nadgers off?"
This was not going well and Radagast was not going to be impressed. Gandalf decided that since he was in the costume he might as well have a go at conducting a defence. Drawing on his extensive knowledge of 'Quincy' and Channel 5 Soft Porn, he stood up and cleared his throat.

"Sister Buffy has a suggestion," said Nora. The rest of the room went quiet.

"Well, not exactly. I'm not surprised that you feel this way about Radagast, personally I can't stand him. But there's no need to go for such drastic action. Maybe he's found out about a few of our tricks, but aren't there thousands more he doesn't know?" There were nods of agreement. "When I was first married and my husband went out to work every day the gas man came round to read the meter and I offered him a cup of tea and one thing lead to another. Then when my husband came home early, I just shouted down the stairs to him to take some money out the biscuit tin and go to the chip shop to get his tea and not disturb me because I had 'women's trouble'." The old ladies shifted uncomfortably in their chairs. "And as for the Richard Sharpe thing, have none of you ever tried stalking him to find his home address. I've got a restraining order you know." Gandalf beamed with pride.

The insult to their beloved Sharpe was the last straw for the members of the Knitting Circle. "Are you just going to sit here and listen to this old baggage defame us and Richard?" shrieked Adelaide, lunging at Gandalf with a knitting needle. It could all have gone very badly for him, if Mr. Penfold had not come in.

"It has come to my attention - " began Mr. Penfold, then he looked up at the pictures on the inside of the blinds. "Oh, that's a nice one, it's new isn't it? Where did you get it? Anyway, it has come to my attention that you have been infiltrated by a man."

The old ladies gasped.

"I heard from a very reliable source that Mr Brown shaved his new roommate and dressed him up as a woman and sent him here to spy on you."

All eyes in the room suddenly focused on Gandalf.


Maureen pounced on Gandalf and started trying to tear the dress away with her bare hands. Gandalf alternated between screaming for help and shouting detailed threats in Elvish as to what he would do to Radagast if he didn't rescue him. Just as the dress began to come away from Gandalf's shoulders Radagast burst in through the window, like an elderly 007 dressed as a monk, carrying Gandalf's robes and hat under one arm and shouting "hut, hut, hut!"

But Radagast was outnumbered and Dora and Flora tied him to a chair as Gandalf was stripped. Gandalf was fully stripped by the horde of slathering women, baying for blood, or maybe something else, but he didn't want to think about that. If push came to shove he could hold his breath until he passed out; in fact, just in case, he was going to do that right now...

*****

Gandalf awoke in a familiar place, although the smell of disinfectant was new, and the faces staring at him seemed familiar. However as he became more conscious he realised that these were not in any way friendly faces. Homicidal would be a better description.

"Go on. We want to know. When exactly did the Sean Bean fixation start?" said Aragorn.

"Wha-?"
"The letter from Miss. MacBeth, which was sellotaped to your chest, when they threw you out of the back of the nursing home laundry van, wearing only your hat to protect your modesty, goes into some detail."

"What details?"

"Details of how exactly you managed to remain in the retirement home for less than 24 hours before being thrown out, and blacklisted by every old people's home from here to Istanbul. Of how Miss. MacBeth found you passed out through alcohol in the ladies only Knitting Circle, surrounded by what she calls 'inappropriate' pictures of Sean Bean, naked apart from curlers and a hairnet. The Knitting Circle were beside themselves, some of them had to be sedated."

Legolas was shaking with anger. "Why? Why all of that? Why couldn't you just go on a killing spree like a normal person and get put into prison!"

"So, how do you like Sean Bean's musket technique?" said Merry nastily. He'd been getting to like the chair.

"At least he can hit the right target."

Merry was restrained from thumping Gandalf by the other hobbits. "Sick, twisted musket lover!"

"At least wizards can see over the bar to order a drink."

Frodo intervened to calm the situation down. "Look, it looks like we're stuck together for the moment, no use bickering."

Gandalf, who had mysteriously acquired a new staff pinned Frodo to the ceiling. "Let me down, I've got jam on the boil and it'll go all solid if I'm not careful." Gandalf let him down again and he went into the kitchen, followed by Sam.

"Frodo?"

"Yes?"

"Um, why exactly are you a member of the Women's Institute?"

"Why not? No-one round here knows what gender name Frodo is, and they share round good recipes, and its nice to get out and have a cup of tea and a chat. I get so lonely when all of you are out at work, and then you come home and all you want to do is talk about your jobs, and well, its nice to talk to people like me."

"Like you?"

"Not that way, I mean housewives."

Sam stared at Frodo. He really, really didn't know what to follow up that statement with. He gave up. "Jam smells nice."

Back in the sitting room behind the sofa, Pippin turned to Merry.

"We want our chair back."

"Do we?"

"We do."
They chorused: "We want our chair back."

Chapter End Notes

The beginning of the story is a misquote of the beginning of Virgil's 'Aeneid'. Most of the story in the Retirement home is based on a very funny play by Aristophanes called Thesmophoriaszusae, which is translated into English either as 'The Women of the Thesmophoria', or 'The Poet and the Women', and it's filthy - we've really only used the clean bits. Lady Cora and Lady Clarice are residents of Gormenghast and belong to Mervyn Peake - will be sent back by return of post at great personal expense. Terry Pratchett is now so deeply embedded into our consciousness we only realised 'The Smell' and 'hut hut hut' were Discworld references when it was pointed out to us...

The authors would like to emphasise that the views expressed by the Knitting Circle about Ioan Gruffudd and Hornblower are not their own, and that they do not question his personal life in any way.

We like men in tight trousers.

Do we?

We do.
At Home With Boromir

Chapter Notes

Any resemblance between the behaviour of the hobbits whilst drunk and the authors down the student's union is purely coincidental.
Story notes: Would really, really help to have seen 'The Full Monty', or at least know the song 'Hot Stuff'. Some jokes will go over your head if you haven't read 'Return of the King', but not many. If you are concerned about the aspersions we are about to cast on Boromir's sexuality Tolkien started it - look at Appendix A at the end of the bit about the stewards...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Stoap pulling it!"

"Only if you stop pulling it y'great lummock!"

Gandalf looked at the scene being enacted on the living room floor in front of him. "Fool of a Took, what are you doing?"

"We're trying to be occult. Look it's a weejee board. Mavis at work does seLances, and we thought we'd try an' contact Boromir."

"Yeah, except Pippin keeps on spoiling it and pulling it to say 'Merry blows goats'."

"Hobbits, always meddling. Let me show you how it's done." Gandalf waved his staff and there appeared in the air at hobbit height what looked like an entry phone. Pippin looked at Gandalf who waved him towards it. He pressed the button.

"Good Afternoon and Welcome to the Halls of Mandos, how may I help you?"

"Ah'm trying to get in contact wi'someone."

"One moment, I'll put you through to the Spiritual Contact Department, please hold."

There was the sound of a celestial choir singing 'Greensleves'.

"Good Afternoon, Spiritual Contact Department, how may I help you?" There was a pause. "Doesn't Gandalf, also known as Mithrandir, Olorin or Mr Grey, live at this address?"

"Um, yes."

"If he's trying to nuisance call Isildur son of Elendil again, his calls have been blocked. Since the mid-fifth age. We don't appreciate passing on messages like that." The last comment was distinctly dark and accompanied by sniggers from Gandalf.

"No, Ah'm no Gandalf, and Ah want to contact someone else."

"Please state clearly species, approximate Age of earth when they died and name."
"Human, Third Age of Middle earth, Boromir son of Denethor."

"We have three Boromir son of Denethors who fit that description. Are you looking for Boromir son of Denethor, killed in an unlikely sequence of events involving a badger; Boromir son of Denethor beaten to death with a jar of picked herring in a drunken argument over washing up; or Boromir son of Denethor, kebabbed in a fight with Uruk-Hai?"

"The last one."

"Are you requesting full manifestation, voice only contact, or one knock for yes and two knocks for no?"

"Full manifestation please."

"One moment please."

With a twinkle of surprisingly girly lights and noise not unlike that of a microwave when it's finished cooking, the spectral Boromir appeared in full song, swinging a mug of beer in a manner described either as carousing or 'looking a complete twat'.

"Four and twenty virgins went up to Minas Tirith and when - Oh, hello." Boromir dropped the ghost of the beer.

"Hello Boromir, no, doon here."

"Pippin?"

"Yeah, you still remember me after all this time?"

"As if tha could forget 'im after that business wi'Horn of Gondor."

The spectral Boromir kneeled down, pulled back one arm and let fly with a punch that went straight through Pippin's head and caused him to overbalance and end up face down on the floor with the two Hobbits standing in the middle of him. Boromir picked himself up, and realising that he would not be able to express his anger through his usual preferred method of extreme violence, would have to do it verbally.

"What the hell do you think you are doing with your lives? I died to save you and look at you, you're spending eternity stacking shelves!"

Pippin jumped in, "We havnae been stacking shelves the whole time, we've done lots of other stuff."

"Yes, I know. Following armies to steal the boots off corpses after battles, selling 'souvenirs' at public executions and that business in Moscow in 1812."

"It wisnae oor fault. We were freezin' oor dangly bits off, an' decided to start a fire an' Merry had stolen this lovely chandelier, an' we were so distracted looking at how sparkly it was in the firelight that we didnae notice how big the fire had got until it was too late. We didnae know it would burn doon the whole city, and who builds cities entirely oot a wood anyway?"

Pippin's little speech had not improved Boromir's mood. He was trying to use psychokinesis to hit Merry over the head with a small porcelain dancing pig, but was just making the lights turn on and off disco style. Gandalf saw what he was trying to do and although there was little love lost between him and Boromir, there was even less between him and Merry and Pippin, so he used his staff to whack them both in the back of the knees so that they fell forwards through Boromir.
Merry shuddered. "It's like walking through a carwash on a cold day."

"When have you walked through a carwash on a cold day?"

"Never, I just think that's what it'd feel like it."

Pippin hit Merry. Not for any particular reason, just because Merry could be a real smug bastard when he wanted to, especially when he started getting metaphorical.

At this point Frodo came in from the kitchen. Saw Boromir, made a strangled cry and tried run for the sideboard but saw that Boromir was in front of it. He darted back towards the door to hide upstairs and ran straight into Sam and seeing no other option, wrapped his arms and legs around him, causing them both to fall over. Frodo began muttering, "Mine, not yours, mine."

Boromir had a moment of confusion because he didn't really have any designs on Sam, but then realised that this was one of Frodo's flashbacks. "Sorry, should I go?" asked Boromir with uncharacteristic tact.

"I think that's probably for the best," said Sam from somewhere underneath Frodo.

Boromir turned round and tried to turn the spectral door handle which had just appeared. It didn't budge. He tried again. And again. He banged the door with both of his see-through fists until an automated voice gave the following recorded message: "We apologise for the over-manifestation of this spirit. Due to engineering work he will have to remain in the mortal realm for one week. We apologise for any inconvenience and suggest that in the meantime he possesses a mortal body to prevent spiritual decay."

Boromir looked at Gandalf. Then he looked at the Hobbits. He didn't really like the idea of his spirit coming apart, but then he didn't want it to be four feet tall with hairy feet either. Gandalf had a thoughtful look on his face, which was always a bad thing. Which was why it with incredible bad timing that Legolas decided to come into the room, having just got in from work. Gandalf waved his staff, grinned, and Boromir disappeared.

"It's you..." Legolas was not impressed. When he had last seen Boromir, they had been in the middle of an argument, the one that no longer has cause and effect, or any kind of coherent reason, but is merely made up of personal insults. He couldn't remember how it had started, possibly Boromir had said something about his mother, or maybe he had said something about Boromir's mother. Or maybe his smell: if he hadn't said something about that, he had definitely meant to.

Boromir wasn't exactly happy with the arrangement either. "Gandalf, I want out!" he said in his own voice.

"Can't."

"You put me in here, you can get me out."

"No, done magic, tired." Gandalf sat back down in his chair, turned on 'Countdown' and recommenced snoring and drooling.

Legolas and Boromir attempted to give each other suspicious looks, which involved Legolas going cross-eyed in a very amusing fashion.

"I'm taking a shower," announced Legolas.

"No we're not."
"Yes we are, just because you don't know the meaning of the word 'shampoo' doesn't mean that I have to smell like you do. Or did, deadboy."

Legolas-Boromir retreated upstairs arguing with itself.

Aragorn arrived home some time later and was perplexed to find Merry and Pippin sitting outside the bathroom chanting 'Legolas and Boromir sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!' while abuse was hurled out of the bathroom in voices which sounded suspiciously like those belonging to Legolas and Boromir.

Aragorn grabbed Merry by the scruff of the neck. "What is going on?"

"Put me down, it's Pippin's fault."

Aragorn picked Pippin up by the scruff of the neck with his other hand. "I don't want to know whose fault it is, I want to know what's going on."

Merry and Pippin looked at each other and decided it was best to go for the speedy truth. "We accidentally summoned up Boromir and got him locked out of the Halls of Mandos, so he's stuck possessing Legolas for the next week. And we're very sorry and have learned our lesson and promise never to do it again."

At this point the bathroom door opened and Legolas-Boromir stepped out dressed in a pink fluffy bathrobe with bunny rabbits embroidered on it, which Boromir was objecting to.

"Only an elf would cross-dress getting out of the bath," said Boromir's voice.

"At least this is the only time I cross dress. I've heard things about you, you had quite a reputation in your company back in the old days."

Aragorn was treated to the strange sight of someone trying to hit themselves and stop themselves at the same time. The hand trying to hit Legolas in the jaw succeeded and both voices simultaneously went "Oww."

"What are you doing? We're in the same body so if you hit me you hit yourself, borscht for brains," said Legolas.

Boromir said nothing, but Aragorn thought he could see an internal battle going on as to whether eyes should be narrowed in anger or not.

"Ah, Aragorn, gone down a bit in the world in the last few centuries, haven't you?"

"I thought you'd be the one to ask about 'going down', you kinky Hobbit lover." Merry and Pippin had the decency to look ashamed.

Legolas-Boromir took a swing at Aragorn, but Aragorn ducked and their fist hit the wall.

"Would you just stop that!"

Aragorn sighed. Someone was going to have to deal with this if Legolas' body was to survive the rest of the week and he had a terrible feeling that it was going to be him. "Get dressed, we'll talk about this over dinner."

Legolas-Boromir was late for dinner because of the argument over clothing. Boromir had taken one look at Legolas' wardrobe and refused point blank to wear any of it and insisted that he would make
the two of them walk around naked if Legolas didn't find anything else for them to wear. In the end, they had looked through the bottom of Aragorn's wardrobe for the clothes he hardly ever wore to find something suitably manly for Boromir to wear and had settled on a red checked lumberjack shirt and heavy work jeans, which, because they were about three sizes too big were held up by a belt with a huge buckle in the shape of the word 'buffalo'.

When they appeared in the kitchen the entire fellowship began to laugh, even Frodo who was still having issues about the fact that Boromir was around so it was the high-pitched giggle of those not entirely in touch with reality and slightly muffled because he was still attached to Sam. They sat down at the table wearing a look of mutual annoyance.

"So, Boromir," began Sam, trying desperately to break the tension with a little small talk. "What have you been doing with yourself since we last saw you?"

"I've been dead." This avenue of conversation turned out to have a dead end, the pun very much intended, but this was one subject Boromir wasn't keen to drop. "You could have kept in touch you know, invited me to some of your little reunions."

"What reunions? That time we all ended up in the same dungeon during the Wars of the Roses was a coincidence, we weren't even all on the same side."

"Then how come you ended up in the same dungeon?"

"Most of us were fighting for the Yorkists, but Merry and Pippin were fighting for the Lancastrians, or to be more precise, following their army and pinching armour off the dead bodies and got caught trying to sell it back to the same side."

Merry and Pippin nodded proudly. "We were camp followers."

There was silence as the rest of the Fellowship gave them a very suspicious look. "Yeess," said Aragorn. "Moving on..."

The Boromir-Legolas situation had to be sorted out so a parliamentary debate was held around the kitchen table, involving all the traditional name-calling and personal insults, but the hair-pulling was something they came up with themselves. It was agreed that Legolas and Boromir should do things by mutual consultation, except for when Legolas was at work, when he was to have full control; as a reward for his co-operation in this matter, Boromir would get to have a few drinks at the end of the week. Therefore it was with a sense of contentment that they settled down to an evening in front of the TV.

However, it didn't last.

Aragorn looked down at his thigh. There was a hand on it, a distinctly elvish looking hand.

"Which one of you is doing...that?"

"It's him!" answered two voices in unison.

Aragorn looked at them.

"Hey, I'm an elf, no sex drive, remember. And I've been sharing a room with you for years, if I wanted to do anything, I'd have done it before now."

The Hobbits and Gandalf sniggered on the other side of the room.
"You'd believe him? He's just using me as an excuse. Why would I want to try it on with the bastard who stole my father's kingdom?"

"You know, this would be a lot more convincing if your hand wasn't still on my leg, and stop... stroking. It's really quite unnerving."

From the other side of the room Pippin joined in with "Unnervin's not the word Ah'd use."

Aragorn lifted the hand and put it back in Legolas-Boromir's lap. "Just stop it."

*****

The next morning Aragorn woke up before the alarm went off, stretched, and got out of bed to try and beat the usual rush for the bathroom. He looked over at Legolas-Boromir, then stared at them. They were sat up in bed, obviously still asleep, their hands curled protectively around a near-empty family size jar of sandwich pickle with a spoon sticking out, their face covered in it. Aragorn decided this must be one of those dreams when you thought you'd woken up, so he pinched himself. No, he was definitely awake. There was only one thing for it - get into the bathroom right now, so that he was in there when Legolas-Boromir woke up.

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The week passed, and once Frodo had been convinced that now he was not in possession of... that thing, Boromir was not a threat, and by Wednesday he was back to as normal as he ever was. Although he did twitch slightly when he heard Boromir's voice unexpectedly. It was now Friday and Boromir was in a good mood because he'd behaved himself all week when Legolas was at work, even when that school trip from the local girls' school had attempted to hold him down and sexually assault him, so tonight he was going to get alcohol. Legolas was also in a good mood because he knew that, as an elf, he had an amazingly low alcohol tolerance and if anything embarrassing did happen, he would be completely unable to remember it.

Later that evening...

"Legolas, Boromir, don't you think you should slow down a little on the drink? That is an elf body that you're in Boromir." Aragorn was feeling very, very sober in comparison to Legolas-Boromir.

"He doesn't mind, do you Legolas?"

"Min'? Why shou' I min'? Dad used to tell me 'bout these great parties Galadriel had..." Legolas dissolved into fits of giggles, muttering about shaved eyebrows.

Aragorn gave up. It looked like he was going to be the only one there who was reasonably sober, since the hobbits were under the table singing a combination of 'ho ho ho, to the bottle I go' and Abba Gold. They seemed to be well on the way to passing out. Gandalf had acquired a large bottle of Goldschlager and a straw in the shape of a pair of glasses. Gandalf was now drunk enough to be laughing and going "look, y'can see all the pretty gold bits going round and round and round..."

As Legolas-Boromir reached out somewhat shakily for their second bottle of beer, the telephone rang. Even when drunk Legolas-Boromir was faster than Aragorn.

"Hellooooooo, Fellowship residence, second mos' royal member, hee hee, of household speaking." Aragorn attempted to get hold of the phone but was batted away.

"Arwen, heloooo." At this point Boromir took advantage of Legolas' drunken state and took over. "Little elvin whore wants a real man does she?"
There was a torrent of abuse down the phone. "Yes it is Boromir. You want to speak about maintenance payments? Well, I don't think Aragorn's capable of maintaining anything much." Legolas giggled inopportunately. Aragorn considered this provocation enough for violence against both of them and slapped Legolas-Boromir to the floor. Aragorn tried to patch things up with Arwen, not helped by the fact that Legolas decided that this was the moment for drunken affection and was hugging his knees. Aragorn kicked him away; "I don't care which one of you it is, anything more like that and I'm calling the police to arrest you for sexual harassment."

Legolas-Boromir decided to look elsewhere. The only other person still conscious was Pippin, atop a heap of comatose hobbits under the table, singing 'Mama Mia', drunken falsetto 'andante fortissimo' and licking the last drops from a bottle of Midori. "Heey, luke at tha' my thongue' gone green" said Pippin, both slurring and attempting to talk and look at his tongue.

Legolas managed to focus. "Hehehehe! Pretty colours!"

Boromir slapped Pippin heartily on the back, very nearly causing him to throw up, but Pippin wasn't prepared to lose alcohol that easily. "Remember the good old days?"

"Wha? When you were tryin' tae kill Frodo in his sleep? Cos if ye're tryin' anythin' li'tha the noo you're gonnae have tae come through me." Pippin pointed at himself while swaying, the jabs at his chest threatening to overbalance him. "And afore ye say anythin' ah know, AH KNOW, it was you, tryin to cop a feel o'me in Lothlorien, taking advantage o'me bein' depressed, ya perv. AND, AND, you were like, 40 and no' married yet. That's a wee bit suspicious if you don't mind me sayin' so."

Boromir narrowed his eyes. "I do mind you saying that. Anyway, Aragorn was 90 and not married."

"Yeah, but he had the elf bird wi' the..." Pippin used international sign language to indicate 'enormous bosoms', "and the..." Pippin attempted to outline in the air the shape of a woman, but ended up with more the shape of an aardvark stood on its tail. Pippin attempted another obscene gesture, but succeeded only in slapping the unconscious Merry in the face. "Sorry pal."

Boromir was not going to let this drop. "And how many children did you manage to have with your wife? One? And this from the enormously fertile hobbits. Oh, yes and named after my brother. I sodding well died to save you and you name your child after my pansy brother! Anyway, I call that suspicious."

"You never met mah wife. After the honeymoon, Ah try anything more than a suggestive look and she slaps me. With rolling pin. Jus after me for the money. No' as bad as Merry' wife, she started that before the honeymoon." Pippin stopped and looked slightly confused. "Least, tha's wha' he says. Tired. Sleep." Pippin gently toppled forwards until he was lying on top of the hobbit heap.

Aragorn slammed the phone down. It was time to move on from the beer to the whisky chaser.

Some time later...

Aragorn and Boromir had moved on to large scale military anecdotes, interrupted by various inappropriate comments by Legolas, along the lines of "I used to have a bow an... arr... arrrr... arrrrrr... pointy things. Kill orcs."

Aragorn was in the midst of restaging the battle of Pelennor Fields on the kitchen table.

"An, an, if this beer boll is me, being all kingy," Aragorn attempted to crown the bottle with an upturned bottle cap but failed. Aragorn looked round for more props "An if this toaster is the army of..."
"Dead people. Were dead people." Legolas managed to make a vaguely pertinent comment.

Boromir looked confused. "Dead people lying on groun' or dead people stanin' up and fightin'?"

"Fighty dead people." Said Aragorn "This, this packet o' Doritos, is dead people."

"Can I have some Doritos?" asked Boromir.

"No! Are fighty dead people, can't eat them. Now need Eowyn." Aragorn looked for another prop.
"An this, this," Aragorn tried to squint at what he was holding.

Boromir helped him out "Unconscious hobbit."

"Yeah, an this unconscious hobbit."

Legolas interrupted. "Name's Merry."

"Ok, Ok, and this unconscious Merry hobbit is Eowyn." Boromir didn't like Eowyn. He didn't like anyone who managed to out-butch him, and he really, really hated it that Eowyn managed this while still being a woman. Well, probably, most of the time, or at least his brother seemed to think so.

"He could be himself."

"Wha?"

"He was there. At battle."

"Wasn' that Pippin?"

"Dunno. Can't tell difference."


*****

Some time even later...

The hobbits had regained consciousness and to some extent sobriety and were sitting on the worktop swinging their legs and drinking coffee. Very strong coffee. They began to notice something. Or rather and absence of something, or someone.

"Aragorn? Legolas? Boromir? Where'd they go?"

"Dunno, was unconscious."

Pippin looked sidelong at Merry. "Merry, are you alright? Cos when Ah passed out Ah was on top of you, an' when Ah woke up you wir oan the table. And Boromir..."

"Nothing happened. I'd know, even if I were unconscious." Merry seemed very sure about this.

"So where are they then?" The question was at least partly answered by the noise drifting in from the garden.

"Firs' I wass afrai', I was pe'rified. Was thinkin' how coul' neve' live without you bymyside."

The Hobbits followed the noise to its source, the back garden. Aragorn and Legolas-Boromir had their arms around each other's shoulders and a half empty bottle in their free hands and were
swaying. They had got to the classic point of singing and the three singers, even though they were sharing two bodies, couldn't quite remember the right words, but all had their own ideas as to what they should be. As the singing descended into cacophony the neighbours started to come out of their houses to watch - they were as keen on a floor show as anyone, the only time anyone had seen the whole neighbourhood together was the night the local Spar shop burned down. Frodo looked thoughtful. He had a score to settle with Boromir (Boromir had saved Merry and Pippin, but had made no effort to save him, and anyway anyone who sacrificed himself for those two had to be really weird). He whispered his instructions to Merry and Pippin. So it would involve taking Aragorn and Legolas down too, but there was always going to be 'collateral damage'.

The window of the Hobbits' bedroom upstairs opened and there was the subtle click of a CD drawer closing. There was a pause and then the unmistakable sound of Donna Summers' "Hot Stuff". Frodo grinned horribly as he saw that his plan was beginning to work; Legolas-Boromir and Aragorn's eyes lit up and they began to dance, Full Monty style. Or at least attempted to, sometimes it was a little difficult to tell, but he was fairly sure the neighbours were all getting the general idea. Frodo knew that the second part of the plan was also working when he looked up again to see Merry leaning out of the window, camcorder in hand.

Legolas-Boromir started to attempt to remove their clothing. This was somewhat more difficult for Legolas-Boromir because they were still wearing Legolas' work uniform, which involved a waistcoat with far too many buttons. Aragorn had succeeded in removing his shirt and was swinging it round his head to appreciative shouts from most of their female, and worryingly, one of their married male neighbours. In fact the number of neighbours had increased significantly, leading to suspicions that they had rung their friends while the entertainment was still at the Gloria Gaynor stage and several other camcorders were also in evidence.

Legolas-Boromir was still having his problems with the waistcoat, so Aragorn loosened Legolas' tie and pulled the whole lot, tie, waistcoat and shirt, up over his head. And there was much rejoicing. Legolas-Boromir and Aragorn were dancing round, out of time to the music and attempting to be suggestive. Then it came to the chorus. They all attempted pelvic thrusts and all fell on their arses, but gamely got back up again and carried on doing it, only to fall on their arses yet again.

At this point Mrs. Wainthrop arrived and Frodo and Sam both tried to hide behind each other before deciding that discretion was the better part of valour and retired to watch the rest of the proceedings from an upstairs window. On their way in, they passed Gandalf on his way out to letch.

Mrs. Wainthrop was so angry she could not speak. She just stood there, pale and shaking with her lips disappearing into her mouth as she watched Legolas-Boromir take their trousers off and Aragorn attempt to do the same while lying on the ground. When Legolas-Boromir succeeded they toppled over to straddle Aragorn.

"Finally, King 'f Gondor where he shoul' be, or where I wan' him t' be..." leered Boromir.

*****

The next morning the Hobbits were well into second breakfast when Aragorn and Legolas-Boromir finally came downstairs. They all looked more than a little worse for wear and headed straight for the kettle to make some coffee, but the Hobbits ignored them and kept on talking.

"Shall we go get Gandalf?"

"Nah, just leave him there a bit longer. We'd need Aragorn to drive to the police station anyway and he's in no fit state to drive."
"You know, I never thought Mrs. Wainthrop would actually call the police, I mean, she's threatened to do it enough times before, but it's never come to anything."

"D'you reckon they'll charge him?"

"Nah, he's pretty good at acting respectable, he'll get away with it. The worst that'll happen is that he'll get bound over to keep the peace, you know, if he does it again they'll put in him jail?"

"Haven't they done that to him before?"

"Yes, but that was when he was calling himself Mr. Merryweather, so it won't be a problem."

Legolas-Boromir sat down at the kitchen table.

"You know, I hate you even more than I did before, if that was possible. I'd hit you, but I think it'd just make me throw up again." Said Legolas shakily as he lowered his head onto the table.

"Just because you're a wussy elf and can't hold your drink."

"Who're you calling a wuss? Which one of us is dead?"

Aragorn managed to look suspiciously at the Hobbits. "What's that in the padded envelope?"

"Nothing." The Hobbits all attempted to look innocent (a feat which seemed to defy the laws of nature in the case of Merry and Pippin).

"Didn't you have a video camera last night?"

"No."

"You're sending the tape to "You've Been Framed", aren't you?"

The authors appeared wearing ill-advised furry parkas, headphones and holding strangely shaped microphones stupidly close to their mouths, but the fellowship were too involved in their argument to notice this strange phenomenon.

"Good morning and welcome to 69 Waterton Crescent where the teams are warming up for the International Video in a Jiffy Bag Rugby Championship. Today's competing teams are the Men of Gondor vs the Hobbits of the Shire warming up by having a screaming row (as recommended by physiotherapists and sports scientists everywhere). The Men of Gondor, are unusually for them, fielding an elf. What do you think about that Bob?"

"Well, normally that wouldn't be allowed, but as he has been possessed by a Man of Gondor the international committee have decided to allow it, although it does put them at a considerable weight disadvantage."

"Yes, Bob, but the opposing team are only four feet tall. It looks like they've finished warming up and they're ready for the game."

"It's a good start into the scrum with Aragorn son of Arathorn going in for the attack to gain possession of the video. Great aggressive play there, well supported by Legolas."

"Though the hobbits are holding their own in the scrum, the real weight of the team are Merry and Sam. Most promising for today's fixture is the speed that Frodo can muster if he has a clear run; we hear he's been training hard, running into sideboards."
"There was talk of Harlequins wanting him as their winger..."

"Wait! Yes! The Video has been passed back and it's the Shire in possession, Pippin making a run for the door, not quite as fast as Frodo but still a good start."

"But in from the outside comes Legolas, I wouldn't like to be in his position, he's too wide to get him before he reaches the door."

"Though Bob, there is the superior elven speed to take into account, and yes, he is right on Pippin's tail at the foot of the staircase, but the hobbits are supporting each other well this morning, and Pippin passes to Sam before he's tackled."

"Legolas was committed to that tackle, so its up to Aragorn to slow Sam down, as the action moves out the front door and towards the halfway line. And yes, with a great burst of speed from the man of Gondor Sam is down! Aragorn has possession and passes to Legolas, but Pippin now sees he has a score to settle and both he and Merry are going for Legolas. Will the superior elven speed be enough?"

"No! Legolas is down. I see now what you mean Bob about the weight disadvantage. That simply would not have happened if Legolas had not been an elf."

"It's the Shire back in possession, and this is shaping up to be a great run from Sam, He's already sidestepped Aragorn, but those of us who remember him playing when he was king of Gondor know he won't give up that easily, and he's tailing Sam."

"No...wait...yes, yes, he's tackling Sam!"

"Oh, that was a beautiful moment, a perfect sideways pass, one handed, from Sam to Frodo as Sam was being tackled. You don't often see playing this good from the Shire."

"Now it's all up to Frodo for that final burst of speed to the post-box. We all know about this player's problems, do you think he'll be dealing OK with this sort of pressure?"

"Well, taking from his previous form in the quest to destroy the one Ring, Frodo can be relied upon to deliver the goods when it's needed, especially when backed up by such a reliable player as Sam."

"He's a real team player isn't he Bob?"

"Well, all the hobbits are, they're coming up behind him for support, but wait, what's this? It's Aragorn son of Arathorn coming out of nowhere, and he's closing the gap on Frodo."

"There are the other hobbits though, level pegging with Aragorn, and yes, they appear to be trying to take him down before he reaches Frodo. Now that really is foul play, there should be a penalty awarded for that."

"They are slowing him though, and we're getting no signals from the referee, in fact there doesn't appear to be a referee, and Frodo is nearly there, only a superhuman effort from Aragorn or Legolas could do anything."

"They're trying, but, but, Yes! Yes! The Video is in the postbox! A truly marvellous run there from Frodo, and a convincing win from the Shire. Some marvellous play."

"Yes, but a very disappointing match for Legolas, what do you think went wrong there?"

"Well, it's the issue of having two personalities controlling the one body, something that all
professional sportsmen try to avoid; those split second decisions simply can't be made by committee."

"There is also the fact that one of the personalities is used to a much larger body."

"Yes, and we can see that on the replay, when Merry and Pippin try and tackle him. Look here, you can see that he doesn't see them as a threat because he thinks he's got much more bulk than he actually has."

"But overall a good game."

"Great game, great game, and great result for the Shire; there'll be the 200 quid from 'You've been Framed' for them in the very near future. For the Men of Gondor though, a result they'll be hard pressed to recover from, especially when that's shown on TV. A humiliating experience all round, and I think Boromir will be glad to retire again and return to the afterlife."

"Well said. Well, that's all from us, and it's good bye from the house of the Fellowship."

Chapter End Notes

Authors' note: Don't say we never do anything for you. For true authenticity we watched the England vs Scotland 6 Nations Rugby on Saturday, and Lady Alyssa is Scottish and Random Flatmate is English. *Random Flatmate starts chanting under her breath triumphantly '22-3, 22-3, 22-3', and moves on to 'swiiiiing loooooooow sweeeet chaaaaariot'. There is a thump as Lady Alyssa twats her one with a hardback copy of Lord of the Rings.* So if anything more is going to be written we're going to have to start talking to each other again.
Fog Over The Job Centre

Chapter Notes

We're sorry that we've neglected Gimli in the past, so this one's all about him. For non-Brits: 'Blue Peter' a children's TV show that middle class kids are forced against their will to watch because it's Educational. John Noakes and Valerie Singleton presented it in the 1960s (yes, it's been going that long, and it's still on), and the incident with the elephant really did happen. On live TV.

At breakfast Frodo was aware that something was subtly different.

"The house is...changing."

"I feel it in my water," Said Merry

"I feel it in my muesli," said Legolas.

"I smell it in the air," said Aragorn.

"No," said Frodo. "That's just the breakfast burning."

Frodo plonked a breakfast down in front of Pippin, who looked at it. "A shadow has fallen across my black pudding."

"Whispers of a too-high grill setting," agreed Merry.

"Any chance of some black pudding over here?"

The fellowship turned to look at the unfamiliar face at the breakfast table. Then they realised what was different.

"Gimli? What the hell are you doing here?" asked Aragorn.

"Och, I was made redundant."

"You mean it's shut. The... factory" Merry and Pippin made hand gestures which made them look like they were auditioning for parts in the next big Bollywood movie.

"Aye, the rubber factory's shut."

Legolas choked on his muesli. "It's no every day you see an elf blow milk doon his nose at the breakfast table," commented Pippin.

Gimli looked annoyed. "Noo that kind of rubber, boyo. The kind that you put on the end of your pencil." Gimli went from annoyed to confused when Merry and Pippin laughed so hard they fell off their chairs and the other, more mature, members of the fellowship were working hard to stifle their giggles. "Erasers. For rubbing things out."

The laughing from under the table merely increased in intensity.
"Gimli, just be quiet. You remember when we were watching TV together and it was the 'Blue Peter' anniversary special and they showed the clip where the baby elephant peed down John Noakes' leg then stood on his foot? If you make them laugh so much that they throw up again you can clean it up." Frodo did not look impressed.

"Ye didnae make John Noakes clean it up." Grumbled Gimli.

"That's because John Noakes doesn't live with us."

"I'd rather live with John Noakes than you lot," muttered Aragorn.

"Really?" said Legolas. "And here's me thinking you only fancied Valerie Singleton."

There were sniggering comments from under the table along the lines of "Here's one he made earlier" and some unrepeatable ones about "sticky back plastic".

The rest of the Fellowship went off to work and Gimli ambled into the living room to join Gandalf in his daytime TV marathon. Gimli managed to watch 20 minutes of a debate on how wearing glasses affects your life before feeling that he was slipping into a catatonic state and really should find something else to do, at least until 'Quincy' started.

Gimli wandered aimlessly into the kitchen where Frodo was cleaning the kitchen floor with a pink spotted handkerchief tied round his head. However, the handkerchief did not catch Gimli's attention quite as much as the fact that Frodo was naked. Gimli and Frodo screamed simultaneously and Gimli shielded his eyes as Frodo attempted to cover his modesty with the mop.

"Is it safe to look yet?"

"Um... I think so."

Gimli kept his eyes shut anyway, just as a precaution. "Um? Frodo? Why exactly would you be washing the kitchen floor naked... without your clothes on?"

"It's... I always do. There's never anyone else in the house, and I quite like it like this."

"But what about me and Gandalf? We're in the house."

"Yes, but you're asleep and when was the last time you saw Gandalf voluntarily get out of his chair?"

"Well, there was that time with the -"

"Yes, but his chair was actually, you know, actively on fire."

"Did he see you?"

"No, he was too busy trying to save the vodka."

"Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"If I get another job on the nightshift and you're cleaning when I'm upstairs in bed you'll at least wear an apron when you hoover the upstairs landing."

Gimli wandered outside. The garden was blooming, thanks to Sam's efforts. Gimli thought that it
could be helpful to do a little weeding (not that much needed doing), and reached for a weed, then remembered exactly how Sam kept the garden so verdant and sprang backwards throwing his arms into the air. He got on well with Legolas, but not that well.

"Are you alright?"

Gimli spun round and was confronted by Mrs. Wainthrop peering over the garden fence. "Um, yes, fine. It was... a nettle. I realised it was a nettle. Och," added Gimli for emphasis.

"That nice Mr. Gamgee never usually lets nettles grow." She proffered a hand over the fence, "Mrs. Wainthrop."

Gimli shook it uncertainly. "I know, I've seen you around." He wished he had the courage to add 'peering suspiciously through a gap in the net curtains', but he'd also heard what Merry and Pippin had to say about her and wisely kept his mouth shut.

"You used to work nights didn't you." The implication of 'as a brothel slave' dripped from the end of every word.

Gimli decided he neither liked, nor cared about the opinions of, Mrs. Wainthrop. "In the rubber factory. But it's closed down the noo."

Mrs. Wainthrop's expression froze, her smile becoming a rictus. "I'd better be going in now, the cake needs taking out of the oven."

"Nice to know you've got a bun in the oven" said Gimli completely innocently after the departing Mrs. Wainthrop.

Gimli walked back into the house again, and paused outside the kitchen door.

"Frodo?"

"Yes?"

"Are you dressed?"

"Not really, but I'm decent."

Gimli cautiously opened the door, unsure whether to trust a definition of 'decent' given by someone who hoovers naked. He saw Frodo thankfully wearing a pair of boxer shorts that came nearly to his knees.

"Gimli? can't you go out somewhere or do something?"

"Why? Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps going down to the job centre and getting some application forms?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me?"

"Oh, no, its just you seem so bored, you seem like the kind of person who needs a job to define who they are." Frodo had learned much from watching daytime discussion programmes.

Gimli was unsure whether or not to take this as an insult. "I was going to go there anyway. I'll be back for lunch." Gimli stomped off to the job centre.
There was one consolation to being unemployed, thought Gimli as he tucked into his lunch; Frodo was a very good cook, and a firm believer in 6 good square meals a day - a good combination.

"Um... Gimli. I don't suppose you want to go out anywhere this afternoon?" asked Frodo.

"No, why?"

"It's just, well, I'm having a meeting here this afternoon, and you'd only feel out of place."

"Meeting? What kind of meeting?"

"Just some people. A... society. You can't come." Added Frodo hurriedly.

Gimli looked at Frodo suspiciously. He extended his hand and attempted to give Frodo a very complex handshake. Frodo looked at him confusedly. "What are you trying to do?"

"Can I come to the meeting now?"

"No! Gimli what are you trying to do to my hand?"

"Nothing, nothing."

Gimli retired upstairs to think on this. It was quite obvious that unbeknownst to the household Frodo had joined the Freemasons, and Gimli had therefore attempted to replicate a freemason handshake that some bloke had shown him in a pub 40 years previously. Like all non-members given the opportunity to find out exactly what the Freemasons got up to Gimli was going to grab it with both hands.

Gimli was going through his wardrobe; he knew that the only way for a non-member to get into a Freemasons meeting was through subterfuge and espionage and for this he would have to look the part, the part of course being Tom Cruise in 'Mission Impossible'. However, neither Gimli's wardrobe or physique were suited to this, but he did the best he could with the available materials and time. On his head he wore a black bobble hat, but as he was reluctant to part with his traditional dwarf helmet, this was also worn underneath. On his hands, a pair of oversized padded ski gloves, his feet, hobnailed boots which clanged when he walked as if a troupe of overweight elephants were attempting to replicate dance routines from 'Singing in the Rain'. The only black jumper he could find was the one Aragorn wore when there was more than four inches of snow and came down to Gimli's mid calf, which was a good thing as the only black trousers he could find were his swimming trunks. Swimming trunks worn with iron underpants is an unusual fashion statement.

He surveyed himself in the mirror. Where other people would have rung for the police or possibly the nearest mental hospital, Gimli smiled at his reflection because all he could see was the dashing, debonair secret agent double-oh-Gimli, licensed to chop people's legs off at the knee.

Downstairs, Frodo was welcoming ladies to the Women's Institute meeting and feeling very impressed with himself; the homemade raspberry jam even came up to Mrs Wainthrop's standards and his scones were almost perfect. He gradually relaxed, he'd been worrying about hosting his first meeting for weeks and as they sat down to drink their tea - the right kind and not overbrewed - everyone was too polite to mention that the living room door appeared to have been barricaded and nailed shut.

Upstairs in the Hobbits' bedroom Gimli was tying Pippin's black satin bed sheets round one of the bedposts of a set of bunk beds and was edging back over the windowsill. Slowly, he abseiled down the side of the house, gouging holes in the brickwork and humming the theme tune from 'The Avengers'. Reaching the top of the kitchen window he paused, let out some slack on the bed sheet,
locked his knees, swung back and burst in through the open kitchen window with the war cry of "Derek Nimmo!".

Mrs Wainthrop was in the middle of the middle of giving some grudging praise to Frodo's jam while Mrs Ramsbottom was in raptures about his scones when Gimli made his dramatic entrance. He skidded across the table and landed on the floor with a thump, covered in raspberry jam.

"Ooh, Frodo, did you get a stripper?" asked Mrs Cartwright, one of the younger and more impressionable members who Mrs Wainthrop disapproved of so much.

Gimli attempted dazedly to stand up and assume the fight stances of about three different martial arts and, since each of them involved taking a different leg of the ground, he fell over, looking like he was trying to do the actions to 'I'm a Little Teapot'.

Frodo muttered some hurried apologies and tried to drag him out of the kitchen by the beard, to which Gimli responded with a cry of "Nobody tosses a dwarf!". All of the Women's institute, apart from the four most upstanding members - one of them being Mrs Wainthrop - began to giggle. Mrs Wainthrop gave them a death stare.

Frodo had given up trying to drag Gimli out of the room and had crossed the mountains of anger to reach the plateau of calm where someone was about to get hurt.

"What do you think you are doing?"

"You mean you're not the Freemasons?"

"No, we're not."

"Then what the hell are you?"

"We're the Women's Institute, the WI, yes, I, Frodo Baggins am a member of the Women's Institute. Satisfied?"

"Yes," squeaked Gimli. He'd seen the amount of damage Frodo had done to Aragorn in the past and decided not to push his luck, especially as Frodo's hands were round his neck. But there was one question that was still unanswered.

"So how long have you... you know?"

"What?"

"Wanted to be a woman?"

"I do not want to be a woman! I never have wanted to be a woman and I don't dress up in women's clothing!" Frodo mentally added the 'at least not very often'.

"So why are you in the WI?"

"I like making jam. And scones. And knitting with very sharp needles."

Gimli became aware that the women were Looking at him. And Looking with a capital 'L'. He was alone, unarmed and outnumbered. He made a tactical retreat.

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Legolas actually enjoyed having Gimli around the place; the friendship that had been cemented
during the time of the Fellowship had actually lasted, finding they had lots of interests in common, such as mass orc slaughter and chess. Therefore, they spent evenings in actual conversations about current affairs, as opposed to the strange and circular ramblings he had with the hobbits. Gimli on the other hand was enjoying talking about matters that didn't pertain to the breaking point of rubber products.

A week later Frodo was gradually getting used to doing the housework while fully dressed and generally having Gimli under his feet. It was getting to that time of year again when the bedrooms needed to be given their annual spring clean, which usually involved having half of their possessions thrown out and three weeks of arguments over the four year old, fluff-covered stick of Blackpool rock which someone had really wanted to keep. Since today's task was to spring clean the Hobbits' bedroom, it was likely that the services of Rentokil would also be required.

When they were almost finished, Frodo gave Gimli the task of changing the sheets on all the beds whilst he went downstairs to do the ironing. Having made Sam and Merry's beds, Gimli turned to Pippin's, dreading it because satin sheets were so much more difficult to tuck in, when he saw something sticking out of the side of it. Closer inspection showed that, not only was there something sticking out, but also that there was a two foot long gash in the side of the mattress. Gimli attempted to investigate further, and pulled out what appeared to be a copy of 'Enormous Bosoms Monthly', dated February 1973. On closer inspection there didn't actually appear to be any mattress in it at all - just porn. He delved back into the sordid depths of Pippin's mattress to reveal a copy of 'Short Busty Women Annual 1985'.

"Frodo?"

"What is it?" called Frodo from downstairs.

"About Pippin's mattress...?"

There was the sound of washing being dropped and bare feet running up the stairs. "What about Pippin's mattress?" he gasped skidding round the corner as Gimli pulled out some 17th Century erotic woodcuts and a late Victorian photograph of a woman of ample proportions wearing an excellent example of contemporary cantilevered engineering as a corset.

"Oh." Said Frodo.

"Yes, 'oh' indeed. No wonder he's always complaining about how his back hurts in the mornings."

Frodo sighed. "I've never understood it myself. All of the rest of us know about it and it's not like we mind. We've suggested that he keeps them in the cupboard or we get him a set of box files, but he insists on keeping them in the mattress." Frodo looked uncomfortable. "Are you nearly finished? Why don't I just make my own bed and you go downstairs and put the kettle on?"

The suspicious nature of this statement entirely bypassed Gimli, who had become engrossed in another engraving. "Hang on a minute. This looks familiar. Is that... is that Pippin? With the...?" Gimli cocked his head to one side. "Nononononono." He dropped the engraving as if it was on fire.

"You should just be glad that his papyrus collection all disintegrated years ago. Really."

****

When Merry and Pippin came home from work Gimli hid and was fortunately not present when Pippin gave them all the good news about recent success at work.

"Ah've bin made employee of the month!"
Aragorn, Legolas, Frodo and Sam looked at him, open mouthed.

"You have been made employee of the month? You, Peregrin Took, have actually been made employee of the month? Who else are they employing? Orcs? Trained gerbils?"

Merry was looking at Pippin. If looks could kill this one would have ripped out Pippin's still beating heart and shown it to him before he died.

"He 'ant told you 'ow, 'as he?" Merry's voice was very quiet and very threatening.

"Ok, so how did you manage to get made employee of the month?"

"Ah shagged ma line manager," announced Pippin proudly.

"Did you get a pay rise as well?"

Pippin looked confused.

"You shagged your line manager, the woman they call 'Big Bertha', for employee of the month and didn't bring up the subject of money during the, ahem, negotiations?"

"Well, no, we had tae be quick, we were in the walk in fridge after all. And anyway, that wid huv been prostitution."

Legolas shuddered. "I'm living off tinned food for the rest of the month."

*****

After dinner Gimli hid from Pippin behind his copy of the Guardian. The Hobbits stared in stunned silence as they watched Gimli and Legolas simultaneously finish reading their sections of the newspaper and wordlessly swapped them over. They even shared a red pen to correct the spelling mistakes with.

The next night at dinner Gimli was looking Elvishly smug. That morning he had received a large brown envelope through the post, which had lead to salacious comments from Pippin about things that came in plain brown envelopes and Gimli going pale again.

"So you've got a new job then?"

"Yes, as of next Monday I'm a night watchman in a warehouse."

"Warehouse? Are you sure y'read that right?" asked Pippin, sniggering.

"Yes. I'm very sure."

"So what kind of warehouse is it?"

"It belongs to a, um, well regarded chain of high street stores."

"What's tha tryin' to hide?"

"Nothing, it's an old and well known company."

"Well known as in notorious?"

It was Pippin who made the connection. "There's a new Ann Summers warehouse just opened on
the industrial estate, isn't there? Ye've got a job there, haven't you?"

Gimli blushed.

"Do y'get a staff discount, because, well, there was this thing in their catalogue..."

"Yeah, it's Susan at the WI's birthday next week and she'd really like one of those suggestive ice cube trays."

"And think of what you could do with..." Aragorn suddenly realised what he was saying and shut his mouth suddenly in a very determined fashion.

"Yeah and they have a really good selection o'bras." all eyes flicked from Aragorn to Pippin.

"What?"

"Not for mahself of course. It's just that over the years I've learned a few things and the quickest way tae see women in sexy lingerie is tae buy them some. No that they stay in it for very long..."

Gimli fought down the waves of nausea brought on by the image burned into the lids of his eyes by the engravings. He was going to be glad to be going on the nightshift again to get a bit of peace and quiet.
And The Sign Said: Center Parcs

Chapter Notes

Story notes: For non-Brits: Alan Titchmarsh = Short-arse TV gardener. Charlie Dimmock = his female sidekick, who hasn't discovered bras yet. Rounders = pansy-assed baseball for kids. Center Parcs = posh very European holiday village with lots of outdoorsy activities and a big swimming pool. This is for all of you who said Pippin was incomprehensible before. You ain't seen nothing yet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa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"Well, she wis getting oot of her carriage and her dress got caught in the door, and then the horses got spooked and it drove away and took most o'her dress wi'it. She doesnae shave her armpits either." Pippin's eyes took on that faraway look associated with nostalgia. "First time Ah laughed til Ah wis sick."

"You laughed until you were sick at Arwen's body hair?"

"No, he bloody well didn't he were laughin at me."

"Why was he laughing at you?"

"Well, I were trying to get an ornamental peacock feather, for, you know, how's-yer-father, an' the bugger comes back and tries to attack me an that's what spooked the horses. An then these three other peacocks bloody well join in. Vicious buggers an' all, they are. That's why he laughed til he were sick."

The rest of the Fellowship looked at Merry with even less respect than usual.

"Och, look at the window, I'm soooo scared. It's a pigeon nooooo, not a pigeon!" said Gimli, trying for sarcasm and failing really quite badly.

"Legolas, could you put the fertility statue down please," said Sam, sitting ever so slightly hunched over. "It's just that I feel a little threatened when you hold it like that, especially when you swing it round."

Legolas, who had been absent-mindedly hefting the statue, threw it so that it spun and caught it again in the same place, to the horrified fascination of the rest of the room.

"Oh, sorry."

The last few days, which should have been spent constructively packing and trying to crowbar Gandalf out of his chair, were actually spent trying to prevent various members of the household from killing each other. This in itself was nothing unusual, what was strange was who was having homicidal thoughts, and about who.

It had all started on Thursday evening when Frodo had been hiding in the sideboard because Legolas had decided that the group needed a little more culture and had tried to make them watch a film version of Wagner's 'Ring Cycle', which in retrospect had probably been a bad idea - next time he would just go for something less controversial, like 'The Magic Flute', although he could imagine the kind of comments that Merry and Pippin could come up with if someone mentioned any kind of vaguely suggestive musical instrument (and this being Merry and Pippin this included everything up to and including the xylophone).

Frodo had been in the sideboard for almost half an hour when Sam had finally tried to start coaxing him out again, but Frodo had not been entirely ready (perhaps because Gandalf was sitting next to it humming the same four bars of 'Ride of the Valkyries' over and over) and when Sam had opened the door, kicked him so hard that it was a damn good job he wasn't married any more. Merry and Pippin tried the pro-active method of grabbing Frodo's legs and dragging him out of the door at the other end, but Sam, still being protective of Frodo, did not like to see him manhandled and tried to make Merry and Pippin let go of him. The upshot of this was that the three Hobbits outside of the sideboard had turned into three angry, hairy, balls of flailing fists, hitting everything and everyone within reach and wrongly blaming most of the damage sustained to themselves and the house on the
other two. The upshot of this was that none of the three of them were talking to each other, or talking to Frodo, because it was all his fault for being insane and hiding in the sideboard in the first place. Frodo, the eldest of the Hobbits, had reacted to this in the most childish way possible by deciding that if they weren't talking to him, he wasn't talking to them either, and that the sideboard incidents were not his fault.

The Hobbits didn't fall out very often, only once a decade or so, but when they did. They did it with style, or, a complete lack thereof.

The Fellowship managed to arrive at Center Parcs with an uncharacteristic lack of trauma. This was mainly because Gandalf switched everyone's travel sickness pill for sleeping pills and as the Hobbits, Gimli and himself had taken them, spent the whole journey in blissful unconsciousness. His initial intention, however had been to switch them for aphrodisiac pills, but Legolas had caught him in the act and threatened to make him pay for the suspension in the car to be fixed and to have the upholstery cleaned if he carried it through, so there had been a last minute change of plan.

This had left Legolas and Aragorn to have a peaceful journey. Or at least as peaceful as can actually be achieved when the journey involves a driver and a navigator and no third party to mediate, with certain Middle Earth touches.

"You're an Elf, you're supposed to have a sense of direction."

"I do have a sense of direction, it's just that you're ignoring all the directions given by the only one of us with a sense of direction."

"Look, it should be that way, I'm part elf!"

"Which part? Arse or elbow?"

But they finally got there, having only gone round Wakefield town centre seven times looking for the M1, and then, with no inconsiderable effort, persuaded all the other occupants of the car to wake up.

Legolas looked at the small chalet they would be living in for the next week with a sense of impending doom. He remembered what had happened when they had all gone to Butlins in the late 50s. Merry and Pippin had drugged Gandalf and entered him into the glamorous granny competition, and with the aid of a lot of make-up and a rather interesting dress, he had come third. At least it would probably be better than Pippin's suggestion that they all go to Ibiza, but only probably and not that much better. At least Pippin wouldn't be coming back with any interesting diseases; he seemed to have been collecting them over the years.

The plan had been for the four Hobbits to share a room, but the way things were going, it seemed that that would be a little difficult. They were all still making a great show of the fact that they were ignoring each other, while actually paying as much attention to each other as possible in small and nasty ways, such as tripping each other up when they walked past, or, in extreme cases, dipping all of each other's underwear in water and putting it in the freezer overnight. The other members of the Fellowship were left in the disturbing knowledge that all four Hobbits were 'going commando' and it had taken them long enough to persuade them to start wearing pants in the first place and they could see the work of decades unravelling right in front of their eyes.

All four Hobbits took their rucksacks into their bedroom and attempted to unpack while pretending to be the only other person in the room and avoid bumping into the other three at the same time.
Since none of the Hobbits were able to cooperate for long enough to cook a meal and they were too small to cook in the human-sized kitchen on their own, the rest of the Fellowship had to take the unusual step of trying to fend for themselves and failing miserably. Dinner was the classic "Fromage sur toast" garnished delicately with big black burnt bits. Gandalf, of course, was taking no part in this and had settled himself in front of the TV.

At this point the Hobbits decided, or at least made the unconscious decision to attach themselves to other members of the Fellowship in an attempt to show the others that their friendship was not the most important thing and that they could manage without them. Sam made the first move, attaching himself to Legolas, as the only member of the fellowship having his own level of common sense and a perception of reality shared with most of the rest of the world. There was then a domino effect of the other hobbits not wanting to be left on their own; however, the desperation led to some strange bedfellows (minds out of gutters, this is a clean episode). Merry, attempting to prove his personal butchness had attached himself to Aragorn; Pippin, since the idea of doing no work and being nasty to people appealed, attached himself to Gandalf, and Frodo, since there was no-one else left, attached himself to Gimli.

Gandalf warmed quickly to the idea of having an acolyte. He used his wizardly powers to re-create 'his' chair, and another hobbit sized version of 'his' chair, in front of the TV (which to his delight had cable, but to his dismay did not have the Playboy channel). They both acquired cans of Tennants from an unknown, mystic source (Aragorn's supply in the loft that he thought no-one knew about). After dinner they were all settled in front of TV.

Sam was checking the TV times. "Can we watch the Alan Titchmarsh season?"

Pippin, now wearing a string vest for no good reason, said to the world in general, "Tha'ala'ti'mrsh'weebasser."

There was a moment of complete confusion.

"What did he say? Was that English?" asked Legolas.

"Glaswegian. Haven't you heard the story?"

"Ah'jinvennnorglaswegiansoaham."

"Yeeees..." said Aragorn, "He's not exactly the inventor. Perpetrator possibly. Centuries ago he tried to teach the old South Farthing dialect to some guys in a pub in south west Scotland..."

"That's nothing like South Farthing dialect." Argued Sam.

"I did say this was in the pub. And it has had a life of it's own since then."

"Ah'wasbluddy'steamin'thenso'ahwis."

They all looked at Pippin.

"Whut? Ye'vegota PROBLEM wi'thatPAL?"

While they were unsure of the actual words the sense of 'death threat' got itself across quite clearly. Gandalf seemed to have been thinking about something. "Alan Titchmarsh... Charlie Dimmock?"

Aragron tried to appear casual, "Oh, really, well if she's on we'd better watch. For the gardening." He added hurriedly.
"And not in any way because she doesn't wear a bra?" said Legolas.

"Seetha'dimmock'naebrawaaaaaaaaaeeeyyy. Whitasmasher!" Pippin seemed to think this was a good thing.

Sam sighed. If the only way to get to watch his favourite programme was to let the rest of the Fellowship lech over the person he considered to be his dream woman, then so be it. They settled down to watch. Sam then realised that there was something being whispered, sotto voce by the whole Fellowship, and that was 'rain, rain'.

"Do you know you're doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"Trying to get it to rain on her. It's a recorded programme anyway."

"Rain. See-through. No bra. Hehehehehehehehehe." Gandalf had gone into a little world of his own.

The next morning Aragorn and Legolas were having doubts as to being 'adopted' by the hobbits and were trying unsubtly to get rid of them so they could go pony trekking together. Sam had easily agreed to be left behind, muttering something about going for a walk to have some time to himself, but Merry was proving harder to shake off. This called for some drastic action.

"And what's your name?"

Merry was so angry he thought he might explode, but in the name of all those confronted by a really patronising childminder said "'s Merry."

"And how old are you Merry?"

"37"

"Come on then, no lying young man. You were left here by your daddy, and, and," she sought desperately for a word to describe Legolas, and decided to go for the politically correct route, "his friend, and we know you're 10. Why don't you introduce yourself to all the other children."

Someone was going to suffer for this. However, he was going to have to wash the face paints off first.

Frodo and Gimli had decided to indulge in the age-old holiday pastime of cheating at crazy golf.

"Seven!"

"No way is that seven, Gimli, you're up to twelve at least."

"But I'm using the old dwarf counting system."

"Yes, the same one they use when they owe you money?"

"Look, it's seven!"

"Alright, seven it is. Can we get on to the second hole now?"

They moved round the course to the next hole, which was already occupied by a family of four.
Gimli smiled at them in an encouraging way and they decided that they would really much rather go canoeing.

Each of the holes on the crazy golf course was designed to look like a famous monument from a country around the world and the second hole was representing France with a fibreglass Arc de Triomphe which had a small, but also disproportionately large, model of General De Gaulle which circled round it, attempting to knock the ball off course.

Gimli started to make a long, complicated joke requiring a lot of background knowledge about entry into the European Union, but Frodo looked at him and he shut up. Frodo placed his ball on the starting point and teed off.

"Yes! Hole in one!" He took out his pen to fill in the scorecard. "And that takes my score up to two." He said with uncharacteristic triumphalism.

Gimli teed off. General De Gaulle and the ball connected and the ball shot off onto the footpath. Gimli gritted his teeth. It was going to be a long game.

Legolas and Aragorn arrived back at the pony trekking centre to find that they were entirely alone.

"Not exactly what I'd call a trek for advanced riders. I mean they couldn't keep up after we started galloping along the track, and the first half wasn't that twisty."

"Yeah, I mean any fool can canter through thick woodland."

One of the horsey looking women appeared.

"What happened to the rest of your group? And what did you do to the horses?" They looked down at their horses, which were steaming quietly.

"I have given this horse a proper run. He hasn't done this in goodness knows how long. And he likes it, don't you?" Legolas patted the horse's flank affectionately.

"Who do you think you are, the bloody horse whisperer?"

"No, if you whisper they can't hear you properly."

"And I suppose it'd follow you to hell and back now?"

Legolas looked at the horse. The horse looked at Legolas. They seemed to reach an agreement. "Well, if we were both definitely going to come back from Hell, then yes."

"This does not answer the question of where the rest of the group have gone."

"I don't think they could keep up in the forestry bit."

"What do you mean 'they couldn't keep up in the forestry bit'? It's so thickly wooded you can't go much faster than a walk."

Aragorn and Legolas looked at each other. Legolas tried to raise one eyebrow at the horsey woman, Roger Moore style and Aragorn tried not to laugh. The horsey woman finally lost her temper. "Fine! If you think you can canter through the sodding woods, then you just canter back through the woods and find them again."
As they trotted off, Aragorn turned to Legolas. "That woman didn't half look like Eowyn. Got the same evil temper as well."

Later, back in the house Aragorn realised that there was something missing.

"I'm pretty sure we didn't leave any of them behind in the forest." Said Legolas.

"No, it's not that. It's something else, something...smaller."

Pippin looked over from his miniature throne of power. "Yislef'ma'stupitbassard'ufacosin'innacrechewi'theweans"

"What did he say?"

"Pippin, could you repeat that, only more slowly."

"M'cousin. Stupitbassard. Eatslotsanissadrunkanbam."

"Hang on, I think I got some of that. His cousin." Realisation dawned over Legolas' face, like sunrise at the sewage works. "Ohmigod! We left Merry in the cre'che."

"Don't worry, the cre'che doesn't shut for another hour and a half, we can leave him there a while longer."

As if summoned by some divine force, there was a knock at the door. When Aragorn and Legolas opened it, they were greeted by an efficient looking young woman holding Merry by the scruff of the neck, who was accompanied by a man who could only answer to the description of 'bouncer'. Or possibly 'hitman'.

"Is there anything wrong?" asked Legolas, attempting to slip into the role of completely ineffective parent.

"Well, now that you mention it, there is. Or more accurately, there are. He has taught every child in the cre'che more swearwords than even I know."

Legolas thought about coming back with a witty riposte about how she looked like the kind of woman who didn't know many swearwords to begin with. Or at least none worse than 'knickers'.

"I dint mean to teach 'em the swearwords, I just got me finger caught in t'cupboard door and it really hurt."

"Yes, and you swore solidly for five whole minutes." She turned her attention back to Aragorn and Legolas. "And then he broke Tristan's nose in the rounders tournament."

"It were an accident, and anyway, he was cheating. I were going to get a rounder and he was deliberately blocking me. 'Snot fair."

"There was not reason for you to physically run over him and stand on his face."

Merry at least had the decency to look slightly ashamed at this allegation and shuffled his feet.

"Just like there was no reason for him to cut of one of Chloe's pigtails."

"She said she wanted a haircut, and when she decided she dint like it I tried to make it better."
"By sticking the pigtail back on again with PVA glue."

Pippin was looking dangerously close to the 'laughing until he was sick' stage and Frodo, who was quite perceptive in these matters, went for a bucket and positioned it next to his chair. Managing to do all of this while still making a great show of ignoring Pippin was quite an achievement. "Then of course, we come to the catapult. I suppose it was naive of me to start talking about knights in shining armour, because Merry here seems to know all about knights in shining armour. He tried to demonstrate using a small catapult made out of Lucinda's knicker elastic to fire pencils."

"Lucinda dint mind, she got extra goes on the catapult cos it were her knicker elastic."

"Yes, but Lucinda's parents minded. They're thinking of taking legal action. And we haven't even got on to the miniature siege engine."

"'S called a trebuchet. An' it worked an' all."

"Yes, we know it worked. That's why the cre'che doesn't have any windows any more, isn't it?"

"Oh dear, we're so terribly sorry. He's never like this at home." Lying came easily to Aragorn after centuries of practise of lying to Arwen ("No dear, I haven't been on Crusade...I've been inspecting the outlying farms. The suntan? No, that's just dirt, it'll wash off when I have my bath next month").

"Well, all I can say is that he's never, ever coming back to the creche. And if Lucinda's or Tristan's parents decide to sue, I'll pass on your contact details." She tried to sweep out of the chalet as dramatically as her sensible shoes would allow and slammed the door, but not too loudly.

Merry sat down in front of the TV looking suspiciously pleased with himself. Getting himself banned from the cre'che had been quite fun and eventually worth it for the look on Aragorn and Legolas' faces. And at least they couldn't send him back again.

"Where's Pippin gone?" Aragorn looked at Frodo. "Has he laughed himself sick again?"

"Nah. Laughed till he wet himself."

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It had come to the time that occurs in every holiday, much like the 'crisis' of any serious illness, when it is decided that We Will Do Something As A Group or in this case As A Fellowship. Since it was easiest, it was decided that they were all going to go swimming. All of them. At the same time.

The hobbits looked reasonable normal. Well, reasonably normal stood next to the others. They were all wearing very long, very baggy swimming trunks, with ill advised designs on them, so they all looked like very, very small surf dudes, or at least they thought they did. The effect was somewhat spoiled by Pippin still wearing the string vest, and Sam wearing a pair of water wings. And holding a polystyrene float under each arm. And wearing what looked suspiciously like a navy surplus life jacket which came to his knees. However, next to Gandalf this was normal.

Gandalf was sporting a most fetching and fashionable 'bathing costume', straight out of the couture catalogues of 1891 (or more accurately straight out of the back of Messers Smith and Watson Clothing Suppliers at 3am in the morning). Thankfully for the rest of humanity it covered him from neck to knee, but even Gandalf's shins were fairly worrying. This had horizontal stripes, which gave him the appearance of an elderly, evil version of the Michelin man. He had a waterproof pointy hat on his head, and was wearing an inflatable ring which had a holder for his can of Tenants.

Gimli could not be persuaded to forgo the helmet, and in deference to his dwarvish heritage his
swimming trunks were made of chain mail and leather. Gimli was probably the local fetish supply store's biggest customer, but not for the normal reasons. Legolas and Aragorn were getting a lot of attention because they were both wearing very, very small speedos. Ok, so maybe some of the attention had the undertone of 'poof', but more of it had the undertone of frustrated middle-aged mother. The attention given to Legolas increased as the group approached the pool and Legolas put on a pink swimming cap. The Fellowship stopped and looked at him disapprovingly.

"What? Just because I actually care what chlorine does to my hair..."

They gave in. There was no point arguing with an elf that felt it's hair was under threat, but they had great trouble at suppressing their giggles at the way his pointy ears stuck out round it. Gandalf waded out to the centre of the pool, and bobbed about leering at anything over the age of 18 in a swimming costume, even the woman who looked like a clone of Ann Widdecombe. Frodo dived in and started splashing about, doing handstands under the water and so on. Aragorn went into butch mode, i.e. doing the butterfly and manfully half drowning the rest of the swimming pool. Legolas swam in old woman style, doing the breaststroke very slowly with his head lifted as far out of the water as possible. Gimli and Sam remained sat on the side of the pool together, dipping their feet in the water and nothing more. Merry and Pippin headed straight for the water slides, trying to avoid each other while doing exactly the same things. This even included when the inertia of Merry's greater bulk meant that he caught up with Pippin half way down the water slide ignoring each other.

Frodo splashed over to Sam. "Come on Sam, get in the water. It slopes really gently, just try coming in up to your knees."

"Thought you weren't talking to me."

"Fine!" said Frodo and swam off again.

After the swim, they went to lunch, at the Pancake House. A muttered suggestive comment was made by Merry about Dutch Pancakes, an in-joke with Pippin who tried to ignore it.

"Achshutyerface!"

Merry attempted to give Pippin the finger, but Legolas grabbed his arms and put him in an arm lock. He didn't know what Tristan's parents looked like, but he could see a family across the room with a boy with a bandaged nose giving them very dirty looks.

It was only later in the evening that the full effects of the pancakes, or rather the bizarre pancake Frodo had ordered.

"Don' feel well," said Frodo, going green, and running for the bathroom, followed by the sound of copious vomiting. Sam, completely forgetting they weren't talking to each other, rushed after him.

"I think he meant it about not feeling well. Anyone else feeling nauseous?"

"If Gandalf keeps all his clothes on, I'm fine," said Merry.

"Ah'm OK"

"Pippin?"

"Tha's me."
"Are you being comprehensible again?"

"Whut d'ye mean agin? Ah'm aywis comprehe - comprehenenen - understandable."

"You weren't before." Said Merry, with feeling.

"Was."

"Were not."

"Was."

"So you're talking to me now?"

"Looks like it."

"Why weren't we talking the first place?"

"Search me. Why weren't ye talkin' tae me?"

"Cos you weren't talkin' to me, y'great long dollop."

They hugged to make up, then decided that this was going beyond the bounds of manly affection and sprang apart.

The sounds of intermittent illness were still coming from the bathroom. Aragorn decided to investigate, if only because any one person spending a large amount of time in a bathroom shared between 8 people is not going to make themselves popular. He found Frodo hugging the toilet bowl, and muttering that there was no way he'd eaten as much food as he'd thrown up. Aragorn could think of many ripostes concerning the food capacity of the average hobbit, but suppressed them. If this was going to go on for a long time then it called for action.

A few moments later the rest of the fellowship was treated to the sight of Aragorn running to the kitchen sink with Frodo under one arm, and impressively managing to make it before Frodo threw up again. Being that Frodo was a Hobbit and could not stand in front of the sink to throw up in it in the approved hungover fashion of students everywhere, the draining board was cleared and Frodo was plonked on there, where he proceeded to curl up and start feeling sorry for himself.

After spending the entire night on the draining board Frodo reckoned that he must have got rid of everything that was causing him to be sick and, feeling a little better, decided to have some breakfast.

Gandalf was not happy. He had lost his acolyte to that knotty-pated puttock of a Hobbit Meriadoc. This place was infested with, he shuddered, children. He was really coming to believe in the sentiment that they weren't children, they were monsters and the Hobbits were in league with them.

A more naiNve reader may assume that this was because of some flaw in his character, but it was actually because Gandalf had broken the primary rule of drinking. He'd drunk something that even the makers weren't sure what it was, ignoring the clear labelling of the substance as 'vadko'. Ethnic spellings such as 'wodka' are acceptable, although they may not have the same attitude to 'percentage proof' as the rest of us, but 'vadko', is generally a way of saying goodbye to both brain cells and stomach lining.

The upshot of this was that Gandalf had to get out. This being Center Parcs, the car was parked a
long way from the chalet to force them to walk or cycle everywhere. He decided to take the bicycle as there was a chance it might get him out of there faster.

The Fellowship were having lunch on the small patch of grass in front of the chalet, and as per usual being viewed as legitimate entertainment by all those around them. They were all a little confused by the grey blur on wheels that passed them, narrowly missing their spare plate of sandwiches.

"That was Gandalf wasn't it?"

"Yes..."

"What was that tune he was humming, it sounded familiar."

"It sounded like the theme tune from the Great Escape, only speeded up."

"Gandalf wouldn't try and do a Steve McQueen on a bicycle would he?"

"This is Gandalf, remember."

They jumped to their feet with random cries of 'Alaaarm!' and 'man the bicycles!' and as one being of assorted species leapt on to the bikes and began the pursuit. Having youth, or at least eternally preserved youth, on their side it should have been easy to catch him up, but as Gandalf had the rampaging paranoia the odds had been evened somewhat.

Supplying such a 'diverse' group as the fellowship with bicycles had been something of a challenge. Three BMXs had been provided for the Hobbits, but since there was nothing else appropriately sized for the fourth Hobbit, Pippin, who had drawn the short straw, had been stuck with a pink girl's bike with training wheels so rusted on that Aragorn's attempts to remove them had been useless. Gimli, since he lacked the sense of balance for a bike was on a tricycle and as for Aragorn and Legolas, well their mode of transport was a strange and complex beast. We could describe it as being like the vehicle the Chuckle Brothers drive, but since they don't exist outside of Britain and most people wouldn't admit to knowing who they were in the first place it would be pointless.

It seemed to consist of two benches, the one behind designed for two adults and the one at the front for as many small children as can be squeezed on to it. Two bicycle mechanisms were attached underneath and could be reached through the complete absence of floor. Neither of the two bicycles mechanisms had such useful things as gears, which was making keeping up with the others rather challenging. The fact that steering had to be done by committee didn't help either.

"Legolas, we've got to slow Gandalf down! You're the archer, why don't you do something?"

"If it may have escaped your notice, but I don't have a bow and arrow."

"Improvise!"

Legolas made a grab for Aragorn's waistband.

"This is neither the time nor the place for that!"

"It's nothing like that, my goodness, humans have such one-track minds. I need the elastic out of your underpants."

"What?"

"To make a catapult, you idiot. I think Merry's given me some ideas, you lot are really starting to get
Aragorn found out that it is nigh-on impossible to steer a four-wheeled bicycle when someone is trying to remove the elastic from your underwear. Families sitting around quietly, enjoying the afternoon sunshine, eating lunch outside of their chalets were treated to the somewhat...unusual sight. An elderly gentleman with long, flowing hair and beard, wearing a grey dress was riding a bike at high speed, pursued by four children and a short, bearded gentleman on a tricycle. A few moments later they were followed by a four-wheeled bicycle, weaving erratically and occupied by two gentlemen in a most compromising position who appeared to be in the midst of an argument in Welsh. Something for the photo album.

"Got it!" Legolas waved Aragorn's underpant elastic triumphantly. "Now we need ammunition." He leaned out of the side and grabbed some pinecones off the ground. He then teetered precariously, holding on to the side and leaning out of the bicycle and firing the pinecones at Gandalf in approved 'mobster-in-car' fashion.

"Can't you steer a bit straighter, some of us are trying to aim here!"

"I would, but some fool just took my underpant elastic and now I have to use one hand to hold them up!"

Half an hour and many small injuries later, Gandalf had been captured and forcibly restrained in the chalet.

"What's got into him?"

Frodo picked up a bottle. "More like what's he put into him..."

"Oh no, not the 'vadko' again. Honestly, I'll have to talk to the newsagent about stopping selling this stuff."

Legolas looked worried. "You know what happens when he drinks this stuff. We have to get him home where he feels safe."

"Yes, but how are we going to cope with him in the car all the way home, it takes three hours at least."

Pippin looked thoughtful. "Weel, he doesnae have tae be *in* the car."

The rest of the Fellowship looked at Pippin as they slowly realised what he was suggesting.

Legolas sighed contentedly. "It's so nice without Gandalf in the car. It's easier to split the Hobbits up and it doesn't smell." There was a muffled thump from above. "Although I think we'll probably have to hose out the roofbox when we get back."

Chapter End Notes

Author note: Pippin IS understandable in this one. Say it out loud; we swear he's
comprehensible, we haven’t made him very Glaswegian at all.
This episode is a tribute to Spike Milligan, whose sense of humour has been warping us from an early age.

Legolas had always found Saturday morning to be the most relaxing part of the week since Merry and Pippin never seemed to get up before one in the afternoon at weekends and Gandalf had a warm spot in his heart - or other places - for Saturday morning TV presenters; it was all the bounciness, or, more accurately, the bouncing.

Over the past few years Legolas had evolved his Saturday morning routine. Every week, using just his elven instincts he woke up at exactly 9.30 am, took a relaxing bath with no-one else banging on the door waiting to be let in, went to the paper shop to buy his copy of the Guardian and came home to make himself a cup of earl grey tea and enjoy having the entire kitchen table to spread the different parts of his newspaper out on. The fact that all of this - except for the bath of course - was accomplished while wearing a full length, Victorian, gentleman's brocade dressing gown had ceased to cause comment in the area since he had done it every week since moving in and the joke had worn thin after about two years.

Only this week, his ritual was disturbed by Aragorn who usually took advantage of Saturdays to spend the entire day in his boxer shorts and some other random item of clothing depending on the weather. Today, most disturbingly, it was a cardigan.

"Legolas, I have something to tell you..."

"Mhm."

"I've become a Scoutmaster."

"Mhm."

"And I'm going camping with them."

"Mhm."

"Next weekend."

"Mhm."

"Legolas? Are you listening?"

"Mhm."

"I'm pregnant."

"Mhm."

"I've sold the house to an international terrorist organisation."
"Mhm."

"I've told Celeborn he can come live with us. Permanently."

"You what?"

"I thought you weren't listening. None of it's true, well, some of it is."

"Celeborn's actually coming to live with us?"

"No, last I heard he was heading for the Mongolian border. The bit about becoming a Scoutmaster."

"You what?"

"I've become a scoutmaster."

Legolas raised his eyebrows so much it looked as if they were attempting to make a break for freedom from the top of his head. He had known Aragorn for thousands of years and was sure that any 'criminal' tendencies would have become apparent before then. He really didn't have Aragorn down as the type who went 'scouting for boys'.

"Why? Why have you become a scoutmaster?"

"Well, I was thinking about what Mrs Wainthrop keeps saying about how we should be more respectable, I thought that with my woodsman skills I could be really useful to the scouts, and be respectable at the same time."

"Let me get this right. You have become a Scoutmaster in order to try and become respectable? Were there no openings for gigolos?"

"What do you mean? It's a well respected youth organisation."

"I've met Baden Powell." Said Legolas very darkly.

"Wow! Could you come and give a talk?"

Legolas looked at him again. There followed some long and detailed explanations as to what it was he was trying to get at, followed by equally long reassurances from Aragorn that, no he wasn't like that and no, none of the people running the local scout unit were either. Legolas was slightly reassured, until Aragorn told him that he had told Frodo about this on Wednesday and Frodo had enrolled himself as a skills instructor to teach them how to cook; however Sam had heard about that and had enrolled himself as a skills instructor to make sure Frodo got out of it alive.

Saturday afternoon was spent shopping for camping equipment. Aragorn was the only one who had been camping in the last few years, well, if you could call it camping, he just went off walking in the hills and weather sort of happened around him and his survival bag, so there were a few things they needed before venturing off into the great outdoors again. After several hours, the rest of the Fellowship began to get a little concerned, or at least Legolas did - surely it didn't take this long to buy a few sleeping bags, rucksacks and tents.

As if in answer to his unspoken question, Aragorn's landrover pulled up in the driveway. Or at least it looked like Aragorn's landrover. Aragorn's landrover didn't usually have this much stuff crammed into the back or strapped to the sides. Neither did the suspension usually trail along the ground. Aragorn and Sam both got out and removed a few large carrier bags each from the back of the landrover and walked towards the door, leaving Frodo to take care of the rest.
"Isn't that a little unfair, leaving him to carry in all those bags like that?" Said Legolas.

"What do you mean? This is ours, all that's his."

Frodo insisted on giving the rest of the household a demonstration of each of his new purchases. It was certainly educational - none of them had ever seen a solar powered lamp or collapsible espresso maker - and also most entertaining, especially when Frodo modelled his full body mosquito-proof suit.

"Frodo, we're going camping in the North Yorkshire Moors. There might be midges, but there definitely aren't enough to warrant the bio-hazard anti-midge suit."

"Yes, but you never know. And you never know where we might go in the future, I mean, next year a week in west Scotland might be a nice trip and a bit more adventurous."

"I take it then that your definition of 'a bit more adventurous' means camping in the middle of the swamp instead of on the edge of it then?"

"And isn't the outdoor fridge a little excessive, putting stuff in buckets of cold water has worked fine for the scouting association for decades. And the first-aid kit, you'd think you were on 'ER' or something. Isn't Aragorn a bit offended, he's the designated first-aider, isn't he."

There was a growl from behind one of the leftover sections of the newspaper.

"Well, he hasn't really embraced 20th century medical advances, has he?" said Frodo, against his better judgement.

The growl from behind the newspaper became more wolverine. "And how many times have I saved your life?"

"Last count 47," said Sam. "48 if you count the time last year when he stopped you from electrocuting yourself on the hairdryer."

"That was only because he tripped on the wire and pulled the plug out."

"That is not the point. The point is that I saved your life and am a perfectly competent first-aider. There's no need for you to go all 'ER' on me."

"If he wis goin' 'ER' on ye he'd be jumpin' up and doon shoutin' 'CBC! Chem. 7!' An' tryin' tae defibrillate ye wi' the landrover's jump leads."

"Save us from those who watch medical dramas and think they know first aid."

Merry, certified 'Peak Practice' addict, and avid watcher of anything with blood, gore, a high body count and nurses' uniforms, objected "But I do know first aid, I usually manage to work out what's wrong wi' em long before t'doctors on 'Casualty' do."

"Yes, but most people old enough tae be allowed tae stay up late enough tae watch 'Casualty' manage that."

The Fellowship adjourned to the garden, where the tent was to be Tested, much in the way that NASA tests its rockets. Frodo had invested in a state of the art tent, more intended for going to the Antarctic than the frozen, barbarous, terrible wastes above Ilkley. It was a self erecting tent, a fact that caused much amusement to certain members of the group. Frodo hurled the tent across the garden, where it put itself up in mid air, and was then caught by a stray breeze, blew over the garden
fence and knocked Mrs. Wainthrop (who was definitely pruning the roses and not listening in) into her goldfish pond.

"Oops."

*****

On Tuesday Sam decided that it was a good evening for some gardening and headed out to the shed to find his utility belt. He froze when he heard voices.

"Where's me woggle?"

"Ah dunno, huv ye tried yer trouser poaket, it was there the last time Ah looked."

"Ah, there's me woggle."

"Och no, ma backwoodsmanship's comin' off."

"Give it here and pass me that safety pin."

Sam wasn't sure whether to knock politely or run away very, very quickly. He decided that the geraniums really needed the attention and knocked as inoffensively as possible.

"Ahem," he coughed, hoping that they might not hear him and he could just go away again.

The sight he was greeted with on the inside of the shed was somewhat...peculiar. Merry and Pippin were both fully dressed. Fully dressed in green sweatshirts with badges sewn down the arms (but not very many), green neckties and sensible shoes for doing running about in, or more accurately, sensible shoes for putting the boot in. Sam looked at them in utter horror.

"What are you two doing?"

"What does it look like?"

"I know what it looks like, but I thought Gandalf stopped making those kinds of movies years ago."

"We've joined the Scouts."

"Why?"

"They wouldn't let us in the Girl Guides."

"Not that we didn't try..."

"Tell the truth, why have you really joined the Scouts?" Sam looked at Merry and Pippin suspiciously. He had been pretty sure they weren't the type to go scouting for boys either. Neither had they ever seemed like the type to help old ladies cross the road. Help old ladies under a bus, yes, especially if they were in any way like Mrs Wainthrop.

"Ok, we'll tell you the truth. We wanted to see where Aragorn was going on Thursday evenings. We thought he'd either got a fancy woman or joined the Masons."

"We were soooo disappointed."

"So we thought, that looks like fun, why don't we give it a try."
Sam narrowed his eyes. "Come on, I know you better than that. Why did you really join the Scouts?"

"We decided that the best way to make Aragorn's life absolute living hell, would be to join the other Scout group."

"The other Scout group...?"

"Yes."

"You mean the one that takes...girls...?"

"That one, yes."

"But they're only about twelve!"

"That's not why we joined those Scouts, we joined them so that when we go to the joint camp this weekend we can make his life a living hell then."

"Ah."

"Good idea isn't it."

"No, it isn't, it's really not nice. What has Aragorn ever done to you? He's given you somewhere to live, fed you, saved you from the militia and that angry mob..."

"Yeah, but it's so easy. And it's not like there's much round here to do for fun."

"Yeah, some of us don't want to join the Women's Institute."

Pippin immediately regretted that statement. Sam grabbed him by the woggle and made a very clear threat that the hoe in his other hand could be inserted somewhere rather painful.

"Ok, ok, I take it back about the WI. And about being nasty to Aragorn. We'll stop, but please let us go on the camp this weekend, we've made friends there, and they're looking forward to spending a weekend away with their mates, and they're only kids, you don't want to disappoint them."

Pippin knew exactly how to manipulate Sam. He was more broody than any woman he'd ever met, and couldn't ever bring himself to disappoint children. Sam put him and the hoe down.

"Alright, but on the proviso that you come inside right now and come clean to Aragorn and the others."

The gruesome twosome looked doubtful, but Sam waved the strimmer in their direction and they were persuaded. They trooped inside and presented themselves to the sitting room. Legolas and Frodo burst out laughing.

"But I thought you always went to fancy dress things as the children from that film 'The Village of the Damned'."

Merry and Pippin scowled at the rest of the Fellowship.

"'Snot a fancy dress party. We joined the Scouts."

"No you didn't, I'd have seen you at meetings."
"We joined the other Scout group."

"You mean the...other Scout group." There was a burst of dramatic music. "Gandalf, would you stop watching 'Psycho' when we're trying to have a conversation."

"Yes, yes, the one that takes girls."

There was an appropriate scream from the TV. Everyone glared at Gandalf but he pretended not to notice.

Can we go now, we have to be there soon and we can't be late because it's Merry's turn to carry in the flag at the beginning of the meeting."

Merry and Pippin left, leaving the rest of the group to assess the damage. Legolas began. "So, Aragorn, you're spending a weekend away... with the Hobbits. And you're going to be sleeping in tents...with the Hobbits. You'll be around many naked flames...with the Hobbits. So have you ever considered taking out medical insurance?"

"Hey, I resent that. You can't put me and Sam in the same pigeon hole as Merry and Pippin."

"No, there'd be a terrible fight if we tried that, you're small, but you wouldn't all fit in the same pigeon hole."

Frodo made a face. He may have been insane, well at least some of the time, but he knew when he was being mocked.

*****

Friday evening came and Aragorn, Frodo and Sam loaded up the landrover. Merry and Pippin, or Dave and Pip, as they were known to the rest of their Scout group were going in the Scouts' minibus to keep up the pretence of having nothing to do with Aragorn, and anyway, there wasn't much room once all of Frodo's stuff was put in the back.

Aragorn had supervised Merry and Pippin's rucksack-packing, but as soon as he'd left the room they emptied them and started again. As a result the collective contents of their rucksacks were as follows:

Item 1: Kendal mintcake. Vast quantities thereof. (Merry and Pippin were not big up on modern camping skills, or any camping skills for that matter, but had seen Kendal mintcake in a lot of camping shops and decided it must have some sort of mystic powers. Pippin had suggested that perhaps like cross-channel swimmers and bacon fat that you were supposed to rub it on to keep warm.)

Item 2: Jelly babies. 23 packets thereof. (For bribery of Bottle, the brains of their little gang.)

Item 3: Sandwiches. Copious amounts thereof, all wrapped in tinfoil and absolutely no egg mayonnaise. (Merry and Pippin had no faith whatsoever in Scout camp cooking, but rather misguided faith in 2-day-old sandwiches. However, since Pippin was involved it was unlikely that the sandwiches would last much longer than the 45-minute bus journey.)

Item 4: Cake.

Item 5: Waterprofs.

Item 6: Clean underwear. One set each. (No use in carrying around unnecessary weight.)
Item 6: Slingshots, ammunition and other assorted small weaponry.

Item 7: Frodo. 1, sleeping. (Packed in error and the result of much hasty unpacking a few minutes later.)

Item 8: Sam. 1, in search of missing Frodo. (Also unpacked, but with more violence.)

Item 9: Streetmap of Bad WuNrtsemburg. (Thought by Merry and Pippin to be a map of the North Yorkshire Moors.)

Item 10: Lemonade bottles. (Current contents 50% vodka, 50% lemonade.)

They had an attitude to packing which would have been thought to be sensible by most Hobbits - they had taken a lot of food - but which the Scouting Association would not have approved of. Strangely, the contents of their rucksacks were rather similar to those of the rest of their Scout group. With the exception of course of Frodo and Sam, who didn't have a rucksack so much as an entire landrover with roof box, but most of those items were probably in there somewhere.

*****

Scene: The blasted campsite. Enter one landrover.

"When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning or in rain?"

"Frodo, I think you're getting a little overdramatic."

"Fair is foul and foul is fair..."

"Frodo, stop it, you're just showing off now."

Frodo obediently shut up and continued unpacking the landrover. He seemed to have packed everything except the kitchen sink and possibly the sideboard, which in light of his current behaviour was probably going to be a problem.

"Is this a dagger I see before me, the handle toward my hand?"

"No," said Sam, patting him on the shoulder in a friendly way. "It's a groundsheet. You unfold it and you spread it on the ground so your sleeping bag doesn't get wet."

"Art thou but a groundsheet of the mind, a false creation proceeding from the heat oppresseLd brain?"

Sam decided this would be really good time to have a conversation with Aragorn regarding what they were going to do with Frodo before the rest of the Scouts turned up in the obligatory coal fired, rubber band driven mini bus to find their skills instructor gibbering up a tree.

"Aragorn, we're going to have to do something."

"I know, he's gone all Macbeth again."

"I thought he'd stopped doing that."

"So did I, but the blasted heath scene must have brought it all back to him."

"What are we going to do about it?"
"There's nothing we can do, except from hiding all the sharp objects and Complete Works of Shakespeare and hope for the best."

Frodo was unpacking the sleeping bags while declaiming "Still it cried 'sleep no more' to all the house; 'Frodo hath murdered sleep; therefore Gondor shall sleep no more.'"

"You did get rid of the dress though didn't you?"

"Yep, I know they didn't allow women on the stage back then, but Frodo can't pass for a decent Lady Macbeth even in pitch darkness."

"That's a little unfair, he was a good as Desdemona. Even Shakespeare liked him as Desdemona."

"Yeah, but Shakespeare just thought that all tragic heroines should be really short. Except for the evil ones like Lady Macbeth."

"Yeah, he thought they should be built like rugby players. Students of literature really miss out on a lot not knowing how warped he actually was, I mean, he wanted Pippin as Ophelia."

"Good thing he ended up too drunk to go on stage, wasn't it."

"But you saw how Merry played her, he was nearly as pissed as Pippin and he didn't know the lines, he just happened to have put on the dress."

"People aren't supposed to collapse on the floor laughing at tragedies. Neither are they supposed to ask for refunds because one of the actors was sick on them."

"And the bit where he staggered back on stage after he was supposed to have died and hugged the guy playing Hamlet and said he was his best mate..."

They were startled out of their nostalgic reverie by what appeared to be the sound of a squad of broken lawnmowers attempting the world land speed record while the drivers tortured cats. There was another sound closely following behind it; that of the grand prix sewing machines Lands End to John O'Groats rally, apparently during an air raid. All this meant that two Scouting Association minibuses were approaching the field, although approaching was a relative term - they didn't come into view for approximately quarter of an hour.

*****

Back at the house, Legolas and Gimli were enjoying a Hobbit-free environment. There was no shouting, no fighting and the sideboard was once again a safe place in which to store glassware. However something was worrying them.

"Where's Gandalf?"

"Och, I don't know and I don't care."

"Yes, but whenever Gandalf runs away he always leaves at least two windows and the front door open for burglars and takes a few items of value to sell. The front door is shut and the video machine's still here, so therefore, Gandalf is still in the house. Do you really want Gandalf somewhere in the house when you don't know exactly where?"

[Upstairs in the loft Gandalf was wedged between a beam and an old chest of drawers with one arm outstretched. Several weeks ago he had succeeded in finding Aragorn's 'other' secret stash of drink and was taking this opportunity to completely deplete his supplies. A soft keening noise emitted from
his lips, the one discernible word in it being 'drink', but it his lament was quiet enough that neither of the other occupants of the house could here it because if they found him, he didn't think he could ever live it down.]

Some time later, Legolas and Gimli had searched the house and found nothing.

"Och, why don't we just give in? He's not anywhere nasty or unexpected and we're fairly sure he's in neither of our bedrooms or the bathroom."

"No, I don't trust him, he might just be moving around to trick us."

"Yes, but there's nothing we can do, we just have to stay on our guard. Pity no one ever invented weapons that glow blue when there's a wizard around."

"Alright then. You go get the Warhammer out of the cupboard and I'll set up the Hammond organ."

Legolas and Gimli loved it when they got the occasional weekend to themselves. They'd never understood why, but for some reason the rest of the Fellowship had this terrible aversion to war games and Hammond organ music. Oh well, it was their loss.

*****

When they arrived the Scouts cheerily - or with at least not too much swearing from Merry and Pippin's Scout group - started putting up the tents. The putting up of Scout tents is a mystic art, because they never saw the point of such sensible things as those new fangled dome tents that go up in 10 minutes and are waterproof.

20 minutes later the side of the field with Aragorn Scouts looked like a well drilled army campsite, while the side of the field with Merry and Pippin's Scouts looked like an earthquake in a draper's shop. That is with the exception of Merry and Pippin's tent because while the rest of the Scout group had been putting up their tent, Merry, Pippin, Bottle, Nev, Daz and Spanner had all gone behind the nearest drystone wall for a quick cigarette while the Scoutmasters weren't looking. Merry and Pippin didn't usually smoke - well, not since people had stopped growing pipeweed, they didn't like this new-fangled tobacco stuff, it didn't give you the munchies at all - but this was Scout Camp and certain conventions had to be respected.

A face appeared over the other side of the wall.

"I think smoking's a really bad idea you know. It's really bad for you and it's not big or clever, remember when we had that talk about it last month?"

The owner of the face, and indeed the incredibly piercing voice was Kylie. Every Scout group's worst nightmare, a twelve-year-old feminist, who has joined the Scouts to make a political point and really isn't all that interested in Scouting and wouldn't dare go anywhere near a Guide group because they'd rip her to pieces in five minutes flat.

Five members of the patrol took a long draw on their cigarettes and Bottle sucked really hard on his jelly baby, making a strange slurping noise.

Kylie by this point was incensed. "I'll tell the Scoutmasters."

"Ooh, ooh, Ah'm so frightened ah might just wet maself."

She turned on her heel and walked away. Merry looked thoughtful for a minute, then addressed Bottle.
"Bottle...?"

"Yes Captain?"

"There's another quarter of jelly babies for you if you sabotage Kylie's tent for us."

"Ooh, I like this game! With this quarter of jelly babies I can really impress Molly Nasher."

"Yes Bottle, I'm sure you could. But first, go sabotage the tent."

"How, my captain?"

"Just the usual Kendal mintcake, branch and shoelace job should do it."

"Yes my Captain."

Bottle attempted to sneak off after Kylie as quietly as his boots - bought two sizes too big so he could grow into him - and cardboard knees would allow.

Back on Aragorn's side of the field everything was in perfect order. The tents were up, nearly all of Frodo's luggage had been unloaded and Frodo had been coaxed out of Lady Macbeth mode enough to cook dinner, although he had started the instructions for dinner with the words 'eye of newt and toe of frog', but Sam had taken him for a little walk before he made a second and much more successful attempt.

Since both groups were in theory camping together, Merry and Pippin's group had been forced to abandon their tents for the time being to join in with the first cooking activity, which would count towards a badge if they managed to make something which could be successfully extracted from the bottom of the pot and wasn't actually fatal if eaten. This had also allowed them to join forces with the seventh member of their group, Tony, their heavy. Rumour had it that Tony was really a girl and called Antonia, a rumour backed up by the fact that she wasn't allowed to share a tent with any of the others and had been seen using the ladies toilet on the campsite. However, anyone who voiced such rumours in Tony's earshot were usually knocked into the middle of next week. Merry and Pippin had immediately recognised Tony's potential, as, around the age of 12 or 13, girls tend to be bigger and stronger than boys and very much capable of knocking anyone else in the Scout group into next week.

The meal which Frodo had planned for them to cook was a little different from the usual Scout group cooking, in that it was posh (Sam and Aragorn hadn't been able to prise the spice rack out of Frodo's fingers as they wedged him into the back of the landrover), but also similar because the end result was almost entirely inedible. Well, what Merry and Pippin's group ended up with was inedible (apparently spaghetti carbonara really wasn't supposed to be that colour), Aragorn's group had something that they could eat at least, and Frodo and Sam, who were cooking for all of the Scoutmasters, turned out something worth at least one Michelin star. Not even Pippin could eat what his group cooked, and it wasn't from lack of trying, or at least from lack of Merry's trying.

*****

Legolas was in the process of playing Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor on the Hammond organ. Why he was attempting to do this is another matter entirely and one which we will not be going into in any great detail. He had long since given up on paying any attention to the comments coming from next door as they were all along the lines of 'shut up with the 'Phantom of the Opera' music'. He had decided that they couldn't possibly be addressed to him because he wasn't playing songs from 'Phantom of the Opera'; all musicals went against the Elvish sensibilities about song.
There was a clatter from the other side of the living room. Gimli had taken out his own personal video collection - which, before you get any ideas is nothing like Gandalf's personal video collection - and was watching his Gene Kelly films and trying to copy the dance routines. He had nearly memorised the one with the chair and the newspaper, but his legs weren't really following the clearly labelled instructions given out by his brain.

Up in the loft soft cries of 'drink! drink?'' could still be heard.

"Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here and fill me from the crown to toe top full of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood, stop up th'access and passage to remorse..."

Sam gently put his hands on Frodo’s shoulders and pushed him so that he sat down again. "I don't think that was quite what we had in mind when we said we were going to tell ghost stories."

"Be thou a spirit of health or a goblin damned...?"

"Frodo, just let someone else tell a story."

Kylie however, was trying not to gibber. "I don't see why we have to tell ghost stories. I don't believe them. The dead can't come back, it's a scientific fact."

The members of the Fellowship who were present exchanged looks, and Merry grinned wickedly. "Let me tell you about the Dead Men of Dunharrow..."

Half an hour later Kylie had locked herself in the campsite toilet with two torches and the lights on, saying that if someone would just bring her sleeping bag she'd be fine there for the night.

Pippin was reaching a crisis point. He'd eaten all the sandwiches and the cake on the journey there, and had been deprived of dinner. He'd made repeated, desperate attempts to eat it, but his body had rejected it as 'poisonous, possibly radioactive', and he'd been utterly unable to swallow one bite. He was now shaking with sugar withdrawal symptoms and had lost all power of rational thought.

"Rational, rational, rations, rations, food, food, tapestry, cyclone, special offer, food..."

He went away from the campfire back to their tent, looking for food.

"Celeriac?"

He ransacked the rucksacks, and found a large amount of Kendal Mintcake and jelly babies. He made an experimental attempt to eat the mintcake.

"Revenge!"

This did not go down well.

"Where's Pip gone?" Merry had noticed a lack Scottish swearing at the campfire. They were getting to the alternative words for 'ging gang goollie', and Pippin was a most enthusiastic singer of this.

"Went back to our tent looking for summat to eat." Supplied Daz.
Merry froze. "But, but there's jelly babies in there!"

"Yeah, and?"

"He'll eat the green ones!"

"And?"

But Merry was running at full tilt across the campsite towards his tent. He dived through the door to see Pippin crouched in the corner of the tent, Gollum-like, with empty packets of jelly babies around him. He raised a handful of them to his mouth as Merry leapt towards him.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" (in approved bodyguard fashion).

Merry hit a tent pole and the whole tent collapsed on them. In the tangled mess of hobbits and canvas a noise started, high pitched and very, very fast.

"yingtongyingtongyingtongyingtongyingtongyingtongiddleeyepo..."

This was accompanied by frenzied movement while still wrapped in the tent canvas. Merry had never seen him this bad before, and crawled out of the tent to get help.

*****

Nev, Daz, and Bottle approached Aragorn.

"Scuse me."

"Yes?"

"'S your nephew. Said Pip was in trouble."

"What have they done now?"

"Said something about eating jelly babies."

Aragorn seized Nev by the collar. "You let Pippin eat jelly babies? You let PIPPIN EAT JELLY BABIES?"

Nev looked rather taken aback.

"Yeah?"

The other Scout leaders looked in confusion at Aragorn, except for Sam and Frodo who knew what was going on and were looking for some rope. Aragorn sprang into kingship mode. He was not going to tackle a jelly baby enhanced Pippin without backup.

"Scouuuuuuuuuuts fall in!"

His scout group materialised, precision drilled, a five-foot tall legion of Gondor. The other scout group looked at them disinterestedly. At this point Merry staggered in, dishevelled, bloodied and missing his woggle.

"Pippin... jelly babies... Tent... don't go near, too dangerous..." then he collapsed.
Aragorn went into proper, pre-battle Henry V mode. "Scouts. Pip is out there, under the influence of Jelly babies. He is dangerous to himself and others. We will hunt him down... for his own safety of course. Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood, disguise fair nature with hard favoured rage!"

The scouts looked like they could probably take on the SAS and win.

"Scouts - search pattern beta 4!"

The scouts fanned out and blended into the darkness. Cries of 'YINGTONG' could be heard from various parts of the field, but surely moving too fast for any mortal creature. Then a soft birdcall rang out, repeated across the field. The scouts had found him, and they closed in. They had him cornered by the toilet block (from within which could be heard the sound of Kylie having terrified hysterics). Aragorn appeared carrying a large coil of rope.

"Once more unto the breach dear friends, or we'll stop up the gap with our Scout Association dead!"

This seemed a little extreme, especially since as far as fighting was concerned Aragorn's scout group favoured the battle cry 'today is a good day for someone else to die.' They leapt for Pippin, and due to their warrior and knot tying training managed to totally avoid injury, whilst securing Pippin.

Since no-one seemed to be about to pay him any attention for his Oscar winning performance, Merry staggered back to his tent, glad to be alive, and so hungry he could eat the Kendal mintcake. However, when he got there a terrible sight awaited him. Spanner, asleep amid the wreckage of his entire supply of Kendal mintcake. Merry gave a desperate prayer to any handy deities that mintcake in such large quantities had no adverse effects for humans. Anyway, this left him but one option. He was going to have to eat Spanner.

Fortunately for Spanner Frodo appeared, muttering something about the milk of human kindness, and handed Merry a double-decker spaghetti carbonara sandwich.

*****

Legolas and Gimli were investigating the art of construction. To be more accurate they had got the Lego out; not the small scale, easy stuff Merry and Pippin occasionally attempted to construct obscene tableaux out of, but the technical Lego. The stuff that moved and had immensely complex hydraulics and microcomputers involved. The current project was an intelligent AT-AT walker, and both of them were peering at dismantled parts wondering what had gone wrong since on its first test run in the garden it had attempted to kill Mrs. Wainthrop's cat. The cat was only slightly charred, but what was worrying Legolas and Gimli was the fact that they hadn't built any weapons into the thing.

*****

Aragorn had gently carried Pippin into the First Aid tent. Then there were a couple of muffled thumps and the gibbering stopped. Then, with due sense of relief he went to bed.

The next morning dawned. The scouts arose, looking much the worse for wear having not slept at all. Pippin was released, with a severe post-jelly baby hangover. Kylie was extricated from the bathroom, by Tony judo kicking the door down and hurling her out. Breakfast occurred, and the campsite was 'tidied'. Morning activities were commenced, mainly basketwork and macrameL Much to the others' surprise no-one was injured in these activities, and Merry and Pippin were unsuccessful in spelling filthy words in raffia. Lunch occurred. Frodo had been convinced that feeding Merry and Pippin was the best way to avoid genocide, and so had switched to the tried and tested method of 'frying stuff.'
The afternoon activity was canoeing. Unfortunately this had been arranged before Aragorn had known the hobbits were coming along and it was too late to change it. More worryingly, to get up to the full compliment of supervisors both Sam and Frodo had to come along.

"Sam, you're supposed to be supervising!"

"I am."

"Binoculars don't count!"

"There needs to be someone on the bank to go for help when something goes wrong. So I'm not going in the water."

"We're not even asking you to go in the water, just get closer than a hundred yards away!"

Sam was dragged to the edge of the water. The scouts were levered into the open canoes, Merry and Pippin having 'bagsied' going with Tony since she was the strongest, so they would have to do least work. Their canoe began to power downstream at great speed with Tony paddling and Merry, Pippin and Daz making Indian calls and rude gestures at the other canoes.

There were still a few lifejackets left after all the Scouts had got into their canoes, so Sam decided it would probably be a good idea to get his hands on one if he had to be within 10 metres of water. It was tricky stuff, you never knew where you were with water, it could move on it's own if you put it on a slope, you know. Sam was the most regular caller to the National Floodline, because you could never be too careful. Unfortunately, putting the lifejacket over his head put him off his guard for a second and he was unable to fight back when Aragorn grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him into a canoe muttering something about how they needed a third person to balance it out.

Sam found himself midstream in a very old, very battered canoe. He panicked. He screamed and started trying simultaneously to get out and to lie down and hug the bottom of the boat in case he fell over the side. The two other occupants of the canoe, Aragorn and one of the other Scoutmasters turned round to see what all the fuss was about, but this amount of movement proved too much for the canoe. It capsized.

Sam automatically began to panic even more and thrashed his arms and legs around so that all the water splashed up in his face. Then his feet hit something; it was the bottom of the river. A second later Aragorn grabbed him and dragged him out of the water.

From a boat somewhere downstream a thin cry of "He's fallen in the water" could be heard. That was it. Sam was cold, wet and humiliated. He was fairly sure that he had heard the other Hobbits laughing at him and they were going to pay for that later. He wanted to go home. Not only that, but he never wanted to have any contact with the Scouting Association ever again.

*****

Back in the house Gimli was setting up a rematch of the Battle of Helm's deep with a bookcase, stepladder and a complex set of ramps made out of cardboard for the next Warhammer game, while Legolas, head thrown back, was really getting into the spirit of playing 'A Whiter Shade of Pale'.

Gimli became aware of a presence in the room. He turned round.

"Legolas."

"Sixteen vestal virgins, who were leaving for the coast..."
"Legolas!"

"Might just as well have been closed..."

"Legolas. Aragorn and the Hobbits are home."

Legolas stopped abruptly. Damn all these stupid mortals, he was catching embarrassment from them. But he was an Elf and Elves didn't do embarrassment. He tried again for smug and just about managed to pull it off. It wasn't like anyone else in the house knew how to play the Hammond organ.

"I thought you weren't supposed to be coming back until tomorrow?"

"We weren't, but our plans for the weekend also included us having tents."

"Tents?"

"There was a mysterious accident. They all caught fire while we were canoeing. But luckily for us, Sam and Frodo were around to put the fires out. Shame neither of them actually saw who did it. In a campsite in the middle of nowhere. With no one around for miles except them."

"How could we have been expected to see anything? Sam was getting changed out of his wet clothes after he fell in the water and I was in the quartermaster's tent making him a nice cup of tea."

"Yes, the quartermaster's tent was the only one that didn't catch fire, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that was lucky, wasn't it?"

Aragorn gave up. "However the fire may have started," Aragorn looked meaningfully at Sam, "it has been made very clear that none of us are welcome at any Scouting Association event ever again. We're not even allowed to come within a twenty foot radius of any Scout hut anywhere in the country."

Legolas shrugged. This was his weekend and now that proper Elvish smugness had set in he wasn't going to let the return of Aragorn and the Hobbits prevent him from doing whatever he wanted until Sunday evening. He returned to his Hammond organ with great enthusiasm.

"Um...Legolas?"

"What?"

"I think Rachmaninov meant that for the piano..."

*****

Three days later...

Aragorn had had a long and difficult day at the forestry commission and had come in covered with mud up to his waist, so had sensibly decided to go for a nice relaxing bath. Complete with model boats and submarines. He was trying to re-enact highlights from the Battle of the Atlantic and giving a running commentary in English and German.

"Alaaaaaaaaaarm! Wasserbombe!" Aragorn threw a soluble aspirin at his submarine for dramatic effect. "Charges detonated sir. Switch to ASDIC." He began to imitate the noises of early sonar equipment.

"Prepare for second attack."
One floor above, Gandalf was the closest he'd been yet to actually reaching the beer, whilst still to all intents and purposes trapped in the loft. If he just moved his staff like this...and shifted his weight to the edge of the beam like so...

There was a crash. With much speed, but a complete and utter lack of grace Gandalf came through the ceiling and landed next to the bath, beer in hand.

"Scheisskopf!"
"Drink!"

"No, Gandalf, that's bleach."

"Drink?"

"Liquid air freshener."

"Drink?"

"Washing powder, I'm trying to do the washing up, go watch some of your videos, that'll take your mind off it."

Gandalf went back to the sitting room. He didn't want videos, he wasn't in the mood for videos, he just wanted a drink. He looked behind the TV, one of the places he knew Aragorn sometimes hid alcohol. There was a half-empty bottle of cherry brandy, which Gandalf sniffed, sipped tentatively, and then poured into Aragorn's ass groove on the sofa. He could try asking Frodo again, but he'd only try to settle him down in his chair with something constructive, or at least non-destructive, to do until someone else came home. There was nothing for it, he was going to have to go to the shops, but first he needed money and there was only one port of call for this - the sofa.

Having acquired enough money (for vadko anyway, so approximately '1.15) Gandalf set off, leaving the front door wide open. Half an hour later Frodo, disturbed by the lack of mumbling, came to check on Gandalf, but reasoned that he would find his own way home eventually and shut the door.

Gandalf eventually made his way to the park, bottle of vadko in hand. He found a bench offering him a good view of the young mothers pushing their children on the swings and adopted the usual mode of 'dirty old man in park'. That was until the vadko began to take effect.

"Balrogs, everywhere. They're watching me. Some of them have even got wings!"

The sparrow was a little disturbed by this accusation and flew off to find someone else to scrounge food from.

*****

"Hello, 696969."

Frodo had been meaning to have a word with the phone company for a while about this. When everyone else in their street had had their area code changed, they'd mysteriously got a letter telling them the whole number was changing. He had a feeling that Merry and Pippin, possibly in league with Gandalf, had something to do with this.

"Hello, is that Mr Baggins?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm calling from the Accident and Emergency department, there's been a gentleman come in and he had a sort of collar round his neck saying that if anything should happen we should contact a Mr Baggins at this number?"

"Oh dear, has Gandalf been in an accident?"
"Yes, it's probably best if you come in."
"Yes, I'll be there as soon as I can."

*****

"I'm afraid, Mr Baggins, but we did everything we could, but Mr Grey didn't make it."

"Oh." Said Frodo very quietly.

"I know this is hard for you, but did Mr Grey have any suicidal tendencies?"

"No, why?"

"Because one of the eyewitnesses said that they saw him leap in front of a speeding double-decker."

"Oh."

"Apparently he was waving a branch around and shouting something like 'you cannot pass, I am a servant of the secret fire' and then something about a dark flame, but that finished rather abruptly."

"The bus?"

"Yes, I'm so sorry. Does any of that mean anything to you?"

"Yes, I think so."

"What exactly does it mean?"

Frodo had a sudden realisation that any attempt to explain the balrog incident would just get him committed again, so he gave an explanation as close to the truth as he dared. "He's probably been drinking something. He quite often gets a bit like that when he's been drinking."

The doctor nodded understandingly. "Were you very close to your Grandfather?"

"No, not really." This was roughly true, as no one ever really wanted to stand too close to Gandalf.

"Oh." The Doctor looked slightly confused. "Are there any other family members you'd like us to contact for you?"

"Yes, here." Frodo pulled out his emergency 'I've gone completely barking' personal information sheet with all of the Fellowship's work numbers on it and handed it over.

"Would you like to talk to someone about this?"

"No, it'll be fine, he'll snap out of it soon. He's just doing it to annoy me."

The doctor looked at the contacts sheet again. It also listed a strong enough cocktail of anti-psychotic drugs to knock out a small elephant and the number of a community psychiatric nurse. He should probably phone her first.

*****

"Hey, Phil, you've got all of Julie's patients from the first half of the alphabet while she's away in Torremelinos, haven't you?"

"Yeah, that's me."
"A and E have got a Frodo Baggins and they want someone to go down there and have a chat."

"Ah. I think the actual phrase I used when I agreed to this was 'I'll take all of Julie's patients in the first half of the alphabet, EXCEPT Frodo Baggins, because I'm only five years away from retirement.'"

"Well someone's got to go see him."

"Send one of the psychiatrists, because not even the offer of a night out with Diana Rigg'll get me to see him."

"Dr Brown, can you do a psychiatric consult on one of the patients in A and E?"

Dr Brown guiltily swept his 'Xena: Warrior Princess' action figures into his desk and tried to look professional. "Yeah, what's the name, have you got a history?"

"It's Frodo Baggins and the history..."

"If it's Frodo Baggins I know the history and the answer has suddenly changed to no. I can't do a consultation. Ask one of the consultants, they're paid more than I am."

"Look, someone's got to seem him. All the psychiatric nurses said that too."

"There's a good reason for that and I think I speak for all my staff-grade colleagues when I say 'No way, Jose'."

"Funny, but that's almost exactly what all the nurses said."

"Can you do a consultation on a patient in A and E, Dr Shaw?"

"What's so important it needs a consultant?"

"It's, um, Frodo Baggins."

"No, no and no."

"But no-one else will go..."

"I consider it one of the privileges of being a consultant that there are other people who I can tell to go and deal with Frodo Baggins."

"What am I supposed do? Tell A and E that the whole department's too scared to see this patient?"

"You could go yourself."

"I'm a secretary, I don't have any medical training."

"This is Frodo Baggins, no one would notice."

"I think that's an unethical statement, so I'll pretend I didn't hear it."

"I know! We'll reclassify the problem. I don't think Mr Baggins needs a psychiatrist, he needs a psychologist."
Five minutes later the secretary came back. "Everyone in psychology's gone to a conference in Birmingham for the day."

"Who told you this?"

"Their secretary."

The consultant walked to his window and looked out across the courtyard. His office was on the third floor on the opposite side from the psychology department, who had their offices on the second floor. "Ah yes, the type of conference which is held behind a filing cabinet in their office with everyone drinking coffee nervously and biting their nails."

"It would appear so. I've never seen an entire department, no, two entire departments, hide from a patient before."

"You're new here aren't you?"

"Used to work in London."

"Ah, so you haven't heard about Mr Baggins yet?"

"No, but I get the feeling I'm going to. This doesn't solve the problem though, someone has to go see him."

"I could threaten to sack one of the staff-grades of they won't see to it..."

"That would probably be even more unethical than sending me."

"Alright then, find everyone you can with psychiatric training and tell them to be in my office in ten minutes. Oh, and find some straws, we're going to do this the old fashioned way."

*****

Due to the entire Psychiatry department attempting to hide under the sink in the disabled toilet claiming that they were all gynaecologists, or midwives, or breast care specialists, or indeed anything that would definitively exclude Frodo, Sam and Aragorn arrived before the professionals.

A nurse gave them the bad news and asked them to talk to Frodo since he had 'taken it all rather badly - he doesn't seem to understand that Mr. Grey isn't coming back'.

"You could call Julie, that's his psychiatric nurse..."

"Finding any psychiatrist in this hospital at the moment would be nice, they've all disappeared..."

Frodo looked up and smiled as they came in. The other two waited until the door was shut before speaking.

"Umm... Frodo... are you alright?"

"Yes, fine."

Aragorn felt this was a good time to wax wrathful. "Then why the hell did you feel the need to blow our cover? There was no need for you to say that Gandalf is coming back, we all know he's coming back!"

"Oh. Ooops. Sorry."
Frodo was not looking his best. Even with the knowledge that previous attempts to kill Gandalf (cyanide, arsenic and straightforward decapitation) had failed, the news that he had been run over by a bus had been quite a shock, and Sam was a little worried about Frodo, who decided to justify those worries.

"It's all like it was before... With the thing..."

Sam and Aragorn looked at each other. Sam put his arms round Frodo, partially as a comfort, but mainly to restrain him.

"Come on Frodo, don't think about it, it's your WI meeting tonight, what are you going to do then?"

However, Frodo had just started gibbering quietly. This was somewhat of a relief, since low grade gibbering tended to stay as low grade gibbering. He attempted to burrow into Sam murmuring things about 'horrible eyes'.

*****

Gandalf was all cold. He wasn't sure why, so he opened his eyes. He was naked and in a very large fridge, one of his stranger awakenings, but not quite as strange as when he woken up on top of St. Paul's cathedral in the seventeenth century to find that the cathedral was in fact on fire. He was on a very uncomfortable tea tray and really wanted to be somewhere else. The word 'pub' flitted through his brain, closely followed by 'drink'.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen, this is the pathology lab..." the pathologist swept in, trailing medical students in his wake, to be abruptly cut off by a bang from one of the morgue fridges.

"Sounds like something's not quite dead in there!" There were the dutiful giggles made by all students whose lecturer has made a truly pathetic joke, but they know this is the man who marks their tests. Unfortunately this was followed up by Gandalf crashing feet first out of the fridge and landing in a crumpled heap on the floor. Naked Gandalf was bad enough; naked Gandalf back from the dead would make Buffy run for the door. However, the Pathologist made an admirable recovery, and none of the students fainted.

"This WAS the cadaver I was going to show you, but he appears to have recovered. As I am sure from your perusals of the textbooks, you will be aware this would appear to be a unique recovery from brain death. This would be a good moment to move onto the legal liabilities section of pathology, but first I feel we should do something for this gentleman."

Gandalf was uninterested in this conversation, although he was interested in some of the female medical students and he started leering towards them like something out of 'Night of the Living Dead', except with more of a cupping motion. His attention was distracted by the interesting jars of clear liquid on the side. He sniffed one, then drank it.

"Nooooo..." the pathologist was quiet for a moment. "That was formaldehyde. I think that he will be returning to the state of 'cadaver' very soon, so if someone could page the crash team right now..."

One of the students headed to the phone.

"But there's only us here," objected one of the students, "We could just leave him, and all the legal stuff wouldn't happen."

"I take it you slept through the medical ethics lectures?"

"I've paged them, sir."
Gandalf was cold, and now bored and not really drunk enough for his liking. And the women had too much in the way of education and too little in the way of bosoms to hold his attention. He headed for the door.

"Follow him! But don't try and stop him, we could make it worse!" the pathologist yelled, deciding this was the point to become the Indiana Jones of the pathology world.

"How can we make it worse? He's legally dead!"

*****

The entire Psychiatry department was on its way down to A and E. The drawing straws idea had worked, and only one of them was actually going to see Frodo, but since the person who'd drawn the short straw was the chief consultant psychiatrist the rest of the department really, really wanted to watch. This of course included all the cleaners and the secretarial staff. They gathered round the door of the relatives' room, some peering though the cracks in the door, others with stethoscopes pressed to the wall.

"Mr. Baggins. I'm Dr. Shaw, how are you feeling?"

"Eyes. Flames. Eyes. Sees me." All this though was rather muffled, coming via Sam's neck.

Dr Shaw looked at Frodo's copious medical notes (volume one) and wondered what to do. There wasn't really anything they hadn't tried on him, including once, in a fit of bad handwriting, viagra, but he did seem genuinely distressed. And he'd been genuinely distressed when there'd been that incident the last time he'd been sectioned. Dr. Lewis had taken early retirement after that. Best to sedate him before he did anything dangerous. However, given the unpredictable effects that some drugs had on him he'd better stay around, although this was helped by the confident knowledge that half the hospital was listening outside.

About half an hour later the drugs had indeed gone unpredictable. Frodo did occasionally gibber about giant eyes and giant spiders, but he didn't seem to care about this, since he was now deeply in love with everybody. He'd started on Sam, moved over to Aragorn and was now sat on Dr. Shaw's lap, cuddling him and kissing him on the cheek.

"Y're such a nice doctor, I do love you, lovely psychiatrist. Can we take him home please Aragorn?"

Outside the muffled giggling had turned in to outright hilarity, but they were about to regret this lack of self-control.

"More nice people!" Frodo opened the door and proceeded to declare his love for the whole of the psychiatry department, hugging and kissing all of them as well.

At this point Merry and Pippin turned up, complete with Sainsbury's uniforms. Aragorn attempted to explain the situation, more difficult when Frodo's current definition of 'brotherly love' (or even cousinly) involved kissing. With tongues. Merry and Pippin were dying of embarrassment. This though got worse.

"You know I love you. You do don't you, Tinkletoes."

Pippin froze and Merry and Sam started giggling in spite of themselves. One of the nurses couldn't help herself.

"Tinkletoes?"
"Oh yes. When he was little, four, I think he was, he was the pageboy at a wedding and his mother told him to go before it began but he was so excited he couldn’t, and then he did. In the middle of the ceremony, all over the bride's train as well."

Pippin was attempting to commit hara-kiri by thought control alone. Here he was surrounded by some very nice people in nurses uniforms and the first thing they were finding out about him was the wedding incident, which in 6,000 years had not been supplanted as 'the most embarrassing moment of my entire life', with a close second being when Merry told the entire court of Gondor about the wedding incident, third being when Merry had told the massed legions of Augustus about the wedding incident, and so on. At least Frodo telling someone was a change.

Fortunately for Pippin's sanity, but unfortunately for his libido Legolas arrived, and the nurses very suddenly found something much more interesting than Pippin's embarrassment. Legolas was given the bad news, then offered no less than 56 cups of tea by different nurses, and 35 separate offers of sexual favours 'to take your mind off things'. The fact that Frodo was attached to his lower leg, claiming to 'love you, lots and lots, nice person' did not seem to dampen their ardour.

*****

Gandalf was still rampaging around the hospital, acquiring a larger and larger train of people. Each ward he stomped through gathered him more, doctors, nurses, medical students and some more mobile patients (hospital is deadly dull, so naked insane old men definitely come under the heading of 'entertainment'). The crash team was also following him, in case he should decide to go back to being dead, and the crash cart (with defibrillators and other such interesting things in it). The crash cart had also acquired, on its way through a paediatrics ward (now full of traumatised children) a small child, holding on and going 'wheeeeee'. The crowd was too distracted to do anything about this.

The lead doctors were having an argument.

"Look, we have to stop him, he could be doing himself untold damage!"

"No, it'll be worse if we do?" He paused mid sentence to look at his colleague, while still following Gandalf. "Hang about, what would you know, you're an obstetrician!"

"And you're a dental surgeon, so we're quits."

There was a movement in the crowd following them as others tried to elbow their way to the front.

"This should be led by the relevant professionals. Let me through I'm a cardiac surgeon!"

"Why the hell is this a cardiac problem? Look at the way he's acting, definitely a neurosurgeon should be leading this."

The two had elbowed their way to the front of the following pack, with their acolytes (staff grades and medical students) in train behind them, taking sides as appropriate.

"This is most emphatically a cardiac problem. Typical post heart attack behaviour."

"Coming back form the dead is typical? I don't want to know about your clinical excellence record."

"His heart stopped and now it has started again, QED cardiac issue."

"But for something as unusual as this it must be a complex neurological problem. And his brain must have... have... stopped and re-started again, therefore neurosurgical issue."
A small Brummie voice from the back of the pack piped up. "His kidneys must have stopped and started again as well, so it's a G.U.M issue."

The pack paused and stared at him.

"Sorry." He squeaked. The pursuit began once more.

Gandalf had a crisis at one of the crossroads, the choice of directions seeming to confuse him. This gave the pathologist time to get his way to the front and stake his claim.

"This patient is dead, and I am the pathologist so therefore he's mine."

"I take it all your cadavers are so active?"

"That is not my problem, I have a signed death certificate so he's dead. Mine."

"Who signed the death certificate? Because I don't want to be admitted under them, I'd be down in the morgue like a shot."

The pathologist did not appreciate sarcasm. "I did have look at him you know. Definitely dead, you know no pulse, heartbeat, breathing, brainstem activity, pupil reaction, you know D-E-A-D. Dead."

"He's off again!"

"Come on lads!"

"Neurosurgeons and associated staff first!"

"Come back here, you smug bastards! Come on cardiologists, get yer running shoes on, not all neurosurgeons are Roger bloody Bannister!"

Legolas was sat with Frodo on his lap to try and calm him down a little (before he did anything that could be construed as sexual harassment), and to give Sam a rest. Legolas was also surrounded by a crowd of female admirers, the male ones having been beaten back forcefully with handbags and much crying of 'he's mine bitch!'. Small scuffles were still breaking out at the back of the crowd, but they were careful not to fight at the front. Might ruin their chances. Legolas was ignoring them. Mortal women were all the same.

Frodo was still gibbering (although it was very affectionate gibbering), so Legolas thought he might take his mind off it with a song.

"Frodo?"

"Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm?"

"Would you like me to sing to you?"

"Yes."

"What shall I sing?"

"Could you... could you sing a lament? For Gandalf?"

Legolas had the thought that perhaps 'Ding Dong the Witch is Dead' would be more appropriate, but
quashed it. "Are you sure that won't make you worse?"

"Sure."

Legolas began to sing, and Frodo curled himself contentedly round him. However, the rest of A and E were reacting badly to the song. The whole place began sobbing, genteely at first and them moving on to the big, chest heaving stuff, necessitating everyone hugging each other in an attempt to use each others shirts as handkerchiefs. Dogs howled, babies cried. In short, Legolas managed to paralyse an entire hospital department. This is of course, with the exception of the other members of the Fellowship, who were sat in a corner playing poker for Smarties.

It was into this emotional maelstrom that Gimli arrived, having woken up to find the note on the kitchen table ('Gone to hospital, Gandalf probably dead, will get bread whilst I'm out.') He reported to reception, who managed to point him over to Frodo and Legolas in between sobbing all over important medical records. Legolas finished his song. There was a general feeling that something terrible had happened, but they weren't sure what. Gimli offered assistance, but Frodo seemed to have fallen asleep, so he decided to go out into the waiting area for some more quality sleeping where he wouldn't be interrupted by sex crazed nurses.

*****

Gandalf was striding through the Geriatrics ward when he suddenly stopped, braking fast enough to cause a pile up in the following crowd (now consisting of most of the hospital staff and a large proportion of the patients. Some of the visitors had commandeered wheelchairs and trolleys to push along their loved ones to see what was happening, but due to the lack of such transport it was about three to a wheelchair and seven to a trolley. The sudden braking caused much falling on the floor, and untold damage to post operative scars.) He sniffed the air and looked around himself suspiciously.

"Drink!"

Gandalf moved slowly, triangulating. Then he pounced on a patient's locker, and began to go through the contents. This delay gave the two warring surgeons time to get down to business.

"This isn't even about him, this is about pecking order in this hospital! I've heard the comments in the staff room, 'he isn't exactly a brain surgeon', well cardiac surgery is very challenging."

"Is it bollocks! I'm working on the brain, we don't even know how half of it works!"

"Exactly! Half trained butchers!"

"Glorified flesh tailor!"

"Lobotomiser!"

"Personality-bypassed, heartless bastard!"

That was it. They both grabbed nearby drip stands (swift check that they weren't attached to any patients) and began to take swings at each other. The others formed a semi-circle round them, egging them on randomly.

Gandalf meanwhile felt that he was nearing the source of drink. His reached again into the cupboard (the occupant of the bed being far too terrified to offer any resistance) and his hand closed around a bottle.
"Drink?" Contentment and anticipation oozed out of him. He withdrew his hand from the cupboard to find it was... a bottle of cherry brandy.

"Drink! Nononononononononononononononononooooooooooooo! DRINK!"

The two surgeons, who were attempting to be Russell Crowe but ending up more like Benny Hill, temporarily forgot their fight and looked at Gandalf who set off again. They did not stop the fight as they followed him, taking wild swings at each other, while the following herd kept a safe distance.

*****

Gandalf burst through the doors of A and E, like a vengeful (naked, smelly) god, followed by most of the hospital.

"Drink!"

Frodo, who had been nice and warm and felt safe curled up on Legolas' lap, woke up, and did not look... right. The psychiatry department took a collective step backwards and tried to look for somewhere to hide, or just someone to put between them and him. He stood up.

"What is going on?"

Gandalf paused. This was a person he recognised, and not only that it was a person who on previous occasion had provided him with drink. A nice person. Perhaps everything would be all right now?

"Frodo...?"

"Gandalf!" Frodo turned to the psychiatrists. "See, I told you he wasn't dead." The psychiatrists looked like they would believe just about anything right now, as long as Frodo didn't try anything.

Frodo went into organisational, WI efficiency mode. "Could someone please find some clothes for Gandalf? Those patients look like they should be in bed, shouldn't someone be seeing to that? And you two, stop acting like children and grow up! Put the drip stands down!" He went over and forcibly disarmed them. "How did all this start?"

"He started it?"

"I am not interested in who started it, I want to know why you are behaving like this."

"He thinks he's better surgeon."

"Am too."

"Are not."

"STOP IT! I am sure you are both very good surgeons, otherwise the hospital wouldn't employ you would it? Does it really matter who's best?"

"Yes."

"NO IT DOESN'T! Now you can either go back to your departments and be good surgeons, or you can stand here arguing and you'll both be bad surgeons, understood?"

"Yes."

"Yes."
"Now you are both going to apologise to each other, NICELY, then you are going to go back to work, alright?"

The two grudgingly apologised and slunk off. Frodo would have re-organised the entire hospital (quite probably to the benefit of the NHS, but never mind) there and then if Legolas hadn't intervened.

"I think we should take Gandalf home."

"But they've signed the death certificate, he doesn't legally exist."

"Oh, I think a threat of a medical malpractice suit against them and they'll make him exist. If we threaten them enough I'm sure they can even find some computer hacker to wipe his criminal record. Come on, let's take the poker school and the streaker home."

The other members of the Fellowship were extracted from the Poker game (Merry currently owed Pippin NestleL's entire European Smartie production for the next three years) and piled into Aragorn's landrover to go home.

"You know, I get the feeling we forgot something..."

"Oh, let's just go home."

****

The next morning the general admissions ward was having problems with an argumentative patient in a helmet.

"Look, Mr. Goodson, we have not removed your tonsils!"

"Och, you have. I didnae even want to be admitted I just fell asleep in the waiting room in A and E, and you admit me and take my tonsils!"

"You were admitted for observation because you were found in A and E unconscious and every effort was made to wake you up and you did not."

"I said I was asleep. That's normal when I'm tired. That's no reason to go and take out my tonsils and sell them to the Triads!"

"We have not sold your tonsils. We have not removed your tonsils. Your tonsil status now is exactly the same as when you came in. And what do you think the Triads would want with tonsils anyway?"

"Ah've heard all about it, organ trafficking!"

"Of useful organs yes. Tonsils no. And the NHS has nothing to do with that sort of thing."

"Why should Ah believe you? You work for them!"

"Yes, because on this nurse's uniform there can quite clearly be seen Triad and other Mafia logos." It had been a long night.

"All I know is I came in last night with tonsils and they're not there now."

The nurse sighed. She would call a psychiatrist, but for some reason all of them had called in sick...
Flight To The Ford Fiesta

Chapter Notes

Apology: Sorry its not one of our best, our muses have gone off on a bender to Torremolinos.

Frodo was sat on the sundial in the front garden, peacefully reading this week's copy of 'Good Housekeeping' when Legolas arrived back home.

"Frodo… What are you doing out here? It's freezing. And what's that smell?"

"I know its freezing. Its Gandalf."

Legolas narrowed his eyes. "Would this be why I can smell swimming pools? Has he been trying to turn Mrs Wainthrop’s goldfish pond into a hot tub again?"

"No, the restraining order’s still in place. He drank the bleach and then the toilet duck, and then all this green gas started coming out of his nose, so I ran out here."

"Does he not know that when you mix toilet duck and bleach you get chlorine gas?"

"Perhaps he was hoping his stomach acid would neutralise the bleach…"

"Would it be too much to hope that he is dead?"

"Again? No, I heard him swearing at the telly. Can you do something about it? It sinks, I'm too short to make it to the windows before I start choking."

Legolas sighed, and wrapped his scarf around his face and strode into the house.

*****

This was another final straw for Legolas. Putting Gandalf in a home had failed, and so now it was time to try Plan C (Plan B, faking his own death, moving to Bulgaria and setting up a tinned porridge factory, had been rejected as impractical). Legolas felt that it was time for his announcement at dinner, at least partially because two of the hobbits would be far too busy eating to make any witty comebacks. Pudding was chosen as the ideal course to announce things during, since today was jam roly-poly day, and Merry and Pippin could be relied on to eat so much that they were incapable of speech or movement for about 2 hours afterwards.

"I think you should know. I'm going to start having driving lessons."

Merry and Pippin had come to the end of their portions (the portion size described by the UN as 'would feed one reasonable sized famine-struck village for about a month, as long as they didn't mind all that cholesterol at once') and paused in the middle of licking the last of the custard out of their bowls. Pippin had a strained expression, indicating that he was attempting to make some kind of filthy comment about driving lessons, but was simply too full of suet to make the vocal chords move. Either that or his tongue was stuck to the plate again.
Aragorn looked surprised. "I thought that you said cars would never catch on. That they were a danger to all life on earth, and a hazard to the environment."

"That doesn't stop him accepting lifts from you though." Frodo attempted to look angelic, and failed.

"I still do not like cars. Trains, trains are different. A much more genteel way to travel. Like 'Brief Encounter'."

"Especially when you're pushing the trolley up and down asking people whether they'd like tea or coffee."

"And even more so when you've been stood on Huddersfield station for two hours waiting for a train that they then cancel, and when the train breaks down, and…"

"Yes, yes, just shut up. I'm learning to drive to get a little more independent. That is all." He mentally added 'so I can get away from you lot whenever I like without worrying that 'the wrong kind of snow' has shut down the entire rail network again.'

It was Merry's turn to try and say something. Again the power of such a vast amount of suet was too much to allow speech, but Merry's efforts succeeded in making him fall off his chair. He waved his arms and legs a bit, but was too full to stand up again. The rest of the Fellowship took one look at a tall, well built hobbit completely stuffed with jam roly-poly, decided that they liked not having lower back problems and left him on the floor.

"Good afternoon Mr. Green. This is your first driving lesson, yes?"

"Yes, it is." Legolas smiled manically.

"Well, I'm just driving you to a nice quiet bit of housing estate where you can get used to the feel of the car, alright?"

Legolas nodded just a little too eagerly.

"Are you sure you're OK with this? No-one's forcing you to take these lessons…"

"No, no, no, no, no, no, really, I want to learn to drive. I'm just a little nervous."

They parked, and got out of the car.

"Now before I let you get in the driving seat I need to check your eyesight. Could you read that number plate over there."

"The red one?"

"No, that's about a quarter of a mile away, Mr. Green, we're not that strict. The green Punto please."

"P648 GKF, Hendersons Fiat Dealership, Weatherby."

The instructor looked at him dubiously, walked over to the car and then walked back again. "Yeeees, well, I don't think your eyesight is going to be a problem. If you could get into the drivers side please?"

Legolas had some problems climbing into the driver's seat, since the instructor was quite a bit smaller than him. He managed to lever himself in, and then pushed the seat back to its greatest extent. The
instructor told him where the seat should be for the proper driving position, but the seat wouldn’t go that far back, so Legolas ended up with his knees brushing the steering wheel, but this wasn’t an issue since he immediately hunched in terror over the wheel, gripped it with white knuckles and stared straight ahead.

"Turn the ignition, not for too long, now if we could try putting the car into gear. Right, just push the clutch pedal down. Push the gear lever into the first position. Apply a little pressure to the accelerator. As you gently raise up the clutch you'll feel the car begin to move."

Legolas felt the car move beneath him, panicked, took his foot off the clutch and both hands off the steering wheel and curled into the crash position while still remaining seat belted into his seat.

"Witchcraft!"

The instructor knew this was going to be one of his more difficult cases.

*****

"Hi Legolas, had a good driving lesson?"

Legolas was staring fixedly straight ahead, muttering stopping distances under his breath (none of them for anything travelling faster than 20 miles per hour). He didn't seem to notice Frodo and walked into the lounge, still staring straight ahead.

"I'll take that for a no then…"

Merry wandered past looking despondent. Frodo did what any right thinking Englishman would do the circumstances. He went off to make some tea.

A few minutes later he entered the sitting room carrying a pot of Darjeeling, which he administered in much the same way as MASH surgeons administered morphine to injured soldiers. Well, not quite, not actually intravenously, although that probably would have been a lot more helpful. Sam was sat on the end of the sofa, looking helpless and trying desperately to think of something that needed doing in the garden. Insane Frodo he could deal with, but insane Legolas was causing him serious conceptual problems. Legolas was remaining uncommunicative, still muttering and staring, but Merry wanted to get this off his chest.

"He's gone all secretive."

"Who has?"

"Pippin. Going off places on his own. Not telling me anything. It's like with Nell Gwyn all over again."

"Mavis Enderby?"

"It's got to be. It's not like she's acting any different or anything, but that's the only reason he could be sneaking about. He'll be banging her in the store cupboard. It should be me in there!" He wailed.

Frodo patted him on the shoulder, but Legolas' mental state was a more pressing worry. Fortunately Aragorn arrived to provide a somewhat bigger shoulder to cry on. So Frodo attempted to get Legolas at least to talk about it.

"Legolas… Is there something bothering you?"


"DRINK!" This caused a sympathetic reaction in Gandalf, but they ignored him.

"I hate driving. I hate it. It's, it's a thing, not quite living and not quite dead."

Gandalf looked offended. "Do you mind?"

The Fellowship looked at him somewhat surprisingly. Obviously they were at the beginning of one of his more lucid phases, possibly all that chlorine had fumigated his brain.

"Sorry. But, it can go so fast, with so little control, it wants to go fast I tell you, it has the power of darkness behind it!"

There was a noise from the driveway. The Fellowship went to investigate it. Pippin was stood in the driveway, next to a moped, in full, very small biker leathers. He was beaming with pride.

"Ah've passed mah test as weel." He said as if to explain it all.

"So that's where you've been?" Merry was still a little suspicious.

"Ah didnae want tae tell youse in case Ah didnae pass. But now Ah have, and Ah've got the bike. Oh, and this." He tossed a spare helmet over to Merry. The rift between them was instantly healed.

"Canwegooutonthebike, canwegooutonthebike?"

Merry ran for the moped, dragging Pippin behind him. Knowing that it would be some time before they came back the other members of the Fellowship went into 'biting mode'.

"This is going to be like the business with the Sinclair C5 again, isn't it?"

"Yes, the Police were very understanding about it and the coach company agreed not to sue after we got Gandalf to have a word with them."

"But the driver wasn't exactly happy about it."

"We did get rid of it last time we moved, didn't we?"

"Yes. That and his cheese press."

"Good."

"Aragorn..." Sam tried to alternate between looking at his feet and looking innocently at Aragorn while shuffling slightly on the spot.

"What?"

"Well, you know how Pippin's a moped...Can I have a sit on motor mower? I'll pay for it myself and everything and I promise it won't get in the way."

"Haven't you got one at work?"
"Yeah, but it's not the same and anyway, there isn't that much grass and I can't quite reach the pedals without attaching things to my shoes."

"But there's even less grass here, you said you wanted to completely change the garden a few months ago and covered half of it with decking. The mower would probably be bigger than the lawn."

"It's not fair! You let Pippin do whatever he likes, just because he's really violent."

"I didn't let Pippin get a moped, he just went and got one."

"You haven't said he has to take it back."

"He's a grown up now, at least on paper anyway and he's using moped on public roads, not our garden, so whatever chaos he causes isn't my problem."

"Legolas would let me have a motor mower, wouldn't you, Legolas?"

Legolas went pale at the mention of the word 'mower' and backed away. "Ask Aragorn."

******

"Hello, 696969." Frodo really was going to have to write to the phone company.

"Hello, is that Mr Green's house?"

"Yes, but he's out at his -"

"I know he's out at his driving lesson, I'm his instructor. He's a little upset and refusing to get back into the car."

"What do you mean 'a little upset'?"

"Alright, he's trying to talk to the car, I just thought it might be better if someone he knows walks him home."

"Where are you?"

"We're out near the park, with the driving school's logo on the roof of the car, but I think you'll probably notice Mr Green first."

******

About fifteen minutes later Frodo found the driving instructor, who was leaning against the back of the car, smoking and generally watching the world go by.

"Um, are you the one who phoned me about Mr Green?"

"Yes, he's round the other side of the car."

"Thank you. Is he alright?"

"See for yourself."

Legolas was crouching beside the car with one ear pressed against it, whispering softly to the headlight.
"Legolas… Are you alright?"

"Squirrel."

"What about a squirrel."

"I nearly killed it."

"Yes, but you didn't, did you?"

"Don't know, check the tyres on the other side for bloodstains."

Frodo pretended to look. "No, it got away. There's nothing to worry about, really."

"Yes there is."

"What is there to worry about?"

"The cars, they're too dangerous. People shouldn't be allowed to drive them. Especially not me."

"Do you want to go home?" Legolas hesitated. "We can take the footpath."

"Ok."

"Legolas?"

"Yes?"

"You have to let go of the car, first."

Legolas reluctantly let go of the car and grabbed hold of Frodo.

******

"Did you really have to embarrass me like that?"

"Like what?"

"Carrying me all the way home. You made it look like it was me who was having… an incident."

"You don’t usually mind when people have to carry you."

Frodo blushed and looked uncomfortable. "Yeah, but not in public, and anyway, I’m not usually in any state to notice."

******

"Merry, d’ye want a lift home?" Pippin held out the spare helmet and looked at Merry pleadingly.

"Umm, no, I’m going to take the bus. Wait, I’ve got an idea, we don’t enough things together these days, so lets both take the bus!"

"But we could be home in less than half the time on the moped."

Merry paled. This was the problem. It wasn’t that Pippin was a bad driver - he was quite good when it came to avoiding oncoming lorries when speeding down the wrong lane of traffic - he was just a little shaky on the Highway Code. Drive on the left seemed to be a concept which had bypassed him,
but drive wherever there was less traffic, be it on the right, left, middle, pavement or shopping precinct was the accepted way of doing things and those red, orange and green lights on sticks must be leftover Christmas decorations.

“Yes, but you miss all the scenery on the moped.”

“You mean the canal, the derelict factory, the three housing estates and the railway line?”

“Yes, urban scenery and I’ve developed an interest in industrial archaeology.”

“You don’t trust me on the bike, do you?”

“No, no, of course I trust you on the bike. I trust you implicitly, it’s just…are you sure you passed your test?”

“You don’t trust me, do you? Fine! You can get the bus home today. And every other day as well.” Pippin stormed off towards his bike and revved it up as menacingly as you can with a motor that had previously been used in a lawnmower.

Merry stormed off, practising looking 13 to get half fare on the bus.

********

“Legolas?”

“What?”

“It’s your driving instructor on the phone.”

Legolas gave a high-pitched squeak not unlike that of a newborn kitten and beautifully conditioned by life with the fellowship dived into the sideboard. Frodo excused himself to the driving instructor and put the phone on mute.

“Did you hide in the side board at the Battle of Helm’s Deep?”

“Sideboards weren’t invented.”

“Did you hide in a cupboard, then?”

“No.”

“And did you hide in the battle of Gaugamela?”

“No, we were in the middle of an arid plain, do you think there were just cupboards hanging about the place?”

“That’s not the point. What I’m trying to say is that you’re not a coward.”

“I hid in the cupboard at the battle of Trafalgar.”

“You got locked in to a storeroom by accident.”

“Yeah, accident. Bloody Hardy always trying steal the limelight with Nelson. It should have been ‘kiss me Legolas’, not ‘kiss me Hardy’.”

Frodo decided that this was not the point and didn’t ask why Legolas wanted to be snogged by dying
lord admirals, but made a mental note for future reference.

“Fine. Do you want to talk to your driving instructor or do you want me to tell him you’re a cissy?”

“Are you calling me a cissy?”

“Are you wearing pigtails? I’m calling you a cissy.”

“I was nervous.”

Frodo attempted to raise one eyebrow, but failed and just ended up looking stupid. “Are you talking to him or not?”

*****

Legolas’ Diary:

Driving Lessons: 1 (v bad)

Giant sized toblerones: 3 (v v bad)

Cigarettes: 0.1 (bad idea, not cut out to be smoker)

Offers of sexual favours: 1/2 (don’t know if woman in post office was serious)

Frodo sent me for driving lesson. All bad and horrible. All other drivers’ faults. Got stuck going round roundabout 27 times. Driving instructor sick, not allowed to go back. Was followed round by 4 blokes in souped up nova with spoiler pissing themselves laughing. Others think I can’t hear them talking about how too many toblerones will make me fat. Don’t care, they’re all fat anyway (Aragorn claims it’s muscle, but yet to see six pack in shape of mini-beer gut). Hate life, hate Fellowship, all Sauron’s fault. No Sauron – would be living with Elves. On same note two most obnoxious Hobbits seem to have fallen out, can only be a good thing.

******

Pippin’s Diary

Number of mopeds owned: 1; v v happy, but could be better (harleyharleyharleyharley)

Number of times hit round head by Mavis: 3 (last one with catering tin of beans – count as 2?)

Number of days since last shag: too depressing to count.

‘Enormous Bosoms Monthly’ late again, deeply depressed. Merry not talking to me, also depressed. Got stopped by Polis, very, very depressed. Aragorn, Legolas and Merry sold moped and burnt self’s driving licence, suicidal.

*******

“Listen to that.”

“What?”

“Silence.”

“That’s only because Gandalf forgot to take the tv off mute before he ate the batteries in the remote
control.”

“Why’d he eat the remote control batteries?”

“Dunno, cheap thrills, I think he’s getting immune to alcohol.”

“He’s getting pissed on ammonium chloride?”

“He’s not human, remember.”

“He’s also not deaf. And what he does with his own free time is his own business.” Gandalf hiccupped. “Do not meddle in the affairs of Wizards.”

“That’s your answer for everything, isn’t it? Why are you attempting to sell our video? ‘Do not meddle in the affairs of Wizards’. Why is Joanna Lumley tied up in the cupboard under the stairs? ‘Do not meddle in the affairs of Wizards’.”

Gandalf pointedly ignored Aragorn’s comment.

If Legolas had lacked dignity, he would have sat in the middle of the floor doing the opposite of Toad of Toad Hall, ie, making steam train noises. But since he did have dignity he was sitting on the sofa looking very smug about having been blacklisted by every driving school in the country and would never have to sit behind the wheel of a car again. He took another bite out of his giant toblerone (it wasn’t an addiction, really, he could stop any time he wanted).

Pippin was also trying to take bites out of Legolas’ giant toblerone, but kept being swatted away. He was not happy. Merry was talking to him again, but he didn’t have a moped. Possibly these two facts were connected. However, given his current listing on the local, and indeed the national police’s ‘stop this person if they attempt to drive anything, even a steamroller’ list, he didn’t think he was going to be getting the moped back any time soon.

*****

“I think we should let him out now. It’s terribly cruel keeping him locked up like that.”

“Yes, yes, let me out! I don’t need any more toblerone, I’m cured.”

“No, it’s not out of his system yet, you can still hear the tremor in his voice. Better give him another few days.”

“Nooooooooooo!”
Many Meetings

Chapter Notes

Story notes: If you have the music to 'Benny Hill' or 'The Dambusters', go and dig them out now. You'll need them. Everyone else look for a kazoo or hum.

"Tea? Coffee?" Legolas had managed to get himself 'promoted' to serving in First Class, being a lackey to all the people who for no good reason felt that spending more than £100 on a train ticket was a good idea, although there seemed to have been rather more of them since Legolas had become the lackey. He had actually been asleep for the last half an hour, having developed the elven ability to keep walking while asleep into an ability to offer and serve tea and coffee safely (and this had been the bit that had required a lot of practice at home - after the first time Aragorn had insisted he practiced with cold water). Occasionally he had served the wrong one, but this was British railway hot drinks, it wasn't like anyone was going to notice.

"Could I have a mineral water please?"

"Of course sir."

Legolas began to walk away. He hadn't actually woken up, so whether they were going to get their mineral water was in doubt, until they said something to actually make him bother waking up.

"Legolas?"

Legolas didn't usually use his real name at work, so hearing it came as a bit of a shock - he didn't think he knew anyone who travelled first class. He woke up and attempted to focus on the speaker, but immediately wished he hadn't.

"Galadriel...Elrond...Haldir...Glorfindel...How nice to see you." Legolas turned on the fake smile usually only reserved for when they had a special offer on for pensioners' APEX tickets.

"How nice to see you too, Legolas, or should I say," Elrond squinted at the name badge, "Lars."

Legolas used all his self-control to stop himself from reacting. He had needed to find a name that sounded similar to his own, or at least began with the same letter and had made the mistake of accepting Pippin's suggestion. Now everyone he knew at work was convinced that he was Swedish to his face, and behind his back that he was a resting porn actor. Unfortunately, due to his Elvin hearing he knew this.

"It's good to see that you're making your own way in the world."

"Yes, he's certainly going a long way," said Haldir in a voice just on the edge of normal hearing. Legolas thought it was a great pity that he was only carrying one pot each of tea and coffee so could only give two of the four of them nasty painful burns. "I thought you would be more interested in things other than the shallow, materialistic aspects of life, like money. I'm still very much in touch with my inner elf."
"Yes, and well done, it's not easy when you don't have 62 acres of landscaped gardens to get back to nature in, oh and I'm replanting a forest at my highland estate." Elrond smiled smugly and Legolas wanted to punch him. He could have mentioned how well Sam kept the garden at their house, but this would mean admitting he lived with the rest of the Fellowship so he kept his mouth shut.

Galadriel attempted to bring the conversation back up to a more genteel level. "So how are the others?"

"Others?"

"The rest of the Fellowship, you are still living with them, aren't you? It's so nice that you've all stuck together. Celeborn told me all about it"

Legolas thought some very un-Elvish words. He made a mental note to be really supportive to Aragorn next time he had to phone Arwen for an argument.

"Celeborn? I though you'd..."

"We have, it's just that he rang me a few weeks back, he's in jail in Ulan Bator and wanted me to get him a lawyer." Galadriel smiled ethereally. "So, how are they all?"

"Oh, um..." Legolas was saved from having to answer this question by his supervisor.

"Come on, lots of other customers on the train, can't have you spending too much time with these ones."

"You'd better get back to work then, but take my business card and if I could have your phone number??"

Legolas was forced to go through the humiliation of having to repeat the Fellowship's phone number in a public place. Haldir sniggered.

*****

As Legolas was walking home from work that evening he heard a strange noise, it seemed to have been following him for about two streets and getting progressively louder. A shadow and a threat had been growing in his mind, but Balrogs were extinct and orcs were pretty endangered these days, weren't they?

As he was nearing the house, the beast overtook him, a great enormous green thing with glowing eyes and hunched figure at the controls which seemed to be in an even worse mood than the beast itself.

"Come on, come on, you stupid machine."

There was a reason why Legolas didn't drive, in fact, there were many of them, cars being the main one. "Having problems, Aragorn?" Legolas jogged along to keep up with him.

Aragorn growled and put his foot down, almost forcing Legolas to break into a run, but not quite. The landrover lurched forward and then stopped about five feet from the end of the drive.

"Sod it!" Aragorn got out, slammed the door, kicked the wheel in the approved fashion (ignoring the pain this caused on account of being a butch man in a bad mood) and stormed into the house.

"Ah could fix it for you," offered Pippin. "Ah know aboot things like that." Pippin attempted to sneak out of the room with Sam's toolbox.

"Yes, we know you know about things like that. And so do the RAF. And so do all the other NATO countries who were pissing themselves laughing when they heard about this."

"It wisnae ma fault, Ah didnae know ah wis haulding the manual upside doon. Hobbit error, that sort of thing happens all the time."

"It does whenever you're involved."

"When was Pippin in the RAF?" Asked Frodo.

"It was just for a few months after they saw Top Gun."

"Really, I thought they'd gone to Lanzarote." Said Sam

"No, him and Merry joined the RAF, they just told everyone they'd gone to Lanzarote because they knew you'd make, you know, suggestions."

"Oh, right. Yeah, we would have made suggestions."

"But getting back to the point, making a 'Hobbit error' would have been stopping the planes from being able to take off. What you did was wire them up so that whenever anyone tried to make a steeply banked left turn in them, the ejector seats activated. That takes a special kind of skill, you know."

"A little bit of water doesnae hurt anybody."

"Yes, but the North Sea can be pretty dangerous in January."

"Nobody died."

"Some of them came out with fewer fingers and toes than they went in."

"Nobody died."

"They did try to kill you afterwards."

"Nobody died."

"Wait a minute, how did you two get into the RAF, you're at least a foot under their minimum height limit."

Merry and Pippin looked shifty, but no answer was forthcoming.

*****

Later that evening, Gimli decided to have another go with the robotic lego. He'd seen programmes about artificial intelligence and it didn't seem all that hard. He was pretty sure he'd got it right this time and had deprogrammed the 'kill all felines' part and had definitely double-checked that there were absolutely no weapons on board. He put it down on the ground and waited for it to get its bearings.

After waiting for a few minutes he leaned down, flicked the 'on' switch and tried again. The miniature AT-AT walker started whirring and clicking to itself in a slightly menacing fashion.
TARGET: humanoid, creator, friend. Gimli, beardie-weirdie. If dies, no more repairs.

Fortunately for Mrs Wainthrop's cat, it moved over to the other side of the garden to stalk a thing in the bushes and the sighting of the target was lost. Gimli looked at the AT-AT walker critically. While it had been reconfiguring all of its internal mechanisms, it had given the appearance of just sitting there and being broken. Gimli picked it up and took it back inside, looking for the instruction manual.

*****

"Hello, 696969." How many more times today was Legolas going to have to admit to his phone number?

"Hello, Legolas?" There was some sniggering in the background, from which the word 'Lars' could be heard quite clearly.

"Yes..."

"Hello, it's Galadriel. I was just thinking how it's a shame that we never see each other these days, and Elrond suggested that we should invite you to this little party he's having two weeks on Saturday."

"Elrond's having a 'little' party."

"Well, it's a grand fancy dress ball in honour of his two centuries of divorced freedom. Oh and you should ask the rest of the Fellowship to come along, I would so like to see Gandalf again."

Legolas sighed, this was going to be a long explanation.

*****

"We've been invited to what?"

"A party at Elrond's place, Galadriel invited us and she's sending us all invitations through the post."

Gandalf's eyes lit up. "Galadriel's having a party?"

"No, Elrond is."

"Buggeration. Don't think I'll bother then."

"There's going to be free alcohol..."

"I shall, wizards are entitled to change their minds frequently. And there's got to be someone with a bit of decorum."

Sam was looking uneasy. "She wouldn't be having any...you know, magic mirrors around the place these days?"

"No, I asked about that. A few years ago Haldir and Glorfindel came in at 3am, decided they needed a curry and levered it off its stand to use it as a balti pan. Apparently vindaloo and magic don't go. She tried putting it in the garden as a bird bath after that, but for some strange reason, none of the birds will go near it."
Sam was reassured, but Aragorn was still a little concerned. "What type of party is it going to be? The last time I went to one of her parties it was a toga party and that'd be great?"

"Aragorn, the last time you went to one of Gladriels parties it was under the Emperor Hadrian, so it wasn't so much a toga party as a 'come as you are'."

Aragorn looked sulky. "It was fun though..."

"Anyway, this is a fancy dress ball. It's going to be a genteel occasion, so I want everyone to have their costumes sorted out by Saturday so we can refine them. Or, if necessary, vet them. And before you ask, Pippin, you can't go as Adam again. Fancy Dress implies you have to get dressed."

"Ah could find a fig leaf this time..."

"NO!" The Fellowship were agreed on one point at least.

*****

Saturday came. Fancy dress preparations had gone on under strict secrecy, so they couldn't pinch each other's ideas. Gimli had been playing with his Lego out in the garden and had to be forcibly dragged inside to try on his costume. The hobbits were stood together outside the sitting room, having come up with a joint theme for their fancy dress. They wanted to have a grand entrance for the rest of the waiting Fellowship.

"Ready?"

"Yes."

The four hobbits leapt into the room.

"No-one expects the...oh."

Frodo stopped mid-sentence, and readjusted his hat and false moustache nervously. Pippin managed to grapple the Biggles helmet off Merry in triumph during the distraction.

"We can't all go as the Spanish Inquisition."

"We've learnt all the lines though." Argued Frodo. "And we don't have Inquisitors with stupid beards."

"We thought of it first though."

"Prove it!"

"Don't have to. We're bigger than you."

"Yeah, but do you know how difficult it is to get Spanish Inquisition suits this small?"

Legolas decided to break it up before anyone started acting like the real Spanish Inquisition. "OK. Stop it. There's only one solution. NONE of us can go as the Spanish Inquisition. We're all going to have to find new costumes, alright?"

There were some muted grumblings, but the idea was accepted. Suddenly from outside there were some strange zapping noises and a high pitched 'miaow'. Legolas looked at Gimli in horror.

"Were you playing with the robotic Lego again?"
"Yeah, but I de-programmed it from killing cats."

The rest of the Fellowship tried to keep up with the new developments, but were interrupted by a shout from outside.

"Tiddles! Oh my Tiddles! What have they done to you?"

This was followed up a few moments later, proving that hell hath no fury like a woman de-felined.

"Have you been interfering with my pussy?"

It was a tribute to how wrathful she looked that neither Merry nor Pippin even smiled at this comment.

"I can assure you that..."

"YOU HAVE KILLED MY CAT!"

She advanced on them, and the Fellowship decided as one that discretion was the better part of valour and ran.

[At this moment the authors would respectfully ask that you imagine this next scene at double speed, with the Benny Hill music playing.]

Mrs. Wainthrop had acquired a rolling pin. The fight or flight instinct kicked in and there was no way any of the Fellowship would stand against Mrs Wainthrop. Legolas, with elven speed was leading, closely followed by Aragorn and Gimli. The Hobbits had more trouble keeping up because of their short legs, although, in truth, all of them were running a bit slower than usual because it's difficult to run in full cardinal's robes.

There was a noise from behind them that sounded far too mechanical to be coming from Mrs Wainthrop, so the hobbits broke the golden rule of not looking behind them to see something very strange, and also to solve the mystery of what was wrong with Aragorn's landrover. It was obvious now that half the engine must be missing and that the missing parts had gone into Gandalf's chair. The Hobbits decided to use this to their advantage, so slowed down and leapt on.

"Come back here right now! Who do you think you are, impersonating the clergy and doing unnatural things to the furniture?"

Gandalf changed gears, taking them up to an amazing 13 miles an hour. Merry jumped on to one of the arms, facing backwards to put him in a better vantage position for giving Mrs Wainthrop the finger. He hadn't planned on standing on the recline lever, though, and he was lucky to catch the back of the chair as it changed position. Fortunately for the rest of the passengers, and for Mrs Wainthrop's sanity, Merry was wearing underwear when his robes blew up over his head.

With the chair reclined, Gandalf was out of reach of the gears and steering, making the chair veer wildly out of control. Pippin leapt into the driver's seat (Gandalf's lap, a place where few people are willing to venture, except in dire need), pulled on his flying goggles and took control.

[Now dear readers, please switch back to normal speed, black and white and the music from 'The Dambusters'.]

As they reached the park Mrs Wainthrop decided to concentrate her efforts on pursuing Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli since the chair was swerving to much to follow easily.
Back in the chair, Frodo was sat on the back of the chair, with Sam and Merry on each of the arms and Pippin still driving. Frodo took command.

"Right chaps, Johnny Wainthrop's got some of our chaps pinned down, we've got to go after them."

"I thought her name was Irene."

"Shut up, I was going for rhetorical effect. Tally ho, pip pip and Bernard's your uncle."

"Don't insult him while he's driving, you'll put him off."

"I wasn't talking to him, pip pip is just something you say in these situations."

Pippin turned round, taking the steering wheel with him. "Is someone talking to me?"

"Tree! TREE!"

"Oh, thanks for that."

"We've got to swing round and put her off somehow."

"We could throw things, that would distract her."

"With the things in Gandalf's chair we could probably kill her."

"Oh can we, please?"

"No, nobody does things like that any more, we'll just have to scare her off."

Sam held up a half empty bottle of vadko. "We could use this."

"Look, there she is, on the other side of the pond."

"Is anyone else thinking what I'm thinking?"

Sam took out his emergency ball of string and he and Merry set up a mechanism that allowed them to start spinning the bottle at high speed.

"Right chaps, we've only got one shot at this. The fellowship expects every man to do his duty."

Pippin steered them towards the pond, ready to veer off at any second.

"Steady, steady."

Sam and Merry, with some magical assistance from Gandalf had managed to get the bottle spinning at an amazing speed.

"Ready...Fire!"

Pippin crouched behind the steering wheel as the bottle of vadko was launched over his head. He swerved to stop them going into the pond and the rest of passengers turned to watch the bottle. It bounced once, twice, three times then came to dry land at Mrs Wainthrop's feet.

Mrs Wainthrop had only a few minor cuts, but was much more concerned by the fact that her slippers were starting to melt. She abandoned the pursuit and strode off home before she met anyone she knew and they thought she'd been drinking, taking one last shot at the chair with her rolling pin. Mrs. Wainthrop was a crack shot with the rolling pin (years of practise on the now deceased Mr.
Smoke poured from the chair's engine.

"Ah cannae control her, captain! The engines cannae take much more of this!" Shouted Pippin, fighting with the steering wheel as they went into a steeply banked right hand turn.

"Eject! Eject!"

Merry grasped the recline lever and pulled it back into upright position, throwing all five passengers clear as the chair continued its curve until it crashed into a tree and exploded.

Gandalf looked at the burning wreckage of his much loved chair and started to gibber.

"Chair...chair...drink..."

"I suppose we should just be thankful we got the drink out first though."

"Yeah, if we hadn't, there would have been one hell of an explosion."

Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli walked round the pond to check that Gandalf and the Hobbits were alright. On finding that they were alive at least, Aragorn decided to give speech of gratitude.

"Never in the field of human conflict have so many..." The rest of the Fellowship felt that this speech was somehow familiar. "So many, given so much, to so few, so often. On so many occasions, have so few given... many." Aragorn looked confused and gave up. It was probably the vadko fumes going to his head.

Back at the house, Merry and Pippin were in the back garden prodding the cat with the end of the outdoor extension wire.

"Can we defibrillate?"

"No, bugger off." Said Aragorn. "Go hunt down the AT-AT walker before it does any more damage."

"Can we have guns?"

"No, you can't. Use the strimmer and get the others to help you. I want that thing destroyed."

Aragorn picked up the cat and carried it into the house. This was going to take all the healing skills of the king of Gondor, and probably a whole bottle of calpol too. Calpol is not, as stated in the bottle, paracetamol suspension, but in fact a mystic elven healing draught. This is where the pleasant flavouring and mild addictive properties come from.

The hobbits had set up an ambush. They were sat behind a bush, with a feather duster laid out on the lawn. They were using a piece of string to twitch it, and were making 'miaow' noises. Behind a bush on the opposite side of the duster crouched Gimli, strimmer in hand. He had insisted he be the one to, in his words 'put it down'.

There was a noise over to the hobbits' right. They held their breath. They could see the AT-AT walker in the undergrowth, apparently considering its next move. It began to creep out, keeping as close to cover as possible. It suspected a trap. However, there was a probable feline, and its instructions were quite clear. It lined up for a shot.

Gimli took a deep breath. It was his monster; he was going to destroy it. He leapt out with a
dwarvish battle cry and swung the strimmer at the AT-AT walker. It exploded into thousands of pieces. Gimli sighed.

After some hard work the cat recovered, and Legolas and Aragorn went round to Mrs. Waintrop's to present it. She was not impressed, but less homicidal than she was before.

*****

Over the next few days Gandalf experimented with a number of costumes, now sat in a deckchair in lieu of getting a new chair. His first attempt was a piece of heather on one shoulder and a cornetto wrapper on the other shoulder.

Frodo was confused. "Gandalf. Who are you supposed to be?"

"Othello."

"What?"

"Othello." He indicated his shoulders. "Othello, the Moor of Venice."

"No. It's a fancy dress ball, not a terrible pun ball."

His next attempt, as MacBeth was even more short lived. Legolas came in while he was attaching the wire coathanger to his hat, with the plastic dagger on the end, for that inimitable 'is this a dagger I see before me?'. Legolas disarmed him before Frodo could see him. Gandalf spent a couple of days as Captain Kirk, complete with truss and bell-bottoms before going back to Shakespeare.

"What is it now? Why the toy mouse?" Frodo was getting bored with this.

"Down girl!" Gandalf looked expectant.

"Go on. Do tell me. I can barely contain myself."

"I'm Petruchio. The Taming of the Shrew?"

"That's a mouse. And I thought we'd established the difference between 'fancy dress' and 'terrible pun'."

The Fellowship reconvened for another go at the fancy dress a few days before the party. Gandalf had actually managed to find a costume rather than a pun. The rest of the Fellowship thought that as he was going to go as Anne Robinson, he should have at least shaved his beard off, or at the very minimum tucked some of his hair under the ginger wig. The black trouser suit did look quite reasonable though. This was strangely disturbing, but the Fellowship tried to take as little notice of it as possible, at least he hadn't followed up on his threat to use Pippin's favourite costume.

Speaking of which, Pippin had managed to find a costume, which while it involved clothes, didn't involve many clothes.

"Mah name is Maximus Decimus Meridius..."

"Don't you mean Minimus?" said Merry.

Pippin waved his sword at him menacingly. "You can't exactly talk, with what you two are wearing."

'You two' were Merry and Frodo, fetchingly dressed as Agnetha and Anni-Frid with Frodo on very
high platforms and Merry on much lower ones to even out their heights. They were also wearing a pair of ravishing, sparkly dresses and worryingly convincing bosoms, which caused some comment.

"It's a gel filled bra."

"Why do you two own gel filled bras?"

Frodo decided to change the subject. "Sam, what've you come as?"

Sam hadn't had much time to organise his costume, so had rummaged through a box of old clothes in the loft in much the same way as people do before going to a 70s party. He had finally settled on a suit from several centuries ago.

"I'm Capability Brown."

"Who?" asked Pippin.

"The most famous gardener ever."

"I thought that was Charlie Dimmock."

"Shut up."

Sam and Pippin started a sword, or more accurately, a sword and hoe fight. Frodo tried to quieten them down by asking about Aragorn and Legolas' costumes, which were somewhat unusual.

"Well, I'm Doctor Who, if you couldn't have guessed from the scarf and the hat, and this is my assistant, Romana." Aragorn indicated Legolas, in a white dress, white knee boots and very 70s hair.

"Wait a minute, didn't Doctor Who have male assistants too?"

"Yes, but they were all really useless, Romana was a time lord. And I didn't see you objecting to Gandalf cross-dressing."

"Since when was Anne Robinson a woman?"

"Wait a minute, what's that smell? Did someone leave the cooker on?"

Gimli entered the room, wearing a battered Victorian suit and had parted his beard and pinned it up to the side of his head to create enormous sideburns. There was a stovepipe hat on his head which increased his height by over a foot and he was smoking a cigar, which was the source of the smell.

"Who're you supposed to be?"

"Isambard Kingdom Brunel."

*****

Will Gandalf drink Elrond dry? Will the Cybermen turn up at the party? Will Gimli rebuild the Clifton Suspension Bridge over Elrond's ornamental lake? Or will Pippin in fact have his vengeance in this life or the next?

Tune in for the next exciting episode, which may or may not turn up before we go home for the Easter holidays.
The Karaoke of Elrond

Chapter Notes

Story notes: ‘Abba Gold’ and ‘Queen’s Greatest Hits’ would be handy. Also a knowledge of who the following people are:
Isambard Kingdom Brunel: Victorian Engineer who did railways, boats (metal ones) and bridges.
Catherine the Great: Empress of Russia, notorious for her amount of lovers. Story about the horse though probably not true.
Cirdan: Elf. Built the ships that took the elves to the west, original possessor of the ring of power Gandalf ends up with. Appears in film for 2.5 seconds.
James Watt: Inventor of efficient steam engine.

Elrond’s stately pile is a splendid example of the late eighteenth century neo-classical revival in English architecture, the beautifully balanced wings creating a building perfectly proportioned, marvellously at home in its landscaped gardens, and not at all enhanced by a Forestry commission Landrover with so much dirt on it you could grow potatoes. They had intended to go through the car wash, but Pippin and Sam, who had drawn the short straw for travelling on the roof (Merry and Frodo were insisting on standing up in the back so as not to crease their dresses), had complained loudly. Pippin especially was adamant that if they went through a car wash he’d rust, and had threatened to do horrible things to Aragorn with his gladius if they did.

The Landrover was abandoned to its fate along with a large number of limousines, BMWs, Bentleys, and inexplicably one Soviet-era Lada. They proceeded to the entrance with as much dignity as they could muster. None.

“Do you think this split’s too revealing?”

“Not with your legs.”

“You are wearing underwear?”

“Yeah, have I got knicker-line?”

“Umm, did anyone suggest to you not to wear boxers with a skin tight dress?” Merry frowned and wriggled to try and smooth the boxers down a little.

“Why? You wear underwear rarely enough as it is?” Legolas was embarrassed enough as it was…

“Last time I wore this. Ummmmm, well, last time there was some… exposure.”

“SOME exposure? He says SOME exposure?” said Frodo.

“Hang on. Last time?” Legolas wanted answers. However, as far as Frodo and Merry were concerned he was more likely to discover the secret of cold fusion while watching ‘Blackadder’.

The party was a high security affair; Elrond knew enough People who had Enemies, or even People who were Enemies of People, or People who had had enough People killed to start worrying about Knives In Backs. Or even being determinedly clubbed to death with a teaspoon (we meant the
capital ‘E’ on Enemies). Therefore, there was a metal detector on the way in, and this being an elven party, a magical-items-of-possible-belligerent-use detector.

Frodo, Merry and Gimli fell at the first hurdle of the metal detector. The security guards had apparently heard of Pippin’s reputation beforehand, had decided they weren’t paid enough for that and just waved him though.

“It’s all the sparkly bits. They’re all metal. Can you let us through?”

“I’m afraid we will have to strip search you.”

Merry looked far too pleased with this state of affairs. Gimli, on the other hand, was exceedingly unhappy.

“Och, yer not strip searchin me. Not having strangers’ hands in unfamiliar places!”

Frodo sighed. “You’re wearing the iron underwear again aren’t you?”

“No.”

“Gimli…”

“Yes. Och.”

“Go and take them off.”

“I’m no goin in there naked under my clothes!”

“You’re wearing a full Victorian suit. It’s not exactly revealing.”

While Gimli was being talked out of his underwear Gandalf was having problems with the magic detectors.

“The staff is part of my costume! Do not meddle in the ways of Anne Robinson!”

“LET GO! NOW!”

Legolas and the two elves dealing with the magical items also had hold of the staff and were attempting to wrestle Gandalf for it. This was a course of action hindered by the fact that their heightened elven senses made them really want to keep their distance from Gandalf.

Aragorn decided that it was time to use cunning.

“Gandalf… there’s free drink inside.”

“I know, if these fools of elves would give my staff back!”

“If you put the staff down, you can have the drinks.”

“I’m a very old man. Creation of the world? Been there, done that, got the live album. I need the stick to walk.”

“I didn’t know you were planning to walk further than the drinks table.” Legolas was acutely aware that they had now drawn a crowd and was sure there were some muffled sniggers of ‘Lars’ from the back of it.
Eventually, with the help of a waved bottle of Stolichnaya, Gandalf was disarmed. Gimli had been deprived of his underwear and was feeling distinctly uncomfortable and Frodo and Merry couldn’t stop giggling. They proceeded to the main hall of the party and, in the tradition of all truly expensive parties, they were announced.

“The Lord Aragorn, son of Arathorn, also known as Strider, Estel, Wingfoot, You Bastard and That-Useless-Dunadan-Gobshite.”

The announcer looked at the card Elrond had supplied him with with slight confusion, but the message seemed to have gotten across.

“Legolas of Mirkwood, also known as Lars, Romana, Lucinda and Tracey.”

From the other side of the room a group of younger Elves could be seen snorting into his champagne glasses and whispering.

“Gimli son of Gloin, son of - ” The announcer descended into laughter, only just turning off his microphone in time.

“Samwise Gamgee, Mayor of Hobbiton (retired) and winner of The Great North Show’s biggest marrow competition 1947-58.”

Next the announcer attempted to introduce Gandalf, but got as far as ‘Mithr- ” before the wizard himself knocked him over while foraging for more drink.

The announcer picked himself up again and tried for the last three. “Thain Peregrin Took, also known as ‘Have You Seen This Man’, ‘Wanted: Reward 10 Shillings’ and Tinkletoes. Meriadoc Brandybuck, Master of Buckland, also known as Dave. Frodo Baggins, former r—” The announcer doubled over, groaning as ‘Have You Seen This Man’ headbutted him between the legs.

Then announcer, however, was committed to his job and after a short recovery, carried on. “Also known as Case B, Patient X and Volume Two of the Complete Handbook to Psychiatry.”

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“Excuse me, but are you by any chance dressed as Isambard Kingdom Brunel?”

Gimli looked up. “And are you dressed as James Watt?”

“I have to ask you, but do you think the wide-gauge railway was the best missed opportunity in British Engineering?”

“YES!”

Gimli had found his new best friend. In the next ten minutes their conversation had covered the Great Eastern, the Great Western and the incompetent bastard who built the first Tay Bridge. Tristan, the James Watt look-alike was in the middle of a PhD in steam engineering and was almost bouncing off the ceiling with excitement at having found someone as enthusiastic about old engineering projects as he was. Gimli, being shorter, was bouncing off the walls at having found someone he could tell all his anecdotes about the engineering projects to.

“Yes, definitely, I’m sure the Victorian Hydroelectric systems are still here, Elrond had them unplugged because the national grid was more reliable.”

“Really?” Tristan was impressed. “The original system is still in the grounds somewhere?”
Gimli nodded

“We’ve got to go and find it. We simply must!”

“We’d better get ourselves some equipment first, I mean, there won’t be any lights and the doors are probably nailed shut.”

Tristan’s eyes lit up. “Adventures! Like ‘Swallows and Amazons’!”

“Yes…” Gimli had never been a terribly social person, dwarves never are, and although he’d never read ‘Swallows and Amazons’, decided to go along because it had to be better than the party and he could probably find a crowbar or something else heavy to hit Tristan with if ‘Swallows and Amazons’ was even filthier than he thought it sounded.

*********** ***********

“Samwise is such an unusual name! How delightful!”

“What?”

Sam had been accosted by a gaggle of women who would be beautiful were it not for their close resemblance to thoroughbred horses. They appeared to be attracted to him for some unknown reason. Perhaps it was hobbit pheromones, or perhaps they’d heard what it is they say about men with very big feet (they spend a lot on shoes), but whatever the reason they had latched onto him.

“Who are you dressed as? It’s a simply wonderful costume, and the wig sets it off perfectly!”

“Uuuummm, Capability Brown.”

“Oh, how lovely, he did our garden.”

“What, recently?”

“No, silly, in the eighteenth century!”

They laughed, or more accurately whinnied.

*********** ***********

Meanwhile, the rest of the Fellowship, apart from Gandalf, had elbowed someone dressed as Darth Maul out of the way in an attempt to get better acquainted with the drinks table. Gandalf, having managed to hide three magnums of champagne and bottle of very good vodka packed in ice in his costume, was really starting to get into the business of getting seriously drunk, when he heard the voice from under the drinks table.

“Whassall we do wi a drunken sailor, whassall we do wi a drunken sailor, whassall we do wi a drunken saaaaaaaaaailor, early in the mornin’. ”

Gandalf was pretty sure that Elrond would never shame himself by serving vadko at one of his parties, so the voice under the table must be real. He lifted the tablecloth to reveal a bearded elf dressed as ‘Captain Birdseye’.

“Cirdan?”

“Mithrandir!”
“How’s it going? How’s the boats?”

“How’s it going? How’s the boats?”

“Boas? Don’ talk to me abou’ boas. Wood! You make em out of wood, not metal. I thought I saw Kingdom Brunel go past. If I see him again, I’ll punch the fecker. Iron clad, my arse!”

This statement caused Gandalf some confusion, but he let it pass. He crawled under the table and offered Cirdan some of his vodka.

********** ************

Aragorn and Legolas seemed to have found their niche in the party. Aragorn had acquired a glass of port and was talking to a group of men who had even more facial hair than he did, or at least longer facial hair. The conversation had quickly got round to Big Dogs, landrovers, and killing things, subjects which Aragorn could quite happily talk about for hours, although he did get a bit lost in the bit about the cost of re-roofing the west wing because the last time there had been a west wing to re-roof the bill had come in guineas.

Legolas would have wandered off to find a more interesting conversation, but he was having trouble with his drink. It wasn’t so much that he was drinking Pimms and lemonade, but attempting to suck a fruit salad lubricated with a dash of Pimms and lemonade through a straw, and there was cucumber in it, which wasn’t really helping.

There was the strange noise of metal grating against metal under great strain.

“What was that?”

“Sounds exactly like m’Poppy did when she was giving birth.”

“Your wife?”

“No, m’ best hunter. Had a terrible time of it, never going to breed with her again.”

Legolas was snapped out of his fruit salad-induced reverie by a large hand landing on his shoulder.

“Veronica!”

Legolas turned round to see the large red face atop a large red uniform attached to the hand and politely tried to explain that he was not, in fact, called Veronica.

“Of course you’re Veronica, could never forget your face, or the rest of you. You haven’t aged a day since I last saw you in ’89. You can’t say you’ve forgotten your old Colonel Melchett.”

“My name is not Veronica.”

“Course it is, or perhaps, you’d prefer Lady Gallsworthy, you liked it when I called you that before.”

“Please, go away and stop bothering me.”

“You didn’t say that before.”

Legolas decided to have a go at changing the subject. “So why haven’t you come in fancy dress?”

“I have, I’ve come as Colonel Armstrong, artillery chap, borrowed his uniform. He’s come as me, you know, floating round the party somewhere.”

“I see.” Legolas was attempting to signal to Aragorn to come and rescue him. Now.
“Would you like another drink, m’dear. You seem to just be sucking on the fruit salad.”

For a second Legolas thought about refusing as rudely as he could while still staying within the boundaries of polite in case he led him on, but then decided to let him do it as it might give him the chance to run away. However, this did not go entirely as planned.

“Oh sorry.” Legolas apologised to Darth Maul, whom he had just tripped up. Darth Maul gave him and Aragorn a filthy look and hissed.

“Legolas!”

Legolas turned round at the sound of his name to see Galadriel sweeping in in full hostess mode, dressed in an 18th century ball gown.

“Galadriel…is that your Catherine the Great costume?”

“Yes, wonderful, isn’t it. It’s modelled on one of the originals, you know.”

Aragorn and Legolas exchanged Looks. Aragorn had Met Catherine the Great and had spent the next fortnight riding sidesaddle.

“Legolas, there’s someone over here who you really have to meet, why don’t you just come with me…”

***********

Frodo, Merry and Pippin had all managed to use their height to their advantage when it came to getting nearer the drinks table and had spent most of the evening so far sitting on chairs piled high with cushions drinking flaming B52s through straws.

“Ha! M’strws leeeest burnt n’so I win.”

“Ok, Ok, lesh say best of 14 then…”

“Bu’ tha means I’ve still won.”

“Not if we drink another 14 it doesn’t.”

“Nonononono. Nearly set m’bosoms on fire last time, no more flames.”

“Wha was tha noise?”

“Wha noise?”

“Like when we put Gimli’s iron underpants in the washin’ machine.”

“Soums’ more lie a cheese grater to me.”

“Doing what?”

“Being cheese-gratery. With another cheese grater.”

“So thas’ where you get baby cheese graters.”

“Frododododo, why’ve you grown.”

“Not grown. And not over there either…oh. Ello Elrond.”
Elrond and Haldir were stood, arms folded looking at the hobbits. They were angry. Very angry.

“I thought that there was to be liaison so no-one had the same costumes.”

“Sorry. Din thin you’ do Abba as well. Niice dress Haldir.”

“This is embarrassing. This is my party, and you, you turn up having stolen my costume idea!”


“I demand you go and change.”

“No way. We’re a better Abba than you. Been Practicing.”

“Yeah. Can do… stuff.”

“That is beside the point…”

“No, is not. We put time’n effort into this. Important.”

Frodo had a determined gleam in his eye. “We’ll show you what Abba should be like…” He scuttled over to the string quartet, dodging Darth Maul, while Merry started stretching. Pippin knew what was coming and decided this was the moment to make his exit, muttering about how little alcohol it took to make Frodo sing on tables.

Frodo had finished his negotiations with the sting quartet and made his way back to Merry. There was some muttered planning, then they got up on the nearest table that was unencumbered with alcohol.

The strings launched into a very familiar pizzicato opening. Frodo and Merry stood back to back on the table, heads turned to face the audience.

“Mama Mia. Here I go again.”

They were not just, in the best drag act style, mouthing the words. They were actually singing it, in very convincing and tuneful falsetto. They had also got a very good dance routine going on. The rest of the Fellowship were watching them open-mouthed. Sam decided that this was really a very good time to show the horsey women round the garden, although their agreements to this were just a little too enthusiastic. Gandalf and Cidan left, drunkenly leaning on each other and saying things about a “boainlak”. Aragorn seemed to have evaporated. Pippin, who had been chatting up a chambermaid built like a prehistoric fertility goddess, decided that this was the time to steer her out of the room and in the general direction of the shrubbery. Legolas, however, much like witnesses to a car crash was possessed with a horrified fascination.

Elrond and Haldir were not pleased. They knew they could not compete with such a professional Abba. Frodo and Merry decided to follow up ‘Mama Mia’ with an energetic version of ‘Waterloo’, before heading back in the direction of alcohol again.

**********************

Out in the garden things were getting busy. Gandalf and Cirdan were heading towards the boating lake carrying a Louis XIV writing desk and an Edwardian hat stand. Pippin was in the process of seducing Barbara the chambermaid, using up some of his best chat up lines.

“Has anybody ever told ye ye’v got great knockers?”
“Ta. Well, actually just 'bout everybody says that.”

“Yeah, well, ah dunnae just mean great knockers, ah mean truly enor- wonderful knockers.”

“Look I don’t come out ere for conversation.”

“Look, ah wuz just tryin to create an ambience.”

“Shurrup and get yer shortarse over ere.”

Pippin liked this woman.

On the other side of the rhododendrons Sam was having a far less pleasant time. The horsey women had all disappeared, save one. Sam was feeling like he was being hunted, like a lone wildebeest who can smell lion, but knows there is nothing they can do about it. Frodo and Merry were going to suffer. It was only embarrassment that had caused him to leave the herd, and now he was alone. Prey.

“Do you have a girlfriend Samwise?”

“Ummm, no, not at the moment.” Sam realised as soon as he had said this that this had been the wrong answer.

“I can’t imagine what someone like you is doing still single…”

“Oh, you know, bachelor lifestyle. Yes, that’s it. Like being free and single.”

“But surely the joy of going home to a home cooked tea, a warm house.”

Sam couldn’t imagine that she knew which way up a saucepan went. “But I go home to that every night..”

“Oh, yes, the cook, but its not the same as having someone to share it with.”

“Frodo’s not the cook. He’s my friend.”

“Ooooooh, you mean the man dressed as… Abba?”

“Yes, that’s him. He practices that a lot.”

“Really? And, and the other… gentleman being Abba?”

“That’s his cousin. He lives with us too.”

Were it not for the self control which is in-bred into the truly posh she would have run screaming. “I am sorry to have got the wrong impression…”

“What wrong impression?”

“That you were, um, single.”

“I am single.” Damn. He’d told the truth again and really hadn’t intended to.

“Then you aren’t… a, a, a non-heterosexual then?”

Sam had no idea what she was getting at; he just nodded in fear.
“So glad to have cleared up this misunderstanding.” She started to advance on him. Sam started to retreat, but tripped and fell backwards into the bushes. She was still advancing. Sam closed his eyes. This was the end of any shreds of self-respect he still retained.

By the boating lake Gandalf and Cirdan were attempting to remember the principles of buoyancy. A drawer from the writing desk floated perfectly well on its own, but when Gandalf got in it had a tendency to sink. When Cirdan got in it also sank, but rather more slowly since he didn’t have several magnums of champagne secreted about his person. They had gone back to the house to test the theory that all they needed was a bigger drawer, but this was hampered by it still being full of Galadriel’s underwear. However, this had inspired the next plan, of making a boat from bits of the writing desk held together with knicker elastic and bras.

Activities in the Rhododendron bushes were just starting to get energetic, whether this was lewdness or in Sam’s case the fight for life, when a large group of figures appeared at an upstairs balcony, holding powerful torches, floodlighting the spectacle of Pippin conquering the lower slopes of Mount Barbara.

“Ahhhhh, you gonna take me home tonight. Ahhhh down beside your red firelight. Ahh, fat-bottomed girls you make the rockin world go round…!” This was sung with gusto by a group led by two sets of dangerously swaying Abbas who had apparently made their peace.

The horsey woman shrieked. She obviously thought this was in reference to her, and ran off, because those diet pills had been exceedingly expensive. Sam took his chance to slink off to any safe looking place. Hanging round with Frodo and Merry was embarrassing but less humiliating than this.

On the other side of the Rhododendron bushes neither Pippin nor Barbara seemed to be showing any signs of shame. They finished, and the audience on the balcony held up scorecards for technical execution and artistic interpretation. Unfortunately, they didn’t seem to be heading even for a bronze medal place on the basis of those scores.

“Ah demand a stewards inquiry!”

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Legolas was starting to wonder whether someone had been putting something illegal into his drink because he didn’t think he could get into a situation like this under any other circumstances. The room was full of Doctor Whos, Doctor’s assistant and various bad guys. At the back of the room there was a Dalek, apparently trying to down shots of vodka through its sink plunger. Legolas waded through the sea of long scarves and frock coats until he eventually found a hairy, disreputable looking Doctor Who watching recorded episodes and playing the Doctor Who Drinking Game.

“Assistant screams, take a drink everyone!”

“No, that’s a male assistant screaming, two shots!”

The assembled Doctors knocked back their shots and one of them slid under the sofa.

One of the Cybermen looked in Legolas’ direction. “Lars! What brings you to my Tardis?”

“Glorfindel? This is all yours I take it, including the full size replica tardis and cut-outs of the assistants?”

“Well, I have a lot of time on my hands, I need a little hobby. Actually, I was having the most interesting conversation with Aragorn about how Doctor Who is really just a Ranger in space…”
Legolas had heard this all before. In fact he’d been hearing the full hour-long lecture version every few months since the BBC had first commissioned the series.

Aragorn perked up at the sound of his name. “Romanadvoratrelundar! You’re looking particularly Galifreyan tonight!” He put his arm around Leoglas’ shoulder, more to hold himself up than as a gesture of friendship.

“Aragorn, we should really get back to the main party, the Hobbits are…getting up to things.”

“But, but, but, we’re nearly up to the episode Mary Whitehouse tried to ban!”

“Look, I’ll buy you the video, just come and help me stop the Hobbits from embarrassing us any further.”

“You never let me have any fun.”

Legolas dragged Aragorn away from the mini Doctor Who convention and out into the corridor and was about to try and find his way back to the main hall when Frodo and Merry crashed into him.

“Gandalf! Cirdan! Lake! Knickers! Sinking!”

Legolas went into schoolteacher mood. “Slow down, take deep breaths and tell me calmly what happened.”

“Gandalf and Cirdan made a boat out of a desk and knicker elastic and they got out into the middle of the lake and now they’re sinking.” Frodo finally stopped to take a breath just as he was starting to go blue.

“They did what? No, don’t repeat it, if you collapse it’ll only make things worse.”

They strode out towards the lake, pausing only briefly at the gamekeeper’s shed to pick up a coil of rope, which just happened to have a gibbering Sam attached to it and since he couldn’t be persuaded to let go, they took him with them.

“Rope. Rope good, always need rope, very useful.”

“Yes, but you don’t need to hold on to it so tight. Nothing bad’s going to happen if you let go, I promise, Scout’s honour.”

“Scouts?”

“Brownie’s honour.”

Sam eventually let go, and luckily they were just in time. A few minutes previously the desk had snapped in half, and now the remaining stern-end was bobbing up and down on the surface, about to begin its slow descent into the deep, with Gandalf and Cirdan balanced precariously on top.

“Don’t let go, Gandalf!”

“I can’t let go, you’ve tied us together because you know I’m the only one who can swim!” Gandalf thought about this for a moment. “Why the hell didn’t you learn to swim, anyway, you’ve been around water your entire life you stupid bastard!”

“I have confidence in my ship-building abilities!”

“So did Ismay when he built the Titanic!”
Legolas considered throwing them the rope, but realised that they were bickering too much to catch the rope, so tied it into a lasso and dragged them back to the side of the lake.

Gandalf recovered first. “It is customary to offer those who have been near death a brandy.”

********** **********

Gimli and Tristan were starting to really look the part of Victorian engineers. Lit by the flickering light of oil lamps, they had long since discarded their jackets and were working with their sleeves rolled up. They were covered in oil and the dust that had gathered in the room since anyone was last in it and enjoying every second of it.

“And if we just hit it with the spanner like so, and leap back in case I’ve got this wrong and anything drops on us, we should be able to put the water in and see if it still goes.”

Gimli hit the side of the strange mechanical beast in a very precise and calculated way and they both sprang back. Nothing fell off.

“I think there’s a stopcock here to let in water from the lake…”

“Shall we?”

“Och, I think we shall.”

Tristan turned the stopcock and set the entire hydroelectric system into motion. There was a moment of silence while they waited to see if it leaked. But the system was sound and working perfectly and Tristan and Gimli leapt around the room in triumph.

********** **********

Unbeknownst to the budding engineers, Elrond had never actually got round to disconnecting the hydroelectric system from the house’s fuse box – he hadn’t seen the point since it was going to be switched off.

“Does anyone else think the lights in here are getting a bit bright?” asked Legolas.

There was a whirr, then a blinding flash and many small explosions joined together as the hydroelectric system gathered momentum and the power surged, blowing every lightbulb in the house.

“Well, now you come to mention it, no.”

Sam made a grab for Frodo.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Well, there’s people out to get me. They might find me in the dark.”

“People out to get you?”

“This woman, she looks like a horse and she tried to molest me in the rhododendrons.”

“Ah, the worst place to be molested.”

“Stop taking the piss, this is serious.”

“Alright, if she finds us you can pretend that I’m your boyfriend, but I do draw the line at kissing you.”
“Agreed.”

Aragorn and Merry had managed to find torches on their trip to the gamekeeper’s shed, but instead of trying to look for other lost people, they were reflecting them off the mirrors, intoning ‘this is the voice of the mysterons’ and giggling. Legolas cuffed Aragorn round the side of the head and took the torches.

“Sam, Frodo, take these and go and find either Elrond or Galadriel to see if there’s any emergency lighting.”

As if on cue, Galadriel appeared at the other end of the corridor and started weaving towards them, giving occasional cries of ‘aiyah!’, ‘wsnihahaha!’ and ‘neiow!’ between giggles.

“Galadriel…? Are you alright?”

Pippin emerged from underneath Galadriel’s skirts. “She’s fine, just a bit pissed. However, the doonstairs bathroom is fillin up with horrible green slimy water, exactly like this stuff that we’re covered in.”

Merry temporarily lost the power of speech. “Wsnip? Hut? Haveyousl- I mean, you and Galadriel, have you got the thousand points?”

“Nah, when the bathroom starts filling up with horrible green slimy water it kind of pits ye aff, and noo she’s too far gone fir it tae count.”

Merry visibly relaxed – he was currently leading by 6 points, even taking Barbara into account.

Elrond and Haldir came round the corner, armed with a large supply of candles and followed by a crowd of people dressed as various Doctor Who characters complaining about the lack of videos.

After much mutual effort the house was lit with candles and Galadriel was put to bed, without any help from Pippin whatsoever. Then Aragorn had a good idea.

“We should sing to keep our spirits up. It’ll be like during the blitz.”

“Which, as I recall, you spent in the Highlands of Scotland,” said Legolas.

“I listened to it on the radio, all of Churchill’s speeches, and I was digging for victory and making do and mending.”

“Yes, but digging yourself an air raid shelter and making do and mending because you’d rather sell your clothing rations doesn’t count.”

Aragorn steamrollered this. “Anyway, it’s the principle that counts. Anyone want to have a sing-song?”

“I know a song about a hedgehog,” volunteered Pippin.

“Anyone want to have a sing-song that doesn’t involve hedgehogs?”

The rest of the party all looked at their shoes and pretended Aragorn was talking to someone else.

“Alright then, I’ll start, and since there are so many of my ex-wife’s relatives here today, I want to dedicate this one to her.”

Aragorn took his position at the foot of the staircase, adjusted his scarf and tipped his hat to a more
rakish angle.

“At first I was afraid, I was petrified…”

Frodo, Merry, Elrond and Haldir knew what was coming next and, not seeing any point in trying to go against it, assumed the role of backing dancers behind him on the stairs.

Aragorn was really getting into it. “But did I crumble? Did I lay down and die? Oh no not I, I will survive!”

At this point he was joined by two cybermen, inexplicably doing the staying alive dance. Legolas just sat down with his head in his hands and waited until he died of embarrassment.

Now that everyone was starting to get into the spirit of it, Elrond took over at the piano and Haldir borrowed a violin from one of the string quartet.

“Master Took, I hear you do a very good, or at least passable, Freddie Mercury, and since Galadriel is indisposed, would you oblige us with Bohemian Rhapsody?”

Pippin leapt to his feet and a choir of Elves assembled behind him. “Is this the real life, is this just fantasy? Caught in a landslide, no escape from reality…”

The rendition continued with increasing gusto, until the high point of the performance.

“Beelzebub has the devil brought a son for mee, for meeeeee, for meeeeee!”

At this point the massed elves began to headbang wildly to Haldir’s attempts to do the guitar solo on the violin. Pippin would have been in the position of ‘laughing until he was sick’ were it not for the fact that he was headbanging along with the best of them. The song ended, leaving Pippin collapsed in a dramatic heap on the floor. Merry went over and kicked him, saying that he was exposing rather more than everyone wanted to see. This notwithstanding it was going to be pretty hard to top that piece of entertainment.

One of the elves was staggering off, the headbanging having been a little inadvisable in his drunken condition. He tripped on the trailing robes of another of the guests, inadvertently ripping off the entire costume, including the mask. There was a gasp and the room went silent. Then up came the cry: “SARUMAN!”

This was closely followed by Pippin’s “hey, Ah’ve got some Homer Simpson boxers just like that…”

Gandalf strode down the stairs, his six and a half thousand-year alcohol problem forgotten. He was the all-powerful Gandalf the White once more. Even though a more accurate description of what he looked like would be Gandalf the Very Stained And Covered In Big Green Drippy Bits Of Pondweed.

“Saruman. Why have you returned?”

“Heard Galadriel was having another one of her parties…”

“Begone, servant of the Dark Lord!”

“Why?”

“What do you mean ‘why’? You’re a servant of the Dark Lord. Sod off.”
“Make me. I am also a powerful wizard!”

Gandalf drew himself up to his full height, rearranged the wig, pulled a spare pair of glasses from his pocket and looked at Saruman witheringly over them. The elves were shocked to see darkness amongst them once more. They would fight the Dark One, as they had fought alongside Aragorn and Isildur. Glorfindel, still in Cybermen regalia sidled up behind Saruman. He tapped him on the shoulder gently, and with the elven combination of grace and brute strength, headbutted him as he turned round.

Gandalf walked over to the prone Saruman.

“Saruman. You are the Weakest Link. Goodbye.”
"Stop stalking Jamie Bamber! Leave him alone, Nell!"

Merry was obviously having the 'General Practice Courtesan Dream', where the mistresses of dead kings rose from the grave to molest the cast of 'Peak Practice'. It was one of his more frequent disturbing dreams, one of the others involving Boris Yeltsin, a laundrette and Saruman, but this one was keeping Pippin awake.

"Stoppit! Run, Jamie, run!" In what could only have been an attempt to rugby tackle the imaginary stalker, Merry threw himself across the bed, much to Pippin's distress.

"Aaaaaaaaaarrrrrmmmmnnnnnnnnggggggggggggggggguuuuuuuuhhhhhhhnnnnnnn!"

This noise requires some explanation. Actually, quite a bit of explanation and we aren't going to promise that it all will make sense, because, lets face it, this is an explanation involving Pippin. Pippin's porn collection had been growing exponentially ever since he had found an abandoned matriculation card (the fact that he had been hanging round student pubs for almost 2 months in an attempt to achieve this was not the point) and was busy getting student discounts on every porn title he could find until someone notices that he wasn't actually called Sarah Jones and he didn't have long blonde hair. As a result, Pippin now had to perch on top of a small mountain of pornographic publications every night when he went to bed. It was extremely uncomfortable and the rest of the Hobbits had nicknamed him 'The Porn Dragon' and claimed that he would be able to tell just by sitting on it if they threw any of it out. What had happened to cause the noise was that Merry had turned over violently causing the underside of his bunk to bulge down into the small space Pippin slept in, landing right on his nose and breaking it. To make matters worse, Merry had now gone from light dream sleep into deep comatose sleep and wasn't going to move.

"Nnnnnnnnnnnnggggggggggggggntoffimeee."

It took about 5 minutes of screaming to wake Frodo and Sam, who had subconsciously heard the noise of Pippin in pain and had decided not to wake up.

"Pippin? What are you making all that noise for?"

"Mn' snuck, tuh bunk by berry"

"What?"

"I think he's stuck."

The amount of noise Frodo and Sam had to make to wake Merry up was sufficient to wake up Aragorn and Legolas in the next room. After banging on the wall for several minutes to shut the Hobbits up they decided to see if Fate had smiled on them and someone had tried to kill Pippin.
The next morning an enormous heap of porn had appeared in the sitting room. Legolas, being the organised elf that he was, had gone out early to Ikea and had returned with many interesting Swedish storage ideas that Aragorn was out in the garden swearing at. Aragorn could understand a little
Swedish, but not an Ikea flatpack. He was having problems assembling his Knep, the Ha-bol was fighting back and he'd just tripped over his Slugis.

Pippin was sat in the middle of the pile debating what he was going to throw out and what he was going to donate to Oxfam. Legolas had not been informed of this plan, and had therefore been unable to veto it. Gandalf, Frodo and Merry were sat by a slightly smaller pile, having first refusal on Pippin's second hand porn. The rest of the fellowship had too much dignity, common sense, hygiene and knowledge of Pippin's... personality to want to even be in the same room as the porn collection.

Legolas stuck his head round the door and threw an assembled box in the direction of Pippin.

"I want over three quarters of this thrown out. And I'm going back to buy you a mattress."

Pippin looked worried. "Those nasty things wi'springs? They look really uncomfortable."

"You are sleeping on a mattress." Something caught Legolas' eye. "Just how old is some of this stuff anyway? Why hasn't it disintegrated?"

"He's a tepid person." Supplied Frodo.

"What?"

"Umm, perhaps that his kind of, ummm exuded body heat and humidity is just right for the preservation of paper? Perhaps we should sell him to the British Library."

"Not after where he's been."

Legolas looked at the picture, then went into the kitchen. He returned a few seconds later with the salad tongs and picked the picture up. He looked at it carefully, using his elven eyesight to its fullest extent, and then tried to talk casually to Pippin.

"Where did you get this?"

"Weird beardy bloke drew it."

"Weird beardy... Italian bloke?"

"Yep. Dead good wi'all the, y'know... bits."

"Yes, yes, anatomical accuracy, I can see that. Um, would this have been a left handed, bearded Italian around the time of the Renaissance?"

"Yep. Name was Davey I think."

"Davey?"

"Yep. Leonardo Davey."

"Do you think that it could have been more likely to have been 'da Vinci' as opposed to Davey?"

"Probably. Mah Italian's not up to much. Hey, do you know why he wrote all that Russian down the side of the picture?"

Legolas was shaking quite a lot now. He squeaked "That writing that looks suspiciously like Italian written backwards you mean?"
"Yeah, what's it say?"

"To the very funny acrobatic dwarf, because I haven’t laughed this much since I was 12 and aunt Lucretia fell into the dung heap."

"Thought he was going tae wet himself he wiz laughin so much."

"Do you have any idea how much this is worth?"

"Nope. Not really my style."

"Yeah, the woman doesn't look like she's going to have back problems when she's older."

Legolas carefully dropped the picture onto the coffee table and started to giggle manically.

"Of course we can't sell it through Southeby's. Who'd believe that an original da Vinci's been in my housemate's mattress for over 400 years? Provenance? Provenance? Hobbit mattress porn, provenance? Heeeheheheheeeheheheheheee!"

The rest of the room had stopped to look at Legolas. "Legolas? Is everything alright?"

"I have to make some phone calls. If any of you so much as touch that picture on the coffee table I will break your arms and make you eat your own livers, understand?"

Everyone else nodded ferociously.

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The next week and a half were somewhat eventful. Legolas managed to sell the picture on the black market for a sum he wouldn't name, but his first suggestion was that they moved somewhere 'bigger. A lot bigger. Where I can have my own room with at least 6 inches of soundproofing between me and the Hobbits.' Frodo demanded a larger kitchen with a central work area and Aga and Sam wanted a big garden. Merry and Pippin had asked for a cellar, but Legolas had decided not to ask why and made a mental note to exclude all houses with cellars from his list of possibilities.

However, the stress of househunting had taken its toll on Frodo. He had been Sectioned. Again. Although to be fair, it hadn't really been his fault as no one had bothered to warn him that the potential buyers looking round the house were mystic new-age types and that one of them was wearing a necklace with a huge eye on it and because she wasn't exactly tall and it was on a long chain, Frodo had had an unpleasant encounter with it at eye level. The hoop earrings and rings hadn't helped the situation either. This meant that the rest of the fellowship were having to cook and clean on their own. Not exactly the best circumstances to be showing people round a house in, as thick black smoke obscuring the view of the kitchen can be rather off-putting.

Even Gandalf had done his bit for the house effort. He spent several days watching programmes on how to sell your house and decided that de-cluttering the house was the best course of action to take and put all the unnecessary items he could find in the shed and taped the door shut. Unfortunately his good work was undone over the next few days when the rest of the household were forced to retrieve the microwave, kettle, bath towels and soap. Gandalf had never used any of these things, so, as far as he was concerned, they were clutter. He had also tried to bully Merry and Pippin into painting all the walls magnolia and as a result every vertical surface was painted up to the height of about 5 and a half feet, at which point they had stopped because they couldn't find the stepladder (trapped in the shed behind the barbeque). Legolas and Aragorn had not been impressed at coming home from a hard day's work to find they had to finish off someone else's DIY.
Then the toilet sprang a leak. In normal circumstances the situation would have been resolved speedily, with Frodo calling the local plumber, the nice efficient bloke from four streets away. However, with no Frodo around, and no one being able to remember the phone number Aragorn decided to try to fix it himself. With polyfilla. And duct tape. Merry and Pippin had retreated to the work surface in the kitchen, wailing that they were going to drown. Water was pouring down the stairs in a biblical fashion when Legolas arrived home from the Arthouse cinema's Ingmar Bergman season. He found the Yellow pages, turned off the water at the mains, rang a plumber, then in response to Aragorn's cries for help rang the fire brigade. Their attempts to free him were hampered his comedic predicament, being wedged into, stuck down and duct taped on to the toilet.

So, the house was redecorated again. Several sets of people had looked round the house. Therefore Legolas decided that it was time they seriously started looking for a new house. Reluctantly he had to concede that this would involve taking the hobbits along with Aragorn and Gimli. Legolas was glad elves never suffered from high blood pressure.

*****

"Billiard room! Billiard room! This one's got a billiard room. Can we have a look?"

"It only says it has a billiard room because they have a billiard table. We don't. OK?"

"Do we really need the sixth bedroom? This one has six bedrooms and a study."

"A spare room's always a good idea."

"Celeborn?"

"Ah, no sorry, only five bedrooms. Definitely."

"This one's got a conservatory. It'd be good for my plants."

"We can build you a conservatory."

"I want a greenhouse as well."

"I want' doesn't get."

"Please?"

"Alright, alright. But we need to go and look round some of these houses. Soon. Very soon."

Legolas had the idea of his own room lodged in his head and was savouring the possibilities. Space for the Warhammer and the Hammond Organ.

*****

"Good afternoon, Mr, er..."

"Mr. Green. And these are my... housemates."

The woman looked at the rest of the Fellowship, and was glad that she wasn't alone in the house. She started her spiel. "Well as you can see this is the hallway, and through here is the reception room..."

The tour continued. Legolas managed to dissuade Pippin from pocketing anything. Sam had a detailed list of questions sent by Frodo about the kitchen, of which the woman could answer none - the nearest she ever got to cooking were Marks and Spencer ready meals.
"Och, Is this a load bearing wall?"

"Um...I don't know, you could get a surveyor's report."

"Does that lintel look like it's buckling to anyone else?"

"No, Gimli, it doesn't. And neither did any of the other lintels you asked about. Not even the one in
the summer house. But could I take this opportunity to ask you about the soundproofing?"

"Well, we've never had any problems with it."

"Yes, but have you ever had four people in the next room trying to learn to clog dance to 'Mambo
Number 5'?" Legolas started staring straight ahead and his eyes took on a strange glazed look.

"I can't say I ever have."

"Yes, but in a hypothetical situation would you say that if someone was clog dancing in the next
room do you think you would be able to hear it?"

"Well, in a hypothetical situation I hypothetically don't know. Just like I don't hypothetically know if
the summer house is going to collapse or the cooker is capable of nuclear fusion. If you don't want to
be able to hear people clog dancing next door I suggest you move into a converted castle with walls
four feet thick!" The woman started wondering if maybe she should just stay in this house if selling it
meant having to deal with people this weird.

"But we only did that once, and we threw the clogs away afterwards and everything."

"What do you mean? We've never lived in a converted castle and even if we did, why would we
need clogs?"

"Oh keep up with the conversation."

"Are those trees yours?"

"What? Pardon? Are those trees ours? They're in our garden. I've decided I don't want to sell the
house any more. Perhaps it would be best if you just left. Now."

****

"Well, that went about as well as could be expected."

"What do you mean? That's the third person who's taken their house of the market when we were in
it this week."

"Um, perhaps... I don't want to be offensive or anything, but begging your pardon, it might actually
work a bit better if only me and Legolas looked round the houses." The rest of the Fellowship turned
to look at Sam.

"What's wrong with the rest of us?"

Sam cowered a bit and took on the expression worn by most men when confronted by their wives
the morning after the night before when they've come in drunk, deposited an empty curry container
on the new living room carpet, knocked over four items of great sentimental value, been sick in and
around the toilet and fallen asleep in the airing cupboard, so Legolas took the opportunity to answer
the question himself.
"Well, where shall I begin? Pippin, has it occurred to you that some people find petty theft somewhat anti-social? Merry, laughing at family pictures and telling them that their much loved great aunt has a face like a, what was it, 'bulldog that's swallowed a wasp'? That's also something they don't teach you in finishing school. Gimli, questioning the structural integrity of everything from the roof space to their child's toast rack that they made at school is a bad plan. And Aragorn, would you please stop diagnosing their trees with all sorts of diseases that are going to make them collapse on the house within a few weeks."

"But they did have."

"Shut up. Shut up all of you. From now on Sam and I are the house buying committee. Aragorn and Gimli are the packing up the old house committee and Merry and Pippin are the Gandalf Riot Control committee."

"What's the Gandalf Riot Control committee?"

"It's your job to stop Gandalf from finding out we're actually moving until the point when the packing committee put the tea chest over his head and shove him in the back of the removal lorry."

"How are we supposed to do that?"

Legolas held out a small rectangular piece of card. "This is a membership card for the Global Video shop down the road. They have the largest porn collection outside of the Amsterdam red light district."

Merry and Pippin gibbered appreciatively.

*****

While Merry, Pippin and Gandalf sat watching 'The Erotic Witch Project' in the living room, Gimli and Aragorn made a start on clearing out the loft.

"Who on earth does this ukulele belong to?"

"None of us have ever tried to play the ukulele. Sitar, clarsach, balalaika, triangle and wood blocks, yes. Ukulele, no."

"Alright then, that can go into the rubbish pile. "Aragorn threw the offending instrument through the hatch where it landed with a slight splintering thud on the landing.

"What about this?"

"What is it?"

"It's a game of 'Pong'."

"I think we throw that out too. What about these boots?"

"Get rid of them! Or sell them to a museum that has really thick glass cases, they smell terrible."

There was a pause. "Those aren't the boots Pippin found on the Somme, are they?"

"What, the ones with bits of feet still in them?"

"No, Pippin only steals things that he can use or sell and you can't either use or sell something that still has the previous owner...resident."
"We'd better get rid of them just to be on the safe side anyway."

Gimli nodded in agreement.

"Hmmm, books, books and...more books. We should probably keep these."

"Including the pop-up Karma Sutra."

"Definitely including the pop-up Karma Sutra."

"What about these mouldy looking ones that look like someone's spilt their dinner on them?"

"Keep those too. One of them's Frodo's autographed copy of 'Mrs Beaton' and he's rather attached except he won't let them near the kitchen because he thinks they might be unhygienic."

Aragorn opened a trunk and his eyes lit up. "Ah ha, weaponry! We're hanging on to this, although maybe we should keep it in better order, some of it's disintegrating."

Legolas stuck his head through the hatch. "None of my weaponry's disintegrating. If you want a bow to work you have to keep it oiled and maintained and I do, so all of my weaponry's fully functional."

Aragorn and Gimli sniggered. "I bet all your weaponry's fully functional."

"Oh grow up." Legolas retreated from the loft, stopping only to pick up and tune the discarded ukulele and sit on the loft ladder and play 'When I'm Cleaning Windows'.


*****

"I think we've reached a crisis point. We've been living on take away food for the past 5 days and if we don't go to the supermarket soon so we can cook something fresh we're all going to get scurvy. And I know all about scurvy, I've been in the navy."

Gandalf, Merry and Pippin took this opportunity to start singing 'In the Navy'.

"I don't know why you're singing that, you were in the navy too. The only difference was that I was an officer and you were press ganged."

"We know what all the officers were getting up to back then you know."

"Yes, but at least I didn't have to spend long periods of time standing in one place so that Nelson could balance the end of his telescope on the top of my head."

The innuendo in this knocked Merry and Pippin for six. They were so many possibilities for smutty comebacks that their brains actually fused and they were left muttering incoherently about 'rum, sodomy and the lash'.

"Legolas," began Aragorn, "You didn't really...get up to what the officers got up to, did you?"

"Well of course I did. Being an officer in the 18th century navy was a stressful job; the death rates were horrendous and you need to put in a lot of hours to run such a complexly rigged ship. You need something to take your mind off it at the end of the watch."

"Yes, but, you didn't have to do...that."

"What's wrong with knockout whist?"
There was silence round the table. "That's what the officers were getting up to?"

"What did you think we were getting up to?"

"Um...um, but... you know what they say about sailors."

"A woman in every port? I can assure you I was not like that. I was an officer and a gentleman, sir."

"That wasn't quite what we meant."

"Well, of course we weren't exactly known for our sinful ways aboard my ship. There were others who got up to worse."

"Really?"

"Oh yes, on the 'Revenge' they used to play poker. Sometimes for money. But back to the matter in hand. Gentlemen, we are going to have to cook."

"Wait, wait, what about when we were in the navy? We just used to eat some lemons. Why don't we just go to the supermarket for a big bag of lemons and stop to get pizza on the way back."

"No, we just need fruit. Let's forget about the supermarket altogether and get ham and pineapple pizza."

"No, we have to prove that we can survive on our own. What's really easy to cook?"

"Macaroni cheese. But not the stuff out of a packet."

"No, I've got a better idea. Macaroni cheese with bacon bits in it."

"To the landrover!"

*****

"So much cheese..."

The entire Fellowship minus Frodo, but including Gandalf who had decided that he was overdue his monthly exercise and that this might just be interesting. However the exercise had fallen by the wayside somewhat when he found out that the supermarket provided wheelchairs and he immediately developed mobility problems.

"Legolas, Elves are good at cooking, aren't they? Why don't you choose?"

"Yes, but cheese isn't exactly elvish. It's all matured and fermented. Not natural at all and definitely not elvish."

"Alright then. Everyone choose one and we'll hope for the best."

Sam and Gimli made sensible choices, Sam choosing extra matured cheddar and Gimli some Wensleydale. Aragorn went for his usual doubly-evil, matured since the French revolution blue stilton that was tethered in its own pen in a corner of the cheese counter. Legolas wanted some mozzarella since it was low fat and inoffensive, but in deference to his high-class elven sensibilities it was proper buffalo mozzarella. Then Gandalf, Merry and Pippin chose and things started getting silly as Pant ys Gawn, Bishop Kennedy and a strange speckled red concoction calling itself Mexicana with a warning about high chilli content on it were added to the trolley.
"What else do we need?"

"I have consulted Delia."

"All hail Delia."

"And we need butter, flour, milk, pasta and bacon bits."

Butter, flour and milk were all easily obtained with only small disagreements over which type of butter (the cheapest) and flour (also the cheapest, after a dip between self-raising and plain). The milk argument was solved by Gandalf's protests that it was below the officially recognised Wizard's dignity level to drink anything skimmed.

"So many types of bacon..."

"We're not going through that again. Look, economy bacon bits, that'll do."

"There's lots of pasta too..."

"We're having macaroni cheese, so we're buying macaroni."

"Can't we have linguini?"

"You're only asking for that because you think it sounds rude. We're getting macaroni."

"The expensive kind or the cheap kind?"

"Well, Delia-"

"All hail Delia."

"Says that we should use one of the more expensive kinds, so that's what we'll get."

The rest of the shopping trip was uneventful apart from when Gandalf wouldn't let Aragorn have his credit card and again when he wouldn't let the supermarket have their wheelchair back. The Fellowship loaded up the car with their cheese, pasta, bacon, butter, flour, milk and lemons and went home to face the daunting task of cooking.

*****

Because the kitchen had been designed for Hobbits, Aragorn and Legolas couldn't quite fit, so sat at the kitchen table reading aloud instructions from the Book of Delia to the Hobbits, who were trying to do the actual cooking. Merry and Pippin were attempting to eat lemons while cooking, which wasn't making it any easier.

"Okay, so you've mixed the butter and flour, now, pour in the milk and stir it quickly so that it doesn't go all lumpy. She says it's ok if it curdles a bit - that's normal."

"Mnnmnnnggg." This, for the benefit of our reader, is noise made by a Hobbit sucking on a piece of lemon.

"What was that?"

"I think he said it's working."

"So now have you made a nicely consistent white sauce?"
Sam, by dint of hitting Merry and Pippin with a ladle until they retreated, had accomplished this task.

"Now, add the cheese."

Merry and Pippin had grated an immense quantity of cheese and they proceeded to throw all of it into the saucepan. The cheese began to melt, although the cheese to white sauce ratio made it resemble fondue more than the sauce normally used for macaroni.

"Maybe we should add some more milk."

"Does Delia-"

"All hail Delia."

"Say to add more milk?"

"Um...hang on a minute I'll check. Yes, you can add more milk if it's too thick. Ooh, there's something else, she suggests adding a pinch of nutmeg."

Pippin went to the spice rack and found the nutmeg. Frodo, being a proper cook, only ever bought whole nutmeg, which confused Pippin slightly. He tapped the nutmeg suspiciously.

"It's all in big lumps, should I just put it in?"

"Yeah, it'll melt...like soluble aspirin."

"I don't want fizzy cheese sauce."

"Well, not quite like soluble aspirin. Just bung it in."

"I think you're supposed to grate it...?" Suggested Sam. But he was too late, Pippin had already thrown an entire nutmeg into the cheese sauce.

"Nah, it's too small, we'll just wait til it melts."

Twenty minutes later the nutmeg still hadn't melted.

"Perhaps we should have grated it. Never mind, we'll make it like finding the sixpence in the Christmas pudding - whoever finds the nutmeg does the washing up. Someone heat the water for the pasta."

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"Urgh, I think I've got the nutmeg. No, wait, it's just another lump of overcooked bacon, it's chewy in the middle."

The original possessor of the nutmeg had been Gandalf, who in tactical defence of his unbroken record of doing no work around the house whatsoever, had wrapped it in bacon and sneakily levitated it on to Sam's plate.

"Mning? Hnyah." For the benefit of our reader this is the noise made by a Hobbit who has bitten into a whole nutmeg wrapped in overcooked bacon and is now attempting to unstick it from his jaws.

To say that the Fellowship were enjoying their pasta al sei formaggio would be stretching the dictionary definition of 'enjoy' further than the elastic in Gandalf's underwear during The Accidental Bungee Jumping Incident. The overcooked bacon was at least adding texture to something which
defied all natural laws because at this exact moment Frodo was also eating macaroni cheese with bacon bits in the psychiatric hospital and enjoying his considerably more. The highlight of Frodo's day when he was in hospital used to be when the really tall doctor who had to duck even to get through the unusually tall hospital doors came to do his ward rounds, but now he spent as much time as possible talking to the catering staff and trying to give them hints and tips.

*****

"I have some important news." Legolas was looking even more smug than usual, so much so that his smugness had radiated into Sam who had come in with him.

"What?"

"I've found the right house for us, and to stop any of you disagreeing about this, we've put in an offer and it's been accepted, ok?"

The rest of the Fellowship's jaws hit the ground.

"You did this without saying anything?"

"Of course we did. Who said that democracy works? It just takes longer. And I've sold this house too and we have to be out by next Friday, but since we can move into the new house on Wednesday, this isn't going to cause us any problems."

"Should we tell Gandalf?"

"No, remember what I said about the tea chest. Anyway, I was wondering if I could talk to you about this. What if we don't tell him and don't bother with the tea chest?"

"But that would be cruel."

"Yeah, think of the people who're moving into this house, they've got kids."

"It would be like a replacement for corporal punishment. Good character building material."

"What kind of character could you build out of Gandalf apart from serial killer? I mean, look at Frodo, he's known Gandalf all his life and look where it got him."

"Alright, we'll take Gandalf. Just don't mention him to the removal companies when you phone up to get quotes, we'll have to carry the stuff ourselves if you do."

"If we give him enough to drink that he passes out and tell the removal men that he's a Guy left over from bonfire night a few years ago that we got too attached to to burn we might just get away with it."

"Do we have that much alcohol?"

"Surgical alcohol should do the trick. Or failing that, meths..."

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"Bloody hell, something in here pongs."

"What did they say this were again?"

"Dunno, but I got the impression it were pretty important."
"Really? That girly blonde one said it dint matter too much, and to leave it behind if we couldn't get it in t'van."

"Should we just leave it? It's bloody heavy."

"Yeah, but it's probably got something rotting in it. If we leave it here environmental health'll be down on us like a ton of bricks and I'm not taking this thing all the way to t'tip for them. We've gone above and beyond the call of duty today, especially when the short barmy one spent most of the morning hanging on to me leg."

"Wonder what they've done?"

"How do you mean?"

"How many people round here move from three bedroom semis into big five bedroom houses like what they're going into? They've either done the lottery or done a bank."
University Challenge In The Dark

Chapter Notes

Note for non-Brits: ‘University Challenge’ is a programme that has been running intermittently since 1962. Universities submit a team of four people who are asked very hard questions in a condescending manner, currently by Jeremy Paxman, who also presents Newsnight and asks politicians hard questions in a condescending manner. If you win you get a slightly tacky glass trophy (and no money. Bastards.).

“Has anyone seen my other pair of boxers?”

“In the tumble drier.”

Legolas looked up from his copy of the Grauniad. “We do have enough money for you to buy some new ones Aragorn.”

“Yes, but that would be a waste of money. I know I own boxer shorts, I packed them before we moved. It’s just a question of finding them.”

“Aragorn. We moved three weeks ago. If you haven’t found them by now you’re not going to.”

Aragorn had stopped the tumble drier and was rooting in its contents to find his boxers. He found them and put them on under his dressing gown.

“Eeeeee ahhahahahaha ooooooo owwowowowowowow”

“Of course, letting them cool down first might have been a good idea.”

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Merry awoke, deep in the darkest pit of ordure, illumined by no light, but rather darkness visible which served only to discover sights of woe, regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace and rest can never dwell, hope never comes that comes to all; but torture without end.

“TURN THE SODDING ALARM CLOCK OFF!”

The screaming of the damned stopped.

“Why the bloody hell you had to buy a Marilyn Manson alarm clock anyway...”

“It wiz oan special offer.”

Merry dragged himself out of the pit, which may or may not have at one point have been a bed. He staggered through no-man’s land towards the dread portal. The room was painted in cheap black paint, through which the floral wallpaper could still be seen. Frodo had refused to set foot in Merry and Pippin’s room three days after they had moved in, saying he was considering phoning the Guinness Book of Records for the ‘fastest creation of a dung heap’ record.

Merry turned the door handle and tugged. Then tugged again.
"’S stuck"

“Don’t be such a pussy.” Pippin swung on the door. Then he looked thoughtful. “Y’know it might be sticky toffee pudding.”

“You mean the stuff we had on Tuesday?”

“No, the stuff we had last Thursday. I was gonnae throw it out, but Ah couldnae find the bin, so Ah threw it at the door.”

“Oh. So what are we going to do? What are we going to do? What are we going to do? WE'RE GOING TO STARVE!” Merry had his hands round Pippin’s neck and was shaking him desperately.

“Naw. We’ve goat the sticky toffee pudding. We’ll eat oor way oot.”

Frodo had been up for a few hours and had returned to his room to water the house plants. He ignored the screaming from the room next door as a matter of course. Giving Merry and Pippin their own room had been such a relief, since he now could ignore the noises and didn’t have to be party to what was causing them. He hummed to himself as he worked. Sam had filled the room with plants, which, coupled with the chintz that covered every available surface that didn’t have a doily on it, made it look like Laura Ashley had been imprisoned in the hothouses at Kew.

In Gimli’s room things dripped, clunked, ticked and oscillated. It was a scene that would have made Heath Robinson pack up his pencils and become an accountant. Gimli was not due to be awake for a few more hours yet, as the water clock measured the time (the water clock, plumbed into the mains was the reason for the terrible shower pressure and total lack of hot water between exactly 7.51 in the morning and 1.54 in the afternoon). When he did awake, though it would be to find his clothes neatly out for him, a piece of buttered toast on a plate and a loaded toothbrush. Well, that was the plan. The plan, however, did not reckon for Merry and Pippin having spent the whole of the previous evening poking the contraption, going “Oooo. What does this do?”. Most dentists do not recommend cleaning your teeth with your own y-fronts. Especially if they’re made of metal.

And to Gandalf. What can we say about Gandalf? (Except the obvious, which is mostly unrepeatable). Gandalf had unpacked himself after a few days, had explored the whole house in about three and a half seconds and had retreated to the sitting room. Except he no longer had His Chair. He was surviving in a deck chair, but had seen the adverts on the TV for chairs usually described as ‘relax chairs’. He wanted one. Badly. Especially after he found out about the built in vibrate function...

His attempts to steal Legolas’ and/or Aragorn’s credit cards had been unsuccessful. Threatening the hobbits had been fruitless also, since they had all blown their money on alcohol and kebabs (Merry and Pippin) a huge spending spree at the Chelsea Flower Show (Sam) and something mumbled that Frodo was being very reticent about. So Gandalf was reduced to pleading. A typical exchange (generally with Legolas, since he had control over most of the money) went thusly:

“I need the chair. I’m very elderly.”

“You have been elderly since I have known you. You have been elderly since the Third Age. And
generally old before that. And anyway, we’re all elderly!”

“But I’ve done a lot of good work in the world!”

“And undone it again! You got hobbits to do all your dirty work for you, and the only reason that Valar sent you to Middle Earth in the first place is because they didn’t like you!”

“I have mobility problems.” Gandalf sunk lower in his chair.

“Not when presented with alcohol. Back in the old days you could walk for miles, climb mountains, breakdance, ride horses and giant eagles and you haven’t aged a day since!”

“I only rode the eagles because wheelchairs hadn’t been invented.”

“A giant eagle is not a mobility aid. It’s just a bloody enormous bird with bad table manners. And what would you know about them becoming extinct?”


“Fittest defined as those prepared to be your 24 hour taxi service? They didn’t even leave any fossils for goodness sake!”

And so on, descending into that classic argument tactic of bringing up things that happened six months ago, or in the case of the Fellowship, things that happened in the Dark Ages. Gandalf was still living in the deckchair, which had been augmented by so many blankets, cushions, bit of string, garden canes, bird feathers, bin liners and a stuffed auk, that it looked like a cross between a magpie’s nest and the throne of the dictator of a small, poverty stricken and corrupt east European nation.

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Frodo was surprised to receive a letter that did not look like junk mail. He opened it, and then started grinning like an idiot. Thank goodness everyone else had gone to work and Gandalf was watching ‘T J Hooker’. Frodo had been cordially invited to rejoin the rest of the 1989 University Challenge winning team from the Open University to appear on ‘University Challenge Reunited’. It was probably best not to tell the others till it was all finalised though.

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Legolas was surprised to receive a letter that did not look like junk mail. He opened it very suspiciously. He spent a good five minutes examining it before concluding that Merry, Pippin and Gandalf did not have either the intelligence or the imagination to come up with a con like this. Legolas had been cordially invited to rejoin the rest of the 1972 University Challenge winning team from Corpus Christi College to appear on ‘University Challenge Reunited’. It was probably best not to tell the others till it was all finalised though.

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“I have something to tell you all.”

The Fellowship looked expectantly at Legolas and started guessing as to what he was going to say.

“You’re gay?”

“You’re pregnant?”
“It was you what did the Burnley Post Office robbery?”

“You’re Jack the Ripper?”

“It was you who stole my boxer shorts?”

Legolas looked witheringly at the rest of the Fellowship. “No. I am going to be appearing on ‘University Challenge Reunited.’”

Frodo looked shocked. “But... but... that was what I was going to tell everyone! I’m going on University Challenge Reunited as well!”

Suddenly there became a thick atmosphere in the room. Legolas and Frodo looked at each other through narrowed eyes.

“Then may the best elf win.” said Legolas through gritted teeth.

Frodo squared up to him. A long way up. Frodo, when sane, was normally a mild mannered, unflappable person. But he possessed a competitive steak longer than the Nile, especially in games requiring intellect. More specifically Trivial Pursuit and chess. Soon after the invention of chess he had played a game with Aragorn, and he had had to be restrained by Aragorn’s bodyguard from doing him a mortal (or as much as you can do an immortal a mortal) with a morningstar.

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There was one major problem. Whilst Frodo’s final had only been 13 years ago, it could be plausibly argued that he had aged well (which was of course the truth), there was rather more problems in the fact that Legolas didn’t look a day older than he did in 1972. Though that’s not to say that he did look the same. A picture was dug up of the 1972 team, and it was as if Led Zeppelin had been on University Challenge.

“Perhaps he really wiz in Led Zeppelin. He didnae tell us where he wiz fir most of the 70s. Took us ages tae find him.”

Legolas twitched slightly. He had gone to university (for about the 12th time) in an attempt to get away from these people, and had been in the middle of his 4th PhD when Merry and Pippin had found him. “If I had been in Led Zeppelin, I think I would have the money to be living in a mansion somewhere, not with you lot.”

“Yeah, but if you really were in Led Zep you’d’ve spent all yer money on drugs and groupies. Wouldn’t be any left for mansions.”

Legolas gave up. Trying to reason with hobbits was pointless.

“How are we going to make him look old?”

“I am old.”

“You need to look it too Legolas.”

“I do look it. You can see it in my eyes that I carry the weight of the world on my shoulders.”

“That won’t work on TV.”

Frodo had a suggestion. “We could cut his hair a bit. Not many people in their 50s have hair that long.”
“You wouldn’t dare...”

“Or maybe we could get the tweezers and pluck some of it out to make it look like he’s got a receding hairline.”

Frodo found himself lifted up and brought to Legolas’ eye level. “Do not. Touch. The Hair. UNDERSTAND?”

Frodo nodded frantically.

Sam weighed in with some tact. “If you tied the hair back, we did a little bit of make up and put you in a really middle aged suit would that be ok?” Legolas cringed at the idea of a middle aged suit, causing him to drop Frodo. “Legolas, people are going to notice if you’re on the telly looking the same age as 30 years ago.”

Legolas gave in. A middle aged suit was found for him, courtesy of the local market. Legolas had wanted a new, tailored Saville Row one, but this had been vetoed as he was only going to wear it a few times. His hair was duly tied back and some subtle lines put on his face with make up.

Legolas gritted his teeth. Any more teeth gritting and it would be tension headaches for the next three years. “How do I look?”

A Scottish voice form the door piped up “Like Neil from the ‘Young Ones’ at 50”

Legolas leapt for the voice, but Pippin had forward planned and was racing towards the door crying “oh, heavy man, heavy!”

After much arguing, fighting and violence it was agreed that the whole Fellowship had to go to both Legolas and Frodo’s games. Even if there would be one person on each occasion attempting to jinx the game. Legolas and Frodo’s teams easily got through the first rounds, mostly because they had the advantage of six thousand years of general knowledge. There was a moment thought, when the opposing team had given the correct answer of ‘Dante’s Inferno’ to one of the questions that Frodo could be clearly heard muttering ‘bloody plagiarist...’.

However, then came the second round. Open university 1989 vs St Hilda’s College 1998. The all female college. Women. Merry. Pippin. Gandalf. We don’t really need to tell you what’s going to happen do we? Ok, so we’ll fill in a few details. How about harassment from the audience, police involvement, twanging bra straps, jam roly-poly and a set of dentures?

“A picture was displayed. All the team were wearing ill advised 1980s clothes, but Frodo’s mullet had to be seen to be believed.

“Let’s let the team introduce themselves.”
“Hello, I’m Bob Davidson, I studied Natural Sciences and I’m now a market researcher.”

“Hello, I’m Christine Robertson, I studied Psychology and I’m now a Psychologist in the NHS.”

“Hello, I’m Dave Christenson, I studied English and I’m now a librarian at Manchester University.”

“Hello, I’m Frodo Baggins, I studied History and am currently engaged in voluntary work.” The Fellowship had spent a long time working out a plausible lie that didn’t mean being blatant. Frodo did plenty of voluntary things for the Women’s Institute.

“Corpus Christi were the highest scoring team ever on University Challenge, like Open comfortably beating their 1972 opponents, Magdelene Oxford. Let’s see what they looked like then.”

A Led Zeppelin tour poster appeared on screen, and there was much laughter from the audience, but especially from Gandalf who had been responsible for switching them earlier. There was a large degree of muttering between Jeremy Paxman and the floor manager, with the decision to press on and look for the proper picture before they broadcast.

“Let’s let the team introduce themselves.”

“Hello, I’m Owen Greenleaf, I studied Oriental Languages, and I’m now working for the Great North Eastern Railway Company.” No lies there, just a certain lack of detail.

“Hello, I’m Andrew Phillips, I studied History and I’m now Conservative MP for Bath North-West.”

“Hello, I’m Graeme Anderson, I studied Chemical Engineering and I’m now director of ICI.”

“Hello, I’m Brian Lang, I studied Classics and I’m now Principal of St. Andrews University.”

A casual observer would have noted nothing out of the ordinary, but one trained in interpreting body language would have noticed the tension building up in the man currently known as Owen as each of the success stories was recounted. You could almost see the missed opportunities and ruined chances floating past him, each of them sunk by the rest of the Fellowship.

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“What would I be referring to in Italy if I referred to ‘La Serenissima’?”

“Open, Baggins.”

“Venice.”

“Correct. Your bonus questions are on the Doges of Venice. For five points...”

The rest of the audience were not really concentrating on the questions, more the team interactions. The six team members who were not Frodo and Legolas had answered about two questions between them. Both teams had already passed the University Challenge scoring record, and there were still nearly fifteen minutes of the programme to go. There was jockeying for position, as first one, then the other went into the lead. The rest of the Fellowship were on the edge of their seats. They knew they were in a lose-lose situation, but probably favouring Legolas winning. After all, when Frodo had lost at Trivial Pursuit (due to some nasty dice rolls) his attempts to rip Aragorn’s arms off at the shoulder had merely resulted in some nasty sprains. Legolas, on the other hand, was a skilled longbow archer.

“Where’s Gandalf gone?” whispered Sam.
“Shh. Don’t care.”

“Another starter for ten. J. F. Bentley designed which Lond—”

“Corpus Christi, Greenleaf.”

“Westminster Cathedral.”

“Correct. Your bonus questions are on twentieth century church architecture. Coventry Cathedral...”

Gandalf had indeed wandered off. He felt that intellectual rigour was dull in comparison to ‘enormous knockers’ and had gone to find his own entertainment. He had found it in an electrical engineer called Sandy, who was racking her brains for a way to electrocute the smelly old man in the dress and funny hat without taking her with him. Although, given the dress, if she could just get to the phone, with any luck the psychiatric hospital would be quite grateful that she’d found him.

“So do you come here often?”

“Every day. I work here.”

“If I said you had a sexy body would you hold it against me?”

“No.”

“Do you have any magic in you?” Sandy raised an eyebrow. “Do you want some?”

“Only so I could turn you into a newt. Then step on you.”

“So, you like it rough then?”

“Piss off.”

Gandalf turned to his last option, which he had learned from Merry. “Get yer coat love, you’ve pulled.”

The fist which hit him in the stomach only temporarily disabled him, but Sandy had the advantage of knowing the territory and disappeared. Gandalf realised that before using that chat up line he should have analysed Merry’s success rate first.

“With five minutes to go the scores are exactly equal. Another starter for ten...”

Legolas and Frodo were hunched over their buzzers, occasionally glaring at each other out of the corner of their eyes. The rest of the two teams had entirely lost interest and had started chatting, passing round photos of each other’s children, reminiscing about the time one of them had streaked through the union bar, and so on.

Then there was a strange humming noise and the lights became brighter. Then in one moment, the lights went out and Jeremy Paxman’s desk exploded. There was a stunned silence, then the sound of Jeremy Paxman assuring everyone he was all right. A few seconds later there was a sort of muffled noise, almost as if a ‘Newsnight’ presenter was being stuffed into a large sack. And a cackle...

The lights returned. There remained the charred remnants of Paxman’s desk, but no Paxman. Not
even charred remnants.

“Sorry folks, but we can’t carry on like this. Recording’s over.”

There were boos and cries of ‘Fascist!’ from the audience.

Legolas and Frodo looked at each other. Then leapt screaming at each others throats and attempted to disembowel each other with their bare hands (which is especially difficult of you’re starting at throat level.) The rest of their respective teams tried to pull them off each other. Then decided that this was too dangerous, and they should just watch. After someone had called the police and ambulance, just in case.

“You did that deliberately! You knew I was going to win!”

“You were on the verge of losing so you did for the lights! And got someone to kidnap the presenter!”

“Shortarse!”

“Nancy elf!”

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“So. How are you feeling?”

“I didn’t know that hobbits were such vicious creatures.”

Legolas was sat up in a hospital bed looking like he’d gone three rounds in the ring with Mike Tyson, an impression backed up by the bite marks on his pointy ears and up and down his arms.

“Och. Ye’ll mend.”

“I know I will. That’s not the point. I’ve written to my solicitor asking to have a restraining order taken out against Frodo.”

“Ummm... Legolas... You do have to share a house with him...”

“I will get out a restraining order stopping him coming within ten feet of me. That is perfectly compatible with communal living. We own a big house.”

Aragorn gave in. Hell hath no fury like an elf with bitten ears.

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“I brought grapes, Frodo.”

Frodo was in much the same state as Legolas, except the bite marks came from bigger teeth. Since Frodo had been put in the Children’s Ward (after a conversation with the psychiatrists along the line of ‘anyone daft enough to pick a fight with Frodo Baggins gets what they deserve and if he’s not gibbering then we’re not taking him’) he was getting a lot of sympathy from the parents of the other patient as an obvious victim of child abuse. This impression was reinforced by the fact that only his three elder brothers came to visit him, two of which were obviously so traumatised they could barely look after themselves, or even maintain socially acceptable behaviour. This was the only reason Frodo had not been reported to the nurses for his triumphalism at beating the entire ward at family Trivial Pursuit, and the only reason Merry and Pippin had not been arrested for sexually harassing the female staff.
“Thank you. You can put them next to the empty chocolate boxes that Merry and Pippin think I don’t know they’ve eaten the contents of.”

“Feeling any better?”

“I’ll feel a lot better when the restraining order comes through.”

“But, um...”

“I’ve thought of that. It specifies that he has to be 10 feet away from me, and the house is big enough to do that.” ~

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It was 4 am in the morning. The household was still riven by the feud now that Legolas and Frodo were out of hospital. Frodo had spent a week in his room ‘convalescing’, which the rest of the house translated as ‘sulking’. The ten feet restraining orders were being enforced, and an uneasy truce was in place. but Gandalf was uninterested in that. He opened the cupboard under the stairs. Then he took the false back out of the cupboard under the stairs to reveal a bound and gagged figure.

“Walkies Jeremy!”

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Rosy fingered dawn graced the eastern horizon, birds sang and Legolas sprang out of bed with catlike agility into his first tai-chi position. As he progressed through its forms the plants on his window ledge opened, elf and plant in perfect harmony. For every morning that Legolas woke up in a room not containing a bearded, unwashed, unkempt man who seemed to be able to snore and drool at the same time, he became a little bit closer to achieving complete oneness with the rest of the universe. He and Frodo had begun talking again. They’d tried talking to other members of the Fellowship, but this hadn’t worked. Any member of the Fellowship either found talking about current affairs, art, literature and so on, either boring, ‘poncey’ or downright incomprehensible. They’d both tried talking to inanimate objects, but after Legolas had found Frodo having an in-depth discussion about the latest exhibition at the Tate Modern with the toaster he decided that apologising was probably best. At least, before either of them started thinking the toaster was talking back at them. His morning meditation finished he dressed and left his room in search of muesli.

Unfortunately, oneness with the universe didn’t include oneness with the articles currently covering the stairs and he fell headfirst down them. He uttered some not very serene words and got up just in time to avoid being hit by four hobbits falling down the stairs in their usual breakfast stampede.

Frodo picked himself up first and launched into vengeful mode, “But I tidied up in here just last night. Who’s left all their stuff on the stairs; if it was you, Pippin, you can tidy it up yourself…”

“If it wis me, ah widn’t have fallen over it!”

The argument was prevented from getting any further by Aragorn sliding down the banisters in a movement that would have made Mary Poppins look like a tap-dancing hippo. Legolas and the hobbits stared at him.

“I tidied this up last night and I don’t want to have to do it again this morning. None of you seem to appreciate how much I do for you. I don’t care if it’s going to make you miss the best part of the day, but this staircase is going to be safe again before you leave the house!” Sam grabbed Frodo by the neck of his dressing gown to restrain him from disembowelling Aragon with one of the railings that held the bannister up.

“It’s not mess. At some point in the very near future you’re all going to thank me for taking this important step in our survival.” The hobbits began exchanging looks of dread. “We’ve all been watching the news recently and and if we keep on just sitting back and ignoring the signs we will regret it later. Or maybe we won’t. Because we’ll all be dead. No, we need these reinforcements over the cupboard under the stairs for protection against…” dramatic arm gesture “nuclear fallout.”

“Valar save us, not again.”
While Aragorn was in a shower ‘appreciating the uncontaminated water supply while we’ve still got one’, the rest of the Fellowship had a house meeting in the kitchen.

“It’s like the Cuban Missile Crisis all over again,” said Frodo.

“It wasn’t just the Cuban Missile Crisis. Remember when he was foreseeing our deaths by meteor, volcano, plague and global warming? This is just the first time he’s ever had the same one twice.” Legolas had spent more time around Aragorn than the hobbits had and had seen most of his rampaging paranoia first hand.

“No it’s not, he was sure Ragnarok was coming round twice.”

“But those were two very cold winters.”

“And he did spend them snowed in in a longhouse with Arwen. Three months shut in a house with her and I’d think Armageddon was upon us. Or at least I’d wish for it.”

“Ragnarok?” Pippin had reverted to his default setting of confusion.

“The Viking end of the world? When the wolf eats the sun? You hung around with the Vikings for a couple of centuries, you said the raping and pillaging bits were the some of the most fun you’ve had in your life.”

“Vikings?”

“Well, that wasn’t what they called themselves, but you must remember the big hairy guys with axes who came from Scandinavia?”

“Weren’t they the Macedonians?”

“No, the Macedonians were the big, hairy guys with the huge long spears who came from Greece.”

“Ah, right. Hey, Merry, you remember Wee Alex, don’t you?”

“You shouldn’t refer to an ancient king who ruled a significant part of the known world as ‘Wee Alex’.”

“Yeah, I remember Wee Alex, he was sort of funny about getting people to bow to him.”

“Wis Wee Alex their king? Ah didnae know that.”

“Why do you think the army followed him? And why he lived in palaces?”

“Well, as far as ah could tell the army followed him because he wis shaggin’ most of them and most of the time he lived in tents.”

“We burned down a palace once, that was a great night, that was.”

“We’ve got to get back to the point. We have to stop him.”

“Wee Alex?”

“No, Aragorn.”
"How?" asked Frodo.

"Why?" asked Merry.

"What?" asked Pippin.

That afternoon work continued on the cupboard under the stairs and Legolas was really beginning to regret suggesting that Aragorn did something useful with the space. He’d only meant for Aragorn to turn it into another bathroom or put up some shelves.

“I’m sure the cupboard was supposed to be bigger than this. I checked the plans before I started to make sure we would all fit. And the structural integrity was good enough for the reinforcements.” Aragorn leaned heavily on the back wall of the cupboard. It echoed

Then it echoed again.

Aragorn might not have been the brightest monarch Gondor and Arnor had ever had, but his ranger-sense was telling him that something wasn’t quite right. He tried knocking on the wall again. It was definitely hollow. And walls weren’t supposed to knock back, were they? Or were they? No, he was thinking of something else entirely. He did what any butch man in his situation would do. He whacked his claw hammer at the wall, satisfied when it went through. He then yanked at it and fell backwards as the whole back wall came out.

The whole Fellowship, this being a very dull Sunday, were quickly gathered as Aragorn fell backwards out of the cupboard with suitable drama and swearing.

“Buggering bastard bollocks!”

The hobbits, disappointed that Aragorn had not given himself any comedy injuries peered into the cupboard nosily.

“Here, that’s not Joanna Lumley is it?”

“Look, just because someone is tied up in our understairs cupboard doesn’t mean they are Joanna Lumley. She doesn’t have a beard.”

“She could have just stopped shaving.”

Frodo intervened. “Sam, I had these really long c-conversations with my psychologist about what’s r-real and what’s not, so could you, umm, tell me, ummm...”

“Yes, Frodo, there is a strange bearded man, who’s not Gimli, Gandalf or Aragorn, tied up in the cupboard.”

“Oh, good.” Then Frodo collected himself and went back into head of the household mode.

“PIPPIN! GANDALF! What have you done?”

The figure, in a tattered suit, tried to cower further back into the recesses of the cupboard, shielding his eyes from the unaccustomed light.

Legolas looked into the cupboard. “It’s rather unusual for them to kidnap a man. Women, yes, Sarah Michelle Gellar especially, but not men. And he does seem really rather familiar.”
There was an approaching cackle. Gandalf appeared, leering in his usual way. “Hobbits, nosey creatures, poking about where they shouldn’t.”

“Actually, it was Aragorn, and who discovered him is not the point. Who is he and what is he doing in the cupboard?”

Gandalf lurched towards the cupboard and stuck his head round the door. “Here boy! Good dog!”

The figure shuffled forwards, still bound. It knelt at Gandalf’s feet, who patted it on the head. “Good dog. Have a doggy treat.” The man was given a distressed bacon sandwich, which he ate with apparent relish.

The penny dropped with Legolas. “Oh, good grief. You’re keeping Jeremy Paxman as a *pet*? Had they run out of Rottweilers?”

“Good Paxman, down boy.” Gandalf reacted as he usually did to Legolas’ difficult questions, by pretending to be deaf.


The House Meeting convened, with Exhibit A on the kitchen table gnawing on a chicken leg. Frodo retrieved the minutes book from the kitchen drawer.

“Shall we skip the apologies and confirming the minutes of the last meeting?”

“No, look, I object to the representation of my behaviour at the pub on Saturday night as ‘illegal and immoral’. It was merely illegal.”

“Pippin, overruled.” Legolas was chairelf, and used to this type of bickering. “In that case I move that we go on to Item 3 on the Agenda, proposed by Frodo, ‘What the hell are we going to do with Jeremy Paxman?’”

There was a slight twitch from Jeremy, probably only reacting to the sound of his own name.

Aragorn stood up. “Chair elf, I propose that we turn both the Paxman and Gandalf in to the police.”

Legolas was unconvinced. “But surely this will put suspicion on us.”

This was greeted by murmurs from round the table, and a smug expression from Gandalf. There followed a few minutes of suggestions of varying from “kill him and bury the body”, “send him to a plastic surgeon and give him a plane ticket to Brazil”, to “get a Paxman flap and a bowl with his name on it”.

Then suddenly an alarm went off. They all leapt up.

“Is that the Buffy alarm?”

“No! Enterprise!”

There was the sound of running feet towards the sitting room. Legolas took his place on the sofa and pointedly said “meeting adjourned.”

Then the room was silent apart from some appreciative murmurs from the hobbits and from Gandalf Heavy Breathing No. 16(a) “Woman, who, while having large knockers, is not particularly
attractive, but is wearing skin tight catsuit and has pointy ears” (this to distinguish it from No.16, which was broadly the same but substituting ‘funny computery stuff on face’ for ‘pointy ears’).

In the kitchen Paxman found himself alone. The time in the cupboard and with Gandalf had basically destroyed his mind and his sanity, but there was still one conscious thought left - and that was ‘freedom’.

The next morning Legolas was somewhat confused. The escape of the Paxman had gone largely unremarked on, except for Gandalf’s demands that they go out and look for him, calling his name and rattling his food bowl, which was ignored. Legolas’ confusion was focused on Aragorn.

“Why are you not in your work clothes?”

Aragorn looked shiftly. “It’s casual Monday.”

“The forestry commission. Casual Monday. Aragorn, for some strange reason I don’t believe you.”

Gimli appeared, nodding to everyone and giving a friendly “och” to Legolas.

Legolas narrowed his eyes. Something was going on. “Aragorn. Am I going to have to hurt you, or are you just going to tell me what you’re planning?”

Frodo appeared with a pan full of breakfast. “He’s digging a fallout shelter in the back garden. I found all the plans in his sock drawer when I was putting the clean ones away.” Frodo was in a worryingly cheery mood, which generally meant they were in line for another Incident. He continued brightly, “I was very impressed at how you managed to get all that stuff into the garage while Legolas was reading the paper, and how you’ve planned to dig it in the lawn so it’s so handy for the house.”

This got Sam’s attention. “Where did you say you were digging this?”

Aragorn looked into his bowl of salted porridge and mumbled, “In the middle of the lawn.”

Sam was getting angry. This was quite unusual, but dangerous nonetheless. “I’m sorry Aragorn, I didn’t quite hear you. Where did you say again?”

Aragorn sprang into King of Gondor mode. “I am digging it in the middle of the lawn. Yes, it will mean sacrifice. But this country was built upon sacrifice! Did Wellington stop to think of the quality of the lawns at Waterloo? Did we hesitate because of the agricultural impact on Pelennor fields? No! We think first of the safety of our comrades! I am protecting this Fellowship against the threat of nuclear war! Cry God for Gondor, Merry and me!”

This prompted a confused “what?” from the hobbit in question, who wasn’t at his best before his second cup of coffee and third fry up in the morning.

Legolas sighed. “Aragorn. There is one, small, tiny, minor point that you’ve neglected to take into account.”

“Which is?”

“We are all immortal. And probably immune to violent irradiated death after what happened between us and the Valar. So building a fallout shelter, which incidentally is about as much use as a soap herring in the actual event of nuclear war, is rather pointless.”
Unfortunately this argument did not have the desired effect. Gimli piped up “Och, Aragorn, I told you that the earth shelter was a daft idea. We should be going with concrete.”

Aragorn’s eyes lit up. “Yes! Concrete! Lead-lined concrete! Get me the Yellow Pages!” He leapt from the table, a man with a mission.

Legolas turned to Gimli. “Why are you getting involved?”

“Och, he’s going to build it anyway. I might as well make sure it doesnae collapse on him.”

Aragorn returned with the Yellow Pages. “How odd. There doesn’t seem to be anyone listed under “fallout shelters”, or “lead-lined concrete suppliers”.”

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That evening, a few doors down from the Fellowship house, a doorbell was rung. Mrs. Pettifer opened the door to reveal two short men, wearing t-shirts with a large mushroom cloud printed on them, and what appeared to be world war two tin helmets with NPC badges stuck on with sellotape.

“Hello madam, we are your local Nuclear Protection Committee.” The man gestured to his helmet. “Have your family made plans for what you will do when World War Three happens?”

“Umm, no.”

Pippin wedged his foot into the door. “Well, can you spare some time for us to talk to you? It could mean the difference between a long lingering death and survival in a terrible semi-human form.”

The woman froze like a rabbit in the headlights, until natural instincts of politeness crept in. “You’d, ummm, better come in. I’ll get the kettle on.”

Merry and Pippin got themselves comfy on the sofa. They had with them large quantities of photocopied ‘Protect & Survive’ leaflets from the 1970s, augmented with pictures taken from movies with titles like ‘Night of the Evil Zombies IV’ and ‘The Texas Chainsaw Massacre’. Merry and Pippin didn’t have an ounce of public spirit in them (unless you are going to count that vodka they swiped from the off-licence); they had seen an opportunity to be let into other people’s houses and cause trouble and had seized it.

The woman returned, bearing tea and followed by two suspicious looking children. The hobbits took their tea graciously.

“So, madam, have you considered what impact nuclear war would have on your two lovely children?”

“No, no, I haven’t.”

“Well, let me first start by telling you about the explosion itself. Do you know the difference between an air burst and a ground burst?”

The woman shook her head. Merry and Pippin began their explanation of what happens after a nuclear blast. Two sentences in she sent the children out to the garden. Two minutes in she was looking very pale indeed.

“And are you aware of how to recognise the symptoms of radiation sickness?”

Three minutes later Mrs. Pettifer was being copiously sick in the kitchen sink. Merry and Pippin had
put a great deal of effort into this and were not being disappointed with the results. This had broken their record from the previous house, where it had taken over ten minutes to make them throw up.

Legolas came home from work that evening to see Frodo apparently attempting to communicate with a large hole in the back lawn.

“Would you like a cup of tea?”

Legolas was about to go and phone the psychiatric nurse when the hole answered.

“What?”

“Tea!”

“Pardon?”

I said TEA! Would you like some?”

“Yes please?”

“Milk and sugar?”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Legolas decided to introduce some sanity into the conversation. “Why don’t you come out?”

“What?”

“Come out of the hole!”

“Why?”

“I think it might just be deep enough. And it probably wouldn’t be a good idea for Frodo to lower your tea in on a piece of string - someone might get burned.”

“It worked the last time.” There was a sound of clinking china. “Do you want the cups back?”

Legolas put on his primary school teacher voice. “Aragorn son of Arathorn you will get yourself out of that hole this minute or there will be Trouble.”

Frodo found himself standing to attention at the mere sound of command in the voice. There was a brief silence from the hole.

“Yes, Legolas. Could you pass down the ladder?”

“What ladder?”

“The ladder on the other side of the hole to where you’re standing.”

“All there is on that side is a mound of earth.”

“Oh. Oh dear.”
Some time, swearing, climbing and tea later Legolas, Frodo and two mud covered beings claiming to
be Gimli and Aragorn were sat beside the hole. Sam had briefly appeared, and attempted to kill
Aragorn for the damage he’d done to the lawn. However, Aragorn was so muddy he couldn’t get a
proper grip round his neck, so he’d gone off to brood and plot elsewhere. Gandalf had dragged
himself out to cast aspersions about the whole project.

“I know what will happen. You’re delving too greedily and too deep; you’ll awake Things from the
deep places.”

Legolas interrupted before Gandalf got going and set Frodo off on the road to another Incident.
“Gandalf, I hardly think you can awake a Balrog from 20 ft down in a suburban back garden.”

“That’s just what Durin said when he stared with the mines of Khazad-dum!”

There was a pause as they all tried to absorb this statement.

“Och, you don’t mine mithril in a back garden. It’s no big enough.”

“I stand by my statement. There will be orcs before you know it!”

“No, that will just be the neighbours, banging on the door to be let in BECAUSE THEY HAVEN’T
MADE PROPER PROVISIONS!” This final comment was shouted over the fences at the
neighbours, since Aragorn felt that everyone should be as prepared as he was.

“The orcs will be there too, wanting let in. You mark my words, orcs!”

Legolas realised that Frodo had begun to burrow into his side, and while not gibbering was most
definitely agitated. It was time to steer the conversation away from orcs. “Look, we are immortal.
We’ve all survived a long time in very violent environments without dying. The probability is that
we can’t be killed by fallout, or radiation sickness, so this shelter is totally pointless.”

“Better safe than sorry.”

“But even if you’re right, how long do we stay down there? Civilisation will be ruined, ambient
radiation would be increased, water supplies polluted...”

“Two weeks.”

Legolas paused. “Two weeks. All the effects of nuclear holocaust will have dissipated in two weeks.
Where exactly are you getting your information from Aragorn?”

“Protect and Survive!” Aragorn handed him a dishevelled mud splattered leaflet.

Legolas took it with distaste and read it. It seemed familiar, and looked dated, but he had probably
ignored it the first time round, since he was immortal. His incredulity grew. “Aragorn, this same
leaflet advocates lying on the ground or in a ditch to avoid the effects of nuclear heat and blast. These
people are quite possibly telling some tiny little fibs, to make people think they can do something
about nuclear war when they can’t.”

“The government would never lie to us!”

“Aragorn, you’ve been the government, you’ve been several governments in fact. I’ve heard you lie.
And not just little ‘no new taxation’ lies, but big, whopping great lies. Remember the drains in Minas
Tirith?"

Frodo made a face. “Urrgh, please, I don’t want to think about that. I only lived in the third circle, I
don’t even want to know about what went on in the seventh.”

Aragorn ignored this. “But surely governments have learned?”

“You’d had over 5000 years of governmental experience when you gave your little briefing in
London in 1347.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Not a lot of people did. It was called “Why we have nothing to fear from the Black Death”, and
90% of the audience were dead within two years.”

Aragorn looked uncomfortable. “But even so, it will offer some protection when we’re done. Better
than nothing?” Aragorn looked hopeful.

Legolas gave in. Logic was a foreign concept to Aragorn. But then again, so were ‘hairbrush’ and
‘shaving’. There were limits though. “How are we all expected to get in there?”

“I did the calculations. There should be plenty of room.”

“Standing on each others heads?” Legolas paused. “Aragorn - are you having that problem
distinguishing between feet and inches again?”

“Och, I told ye it was too small, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“I’m an elderly wizard. I demand there be enough room for me, my hat, my chair and my, ahem,
reading material.”

Frodo’s practical sense came in as well. “And you know how Merry and Pippin eat more in a
stressful situation. We’re going to need an awful lot of food down there. An awful lot.”

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A week after the completion of the shelter Aragorn awoke with the sounds of air raid sirens ringing
in his ears. He took a moment to orient himself. No, these sirens were real. This was it. He had been
proved right. He could show how good he was in times of national crisis.

It took almost another ten seconds for Aragorn to remember to stop screaming.

“War! War! They’ve dropped the bomb! Everyone into the air-raid shelter!” He ran up and down the
corridor, banging on doors, trying to wake everyone else up. “Take only what we can’t leave to be
destroyed in the blast!”

Merry and Pippin went for the enormously well-endowed fertility statue.

“On second thoughts, take only what you need to survive.”

The entire Fellowship was in the shelter within 3 minutes and 52 seconds. They had even managed
to fit in some household essentials: Gandalf’s chair, a selection of books to suit all of their tastes,
camp beds, cooking utensils and, due to an unexplained law of physics observed whenever a group
of people are confined in a small space, Scrabble, Monopoly and a jigsaw with ten pieces missing.
Clothes and food had been moved in pre-emptively by Aragorn a few days previously, which solved
the mystery of what had happened to most of everyone’s underwear.
When the rest of the street heard the distant sound of air-raid sirens they acted according to the advice in Merry and Pippin’s booklets. Well, eventually they did, after they’d been round to the Fellowship house to see if there was any room left in their fallout shelter, only to discover that Aragorn, in anticipation of this very moment, had hidden the entrance.

They rushed back to their own houses and dived into the cupboards, to spend their last few minutes, or their last few minutes of being recognisably human, in relative peace, making one last attempt at pretending they’d lead happy lives. Little dramas unfolded up and down the street.

“Martin, I just want to tell you that even after ten years of marriage, that I still love you.”

“Daphne, I think you should know, I’ve been meaning to tell you this for some time now... I’m gay.”

“What? You decide to tell me this now. You could have let me die thinking that our marriage hadn’t been a complete waste of time. But noooo, you decide that you have to get things off your chest.”

“But that’s what you’re supposed to do when you’ve only got two and a half minutes to live, isn’t it?”

“You’re not supposed to tell people things that’ll upset them. You could have lied! I lied! I’ve been shagging my boss for over a year now, but I was prepared to let you think that I loved you.”

“Oh, um sorry.”

“Now we’re going to spend what time we have left in awkward silence.”

And next door...

“Where’s the baby?”

“We haven’t got a baby!”

“Oh shit, I’m in the wrong house.”

And next door to that...

“We’ll meet again, don’t know where, don’t know when...”

“If you don’t stop singing bloody Vera Lynn then you’ll meet your end two minutes earlier than you were supposed to at the end of this frying pan!”

And in the next house along...

“Dear God, Buddah, Allah, Jehovah... can anyone remember any of the Hindu ones?”

“Diwali?”

“No, I think that’s a festival. Dear God, Buddah, Allah, Jehovah and whoever we’re supposed to worship at Diwali -”

“We could try for some of the Pagan ones...”

“Shut up, Sean. We may have never set foot in any house of religion - except for at our Sheila’s wedding and we can’t even remember which one it was - but we’re not bad people, definitely a lot
better than most of the people in this street and we would like to be considered for any good afterlifes that there might be space left in. Thank you for your time and consideration.”

And at No. 27

“I think we must have read the leaflet wrong, there’s no way we’re going to get all these windows bricked up in the next two minutes.”

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Down in the Fellowship bunker Frodo was trying to be terribly British and stiff upper lipped to stop himself from having an Incident, which meant that in the last half hour he’d made about five cups of tea per person.

Sam looked at Merry and Pippin and how much tea they’d consumed and came to the logical end result. “Aragorn... you know when you built the shelter? You did remember to put in facilities, didn’t you?”

“Facilities?”

“He’s talking about a lavatory, Aragorn.” Supplied Legolas. “We can’t exactly go out and pee in the garden, because as much good as it will do for the flowers, they aren’t there any more.”

“Oh.”

“Och, see that wooden door over there with the half-moon shape cut into it? It’s in there. He forgot all about it, so I built one, and it doesn’t use up any of our water supply to flush it...” Gimli continued a with a long and detailed explanation of how the new toilet worked, why Gimli wanted to build one into the house they would have to build when they got out and why it had been inspired by Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Legolas gave him he verbal equivalent of a pat on the head and left him to it.

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Four hours later, Frodo had reduced the amount of tea being made to a more sensible level, although the Fellowship had given Gimli’s revolutionary toilet design a thorough test. They settled down to play what should have been a nice, friendly game of Scrabble. But then again, they were playing it with Merry and Pippin.

“I really don’t think that’s a word.”

“Of course it’s a word. It’s a complex gynaecological problem.”

“How on earth do you know that? And anyway, it’s spelt with a ‘v’.”

Legolas looked at the words on the board and twitched. He was supposed to spend the next two weeks in here?

He thought about a post-nuclear landscape. He thought of radiation sickness the way Merry and Pippin described it. He even thought about his hair falling out. Then he thought about watching his life slip away as he spent the next fortnight trapped in a fallout shelter with the rest of the Fellowship. He was taking his chances outside.

Legolas got up and strode towards the door. “I’m going out. I will be some time.”

Frodo looked distraught. “Legolas, you can’t go out there! I’m not going to let you die.” Frodo
wrapped his arms and legs around Legolas’ knees. Legolas kicked him away.

“Goodbye, I’d like you all to know that you’ve done more than anyone else to completely ruin my life. And yes, I’m including my mother in this, Gandalf.” With that, Legolas made his dramatic exit from the bunker and perhaps the stage of life.

As the door slammed shut there was a cry of “If you go out you can’t come back in again!” from Aragorn.

Frodo was stood pointing at the door, occasionally whimpering “gone...”.

Sam was about to offer comfort when Aragorn slapped Frodo across the back in a manly fashion and barked “No point in pining. He’s gone, get used to it. It’s a cruel world after the bomb’s dropped.” Aragorn turned his attention to the rest of the Fellowship as Sam tired to comfort the trembling Frodo. “Now, the majority of civilisation will have been destroyed, but there may be pockets of survival. We have to listen to Radio 4 to find out what to do.”

Aragorn reached for the radio. Unfortunately, as he reached to turn it on he knocked over a can of Tennents that miraculously hadn’t been there a moment before. The lager poured into the radio, which made some horrible crackling noises and then went dead.

“Oh. Oh dear.” Aragorn brightened again. “But it doesn’t matter, we have all the leaflets, and as soon as the immediate danger has passed we can go out and loot a new radio.”

There was uncomfortable silence for a while.

Then, the voice of conscience came from an unusual source. Merry looked uncomfortable, then said, “ummmmm. We have known Legolas for like thousands of years. Don’t you think we should do something to mourn his horrible, lingering death?”

The others had the decency to look ashamed, apart from Frodo who hadn’t stopped looking distraught yet.

“We could sing a lament. He’s an elf, he’d like that.”

Sam and Frodo looked at each other. They knew what Legolas thought about everyone else’s singing. He had used the phrases “like cats being run over with a steamroller” and “like a peacock being castrated with a rusty knife” to describe their singing. But, since he was dead, the only thing he could do was turn in his grave. And, since he didn’t have a grave, if he did start turning he might roll so far that they wouldn’t have to step over his corpse when they left the shelter.

Aragorn stood up, solemnly. “Let us sing.”

“See that elf, watch that scene, digging the dancing queen...”

“GANDALF! That is not what he would have wanted.”

After going out the door Legolas paused. There was still a ladder between him and the outside world, and he truly did not know what he would find out there. He briefly wondered if it was possible to commit suicide by shooting yourself with your own longbow, but then realised that he’d left the longbow in the house.

Legolas steeled himself and took a deep breath as he prepared to open the final hatch. He stepped
Had this been a film the ‘Morning’ music from ‘Peer Gynt’ would be playing. Flowers were blooming. Birds were singing. Dawn was breaking, and there was the sound of a milk float. Legolas was suddenly filled with joy - there had been no bomb! Legolas half turned to go back and tell the others, then stopped. He had heard the air raid sirens. He should find out what was going on first.

He let himself back into the house, and turned the stereo in the kitchen on. The sound of air raid sirens came out. He paused. Why on earth was Radio 4 playing air raid sirens? If there was a war on, surely people had got the message by now? The he looked at the stereo again. It was set to ‘tape’. Now filled with a growing sense of suspicion Legolas pressed eject, and was presented with a tape bearing the label “BBC Sound Effects. Volume 6: War”. Legolas knew who was behind this. Only Gandalf had the time, intelligence, cunning and deep down malice to do this.

Legolas briefly flicked on Radio 4, just to make sure life was as normal, then set off down the garden. Half way down he stopped. Aragorn had said they would need to be down there for two weeks. Which meant, with any luck, a whole two weeks with no Merry, Pippin or Gandalf. Legolas returned to the house, thinking of his Hammond organ.

Diary of Aragorn, son of Arathorn, last surviving Man of Gondor, last surviving human (probably, I mean there might be some people ok in the desert, or the rainforests. You never know.)

Day Two.

We are all slowly adapting to life in the bunker and the loss of Legolas. The terrible deaths of thousands weigh heavily on our minds, but somehow we soldier on.

Today we played Monopoly. Merry, Pippin and Gandalf all cheated and all had title deeds to Mayfair and Park Lane. Gimli won whilst they were arguing among themselves.

In other news, Frodo and Sam decided to take their chances with the fatal radiation outside. We knew that they were both going to their deaths, and we probably should have tried to dissuade them, but I had thrown a double and got an extra go and wasn’t paying attention. We are assured that it was the act of two brave hobbits, or at least one brave hobbit and one disturbed hobbit.

Merry and Pippin have bagsied their food rations.

Frodo and Sam paused at the foot of the ladder leading to the outside world.

Frodo put his hand on Sam’s shoulder. “Now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam.”

Sam patted Frodo’s hand. “That was really very moving the first time you said it, but you’ve said it that many times it doesn’t have the impact any more.”

“Oh. Um, how about ‘it’s been nice knowing you’?”

“Hmm. Cliched, but the sentiment’s there. It’s been nice knowing you too, Frodo.”

They hugged, and then started to climb the ladder. Sam was first out, and Frodo called up to him “How far did Legolas get?”
“Quite a long way. He’s not here.”

“You mean there’s hope?”

“I think you’d better come and look for yourself.”

Frodo emerged into the open air. “Oh. Oh well. Do you think we’ve died very fast and this is heaven?”

“Not unless heaven includes him from down the road practising the tuba very badly in the back garden.”

“Hell?”

“No, don’t see the Sackville-Bagginses anywhere. I think there may not have been nuclear war.”

Frodo looked contemplative for a moment, then shrugged. “What do you want for breakfast? Everything in the fridge should be alright.”

“Aren’t we going to tell them?”

“Sam, if there’s been no war the only people in the house will be you, me and Legolas.”

Sam smiled.

They found Legolas in the kitchen. He saw them and paused. “None of the others have followed you?”

“No, just us. The rest of them think we’re dead.”

“Oh, that’s good. I phoned in sick for you yesterday Sam, told them you had the flu, so best take today off and go in tomorrow looking a bit rough.”

Sam nodded.

Frodo looked concerned. “You will do that for Aragorn and Gimli as well? You know how bad Aragorn is at job interviews, we’ve got to keep his job.”

“Yes, don’t worry, I’ve told their bosses they’ve got the flu as well. I don’t want a repeat of that time when he listed the positive points he could bring to the job as ‘experience ruling large kingdom and orc slaying’.”

Frodo relaxed. Then he looked around the room. “Look at the state of this place! We must have knocked half the things off when we left, and I don’t know how this much dust can accumulate in this short time.” Frodo had slipped easily back into being his old self again.

“I’d better be seeing to the garden. It’s like it’s been trampled by dozens of people. Almost as if they were looking for something.”

Something struck Frodo, “what about Merry and Pippin?”

“What about them?”

“You haven’t phoned in sick for them too, have you?”
“No. They get through enough jobs as it is. It was too much effort to dial the number and lie.”

The two weeks had passed slowly but surely down in the shelter. It was now time to face the outside world, and Aragorn was giving them all a pep talk.

“Now, what we will find out there will most likely be horrific. This is not least because it will include the bodies of three of our closest friends lying dead within feet of the shelter. Indeed, there may even be enough of them left for us to see the expressions of agonised terror from their last, pain filled moments. Although, should there have arisen, as is possible, a race of mutant super-cockroaches their bodies will have been eaten, and we will need to be on our guard, as the cockroaches by now will have eaten most of the corpses in this area. Our first objective is to find supplies of food and water, and, if there are cockroaches, an easily defensible position and weapons. Everyone clear on this?”

The rest of them had switched off after the cockroaches, since ‘a race of mutant super-cockroaches will have taken over by the time we come out, you mark my words’ had comprised about half of what Aragorn had said since the fourth day. They all murmured in agreement after he had stopped talking though. The others knew mutant cockroaches was a daft idea; they were more worried about the seven foot tall intelligent homicidal rats. Well, Gandalf as the possessor of the BBC soundtrack tape and fermenter of this whole incident had really rather enjoyed the two weeks down here. It was like ‘Big Brother’, only with so much more despair and suffering.

There was something on Merry’s mind. “We should see if there’s any women about.”

“What?”

“Well, we need to repopulate the planet. We’ll be like, the founders of a new race of... of... short deformed creatures! All we need are some women who aren’t too mutated.”

“Yeah, and we’ll be like the best guys on the planet, with no radiation deformations!”

Only Merry and Pippin could see a nuclear holocaust as a chance to get laid.

Aragorn handed out the swords, and went first up the ladder. He stuck his head out.

“Better come up carefully. I don’t see any corpses, so I was probably right about the super-cockroaches.”

He came out and crouched, senses alert to danger.

The others blinked in the unaccustomed sunlight as they emerged. Then they looked confused.

“Och, Aragorn, there’s an awful lot of houses left standing.”

“Looting! Looting!” Merry and Pippin jumped up and down.

Aragorn looked at them sternly.

“Look, they’d have wanted us to have it. Really.”

Gimli was still looking puzzled. “I can hear cars. And people.”

Aragorn ignored him. “Perhaps the other three tried to take shelter in the house. We should at least look for the corpses to give them a proper burial.”
They all followed them into the house. No corpses in the kitchen, which was looking very clean for having been deserted for a fortnight. No fallout dust or anything.

“That sounds like the hoover in the sitting room.” They went to the source of the noise.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGGGGGGH!” They screamed in unison.

“Eeeek!” Frodo screamed back.

“Frodo! How many times have we told you, at least wear boxers to do the cleaning.” Then Aragorn’s brain caught up with him. “Why aren’t you dead?”

“Oh, um, there was no nuclear war, Gandalf set you all up. And we, um, didn’t tell you because, ummmm, we, um couldn’t find the door again. It’s that well hidden.”

Aragorn turned to wax wrathful at Gandalf, but Gandalf had disappeared.

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Epilogue.

“And tonight, on ‘Newsnight’, we report on the reappearance of BBC presenter Jeremy Paxman. Paxman, who had been missing for over three weeks, was found wandering the streets in a distressed state. He disappeared from a busy BBC studio, but no witnesses saw him leave and he has not yet been able to make any coherent statement about his ordeal. Was this a kidnapping or a breakdown?”
It’s a Wonderful Legolas

Chapter Notes

Story notes: For those sensible people who haven’t read the Silmarillion (this includes Random Dent, by the way), the Valar are the gods of Middle Earth who live in Valinor, and Elbereth is the chief female Valar. If you are insane enough to want to know more, read the Silmarillion (which is only slightly more fun than reading Ulysses), or go to an online Tolkien encyclopedia

It was nearly closing time at Stonehenge. Time to sweep up the druids and inform Americans that no, Stonehenge is not open 24 hours. There was a blond haired man sat cross-legged next to one of the stones, in an attitude of meditation. One of the staff walked up to him.

“Oi, Maharishi, closing time, hop it.”

This got no response.

“Eternal oneness with the universe starts again at ten tomorrow.”

He sighed. He’d best find the lad with the pointy ears that worked the souvenir shop. He seemed to deal with the weird ones well.

A few minutes later Legolas was approached by an elf in an English Heritage uniform.

“Scuse me.”

No response.

“Hey, are you Legolas of Mirkwood?”

Legolas opened his eyes in surprise. “What?”

“You are aren’t you? Sorry, you don’t know me,” he held out his hand which Legolas shook warily, “I would have only been about seventy when you went off on the quest, but I’ve always though you were so cool.”

“Oh. Thank you. It was rather the high point of my career. Everything’s been downhill since.”

“Oooh, I know, it’s not right an elf of your standing working on the railway.”

“How do you know that?”

“You’ve still got your uniform on.”

“Bother.”

“So what brings you here - no wait, don’t tell me, you’re looking for the mystic portal to Valinor?”
“Yes. Why haven’t I transcended?”

“Tourists. Whole place was getting knee deep in them. There was this nasty incident where this couple from Birmingham were accidentally taken up to Valinor, and the explanations took days. They threatened to sue you know, and Elbereth said you can’t sue ethereal beings, but they were having none of it and...”

“So where is the portal now?”

“Avebury. Dead handy for the post office and the shops. You want to be doing what you were doing here next to the really big stone at Avebury. I can give you directions, you have got a car haven’t you?”

“Ummm, no, I can’t drive.” Legolas tried not to shudder.

“Come on, it really is closing time and I’ll get into trouble if I don’t get you out.” They began to walk to the exit together. “Tell you what, I’ll give you a lift out there. Our Táraadar does the shopping for the Valar normally, but he’s off to New Zealand for a month, so I’m doing it for them. If you come round the supermarket with me, I’ll drive you out to Avebury, and you can deliver the shopping for me, ok?”

“Oh, thank you. Oh, if we’re in the supermarket we can get some prawn crackers for the journey.”

“Good idea.”

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So it was that Legolas found himself trying to ring the doorbell of a bizarrely half-timbered castle in Valinor, weighed down with shopping bags. The door opened.

“Legolas? What are you doing here? Why have you brought shopping?”

“Umm, Encirith, who’s filling in for Táraadar, offered me a lift in return for bringing the shopping, and I’m here because I need to talk to you.”

“Well, come in, and help me unpack this lot.”

As they unpacked the bags Elbereth talked inconsequentially about the weather, the other Valar, and knitting.

“You’ve been most helpful Legolas. Now, let’s get a pot of tea on and we can talk.”

They sat down in the living room. A lot of the furniture was floral print. Doilies were much in evidence, and it was generally the kind of tasteless decor Frodo would have approved of.

Legolas took a deep breath. “I want to die.”

“Now, dear, we all feel like that some of the time...”

“No, I mean it. I have thought it over very seriously, considering all the possibilities. Everything I do is ruined by the other members of the Fellowship. I want to quit, and the only way to do that is to die.”

Elbereth looked taken aback. “This is news. I know we granted immortality to the others as a punishment...”
“Was the intention to punish me?”

“No, dear. But it gave the whole story of the quest a more finished feel if you all suffered the same fate.”

“Boromir didn’t.”

“If there was any way of sending him back, believe me, I would. Anyway, would you want to be in the same afterlife as your grandfather?”

“No, I want to Die with a capital D. No afterlife, the end.”

“Oh, it’s a serious decision to make.”

“As much as I’ve enjoyed taking tea with you, I’m not really in the habit of calling on higher beings just for a cup of Darjeeling.”

“It’s Assam, dear.”

“That’s not the point. This is what I want and you are the only ones who can grant it.”

“Oh, well, I’d better invite the others round, we’ll need to discuss it.”

The Valar gathered in Elbereth’s front room, in a way suspiciously similar to Frodo’s WI meetings. The presence of so many higher beings was making Legolas nervous, so he tried to hide behind one of the two terribly retro lamps, but was thwarted by the Valar’s questioning.

“So, could you explain again why you want to die, Legolas?”

“The Fellowship. The ruin everything I do. However hard I try to get rid of them they still come back. This is the only way to be rid of them.”

“Who are the Fellowship?”

“You don’t remember the Fellowship? Well, you know all that unpleasantness with Sauron at the end of the third age?”

“Yes.”

“Well, they rather saved Middle earth. So we invited them back here for some tea and biscuits and a nice chat about what they’d done.”

“Oh yes, and they brought Gandalf and those two short gentlemen.”

“Gandalf? Oh, you mean Olorin, I thought we decided he couldn’t come back.”

“That was why we decided he couldn’t come back.”

“Ah, it’s all coming back to me now. What was it the short one said about Yavanna again?”

“That ‘the giver of fruits should have bigger melons’.”

“Thanks a lot, it took me five millennia to forget about that and then you go reminding me again. I think we should grant his request.”
“Maybe he’s got a point.”

“About dying?”

“No, about Yavanna.”

“Don’t you talk about my wife like that unless you want to wake up to having a mountain dropped on your head one morning.”

This was all getting a bit silly, so Elbereth decided to weigh in. “I don’t think we should just grant his request, it might give people the wrong idea and then we’d never get any peace.” The other Valar nodded.

“Yes, we shouldn’t just give him what he wants, there should be some kind of quest or challenge.”

“That’s so passé, and anyway, he’s already been on a quest and that’s what caused all the problems in the first place.”

“Then maybe we should just make sure he knows what he’s asking for, it might scare him out of it.”

“You think that someone who lives with Olorin understands the concept of fear?”

“We just need to approach this from a different direction. You know that film that’s on every Christmas? Perhaps something like that?”

The other Valar nodded.

“Who’s going to show him then?”

The Valar, as one higher being, looked at their feet. Elbereth looked at them disappointedly. “Tulkas, you haven’t got anything better to do this week, why don’t you do it?”

“But why don’t you make Este do it?”

“Because it’s her turn to decorate the Christmas tree.”

“But why are we even celebrating Christmas? We’re gods! We shouldn’t be celebrating another deity’s birthday, it’s like buying your competitor’s products.”

“Yes dear, now go and see to Legolas.”

Tulkas made a face at Elbereth behind her back and dragged Legolas out of the room.

A few moments later, due to the power of the Valar, he found himself on the back of a speeding motorbike.

“Tulkas? What are you doing?”

Legolas had never been one for religion. He’d met the Valar, and didn’t feel the need to believe in them. It was like believing in Aragorn. However, he’d never envisaged clinging on to a god for dear life while hurting along at speed across some very rough fields.

Tulkas decided to explain. “Elbereth said to show you about the film they always show at Christmas. So I’m doing the Steve McQueen bits from the Great Escape.”
“Why?”

“Dunno. Escape from your troubles?”

“I’ve tried that, moved house, emigrated, changed my name and faked my own death frequently. They always find me again. Are you sure this is what Elbereth meant?”

Tulkas shrugged, forcing Legolas to hold onto him even harder. “Look out, Nazis!” He did a swift turn on the bike. “We’re going over the fence!”

“Nooooooooo!”

Before Tulkas attempted to jump the barbed wire fence on the bike they were sucked back into the living room, bike and all, and came to a sudden standstill.

Elbereth was looking at them with mild despair. “And what exactly were you doing there Tulkas?”

“The Great Escape. Film that’s always on telly over Christmas."

“That was not the film I intended. And what did you think that was going to teach Legolas?”

“Dunno. It was you that told me to do it, I thought you were being ineffable again.”

“Tulkas, why don’t you start putting the Christmas lights up, there’s a dear.” He skulked off, and Elbereth turned to Lorien. “Why don’t you have a go dear. Actually, just to check, what would you be doing with Legolas?”

“Telling him that there is a Santa Claus.”

“No dear, wrong movie again. Does anyone know which film I’m talking about?”

“Mary Poppins.”

“Muppets’ Christmas Carol.”

“E.T.”

Elbereth sighed. “Oh dear. If something’s worth doing properly it’s worth doing yourself. The film I meant was ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’."

The assembled Valar went “oooooh, of course.”

Legolas folded his arms. “I want to die. I don’t want to have never existed. This is pointless.”

“No it isn’t dear, now come with me.”

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They materialised near a familiar looking city.

“Ancient Rome? But what about the rest of my life? What about the quest?”

“Oh, nothing changed. They took Glorfindel on the quest instead. Did the same as you, except he won the orc killing contest at Helm’s Deep, got forty seven you know.”

“The little bastard! If I ever see him again I’ll-”
“You’ll do what? Tell him that you want to hurt him because in an alternate universe where you were never born he killed more orcs than a non-existent you? Anyway, in this universe he went out onto the rooftops at Minas Tirith to look at the stars after the final victory, tripped up and fell down a chimney into the kitchen furnace. Very nasty.”

“Why are we here?”

“I’m a deity dear, not a philosopher.”

Legolas gave her a look normally only reserved for Aragorn. “I meant, why are we in Ancient Rome?”

“Oh, I’m showing you how a few things would have turned out differently without you. Now, it’s a few days after the battle of Cannae, which I’m sure you know Rome lost.”

“Yes. I was there you know.”

“Oh no you weren’t dear. You were never born. Now, let’s see what’s going on in the senate today, shall we?”

They entered a grand classical building, full of men who looked like they hadn’t been able to find clothes and had just wrapped themselves up in a bedsheet. In the centre of the room was Aragorn, looking very unhappy.

Aragorn was addressed by a man in a bedsheet. “Aragornus, you are charged with treason against the city of Rome, cowardice and anything else we haven’t solved recently.”

“I was not a coward.”

“Publius says that he heard you say, and I quote “run for it lads, there’s no way we’re going to win”.”

“I made a tactical retreat in the face of impossible circumstances.”

Legolas turned to Elbereth. “But he didn’t run away! He was right next to me, and we fought to the last man. And last elf. And the two of us ran away after the rest of them were dead, but that was only because we heard that Arwen had joined the Carthaginians and we didn’t want to be taken prisoner.”

“Shush dear, and listen.”

Another bedsheet stood up. “So, a tactical retreat involves all the men under your command running like buggerly away from the Carthaginians, dropping their armour as they went and screaming ‘run away! run away!’?”

“They may have been slightly over enthusiastic.”

“Aragornus, we send our men to fight telling them ‘come back with your shield or on it’. Your lot barely managed to come back with their underwear.”

Elbereth led Legolas out of the senate house. “I find long trial scenes really rather dull, don’t you?”

“But what happened? And why did he run away?”

“Have you ever realised how much Aragorn looks up to you?”

“He doesn’t look up to me. Squints occasionally, but he won’t admit he needs glasses.”
“Without you, he had no-one to look to for an example of valour. He isn’t the warrior you know without your influence.”

“But fighting is what makes Aragorn... Aragorn.”

“Yes. And without you he is not a brave warrior. Let’s see how he got on after his reputation was ruined.”

Their surroundings changed to a rural landscape. Aragorn was ploughing a field in front of a small hut, whistling to himself and looking generally content. Then there was a shriek from the house.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaarrrrragorn!”

“Yes, Arwen?”

“I hate you, you know that!”

“Yes, dear. You keep reminding me.”

“There’s a rat! In the hut! Get it out, now!”

“It’s only one rat.”

“Get it out! I never had to deal with rats at Rome, but you screwed it up!”

“Sorry dear.” He began to walk towards the house.

“Don’t you dare try apologising to me!”

“Sorry. Where is the rat?”

Legolas turned to Elbereth. “I didn’t think Arwen could get any worse. I was wrong. She only used to start about half of their conversations with ‘I hate you’.”

Shouting continued from the hut, accompanied by numerous crashes.

“I think we’d better leave,” said Elbereth. “In this reality she tends to throw knives instead of pans.” She snapped her fingers.

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“Bznaaaaaaaeeeeeeeaghhghghghghg! GGGGeeeeeeeaaaaaaaawhiwhiwhiwhiwhi!”

Legolas didn’t even bother turning in the direction of the noise. “Ah, I see we’re catching up with Frodo.”

At this point Frodo swung past on the end of a very long candelabra, dressed in full monk’s robes and still gibbering.

“Yes, I’m afraid that without your influence, Frodo became rather unmanageable during the mediaeval period. Sam tried his best, but there’s only so much one Hobbit can do on his own. I think it’s the wall paintings that set him off.”

Elbereth gestured round the cathedral. It was a stunning example of mediaeval architecture and, indeed, wall painting, which meant that every other wall was covered in depictions of Hell and Purgatory and even the angels on the more positive walls had big staring eyes.
Frodo was halfway up the high altar when a group of monks led by Sam burst in yelling “There he is!”

“He’d better not break the altarpiece, it’s practically new.”

“Someone go get the Bishop!”

“Why?”

“His staff’s got the curly bit on the end, it’s really useful for dragging him down again.”

Elbereth continued, “It’s really quite tragic for someone to have to spend three hundred years in Bedlam.”

Legolas winced. “Three hundred years?”

“Yes, and Sam was very lonely without him.”

“Oh come off it. I know what’d happen if you separated Sam from Frodo, he’d just settle down, get married and have a really big family.”

“Alright, so he wasn’t that lonely, but it wasn’t at all nice for Frodo.”

The Bishop had come in and was poking Frodo with the end of his staff, trying to dislodge him.

Legolas put up his arms in mock surrender. “Alright, alright. I get it, I’ve learned my lesson.”

“I beg to differ dear.” Elbereth snapped her fingers.

They found themselves in India, in the nineteenth century, at the height of the Raj.

“What now?”

“We’re going to see the Viceroy.”

Legolas had a horrible thought. “This isn’t Gandalf, is it?”

“Oh, goodness no. In fact, your existence being erased had no effect on Gandalf whatsoever, and I think you’ll agree that we both know far too much about his life already.”

“So if we’re not here to see Gandalf then who are we here to see?”

Elbereth’s answer was cut off by a familiar voice. “Ah wanted elephants! Ah said elephants! An’ see that! See that! That’s a horse! Ah know a horse when Ah see one and that’s no an elephant.”

The lackey on the receiving end of the rant took two steps back. “You said you wished to hunt tigers, sir, you did not say what you wanted to be hunting tigers on.”

“You always hunt tigers on elephants! Everybody knows that!”

“Sorry, sir, but I don’t know where I can find an elephant at short notice.”

“Ah, never mind. Just get someone to go out and shoot a tiger so Ah can huv m’photo taken wi’it.”

“Yes, sir.” The lackey disappeared. Pippin took off his solar topi, and scratched his head. In full
tropical suit he was almost respectable, that is, until he opened his mouth.

Legolas picked his jaw up off the ground. “Pippin is Viceroy of India?”

“Of course not. Merry’s the Viceroy. Pippin’s just his second in command.”

“But what have I go to do with this? I never did anything to stop them from getting a job out here.”

“It’s all to do with chaos theory. You probably don’t remember, but in 1723 you bumped into a man
named Archibald Carpenter. Well, who would have thought it, when you didn’t bump into him it
started a whole complicated chain of events which ended up with Merry becoming Viceroy of
India.”

While extensive scientific tests have shown Merry is not in fact the devil, he shares the same uncanny
ability to turn up when his name is mentioned, in this case, with a stunning young woman, complete
with handy eye level cleavage, on his arm.

“Peregrin old chap! How’s the tiger hunting coming along?”

“Merry doesn’t speak like that!”

“He does now. There’s something about being in charge of large parts of the British Empire which
gives one this incredible urge to use expressions like ‘top hole’ and ‘what what’.”

“But what about tropical diseases? Shouldn’t they be dead of malaria? Or perhaps something even
worse?” Legolas asked hopefully.

“No, funnily enough Hobbits seem to be immune to most of the illnesses you can get out here, it’s
how they managed to climb the promotion ladder so quickly.”

“Snakes? Spiders?”

“They don’t like the taste of them much.”

“What about the Indian Mutiny?”

“That was ages ago, they’ve missed it.”

“So nothing bad happens to them at all?”

“No, they become incredibly rich and eventually come back to England and retire to enormous
country houses. Oh, and the average height in the country decreases by about an inch and a half.”

Legolas looked confused, then worked through what Elbereth had just told him. “Eww. Can we
leave. Now. Please?”

Elbereth snapped her fingers again.

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Legolas and Elbereth materialised hovering above a battlefield.

Legolas looked at the soldiers. “Oh. Hastings.” Then a thought struck him. “Gimli...”

“Oh, that looks like him over there, pinned down by a large group of bloodthirsty Norman
cavalrymen.” Elbereth smiled brightly.
“Gimli is a good fighter. Very handy with his axe.”

“Well dear, ever since he lost that orc killing contest with Glorfindel he rather lost his confidence. All the other English soldiers seem to be doing much better than him. But there are rather a lot of Normans over there.” She turned to Legolas. “You were fighting for the Normans weren’t you? Or you would have if you existed.”

“Yes, ok, I was fighting for William the Bast- ahem, William the Conqueror.” Legolas looked at the ground. He knew what was coming next, so saved Elbereth the bother of telling the story. “And I helped Gimli get off the battlefield and got him a job in the Imperial Guard at Constantinople. And now I never existed so Gimli was sold into prostitution and spent several years in horrific misery before he was finally eaten alive by a very drunk Norman called Tancred.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, it doesn’t suit you. No, Gimli didn’t become an Imperial Guard, because it’s very difficult if you have no knees. Or elbows. But oddly enough, the man who did that to him was called Tancred. Look, that’s him over there. And isn’t that King Harold? Oh. Oh. Eaooh. I think getting shot in the eye would be preferable to that.”

“Are we quite finished? Are there any other historic events that I have managed to change?”

“No. All finished. Still want to have your existence ended?”

Legolas opened his mouth to speak, then took a minute to think. Was total obvlion actually better than living with the Fellowship? He paused to remember the good times, like when Merry kicked Gandalf down the stairs, or when Pippin got himself locked into the chest freezer for a week. Or even the time, thirty years ago, when Aragorn had actually remembered his birthday. Reading the Grauniad with Gimli. Watching the garden blossom under Sam’s careful attention. And all the times that Frodo had quite seriously injured him during a psychotic incident he was probably only doing it out of misplaced affection.

Legolas turned to Elbereth. “No, I don’t want to die. I want to go home. Actually, I need to go shopping, I didn’t buy anyone any Christmas presents because I thought I’d be dead. I don’t suppose you could send me back to the nearest Marks and Spencers to home?”

“Yes. Of course.” They now appeared back in Elbereth’s front room. “just put on these ruby slippers.”

Legolas folded his arms. “No. I know you are all powerful beings. You can send me back without ruby slippers.”

“Spoilsport.” Elbereth snapped her fingers and Legolas disappeared. She turned to the kitchen door, which was slightly ajar. “You can all come out now, I’ve sent him back.”

The rest of the Valar filed into the front room. “How did it go?”

“He fell for it. Hook line and sinker. Elves always do. You tell them some tall tale about how this would be what life was like without them, show their friends dying horribly and they’re putty in your hands.”

“Oh, I know. I saw what you did with the dwarf. Very inventive, I must say.”

“Yes, yes. Now someone put the kettle on, it’s time for ‘Watercolour Challenge’.”

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Legolas materialised in the middle of Marks and Spencer, but the other shoppers were too absorbed
in last minute panic buying to notice.

A voice came over the tannoy. “This shop will be closing in fifteen minutes. Please take all your purchases to the checkouts. Thank you, and Merry Christmas.”

Legolas looked up. There was an oversized (but since this is Marks and Spencers, tasteful) calendar on the wall. It said ‘24th December’. Legolas screamed. And kept screaming. He kept on screaming as he pranced at speed round the shop, panicking and buying the nearest things he thought the rest of the Fellowship might like. He was still screaming as he paid at the checkout, which caused the shop assistant to check his signature about five times. He only finally stopped screaming as he reached the bus stop, much to the relief of the other people in the bus shelter.

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Christmas morning. Or to be more precise, ‘Christmas so early in the morning it’s practically still last night’, since hobbits when presents and huge amounts of food are involved are amazingly light sleepers, but surprisingly loud at getting up so everyone else is awake. Aragorn had got to the stereo before Legolas, so instead of carols they were listening to Slade. On repeat play. This was popular with the hobbits who were bouncing round the room like they were on drugs and singing along. Gimli had painted his helmet silver and gold. Gandalf had even got into the spirit of things, had wrapped tinsel round his hat and staff and was demanding to be known as ‘Gandalf the Sparkly’.

It had been decided that no presents were to be opened until after Christmas Breakfast. Everyone get dressed in their best clothes, and were fed enough bacon sandwiches to make them explode. And then to the presents...

Legolas handed out hastily wrapped parcels to everyone and smiled nervously.

Merry and Pippin opened theirs simultaneously. “Socks... wow. Very... socky.”

Legolas looked a bit manic. “I thought so.”

Aragorn was next. “A shaving kit. Like the one you bought for last year. It was such a shame that I accidentally dropped it down the toilet on Boxing Day.”

As was traditional in the house, Gandalf drank the present he got from Legolas. “Mnnnn. Strawberry shower gel. Much nicer than mandarin.” He licked his lips and burped a bubble.

Sam was very appreciative of his Christmas cactus. Frodo was already planning tomorrow’s menu from the new Delia Smith book that Legolas had bought him. But Gimli was the most impressed with his gift, a tool belt filled with useful things. He was now looking round the house speculatively poking things and hoping they’d fall down so he could put them back up again.

Legolas settled down to watch the hobbits fist fight over the remote control. It was actually quite nice to be back.

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It was after Christmas Dinner. The Fellowship were all passed out asleep in front of the tv, snoring at various volumes. The tv played away to itself.

“And now on BBC 1, the Christmas address from Her Majesty, The Queen.”

The shot changed to an elderly woman with big glasses.
“Hello nation. Well, quite frankly it’s been a complete bugger of a year, and I can say that with impunity because there’s not a man jack of you watching this. You’re all sleeping off dinner, arguing or watching Sky. I suppose my daughter might be watching. Hello Anne, you’ve got a criminal record and I haven’t, hahahaha! Oh, that did feel good. Now, back to business. I would like to name personally everyone who’s fucked me over in the past year, alphabetically. Starting with ‘a’ for...”
Come our readers, fly through the mists of time, to before the age of iron, when Mycenae was great and heroes walked the earth. Fly past the Pillars of Hercules, over the wine dark sea, over the land of Agamemnon and Menelaus, to a sea-fringed dusky plain. Sing, Muse, of the sights here to behold. Sing of the great citadel atop the hill, home of the brave Trojans. Sing of those heroes encamped before the fortress, the Achaean Hellenes. Sing as one proud and noble warrior, king among men, comes forth to parley.

"ARWEN!"

At the battlements a face appeared, one beloved of Aphrodite, one that had launched about 10 medium sized ships of the Danaans to avenge her loss.

"WHAT?"

"Please come home. You've been here ages, please? Haven't I always tried to give you everything? I spend half my time off pillaging for your sake and you go off with another man behind my back! What has he got that I haven't?"

"Personality, that's what! He doesn't bugger off pillaging all the time! And he's better in bed!"

Such words goaded bold Aragorn to launch himself at the fortress, though he had not yet buckled on his shining armour and taken up his sword and great shield. Wily Odysseus and brave Achilles, seeing his folly, leapt up and took him back to their camp by the black ships.

"What did you try and do that for you stupid bugger?" spake cunning Odysseus "What exactly were you trying to achieve?"

"The little whore! Why did I marry her?"

"I've often asked myself that. Well, what are we going to do?"

Achilles' brows knotted in concentration. "We get the lads together and we rush the gates."

Odysseus gave him a withering look. "We keep doing that and we keep failing. We've done loads of sacrifices and nothing. I mean, how long have we been here, rushing the gates, not getting anywhere and coming back here again?"

"Dunno. Ages. Feels like we've been here ten years."

Odysseus agreed. "Yeah. And I for one want to get back to the wife."
Aragorn was still sulking. "Well, at least you've got a wife. And there's no chance of her being unfaithful to you while you're away."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Ummmm, nothing, nothing, just that she is a shining example of chaste womanhood."

"And nothing to do with you previous drunken comment that she has, and I quote, 'a face like a Sphinx's backside'?"

Achilles was deep in thought. "Perhaps... perhaps we could attack at night time?"

Odysseus looked at Achilles, who would face many dangers willingly, but not usually intelligently. "And do you remember what happened last time? You getting disorientated and massacring that sacred grove of trees outside the city? Athena was bloody pissed off. I for one do not want another plague of enraged owls, thank you."

Aragorn seemed confused. "I thought they were eagles."

"Eagles, owls, who cares? It was the enraged part, and the sharp beaks and claws part that was the problem."

The High Priest of Zeus appeared, clothed in robes of white with suspiciously long, trailing sleeves. "Morning, Frodo"

"The light comes from the east, but does not descend there, for the eye sees what mere mortals cannot."

The warriors looked at the other short man who was leading Frodo on a piece of rope. They didn’t know how to interpret the auspices, and seemed rather hopeful that this might actually be something helpful.

"No, that’s not a prophecy, he means ‘good morning’ too."

"Ah, then I think we’ll skip the ‘how are you then’ part of the conversation."

"The goats and trees of the field have no use for flame, the great one provides all."

"He says he’s fine, thank you."

"Samwise," said Odysseus, "what can you interpret from the flights of birds for us?"

"I see birds of prey, and birds of carrion all flying towards one point; a donkey’s just died outside the west gate, I think."

"No other helpful, mystic things going on?"

"Not unless there’s something particularly mystic about a dead donkey, no."

"You could go and read its entrails...?"

"After it’s been crapped on by a load of carrion crows? No, thank you. I’ll do you a goat if you want, but it’s been ill and I don’t think it’ll be much use."

"The black ones are servants of him, from Dunland! Crebain! Crebain!"
“Yes, umm, if you’ll excuse me, I think it’s time for the High Priest’s nap.”

Achilles was quite frankly fed up with this, and said so. “Bloody stupid gods...”

Odysseus tackled Achilles to the ground, so the thunderbolt struck down a couple of inches away from him.

“What the hell did you do that for? You know they don’t like it! You’ll have to apologise now. And you’d probably better look for a better sacrifice than one ill goat.”

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Time passed. In the camp of the Achaean Hellenes armour was polished. Swords were sharpened. Then sharpened again. Finally they were sharpened to the point that they were so thin as to be useless, so new swords were forged.

Arwen and her new father in law became engaged in a battle of the colour schemes of the Great Palace of Troy. Priam, Arwen’s father in law favoured big bold primary colours, illustrated with pictures of bulls, while Arwen wanted pastels and pictures of flowers. Paris, Arwen’s replacement for Aragorn tried to stay out of this by retiring to the courtyard to work on his one-man racing chariot.

In the midst of all this dullness a sail appeared on the horizon. Then the sail disappeared. Then it reappeared, a little closer inland. Then it disappeared. This went on for some time, the sail becoming closer on each appearance. People gathered along the beach to watch. As it neared the shore the sounds of voices and cursing could be heard.

“This was a bloody stupid idea.”

“You didnae say that when we had to carry it across that isthm - isthimmy- isthumum- strip of land thingy.”

Then the pair came ashore, dragging a most bizarre boat behind them. Odysseus came forward to greet them. Heavily armed.

“Who the sod are you? And what are you doing here?”

“Who are we? Umm, well, who are you?”

“We are Achaean Hellenes, warriors of proud descent.”

“Well, that’s us too. Apart from the proud descent bit.”

“Hey, Merry, speak for yourself. Ah’m the Thain.”

“No, you were the Thain. Of somewhere that dun’t exist any more. And you were the first and only Thain to be impeached.”

Odysseus was worried. “Achilles, go get Aragorn, would you? I’m having trouble deciding how I’m going to kill these two.”

“Stop there. We are mighty warriors, for hire at very reasonable rates. Well, I’m a mighty warrior, Pippin ’ere gets sat on.”

“Just you come here and say that, pal.”
With that the two short men set about each other with fists, teeth and anything else handy.

Aragorn ambled up.

“Ah, Aragorn, we appear to be being visited by a pair of comedy eunuchs.”

This was enough to stop the two men fighting.

“Eunuchs? No, no, no, no, no, no. No.”

“No. Very no. Do you want proof?”

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

This was not fast enough to stop Merry and Pippin demonstrating the fact that they were indeed 100% hobbit. Achilles went very pale and had to sit down.

Frodo was led in on his leash to see what all the fuss was about. Then he ran forwards and hugged Merry and Pippin.

“The sideways owl hoots thrice!”

Sam joined in the hug, and helpfully supplied, “We’re both very pleased to see you.”

“Could someone please explain to me what is going on?” Odysseus had his arms folding in a way that indicated that someone was going to get a kicking if he didn’t get some answers.

“Oh, sorry, they’re Frodo’s cousins. They’re... ummm... disinherited nobles. Soldiers, traders and pillagers.”

“Sometimes all at once,” added Pippin, “an’ we can do despoiling of virgins at no extra cost.”

“So basically they’re a pair of wastrels?”

“Oh, yes.”

“How do we get rid of them?”

“Quickly?”

“No, I meant by what method.”

“If we knew that we wouldn’t be so far from home.”

“What do they have to do with Arwen going off with Paris?”

“What?”

“What?”

“The mallorn spreads its boughs most wide!” Frodo was pointing at the boat, jumping up and down and looking excited.

“What, that? It’s a collapsible boat, for carrying about the place. Problem is, it collapses when you don’t want it to.”

“A collapsible boat. Of course. Why hasn’t anyone else thought of that? Oh, I know, because it’s the
most stupid idea in the whole world.”

“No, just you wait, a few centuries and everyone’ll have one.”

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A few days later all was as normal. A couple of men had come out from Troy, there had been a
derisory swordfight, with all parties becoming bored and wandering off before actually doing each
other any damage. Merry and Pippin had failed in their attempts to sell anything or seduce anyone.

Then suddenly, as he was being led for his morning walk, Frodo stopped, threw his arms out and
proclaimed, “the gods do not grant victory for you have neglected them; you must offer sacrifice!”

There was a moment’s silence then the whole camp gathered round him.

“Was that actually coherent?”

“I think so.”

“There isn’t anything else that sounds like ‘sacrifice’ is there?”

“Don’t think so.”

Aragorn looked doubtfully at Frodo. “How much should we sacrifice?”

“A hecatomb!”

“What? How much?”

Frodo started bouncing up and down and repeating “hecatomb! hecatomb! hecatomb!
hecatombhecatombhecatombhecatombhecatomb!”

“Samwise... is that a prophecy, or does he just like the sound of the word?”

“Hard to tell. Probably best to go with the hecatomb just to be on the safe side.”

Achilles was a bit slower on the uptake, “but how do you sacrifice a tomb? I mean, you can’t exactly
kill it.”

Odysseus gave him a patient primary school teacher look. “A hecatomb means a sacrifice of a
hundred oxen.”

“Oh. Sorry. But we don’t have a hundred oxen. I’d have noticed them.”

“Hecatomb!”

Frodo was ignored.

Sam chimed in, “Achilles is right. We’ve been living off salt meat for a while now, we’ve only got
three chickens and a goat.”

“What about them?”

“No chickens and no goat means no milk and eggs, and no milk and eggs means no pancakes.”

“Well bugger that. What are we going to do?”
“Ahem.”

Merry and Pippin sidled into the centre of the circle, accompanied by little squeaks of ‘hecatomb’.

“We, as purveyors of strange and expensive things that can only be got from far away, can provide you with one hundred oxen. For a price.”

“What price?”

“Oh, to be negotiated. We accept all major metals.”

So it was that Merry and Pippin were waved off in their collapsible boat.

“Do you think we’ll ever see them again?”

“No, but we didn’t give them a deposit on the oxen, so it doesn’t matter that much.”

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Time passed. Boredom itself became boring. And then a sail appeared on the horizon. this time it moved with purpose, and as it neared shore the sounds of a number of male voices singing ‘row, row, row your boat’ in a round could be heard.

The boat was beached and the occupants leapt onto dry land. Their apparent leader (although none of them seemed to be of an age where shaving was an issue) turned to them and yelled, “this is a leg stretching and food stop only, lads, so no wandering off or starting fights, ok?”

The young man then turned to Odysseus and Achilles, who’d come over to see what was going on.

“Hi! I’m Jason, and the lads are my Argonauts, cos the ship’s call the Argo. Look, we’ve all got matching tunics and everything.”

Odysseus was not sure what to make of him. “Oh. Very nice. Ummm, well, I’m Odysseus, King of Ithaca, this is Achilles, King of Phthia (don’t worry if you can’t pronounce it, neither can he), and there’s Aragorn, King of Mycenae about somewhere.”

“Wow! You must be on a really, really important quest.”

“No, Aragorn’s wife’s gone off with another man.”

“Oh.” Jason seemed incredibly disappointed.

Since he looked like he was going to cry Achilles tried to fill in, “but we do fighting, and sometimes the gods get wrathful.”

“Really?”

Odysseus took his cue from Achilles. “Yes, sometimes wrathful and vengeful on the same day.”

“That sounds so cool.” Jason seemed to remember something. “Oh, yeah, um, we kind of stopped cos we need food, could you sell us some? There’s nothing left on the boat except pickled olives, and that’s only cos Appolonius’ mum’s really bad with olives.”

“If you’re out of food then what are you going to use to buy things off us with?”

“Oh. Um, give us a sec, need to talk to the lads.” Jason dashed off to where the other Argonauts
Another figure left the boat. This one was more purposeful, and seemed much older. And had pointy ears.

“Greetings. I am Legolas, Prince of Mirkwoodae. Wherefore is there such a gathering of warriors upon this shore?”

“You can lose the mighty warrior speech, we’re not really looking for a fight.”

“Sorry. Why are you here, then?”

“King Aragorn’s wife—”

“King who?”

“Aragorn of Mycenae.”

“Um, where is he?”

“Should be round here somewhere. He might have gone to throw things at the walls again.”

There was a hairy blur. Frodo had slipped his leash again, and was being chased by Sam. Going past them he made a sudden change of direction and wrapped himself around Legolas’ leg.

“What is this?”

“Our High Priest.”

“Oh.” Legolas examined the thing attached to his leg. “Frodo?”

At this point Sam caught up with his errant charge.

“Long are the winding ways of rivers in the north.”

“Frodo says hello, and asks what you’ve been doing since he saw you last.”

Aragorn finally turned up to see what all the fuss was about, at the same point that Jason finished his discussions with his crew, and returned, dragging two very reluctant Argonauts with him.

“Me and the lads drew straws, and in return for provisions these two here will gratify your every sexual need.”

Legolas turned sternly to Jason. “This is what you always do Jason! You need something, and your first response is to sell an Argonaut into prostitution; you never think of pillaging or trading, do you? Always looking for the easy way out, aren’t you? What happened to teamwork? What happened to matching tunics?”

Jason looked at the ground. “Very sorry, won’t happen again.”

One Argonaut who had just missed being sold into prostitution breathed a sigh of relief, but then made the logical deduction. “But then how are we going to get food? I’m not touching those olives.”

Legolas looked at Aragorn. “Oh, I think we can get provisions here. The King of Mycenae owes me hospitality. Lots of hospitality. And hasn’t returned that bow I lent him.”
Jason brightened considerably. “That’s good, cos me and the lads are starving. What’s for dinner?”

“Pancakes.”

“Oh, wow, my favourite! Don’t suppose you’ve got any salt meat to go with them?”

“Well, now you come to mention it...”

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The next morning, after a hearty breakfast of salt meat pancakes, Legolas was explaining to Aragorn how he had come to be babysitting the Argonauts.

“I promised his mother I’d look after him. It wasn’t so bad at first, after his throne was taken, since it was just hanging round round the countryside making sure he wasn’t savaged by goats. Then, of course, he goes and annoys the king (who I think was really a bit touchy about him turning up with only one sandal on, but you know how court etiquette is), who sends him off on a quest to find the golden teeth.”

“Pardon? Golden teeth? Teeth of what?”

“I don’t know, I didn’t catch most of what he said, the acoustics in that hall were atrocious.”

“They all look a bit young.”

“They can hardly tell one end of a sword from the other. They need some practice, they’re going to be facing some pretty nasty monsters.”

“They can get some battle practice here.”

“Seems really rather quiet. All I’ve seen either side do is wave their swords at each other and go ‘arrg’ a bit.”

“That’s not fair. They sometimes throw rocks at each other.”

“They’re more pebbles than rocks.”

“We’ve been here a long time.”

“Could you, you know, goad them a bit?”

“Isn’t that what you do to horses?” Aragorn instinctively crossed his legs.

“No, that’s gelding. I meant, go and annoy them until they come out and fight.”

“Oh. What’s the most insulting thing we could call Arwen?”

“Fat.”

Aragorn thought for a moment. “Yep, that’s the one.” He stood up turned in the direction of the walls and took a deep breath. Then he stopped. “You know, it might be a good idea to have everyone in battle formation before we do this.”

Legolas nodded. They rounded up all the men, got their armour on, got out their chariots, explained to the Argonauts the basic principles of spear throwing and lined up in battle order. Only then did Aragorn step forward and address the walls of Troy thusly:
“ARWEN, YOU FAT BITCH, COME OUT HERE!”

“What did you call me?”

“FAT BITCH! COS YOU ARE!”

There was an incoherent noise of rage from inside the walls, which encouraged Legolas to join in.

“He’s right! We were all too scared to say how big your arse looked in your wedding dress!”

There was the sound of breaking vases, and a female voice calling the Trojans to arms. Since they’d all learned who really wore the trousers (or rather who wore the armour and the butch leather miniskirt) in the city, the army obeyed.

They gathered after the battle, for the traditional post-match analysis.

“So Legolas, how many Argonauts have you got left? One? Two?”

“All of them, actually.”

“Really? You must have some god looking out for you, I mean Frodo could have taken them down. Injuries?”

“None caused by the enemy. Megapenthes managed to stab himself in the foot with his own spear, and Peisistratus accidentally walloped Laertes over the back of the head with his shield, but apart from that everyone’s fine.”

A few days later, while the Argonauts were still honing their battle skills (stick *pointy* end of sword into enemy), another ship arrived. It beached itself without them seeing any sign of the crew. They approached the boat warily.

“Aren’t those hieroglyphs on the side?”

Legolas stepped forwards to read them. “Teti’s Reliable Boat Hire, Memphis. ‘You won’t be sunk by our prices!’”

“Reliable! Ah do not call this reliable!” Pippin appeared over the side of the boat. “The collapsible one was more seaworthy.”

“That would be because, unless I’m very much mistaken, this is a river barge and is not meant to go to sea.”

“Oooh, and it’s very nice to see you too, Legolas.” sarcasm dripped from Pippin. Water also dripped from Pippin, and from Merry who climbed out of the boat after him.

“I would say the same, but I really can’t be bothered to lie.”

“Where are our hundred oxen then? We’ve had another battle, with reinforcements while you were gone and we still haven’t got any further.”

“Just let us get unloaded.”
The holds were opened, and ramps were put up to get the animals out of the hold. Those who were not engaged in unloading were looking for firewood and sharpening knives. Aragorn, Legolas, Odysseus, Achilles, and Jason took supervisory roles, i.e. watching everyone else work. This is what the aristocracy are there for.

The oxen began to be led down the ramps. They were a bit old and scrawny, but everyone was too polite to say anything. Then the fourth ox appeared. It was given a long hard stare by the supervisory committee.

It was Jason who first spoke up, “ummm, I’ve spent a long time in the countryside. That’s a goat. Ok, so it’s a shaved and painted goat, but it’s still a goat, and if I notice then the gods’ll probably notice too.”

“Perhaps they just brought us a goat as well?”

Everyone looked at Achilles. They did not share his optimism.

“Let’s at least see what else they’ve brought.”

There were three more oxen that looked suspiciously like goats. Then four oxen that looked suspiciously like sheep. Then there was the crocodile.

“Ok, the sheep and the goats were vaguely plausible. That is most emphatically not an ox. It’s a crocodile.”

“We know it’s a crocodile. It’s not our fault, bloody things get everywhere, it’s dangerous to go to the privy in the morning.”

The crocodile looked unhappy. The various ‘oxen’ looked worried and backed away. The Argonauts (apart from Jason, who was learning the art of command from Legolas) tried to herd the crocodile towards the sacrificial altar.

“Here croccy, croccy, croccy. Nice crocodile... gaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

It made a few snaps at them, but their reflexes were getting better. They went and found their spears (on the principle that this meant that they didn’t have to get closer than six feet away from the crocodile) and herded it away. The supervisors left them to it, and watched the continued unloading of the ship.

“That’s not a ox either. It’s a painted donkey.”

“Ok, ok, so some of them aren’t actually oxen, but wait to see what I’ve got to show you next.”

Pippin pulled something small and squirming out of a sack. “It’s the latest thing for the hero on the move. The portable, dwarf ox, for easy and speedy propitiation of the gods.”

“Pippin, that’s a cat.”

“No it’s not! Look, it’s got horns!”

“They’re made out of papyrus-mache.”

“It’s an ox!”

“Going ‘miaow’? With claws?”

“Well, you can’t expect such a wee thing to make that big deep ‘moo’ noise. And the claws are...”
are... so you can attach it to things. Very useful.”

“It’s a cat.”

“Ox.”

“Pippin. Tell me, how many more of the oxen for the sacrifice are special dwarf oxen?”

“Um, all of them.”

“Now, this is what puzzles me. Egypt is an agricultural country where the cat is sacred. Therefore, it must have been significantly more difficult, not to mention expensive, for you to acquire eighty-seven cats.”

“Well, that’s the other thing. We didn’t quite get the full hundred.”

“How many?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Wait a minute, that cat’s wearing a collar.” Legolas squinted at it. “Temple cats. You have pinched thirty-two sacred temple cats. Do you never want to go back to Egypt?”

“We didn’t pinch them, they were having a clear out at the temple, replacing them all.”

“Pippin, I’ve been to Egypt.”

“Oh. Did you buy cats from a temple clearout too?”

“I’m not going to dignify that with an answer. Just take the horns off them and let them loose.”

“But what about the sacrifice?”

“Has it occurred to you that killing a sacred animal might be a really stupid idea?”

“But they’re not our gods...”

“All the more reason not to annoy them. And the last time I checked all the gods had disowned you.”

The conversation was abruptly interrupted by a noise.

“Sssssssssqqqqqqqqqeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeip! Gahaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Mnnnnnnnnnneaaragh!”

They all ran to the source of the noise, to find Frodo backed into a corner by the crocodile, screaming, with his hands over his eyes so he couldn’t see it. By combined effort the others all managed to herd the crocodile into the river, where it swam off.

“I suppose we’ll just have to sacrifice what we’ve got then.”

The sacrifice was duly arranged. Achilles took charge, since as Frodo was making squeaking noises and repeatedly saying ‘the lamentable wasps!’, it was felt that giving him a knife would be very silly.

“Oh mighty gods, please accept this sacrifice of three oxen, four sheep, three goats,” since it had been decided to keep a goat back so they could try and make cheese, “and this duck I managed to catch...”
“Lamentable wasps!”

“No, no, no, it’s like this.” Legolas took several dainty elvish steps forward.

Jason tried to copy and tripped over his sandal fastenings.

“That was nearly right, just more hips.”

“Are you sure this makes me look kingly?”

“Of course it does, all the members of the royal family where I come from walk like this.”

“That’s not a royal walk, that’s a royal mince.” Legolas looked round to see Aragorn watching them.

“Alright then, lets see how you would do it.”

Aragorn demonstrated, doing what might have been called an uncanny impression of John Wayne, if it wasn’t for the fact that he wouldn’t be born for another few thousand years.

“That’s not a royal walk, that’s an I’ve-just-suffered-an-unpleasant-groin-injury walk.”

Legolas could see the wheels turning in Aragorn’s brain as he tried to think of a witty comeback including the word balls. Eventually he gave in. “That’s how we walk in Mycenae; real men come from Mycenae.”

“Ah, Mycenae, where the men are real men, even when they’re women.”

Before Aragorn could work out this insult, Odysseus and Achilles arrived. “What’s this then?”

“We’re teaching Jason how to do a regal walk.”

“You mean like this?” Odysseus slunk. There was no real other word for the strange diagonal movement which seemed to go from one patch of cover to another patch of cover and seemed to be semi-invisible even in broad daylight.

“Don’t pay attention to him, he’s from Ithaca.”

“Meaning what? If you’re about to make a comment about goats you’re a dead man.”

“No, it’s hilly there, you’ve got one leg longer than the other, so of course you walk funny.”

“I do not have one leg longer than the other.”

“Yes you do, lie down. See, one leg longer than the other.”

“I suppose it would make sense, my dad’s got one leg shorter than the other.”

“Really, I wonder why you ended up with one leg longer then.”

“The gods work in mysterious ways,” said Legolas in a voice that brought words like ‘long-suffering’ to mind.

“I’ll show you a real royal walk from Pht- pth- pffft... I’ll show you how the sons of Peleus walk!” Achilles stomped forward raising clouds of dust and cries of ‘earthquake!’ from inside the city. Then he fell over and began fighting a rock which had looked at him in a funny way.
“I think I’ll stick to my own royal walk.”

“Probably the best idea. Just cut out the hoppity-skip part, and the whistling and you should be fine.”

The next day the Argonauts left. There was much manly hugging, and some unmanly hugging from Frodo. All the flames involved in sacrifice had lessened his grip on reality again and he was reduced to incoherent gibbering. Merry and Pippin helped to subdue Frodo to stop him from following them because after ascertaining that these were probably really quite large golden teeth they had decided that the Argonauts could benefit from their trading and battle experience, so were accompanying them free of charge, much to the annoyance of Legolas. But then Legolas hadn’t been consulted on the matter because as soon as Jason had found out that Merry and Pippin could teach him how to seduce foreign women he wasn’t interested in listening to Legolas’ advice.

There was an exchange of gifts.

“Oh. Aragorn. Thank you for giving back the bow, I hope you’ve kept it in good order.”

“Ummm, yes, of course I have. Yes.”

The Argonauts were kitted out in everybody else’s cast off weaponry. There were the usual comments of ‘don’t worry, you’ll grow into it’, and ‘oh, don’t you look all grown up in full combat armour?’. This was in defiance of all normal logic, however, because there is nothing at all grown up about a leather miniskirt that comes down to your knees.

When it came to the Argonauts turn to give gifts Jason looked a little embarrassed. “We don’t have anything on the ship to give you except for these olives. They’re not very good, but they’re in a nice amphora and you could try throwing the actual olives over the wall of the city, it’d really annoy them.”

They watched the sail disappear over the horizon, waving to it as it went. Then they watched it reappear again.

“I wonder what they’ve forgotten.”

“Actually, I don’t think that’s the same ship.”

“Why not?”

“Because unless they’ve sewn silhouettes of naked women on to the sail very quickly, it’s not them. I don’t think they even know how to sew.”

They went down to the beach to meet the new ship. Oddly, its entire crew appeared to be female. They waved, in a way that immediately put everyone in mind of the word ‘nubile’, except for Achilles, who didn’t know what nubile meant, but was going ‘whhhoarrhh’ which probably meant something similar.

A ramp was lowered and a well-groomed elderly gentleman dressed in white robes and carrying a staff stepped off the ship.

“Hello, I’m Gandalf the White, oracle for hire, and these” he indicated the very impractically dressed young women, “are my priestesses. My clay tablet.”

A small rectangular piece of stone found its way into Achilles’ hand. He passed it Odysseus, who
read it. “‘Gandalf the White. Communing with the gods for 17 generations. We’ll find the right deity for you. Best rates outside of Siwah. First Time Adventurer and group discount available on request (proof of quest required).’ I’m sorry, but we’ve already got an oracle.”

Aragorn turned to Odysseus. “I think our oracle might be, um... broken. Gandalf, could we have a word, please. In private.”

By the end of the morning Aragorn had managed to negotiate First Time Adventurer discount, group discount and My Isn’t That a Big Sword discount. Gandalf was hired as their new oracle at a fee of 10% of any divine providence received. He started well, praying that the god would cause the goats and chickens to produce milk and eggs and was not disappointed. Achilles was most impressed.

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In the great hall of the Palace of Troy the city’s rulers were in council.

“So if there no one has any more remarks to add about the amendments to article 17b part 2 of the slavery laws, we’ll move on to the next item on the agenda. What are we going to do about the siege?”

The members of the council looked at each other nervously. They all knew what they had to do to end the siege, but weren’t terribly keen to offer suggestions as Arwen was standing over king Priam’s shoulder glaring at them.

However, Aeneas, who was basically a spare royal standing on the fine line between ‘brave’ and ‘stupid’ decided to speak up. “Um... maybe we could, you know... give her back?”

Arwen smiled sweetly and kicked Paris, who woke up with a start. “What are you all doing in my bedroom? Oh. Right.” A lackey whispered something in his ear. “Okay. But she’s, like, my wife. So, so, she’s like mine. You can’t give her back, just like you can’t give my racing chariot back. Okay?”

Arwen smiled again. Hecuba, Priam’s wife, spoke urgently into his ear. Priam stood up and addressed the council. “Yes. I agree wholeheartedly with Paris.” Then he whispered “I do, don’t I dear?” Hecuba nodded supportively.

Aeneas, who was never one to give up on an idea once one had formed spoke up again. “But we can’t go out looting and pillaging. We’re stuck here in the city living off salt meat pancakes and it wouldn’t be so bad, but we ran out of chutney last week. When they had that sacrifice the entire city was standing on the battlements breathing in deeply. And does anyone know why there’s a crocodile in the palace privy, because I’m pretty sure that sort of thing never happened before the siege. I think we have to face it that the gods might be on their side.”

Arwen whispered to Paris. “I haven’t, like, seen any crocodiles in the privy. Anyway, what’s a crocodile?”

“They’re big scaly green things that come from Egypt.”

“Big scaly green things? You’re making it up, there’s nothing alive that looks like that.”

Hecuba whispered to her husband again. “Perhaps the big, green scaly non-existent thing is a, what was it dear? Oh yes, a vision from the gods.”

“A vision which tells us that we should get rid of the siege?”
There was more whispering. “No, a vision which says that you are ill-favoured by the gods and we don’t want people like that in the city because they’re unlucky. So if you leave then the siege should follow you.” Priam sat down again looking exhausted by his wife’s mental effort.

“But surely we should consult the oracles.”

“Are you, like, questioning my father’s judgement?”

“No, of course I wasn’t, I was just suggesting—”

“No you weren’t, you were just leaving.”

Aeneas knew when he was defeated, so packed up his belongings and his family and prepared to leave the city. He hoisted his son on to his shoulders, took his father by the hand and shouted to his wife “Creusa! We’re leaving, pick up that luggage and start moving!”

“What?”

“We’ve got to go.”

“Why? What’ve you done?”

“I saw a crocodile in the privy and now I’ve been exiled. It’s a long story, I’ll explain it on the way.”

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“See, Gandalf, the ducks fly over the city, what does this mean?”

Gandalf produced a bow and arrow. “Roast duck for dinner.”

Odysseus decided it was time for a little chat with Aragorn. “Are you sure taking on this new oracle was a good idea?”

“Gandalf? Of course, he really knows his job.”

“You mean he’s good at sitting around eating 10% of our food and getting massages from his priestesses?”

“Well, that too, but he knows what he’s talking about when it comes to omens and signs.” They watched as Gandalf wandered away, probably in search of something he could make wine from.

“We haven’t exactly seen much evidence of this yet. I have tried to use trickery to find out whether or not he is speaking the truth, but his predictions are even more complicated than Frodo’s. I think he was right, but then there aren’t any reciprocating beehives around here, so it must have been some sort of metaphor.”

“He did manage to sort out that plague of frogs.”

“Plague of frog. Singular. There was only the one.”

“It was annoying though.”

Achilles pointed towards the city gates. “Look! People are emerging from the city. Can we go and fight them?”

“They don’t really look like warriors.”
“The big guy looks like a warrior, but he also looks like the small child on his shoulders has been sick on him and I don’t want to get too close in case it throws up again.”

As the warrior and three associated person approached they could clearly hear one of them complaining.

“Take me back, I don’t want to go. It’s bingo night at the over 60’s symposium. Take me back.”

Aeneas ignored his father and called out to the assembled warriors. “I have been exiled from Troy, will you grant us safe passage through your lines?”

“What were you exiled for?”

“I don’t want to go into it, but I have been commanded by the gods to go... somewhere.”

“Somewhere that isn’t the privy in the palace.”

“Shut up, Creusa, I’m trying to negotiate.”

“Did someone mention a command from the gods? Here’s my clay tablet.”

Aeneas looked at the tablet. “Sorry, but I’m not really interested, I haven’t got any money.”

“Then I’ll give you a free sample and if you happen to find some money in the future, you’ll know what you’re getting.” Gandalf cleared his throat and made the appropriate dramatic arm gesture. “You shall found a city upon a river crossing with a strong citadel upon a hill and a reliable water supply.”

“That’s a prophecy then, is it?”

“No, that’s just sensible town planning. This is the prophecy.” Gandalf made another dramatic arm gesture. “The name of this city shall echo down the ages of men, wherever warriors gather to speak of glory and honour its name shall be heard. And its name shall be... Gandalf!”

“Um... thanks, I’ll be sure to keep that in mind when I’m planning a new settlement.”

Aeneas and his family trudged off into the sunset.

“Do you think I should have warned him not to build the city on a malarial swamp?”

“No, that’s just common sense, he should be able to work that one out for himself.”

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“I’ve have a cunning plan, Aragorn.”

“Yes? How cunning?”

“About as cunning as... Look, they call me wily Odysseus, not Odysseus who’s good at similes. It’s very cunning.”

“So what do you suggest we do?”

“Well, everyone knows that Paris is a complete layabout and never does anything around the house, right?”
“...Yes.”

“And how many times do you think he’s given her flowers in all the time that she’s been there?”

“Probably not even once.”

“So all you have to do is make her something really nice and put a bunch of flowers on top and leave it outside the front door late at night. Next morning she’ll pack her bags and come straight back to you. Oh, and some honey sweetmeats too, women really like them.”

“Great, I’ll get started.”

Two days later Odysseus, Achilles and Gandalf gathered to look at what Aragorn had made. It was approximately two feet high and appeared to be entirely constructed from splinters.

“That’s very, um, nice.”

“Yes, what exactly is it?”

“It’s a toast rack.” Aragorn beamed with pride.

“Of course. Does Arwen eat a lot of toast?”

“No.”

“Does she even like toast?”

“Don’t know.”

“Well, I’m sure she’d appreciate the effort, but this has to be something really good, because it won’t work if she’s not impressed. I think we’re going to have to call in a professional and just pretend that you made it.”

“Isn’t that cheating?”

“Yes, but at the moment Arwen’s cheating on you, so just think of it as getting even.”

“Okay. But where are we going to find a craftsman, apart from the ones in the city, because I don’t think they’ll want to come out here what with there being a war and everything.”

“It’s not like you’d notice the war. We just won’t tell them.”

A mission had been sent to look for a skilled craftsman. Some time later, the ship returned, bearing dwarf.

“Och, I’m Gimli, warrior for hire, jeweller, bronze-monger, and carpenter. What can I do for you?”

“We’d like a gift for a lady.”

“Och, I can do you something very nice in silver filigree-”

“No, we need something that Aragorn could plausibly have made.”
“Aragorn? King of Mycenae?”

“Yes, that’s him.”

“How about a toast rack?”

“No. Tried that. Oh, here he is now.”

Aragorn was wandering about, looking confused. “Gimli? What are you doing here?”

“I hear you need a gift for a lady. Finally managed to dump Arwen then?”

“No, the gift is for Arwen.”

“Oh, um, sorry.” Gimli looked at the ground awkwardly. “What do you think she’d like?”

“She likes horses.”

“I’m not good enough with leather to make a saddle.”

“I thought you could make a horse.” There was a pause as Gimli looked at him like he’d gone insane. “A decorative one.”

“Oh, right. How big?”

“I thought horse sized.”

“Are you sure she wants something that big?”

“She was always very emphatic about size being important.”

“All right. A decorative horse it is then. I will need supplies of timber, and I need to work in private so my craft secrets may not be revealed.”

Gimli worked in secret on his project. Well, mainly in secret. Frodo and the crocodile managed to get in there somehow and no-one could work out a way of getting either of them out again. Fortunately, Frodo was now so insane that the crocodile was afraid of him, so it didn’t get messy. Wily Odysseus used all his skills and cunning to get into the workshop, and found to his disappointment that Gimli was neither spying on them, nor embezzling materials. He stuck around for a bit, but then found that watching someone use a lathe is really very dull, so went away again.

Aragorn had been set up to work on bits of wood in sight of the city, so Arwen would believe that the finished horse was his.

A face appeared at the battlements once more. “Aragorn! What the hell are you doing?”

“I’m making a present for you, dear.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll have to wait till it’s finished.”

“Yes, but when it’s finished will I be able to work out what it is?” There was a pause. “It’s not another toast rack is it?”

“No, dear.”
Gimli had summoned Aragorn to go into the more complex aspects of the horse, so if questioned he could actually answer.

“See here? There’s a wee trapdoor in the belly, opening inwards, so you can fill it with flowers and sweet things for her.”

“Why inwards? That’s silly.”

“It’s harder to do, so it’ll look better.”

Aragorn tried to open the door.

“It’s stuck.”

“No it’s not, give it here.” Gimli put his shoulder to the door. “Damn, must have got the timber damp. Bloody crocodile. We’ll have to sand it down and pretend we never intended for there to be a door. You can put the flowers and things on top.”

The horse was duly wheeled out and left in front of the city. It was bedecked and garlanded with flowers, and had on its back a veritable mountain of sweetmeats.

Arwen peered over the battlements suspiciously. She was joined by Cassandra, her sister-in-law.

“Oh, that is nice. Flowers. My brother’s never given you flowers, has he?” The final part of this was said slightly louder, and aimed back at where Paris was standing. He looked panicked and started to search for anything growing.

“No, he hasn’t. But then if Aragorn’s given me flowers it’s because someone else has told him to.”

Paris dashed up the steps to the battlements, carrying the nearest piece of foliage.

“Oh, how lovely. A withered olive branch. Because that really competes with a mountain of flowers.”

“Ummm, like, sorry?”

“Sorry! I’ll give you sorry! I’ll make you sorry that you ever spent more time on that bloody chariot than you spent on me, and I’ll-“

Arwen stopped abruptly, realising that the people encamped outside were listening intently.

“Aragorn wouldn’t spend more time on his chariot than on you.” supplied Odysseus.

“You keep out of this, goat boy.”

“Arwen? Doesn’t the time I’ve spent here, and all the time and effort I’ve put into this show that I want you back? Come home, love. Please?”

There was a slight pause from the battlements. “Someone bring the horse in. Aragorn? I’m thinking about it.”

Paris appeared on the battlements. “Aragorn! You think you can like, come in here and like, like, charm my wife back! Well, you’re wrong. Like, totally wrong. Take that!”
Paris chucked a rock ineffectively in the direction of Aragorn. Achilles was looking the other way and got hit.

“Aaaah, owowow! My heel! Oh, that really hurts.” He started hopping round in circles.

“It wasn’t that big a rock.”

“No, but it hit the bone! It’s like bashing your elbow. Ow.”

“Go and put you foot up then.”

Achilles limped off, muttering about never being able to fight again.

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Inside the horse, Frodo blearily came to wakefulness. He was being jolted about the place and he could hear voices.

“Let’s put it in the great hall, it’ll make a nice centrepiece.”

“Oh, you don’t want it in there. It’s all out of scale.”

“Cassandra, you know nothing about decoration.”

“You mark my words, Arwen, no good will come of this horse. It blocks all the sightlines.”

The voices went away again. Frodo wondered how he’d got in here. Then he wondered how he was going to get out. If he’d been of a sound mind he’d have panicked, but as it was he decided it was time for another nap.

He was woken later by the sounds of feasting and revelry. He tried to get out again, but couldn’t and the sounds of his gibbering weren’t loud enough to be heard over the background noise.

Then everything was quiet again. A survival instinct emerged, and Frodo, after several tries, managed to work out that the trapdoor opened inwards, and let himself out. His first thought on freedom was an entirely logical, ‘where is the privy?’ He found the privy; the crocodile currently occupying it gave him a terrified look and slid away quickly. Calls of nature attended to, he began to wander about the place, gibbering very quietly.

Then he came upon an altar. With flames. He looked at the flames. They looked at him. Frodo’s eyes widened, and the gibbering became more of a keening.

“It sees meeeeee, preciousssssssssssss...”

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“Aragorn! Aragorn! Wake up, Frodo’s gone and Troy burns!” Aragorn attempted to focus on Sam.

“Well, more Troy’s burnt, there isn’t much left of it now.”

This snapped Aragorn into full wakefulness. “What? Where’s Arwen?”

“I don’t know, but there’s lots of charred people hanging about, and Gandalf’s trying to sell them our breakfast.”

“I’ll look for Arwen, and if I find Frodo I’ll tell you, and if you find Arwen when you’re looking for Frodo then get a message to me, right?”
Sam nodded and ran off.

Aragorn leapt out of bed and began to search for Arwen.

Odysseus came up to him, “no, I haven’t seen Arwen, but you’d better put some clothes on. Gandalf’s priestesses are pointing and giggling.”

“ARAGORN!”

Aragorn turned and smiled. “You alive!”

“And you’re making people stare. Go and get a loincloth on.”

“Does this mean you’re coming home?”

“Since living with you is better than living in a smoking ruin, yes.”

“Oh, good.”

Gandalf stood on a rock looking slightly singed and dishevelled and pulling a ‘mad prophet with weird staring eyes’ face.

“You have brought the wrath of Zeus upon your heads! See! He has burned your city to the ground in his anger!” A crowd began to gather around his feet as when you are surrounded by nothing but ruins, watching a priest foam at the mouth is considered a high form of entertainment. “The wrath of Zeus must be assuaged! And do you know how to assuage his wrath?”

The audience, not entirely sure what assuaged meant, shook their heads.

“Then I shall tell you how, ladies and gentlemen! By purchasing items from my wide range of Zeus-propitiation gifts!”

Semi-naked priestesses appeared from behind the rock carrying different items of god-related tack.

“And here we have the lovely Penelope, with a three span high statue of the god himself, complete with thunderbolt. And for those of you on a tighter budget, Arsinoe is carrying a range of small portable thunderbolts...”

Sam was circling the ruined city, calling out Frodo’s name, when a blacked figure emerged from a side door, carrying another smaller blackened figure.

“Umm, I’m looking for a small insane man...”

“Oh, like this one?” Frodo’s unconscious features were shown to Sam, who nodded. “He’s ok, had to knock him out to get him out of the city. Kept going on about eyes.”

“That’s him alright. Sorry, I’m being terribly rude, I’m Samwise, priest’s assistant. And you’re carrying Frodo, he’s the priest.”

“I’m Cassandra. Don’t know what I’m going to do now though.”

“Me neither. Frodo’s not going to be well enough to work for a good while.”
Then there was the bright light, clear noises and clean aroma of a godly manifestation. A voice spoke from the light.

“You shall take what is at your feet, and travel until the people do not know what it is, and question you about it. There you shall build a temple to me.”

“It would be helpful to know who ‘me’ is.”

“Oh, I am sorry. Athena, and could you make it to my wisdom aspect? It gets rather neglected.”

Cassandra and Sam looked at their feet. “Rocks? We’ve got to travel to where people don’t recognise rocks?”

“No, the thing over there.”

They looked at Aragorn’s creation.

“What is that exactly?”

“It’s a toast rack.”

“Well, at least we won’t have far to go then.”
"Does this milk smell odd to anyone else?"

"It's organic. It's supposed to smell... earthy. Natural. Slightly off."

"Merry, are you confusing 'organic' and 'past its best' again? Just because it's got mould on it doesn't mean that it's organic."

"Hey, I work in a supermarket. I know all about organic food."

"Yes, you know that organic food goes on the green shelves next to the pasta. And it's 'worked in a supermarket'. You're both on the dole again, aren't you?"

"Ah may be on the dole, but Ah've had a job. Unlike some hobbits round here."

"I may not have a job, but I'm a productive member of this household. My psychiatrist says so."

Legolas walked into the middle of this argument, and disarmed Frodo, who had been hefting the rolling pin in a determined manner.

"Merry, Pippin, shouldn't you be going to the jobcentre? Before, for example, I give Frodo a meat cleaver and inexplicably wander off?"

Legolas was using the Scary Elf Eyes (the facial expression deliberately never used when the psychiatric nurse was round), and Merry and Pippin decided that discretion was the better part of valour. It was likely though that 'go to the Job Centre' would have transformed itself into 'go to the pub', by the time they were half way to the door.

"Legolas, do you think this milk smells odd?"

Legolas took the milk warily. In the past he had been asked for an opinion on whether a small green lump of cottage cheese (that may or may not have been half a pint of semi-skimmed at one point) smelled off. He sniffed.

"It doesn't quite smell off... just odd. And familiar, somehow."

Frodo sniffed again. "Hmmmm. Damp leather?"

The milk was passed back to Legolas. "But something in the bouquet... metallic perhaps?"

"Yes, a metallic undertone, but there's something else... woody?"

"Hmmm, only very faint. The damp leather is the main note."

There was a pause as Frodo examined the label on the milk. "It says it's milk. Semi skimmed, organic milk. It smells like an unwashed horse. Do you think it's safe to drink?"
"Somehow, no. And it'll make the tea taste of unwashed horse."

"But... but... what about Aragorn's thermos!"

"It's about time he learns about proper civilised behaviour. And that means taking your tea with lemon. You'd think he only stopped being a Ranger yesterday the way he behaves sometimes."

"Merry, Pippin and Sam all take their tea with milk."

"Some people are beyond help."

Aragorn took another look at his sandwiches. They'd been on the wrong end of a large amount of engine oil and he didn't like the look of them. He sighed. He was a Ranger. He could survive on tea alone. He unscrewed his thermos, and squinted at his tea, just in case it was full of engine oil as well. Odd. It seemed to have no milk in it. He checked the handy little 'milk and sugar' compartment, and found it full of... lemon slices? He sipped the tea warily. No sugar!

Aragorn's mind raced. Was Frodo trying to kill him again? No, this wasn't Frodo's style. There was only one type of being warped enough to drink tea with lemon. An elf. Legolas.

He cast aside the tea with disgust. He didn't need it. He was a Ranger, in the middle of a forest. He could find food. Edible things would almost press themselves into his hands! He took up his Swiss army knife and set forth.

A few hours later, he was sat dejectedly on the forest floor. He was hungry. There was nothing to eat in the damn forest. He'd successfully identified over 14 species of fungi, all of which were poisonous. Three squirrels, two rabbits and a wood pigeon had evaded his capture. And after he'd caught the hedgehog he'd realised he had no way of cooking it, so released it. It had given him a resentful look and shuffled off.

He stared at the ground. This was it. He had lost his Ranger skills. And when a Ranger lost his skills, he was no longer himself. No longer worthy. He gave a quick glance round the forest to ensure he was alone and burst into tears.

Aragorn looked at his dinner. "Why are we having tuna pasta bake with baked beans in it?"

"Something's wrong with the fridge. Everything you put in it smells... off."

"Has Gimli had a look at it?"

"Yes, but he wasn't happy that I'd woken him up. He says there's no reason for the smell."

"This hasn't explained the tuna with baked beans..."

Frodo sighed. "Gandalf took all the labels off the tins. I had been hoping for chopped tomatoes."

Aragorn looked over at Legolas, who was pointedly eating dry muesli and crunching it in a slightly menacing way. Legolas caught Aragorn's look, and proffered the muesli. Aragorn had a moment of doubt and then decided to stick with tuna a la beans.

Dinner over, Merry and Pippin decided to investigate the fridge. They opened the door. The inside of the fridge was empty, and sparkling white, as Frodo had tried to clean away the smell. They sniffed.
"Sort of earthy."

"Manky more like. Unwashed."

"But familiar."

"Smells damp as well. Unwashed and damp."

"Well, I washed it, and then I dried it afterwards, even down all the little drain bits."

Merry took a deep breath in. "Y'know, with a bit of pipeweed smoke, this'd smell just like Aragorn used to."

Aragorn strode over and stuck his head into the fridge. "I never used to smell like that."

There was a muttered comment from Legolas, who was standing on the other side of the room with one hand under his nose. "You couldn't smell yourself."

"I was rugged. Rugged smells a bit. No-one used to bathe that often back then anyway."

"Some of us bathed more than once a year."

"Yes, Pippin, you bathed more than once a year because you were swimming in the river every day so you could ogle the women. You were probably the cleanest hobbit in the Shire in Summer."

Aragorn, however, had gone off on his own little despairing tangent. "You never respected me back then. Arwen didn't respect me. None of the other kings respected me, and I was King of Gondor and Arnor!"

A distant comment came through from the sitting room. "Yes, Arnor, the 'buy one get one free' kingdom."

If Aragorn had been any less butch his lower lip would have been wobbling, but as it was he just look slightly constipated.

"Wonder how he managed to sneak up on people when he was a Ranger. I mean, you've got to be able to smell him coming."

Aragorn turned on his heel and strode out of the back door.

"Was it something we said?"

Legolas considered telling Pippin that yes, it was, but decided better of it. He picked him up by his shirt collar and shoved him into the fridge instead.

Aragorn was perched atop the ten foot tall apple tree with his back to the house like a depressed, hairy Christmas tree fairy.

"Aragorn? Are you going to come down now?" There was silence from the tree, so Legolas tried again. "It's 9 o'clock in the evening and it's getting dark. Someone has phoned from each of the houses on either side of us to ask if we know there's a strange man in our garden and if we want them to phone the police. You're going to miss that documentary on Siberian forests..."

"Don't like forests."
"Pardon?"

"I hate forests and they hate me."

"Aragorn, has something happened at work?"

"Nothing happened."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Nothing. Nothing happens when I try to do Ranger things. I've lost all my skills. I'm useless and too old to get another job and I'm going to end up stacking shelves with Merry and Pippin and I'll spend too much time indoors and get a beer gut and I'll never have sex ever again and..."

Halfway through Aragorn's confused and depressive rant, Legolas had climbed into the tree beside him and was patting him ineffectually on the shoulder. It was so much easier with Elves, they just sang for a while and forgot, but humans always seemed to brood, and brooding led to crying and someone, usually him, ending up with a damp shoulder. He decided this had to stop.

"Aragorn, stop being so silly. You haven't lost your Ranger skills, it's like riding a bike, you just have to practice. Now, we're going to go indoors, make a cup of tea and watch that documentary and then you're going to have an early night."

Aragorn looked at his boots. "Yes, Elrond." There was a confused pause. "Sorry, it's the autopilot."

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"Merry? Pippin? Have you been cooking in your sleep again?"

Everyone at the breakfast table looked at the ceiling.

"No, there's no salad cream on the ceiling."

"Then where's this soup come from?"

Frodo was holding a large bowl of soup.

"What flavour soup?"

"Chicken and mushroom."

"Nothing to do with me, then."

"Has the smell gone out of the fridge yet?"

"Yes."

"Then I think we've found something to have for breakfast."

"But you don't know where it's come from. It could be poisoned. Gandalf could have made it."

There was a collective shudder from everyone except Merry and Pippin.

"All the more for us then." Merry put the soup in the microwave and retrieved two spoons.

Legolas eyed the soup suspiciously. "There aren't any clues as to where it came from? No 'leave this alone it's mine you thieving bastards' note?"
"No, but there was this post-it on the outside of the fridge though." Frodo handed the post-it to Legolas.

"'You're not eating properly, learn to look after yourself. There's some soup in the fridge, eat it.'" Legolas paused. "So, someone has broken into the house overnight to tell one of us that we aren't eating properly and leave some soup. Who on earth does something like that?"

Pippin looked up from the bowl of soup. "My mum used to do that just after I left home. I'd wake up in the morning and find a chicken on the dresser. One time it wasn't dead, but then she'd been ill and was a bit confused."

As usual, the Fellowship ignored Pippin and Aragorn got up from the table to put the milk in the fridge now that it was supposedly safe. There was a merest hint of a whisper

"What did you call me?" Aragorn turned round to face the others.

"What?"

"One of you just called me a Dunadan gobshite."

"We never insult people quietly, there's no point if they can't hear you. And anyway, that's a really unoriginal insult, if it was me, I'd have called you a -" Legolas' hand was clamped over Merry's mouth before anyone got to hear what he would have called Aragorn.

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While the rest of the Fellowship were at work or 'the job centre', otherwise known as 'The Flying Swan', Frodo found three more notes on the fridge door. The first read 'Have you been keeping up your elvish? You should be keeping up your elvish. Get out more. Meet a nice girl. Or boy, I'm open minded. You would tell me if you were, wouldn't you? You should eat more. Bilbo.'

This confused Frodo. It sounded like Bilbo, the handwriting was like Bilbo's, but Bilbo was dead. Really very dead. Frodo had been to his funeral just to make sure. He decided that not thinking about it was best. He'd ask Sam later if the post-it was real.

The second post-it read 'Gandalf! I hate you. I hope you know that. Isildur.' The final one read 'Greetings from the Halls of Mandos. Eowyn sends her love, and asks to be remembered to Aragorn and says she's sorry to hear about the divorce. I hope you are all faring well, Faramir'.

Frodo decided to go and have a little lie down.

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The rest of the Fellowship had arrived home, and the notes were undergoing deep scrutiny. Legolas was on handwriting analysis, Gimli was examining the ink, Aragorn was hanging over Legolas' shoulder making unhelpful comments, the hobbits were eating and Gandalf was pinning abusive notes to Isildur onto the fridge.

Merry decided that hobbits could not live by crisps alone, and went over to the fridge to look for more solid food. He opened the door.

"Bastard throne stealer!"

Merry took a step backwards. "The fridge just swore at me!"
"Sorry, thought you were Aragorn."

"S'Ok." replied Merry on auto-pilot.

"Merry, stop talking to it. Don't encourage it."

Merry was pointing at the fridge now, and mumbling. The rest of the Fellowship were looking at the fridge, wondering what it was going to say next.

"Och, must be some kind of fault. I'll have a look at it."

The fridge door swung shut firmly.

"I don't think it wants to be fixed."

"Someone should open it. Find out what's going on."

All eyes turned to Aragorn.

"What? Why me?"

"It's you it has problems with. Perhaps that's why it smelled funny before."

"But it's not my fault the fridge doesn't like me, I'm not a bad person, it's not my fault I'm a Numenorian, I was born that way."

The fridge door swung open. "Bloody Numenorians! Think they're so high and mighty and noble! Bastards!" The door swung shut again.

"I think we have established that you need to negotiate with the fridge. Otherwise we'll have to buy a new one."

Aragorn patted the top of the fridge in a vaguely reassuring manner. "There, there. I'm sure we can work out our differences."

As if in answer the fridge door swung open with some force, knocking Aragorn off his feet. The handle had slammed into his stomach, winding him, so he lay on the floor, alternately gasping and cursing. The fridge laughed heartily.

Realisation dawned on Legolas. "Boromir! You've possessed our fridge."

The fridge blew a raspberry through one of the salad drawers.

"Right, you get out of there this minute."

"Can't. Stuck."

"Again?"

"Not my fault."

"Whose fault is it then?"

"Everyone else came and left a note, but I got trapped. Don't know why."

Light dawned on Merry. "That's what the fridge smelled like! Like Boromir!"
"Yes, well done, everyone else managed to come to that conclusion a few minutes ago."

The fridge took offence. "Are you saying that I smell?"

"No, no, no, not that you smell, more that you... ummmm..."

Frodo came to the rescue, "have a distinctive perfume."

"Are you accusing me of wearing perfume?"

"Noooooo, ummmmmmmmm..."

Aragorn had managed to get up. "Why did you hit me? I thought we had sorted all of this out the last time that you appeared."

"We didn't sort anything out. We just got absolutely wankered. And holding a grudge is much more fun. There's not much to do in the afterlife, and plotting ways to hurt you gives me a hobby."

"Oh." Aragorn looked hurt.

Frodo tried to rescue the situation a bit. "It's nice to have a hobby."

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Over the next few days many methods were tried to remove Boromir from the fridge. Bell, book and candle (or alarm clock, copy of the Grauniad and glow-in-the-dark t-shirt) failed. 'Get thee behind me Boromir' just confused everyone. Invocations to the Valar received a message saying "The Valar can't come to the psychic link right now, but if you'd leave a message after the celestial choir, we'll get right back to you." The Valar did not ring back. Gandalf had actually for once done some magic, which had succeeded in giving Boromir a celestial migraine and covering the outside of the fridge in green slime, much to Frodo's disgust.

So they'd given in. The fridge was left open during meals, so that Boromir wouldn't feel left out. Frodo had had a long chat with Boromir, to 'finish working out some Issues'. But generally, life continued on as normal. Well, the Fellowship's definition of 'normal', anyway.

Dinner had ceased to be 'mystery tin' and returned to 'cordon bleu with extra suet'. Aragorn's mental state had not improved much.

"And then there was the other squirrel-"

"Aragorn, I don't think that they have a vendetta against you. Really."

Sam chipped in. "Yeah, when I'm trying to do my gardening they get everywhere. It's just what squirrels do."

"But I can talk to the animals."

"You're confusing 'Ranger' and 'Dr. Dolittle' again."

"I'm not, really I could talk to them."

"Do they talk back?"

"Well, no, but-"
"Then you don't need to talk to a psychiatrist just yet."

"I'm the one with mental problems. Me. Don't start muscling in." Frodo had that worrying glint in his eye.

"You don't need a psychiatrist, you need a vet." said the fridge.

There was a pause.

"That wiz a crap attempt at an insult. Ah mean, 'You don't need a psychiatrist, you need a life' would have been at least relevant."

Merry sang, "I talk to the trees, that's why they put me away..."

"That, you see, that wiz an insult. Ok, it wasn't original, but it was a quote used in an appropriate context. You cannae just wade in with comment about vets, thought has to go into it. Ah've spent years perfecting mah insults."

"Thank you Professor Took of the Insultology Department."

"You see that? Combined both a pertinent comment and a heavy dose of sarcasm." He smacked Merry in the face. "Bastard!"

"But there is always room for a good old traditional expletive. I think we can stop now." Legolas aimed his comment at the flailing mass of arms and legs that was Merry and Pippin.

Aragorn leapt up. "By Jove, I think I've got it!"

"Got what? Dutch elm disease?"

"No, no, how to get Boromir out of the fridge. Old Cordwangler's Extra Blue Fantastically Mature!"

"What? You don't mean... the Dread Stilton of Doom?"

There was a gasp from the room. Merry and Pippin stopped fighting and stood up.

"Not the Dread Stilton of Doom! You know what happened last time!"

"What did happen last time?"

"I don't know. I was hiding, but I heard the noises."

"But what do you hope to achieve?"

"Well, if we put a half pound-"

"A whole half pound? Are you insane?"

"Ok, if we put a quarter pound of Cordwangler's into the fridge, if there's anyway for him to get out he'll take it. If not, then they'll fight to the death."

There was an aggrieved yell from the fridge. "Don't I get a say in this?"

"NO!" said the Fellowship as one.
A tall dark man, swathed in black, his face hidden by a deep hood, strode into the Cheesmongers. "I'd like a quarter pound of Old Cordwangler's, please."

The boy behind the counter paled, and the shop went silent. All eyes were on the stranger. At the other end of the room a cheese knife clattered to the floor. "I'll-I'll h-h-have to g-get Mr. George."

"You do that then."

A short neat man with glasses came through from the back. "Do I hear the name of Cordwangler's being used in vain?"

"My apologies, Mr. Aragorn, I didn't know it was you."

The boy looked confused. "But, but it's Cordwangler's, and you said-"

"Lad, I've seen him eat it with pickle."

There was a collective gasp from the room.

One of the other customers spoke up. "With pickle? That's not possible, the human frame cannot..." He tailed off as Aragorn turned to look at him. He swallowed. "Sorry."

"Come through to the back room."

The other occupants of the shop clustered round the door to the back room, jostling each other to get a better look.

A heavy table, covered in scorch marks, sat in the centre of the room. On top of it was a thick glass bell jar, firmly bolted to the table. Through the translucent green of the glass could be seen... the cheese. Chained down, it occasionally hurled itself ineffectually at the glass.

Mr. George handed a spanner to the lad. "Release the bolts."

He tentatively approached the table. The cheese, sensing his fear, redoubled its efforts on the glass. Mr. George held the top of the bell jar firmly as the bolts were released.

"Now, lad, when I lift the glass you slide the cheese board under it."

The jar was lifted. The cheese leapt, and as it did the cheese board was slid under it. Now the lad held it down while Mr. George took hold of the diamond edged cheese wire. He looked up at Aragorn. "A quarter pound was it?" has asked, conversationally as the lad wrestled the squirming cheese.

Aragorn nodded.

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Aragorn bore the cheese (safely ensconced in a reinforced box) into the kitchen. The rest of the Fellowship looked at it in barely disguised terror, which Aragorn mistook for awe.

"You got it then?"

"Yes. Boromir... open the fridge."
"Not bloody likely. I know what you've got in there."

The Fellowship formed a huddle around Gandalf's chair. "Gentlemen, this calls for a very special blend of psychology and extreme violence." Gandalf cleared his throat. "What's this? An enormous chocolate cake made with fresh cream that needs to be refrigerated..."

Legolas tapped Gandalf on the shoulder. "This is Boromir, not a Hobbit. You remember Boromir, don't you?" he whispered.

Gandalf tried again. "And what's this? Fifteen pints of Sam's home brew and a big bottle of that stuff he distils from potatoes in the shed?"

The fridge door flew open and banged against the wall. All of the Fellowship except Aragorn grabbed the door handle to keep it open while Aragorn leapt into the fridge and chained the stilton down in the pen they kept for such occasions.

Then they slammed the fridge door shut and leaned against it. And waited...

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Inside the fridge the cheese could smell prey, and prey its own size. Something in the unique aroma of the stilton had reacted with Boromir's equally strong personality to cause him to incarnate in a three and a half inch high form. A three and a half inch high form which was now reaching for its very small sword in defence from the predator currently stalking it.

Boromir edged round the side of the fridge. "Nice... cheese. Good cheese. You don't want to hurt me, do you?"

It growled in response and shuffled closer.

As the bars of the cheese pen began to buckle, Boromir started losing confidence in its structural soundness. That did it. He took the shield off his back and drew his sword. This would be a fight to the death. Men of Gondor didn't lie down and accept defeat in the face of dairy products.

So as the cheese burst out of its pen Boromir was ready.

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In the kitchen the Fellowship could hear a knocking from inside the fridge.

"Poor Boromir. I'm sure he fought bravely."

"We'll have to give him a proper burial if there's anything left to bury."

The knocking from inside the fridge became more insistent.

Their heads bowed, the Fellowship backed away from the fridge.

The fridge door opened explosively, disgustedly spitting out a tall, hairy, unwashed man armed with a sword dripping with runny blue stilton.

"I defeated it! I defeated it and claimed its powers! Gondor is victorious once more!"

"Oh dear, not again."

To be continued...
All the windows were open. A fan was going in the sitting room. Gandalf had stapled ‘magic pines’ round the brim of his hat. Legolas had moved into the shed. In short, Boromir had managed in the course of one hour to stink out the entire house.

Frodo had tried to sneak up on Boromir and cover him in ‘Febreeze’, but Boromir had fended him off. There had been multiple attempts to persuade him into having a bath, or at least changing his clothes and putting on some deodorant. Boromir was not giving in.

A conference was convened in the shed, with Legolas looking worringly like an international terrorist, what with the scarf round his face and the expression of homicidal disgust.

“What are we going to do?”

“Chuck him out.”

“He’ll never survive in the modern world. He’s not cut out for it. I have a duty to him you know.”

“No, you don’t. He doesn’t think you were ever his king, therefore you don’t have a duty to him.”

“He called me his king when he was dying...”

“Aragorn, he’d lost so much blood I wouldn’t have been surprised if he’d called you his grandmother.”

“I knew her, and she was quite hairy...”

“We’ve got off the point again.”

“There was a point?”

“When?”

“What point?”

“Who?”

“What Are We Going To Do With Boromir?”

“Send him back, throw him out, give him to a nature reserve or Battersea Dogs’ Home. But we can’t keep him.”

“Yeees, we don’t have a good record with pets. Boromir’ll be like the hamster all over again.”

“Yes, but he can feed himself. And I don’t think the foxes’ll get him.”

“And we could take him for walks. I’d walk him, promise.”

“Merry, you said that about the ferret. You’re useless with animals.”

“Anyway, he’s not an animal, he’s an intelligent and sensitive being.”

“Really? He hides it well.”
“It’s a pity the Uruk-Hai didn’t kill him when they had the chance.”

“Ummm... they did.”

“Oh. So they did.”

“We’ve got to keep him. At least until we can persuade the Valar to take him back. He is the ninth member of the Fellowship, and we have a bond. We must remain true to one another.” Frodo held his head high.

“Frodo... You do remember him trying to kill you?”

“I have talked this through with both Boromir and my psychiatrist. He wasn’t himself at the time. I am completely at ease with the situation.”

“So, we keep him. But I am not going back into that house until he has been thoroughly washed, his clothes burnt, and he has been house-trained.”

“He won’t wash voluntarily.”

“So we’ll have to make him.”

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Aragorn and Legolas were stalking Boromir through the house with the unusual weapon of a pair of kitchen scissors. Aragorn was in full indoor Ranger gear and Legolas had a lavender-soaked handkerchief tied over his face ninja-style. Although there were few ninjas who favoured delicate floral embroidery.

“Are you sure this is the only way to get his clothes off?” Asked Aragorn, who wasn’t even sure he wanted to see Boromir naked, even in the cause of getting him clean.

“It’s not like we’re going to keep them and he never takes them off voluntarily when he’s sober.”

“Why can’t we just get him drunk?”

“Because you’d get drunk too and the only thing you’re good for when you’re drunk is singing Gloria Gaynor.”

“I resent that, I sing other things too!”

“Such as?”

“...Aretha Franklin?”

“You see what I mean. We’ll just have to cut him out.”

Boromir was standing in the kitchen, seemingly engrossed in the microwave, which he was poking with his sword at arm’s length. This distraction was seen as the ideal opportunity to pounce.

“Commence operation Aberystwyth!”

“Aberystwyth? I thought we were calling it Clean-Steward.”

“Never mind, just get him!”
Aragorn and Legolas jumped out from underneath the kitchen table and wrestled Boromir to the ground, giving the coded whistle for the Hobbits in the cupboards to help with the actual cutting.

“Argh! No! Get off! What are you trying to do to me!”

“We’re taking your clothes off—”

“I always had my suspicions about you, you know!”

“So you can have a bath.”

The shock caused Boromir to stop struggling for a few seconds.

“A bbbbb- b -”

“A bath, yes.”

The struggles recommenced with added screams, howls and clawing. Boromir may have grown up in a society with a noble warrior code, but when he was caught in a corner he could use even more dishonourable fighting techniques than Pippin on a Saturday night.

Legolas held the scissors poised over Boromir’s groin. “Boromir, I can cut off your trousers while you’re wriggling about, or, I can cut them off when you’re lying still. The choice is yours.”

There was a moment’s thought. Legolas was sure he could hear the rusty mechanisms of Boromir’s brain slowly beginning to work.

Boromir gave in. Maybe surrender was a valid alternative after all.

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“No, noooooo! Not the bath, not the bath!”

The Fellowship had had to carry an almost naked Boromir up the stairs to the bathroom as he refused to cooperate any further with Operation Aberystwyth. He had tried digging his nails into the carpet, but Merry and Pippin had just followed behind him, gleefully jumping up and down on his fingers until he let go.

Boromir tried grabbing hold of the handle of the open bathroom door, but since this had been fitted by Aragorn, it simply parted company with the door.

“How are we going to get him in the bath?”

“I hadn’t thought too much about that, why don’t we just pick him up and throw him in.”

“NOOOOOOOOOO!”

Aragorn and Legolas took hold of Boromir’s arms and legs and hurled him in the direction of the bath. Boromir howled as he hit the mint scented water and the remains of his clothes dissolved on impact.

“Quick! Get the loofah!”

Boromir’s animal instincts cut in again and he began scrabbling wildly. A lucky blow caught Legolas in the face and dislodged the handkerchief. One nostril full of Boromir’s smell at such close range was all it took to overpower his delicate elven senses.
“Elf down! Elf down!”

“Quick, he’s getting away.”

Boromir was out of the bath and making for the door before Aragorn had time to respond, but his wet feet didn’t give him much grip on the carpet and he stumbled, giving Aragorn the opportunity to rugby tackle him at the top of the stairs.

Boromir made one last attempt to break free, which led to them both rolling down the stairs in a tangled heap to land in a compromising position at the feet of Gandalf, who had somehow materialised in the hallway with his chair and a pair of binoculars to allow him to see into the bathroom.

Gandalf leered.

Boromir froze with a ‘rabbit-in-headlights’ expression on his face and offered no resistance to Aragorn dragging him upstairs again.

Aragorn held Boromir up against the wall in an arm lock at the top of the stairs long enough for Frodo to wave a bottle of lavender oil under Legolas’ nose and retie the handkerchief before dragging him back into the bathroom.

“Right, we’ll try this again. Is everyone ready?”

“Wait a minute, we’ll have to run the bath water again. You wouldn’t believe how grey it went and he was only in there for a few seconds...”

Boromir tired to make a break for the door again, but was securely restrained as the water ran. Once the bath was full, and the temperature carefully tested by having an elbow dipped in it, Legolas and Aragorn grabbed Boromir and threw him in again. However, Boromir was ready for this, and managed to brace himself, starfish style, with his hands and feet grabbing on to the sides of the bath, so he was suspended above the water.

“Boromir! Let go!”

“Shan’t”

Aragorn tried pushing down on Boromir’s stomach, but he was made of sterner stuff and refused to move. Pippin, however, took a more direct and effective approach. He hit Boromir between the legs with a long handled scrubbing brush, and Boromir fell into the water, whimpering.

“Everybody in and wash!”

The whole Fellowship (well, apart from Gimli and Gandalf) attempted to wash Boromir as flailing body parts went past.

“Aaaaaaaahh! Nooooooo000! Nononoononononoono!”

“Don’t be such a baby.”

“Out, out damned spot!”

“I think that’s a freckle and if you keep scrubbing you’ll draw blood.”

“Hey, that’s my foot you’re washing, not his.”
“We need more soap over here! Stat!”

“Stat?”

“Like what they say on ‘ER’. Quickly.”

“The English language is perfectly adequate without ER-isms, thank you.”

“Aaaaaah, careful down there.”

“Yeah, Pippin, don’t damage the Gondorian not-quite-royal jewels.”

“Merry, shut up or you get a loofah stuck right-”

“Stop it.”

While the Fellowship were distracted by their bickering Boromir made a break for freedom. Both Aragorn and Legolas tried to stop him, but since he was covered with soap he slid out of their grasp.

He bounded down the stairs, past a leering Gandalf, and out through the kitchen door into the garden. The rest of the Fellowship were hot on his trail though. Boromir paused in the middle of the garden. He was naked, sopping wet, covered in soap and really quite cold. but a brisk run would probably dry him off. The rest of the Fellowship appeared in the doorway.

“Don’t tackle him in the garden, you’ll undo all our work.”

“Don’t let him near my compost heap either.”

“Yes, that would be nasty, make him even smellier.”

“I was worried about the compost heap, not him.”

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“Lorna! Andrea! Gemma! There’s a naked man in Cute Pointy Ears Guy’s garden!”

There was a sound of running feet.

“Is it him? Is Pointy Ears naked?”

“No, different naked man.”

“Bugger.”

Four faces appeared at the now open window. Living diagonally opposite the Fellowship house had some advantages. For instance, if you leaned out of the upstairs bathroom window at the right angle, you could see right into Pointy Ears Guy’s bedroom. There was also a good degree more excitement to be had than from the normal suburban neighbour.

“I’ve never seen him before.”

“Bit old.”

“Nice muscles... and other things.”

“Ooooh... he’s got scars as well.”
“And what are you four doing?”

“Um, mum, we were just, um...”

“Is that a naked man in next door’s garden?”

“Um... yeah?”

“Why didn’t you say? Budge up, I want a better look.”

More and more interested parties were gathering, some with binoculars, some with cameras, and some with those things on tripods you use for measuring things a long way away. Some people are even pedantic about accuracy in voyeurism.

“Boromir. You’re frightening the neighbours. Come inside.”

“They don’t really look frightened, as such. More intrigued.”

At this point, awoken by the hubbub, Gimli appeared, in paisley dressing gown and foul mood.

“What’s going on? Och.”

“We brought back Boromir from the dead, we tried to give him a bath and now he’s got loose. We need him back in the bath, he’s not clean yet.”

“Oh. I mean, ‘och’.” Gimli looked thoughtful. “We could herd him in. Get the hose out and get him inside that way.”

Boromir was unaware of this argument. He was more worried about the suggestive looks he was getting from various women. So he was taken by surprise when he was hit with a blast of freezing cold water.

“Boromir! Your choice! Nice warm bath, or freezing hose-down with an audience.”

Boromir was trying to simultaneously cover his modesty with his hands, and get away from the cold water. The bath had to be better than this, and he allowed himself to be dragged back upstairs again, to be greeted by yet another fresh tub of water, the last lot having been turned brown. He turned to look at Legolas and Aragorn.

“You can get in, or we can throw you in.”

Boromir gingerly lifted his leg and dipped a toe in the water. “AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! It burns! It burns!”

“Oh, sorry, I’ll run some cold in.”

When the bath had been reduced to a temperature more suited to Boromir, he sat in the bath scowling.

“Are you going to wash yourself, or are we going to have to do it for you?”

Boromir picked up the loofah and brought it to within a few millimetres of his arm and waved it up and down a bit.
"No, wash properly."

Boromir made some grumbling noises, but proceeded to wash himself.

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A clean, fresh scented Boromir, dressed in Aragorn’s cast-offs, was sat in the sitting room.

"We need to sort out where you’re going to sleep."

"Not in my room." Legolas was very firm about this. Legolas and Boromir had inhabited each other’s minds and knew rather more about each other than they ever really wanted. So they were trying to, as politely as possible, avoid each other.

"He can sleep on the sofa."

"That’s that sorted then. Now, Boromir, how much do you know about life in the twenty-first century?"

"Licentiousness. Lack of honour. Strange machines that go ‘ping’. Fornication in the streets-"

"You shouldn’t take Pippin as an example."

"Ok, fornication."

"What about art and literature and culture?"

"You’d have to ask Faramir."

"Oh, yes, there was a note on the fridge for you, ‘please, please come back Boromir, Eowyn’s being mean’."

"Ignore it. She’ll have been pulling his hair again."

"We need to teach you about modern life. How to cope. What you can and can’t do. I mean, for example, you can’t punch people in the street anymore."

"You can’t?" Pippin looked genuinely shocked.

"And you can’t grope women just because they’re wearing revealing clothes."

"Since when?" This was educational for Pippin as well.

"Reasonably frequent bathing is the norm."

Boromir looked worried. There seemed to be a good deal of explaining left to do.

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"...and those are the basic principles of Feminism."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

"It’s amazing how two men as butch as Aragorn and Boromir both scream like girls."

Frodo was exuding smugness at recalling all the basics of the ‘Feminist Theory’ evening class, while Aragorn was holding a paper bag to the face of a hyperventilating Boromir. After about fifteen
minutes Boromir had calmed down, and the lesson continued.

“Wearing armour in public is regarded as odd. Carrying weapons in public is illegal.”

“Um, has Gandalf been in prison a lot?”

“Not as often as you’d think. He’s got many identities and can convince juries that he’s weak, feeble and dying.”

“But, you should try and avoid prison. I mean you might be sharing a cell with him. Last time he was Inside he managed to get four consecutive cellmates put on suicide watch.”

There was a collective shudder.

“You’ll have to remember that you’re no longer rich, powerful or noble. Remember the people who lived in the First Circle? You’re like them, now. But with much better plumbing.”

“You may be first circle, but I think I’m second circle at least.”

“Ok, let’s not bicker. You’re working class now.”

“I thought this was a classless society.”

“But we’re definitely not upper-class anymore. You can’t go round ordering people about. Well, you can, Gandalf orders us around all the time, but we ignore him. Oh, and I know this will be a disappointment, but we now have a safe water supply so you don’t drink beer at breakfast. Unless you’re Gandalf.”

“Have you noticed that all our little rules come with a Gandalf-exception clause?”

“Yes, but do you want to get close enough to Gandalf to enforce the rules of modern society?”

“A wizard is never hidebound by rules and regulations. We are free agents.”

“But when you’re in prison.”

“Frodo, in deference to Boromir’s sensibilities, had cooked a large amount of roast lamb, with all the trimmings and enough Yorkshire Pudding to build a small igloo.

“Vegetables? We’re eating vegetables in the twenty-first century?”

“They’re good for you.”

“We’re immortal. Why do we care? It’s not like we’re going to have heart attacks.”

“My spoon has holes in it.”

“It’s a fork. You don’t eat with your fingers. Use the fork to hold things down while you cut them, and then use it to transport them to your mouth.”

“It’s a girly way of eating.”

“No it’s not. It’s civilised.”
“Keeps you regular.”

“In a house with a limited number of bathrooms, this can be seen as a bad thing.”

“And anyway, why sprouts? Even Legolas doesn’t like sprouts and he even likes broccoli.”

“They’re traditional.”

“Yes, but so’s the Black Death.”

“Yeah, there’s loads of vegetables we will eat.”

“Just EAT THE DAMN SPROUTS!”

Everyone looked at Frodo’s expression and dived for the sprouts. They proceeded to eat them, while making comments of ‘mmmmn, sprouts’, and ‘I’ll have a second helping’. They even ignored Boromir’s complete failure to master the technology of Fork. He tried to subtly eat with knife only.

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Boromir retired to bed, or rather the sofa, confused and depressed. This modern world seemed terrible, filled with strange rules about behaviour and odd foods. He lay down. Perhaps it would be better in the morning.

His dozing was rudely interrupted though, by “And now, on channel five it’s tonight’s erotic thriller, ‘Last Temptation of the Vestal Virgins’.” There was appreciative heavy breathing from the mound of accumulated rubbish (the core of which was a deckchair), that was Gandalf’s throne.

Boromir sat up. He may not have known much about the modern world, but he knew he didn’t want to be in a situation that involved both Gandalf and the word ‘erotic’. He was going to have to find alternative accommodation.

“Aragorn... can I sleep in your room?” Aragorn had managed to sleep through the knock at the door, but not the drawn out whinging that followed it. “I don’t take up that much space and I’m sorry for calling you a throne stealer...”

“Alright then, but only if we top and tail. I know you wrap yourself around anyone you sleep next to and your breath in the morning is even worse than a horse’s and I should know.”

Boromir said ‘thank you’ meekly and slid into bed.

There was a pause. “Aragorn... are you naked?”

“No, ‘ve got boxers on, go t’sleep.”

“Boxers?” Aragorn had already fallen asleep and ignored the question.

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Legolas wasn’t entirely sure where he was when he woke up. His warrior reflexes had lost their edge in the last few years and it took him a few minutes to work out what was going on if he was woken up suddenly these days. He began to piece together the information he had. It was dark and the walls were vibrating. There was a word for this, he was sure of it.

“Earthquake!”
Within seconds of his scream the shaking stopped and the rest of the Fellowship emptied out of their rooms onto the landing to investigate.

“What’s going on?”

“It couldn’t have been an earthquake, you don’t get them round here.”

“It felt like an earthquake.”

Boromir trudged out of Aragorn’s room in Aragorn’s spare dressing gown. “What earthquake?”

Aragorn appeared behind him. “Why are we talking about earthquakes?”

“Why was Boromir in your room?”

Pippin made his suggestive face. “Did the earth move for you?”

“What?”

“What?”

“There was an earthquake. A few moments ago. Then it stopped.”

“Yeah, and you don’t get earthquakes that strong here.”

“I didn’t feel any earthquake.”

“Me neither.”

“Distracted, were you?”

The innuendo bypassed Aragorn. “No, asleep.”

There was a slight pause, and some cogs whirring. “Boromir... snores like an orc with sinusitis... Aragorn... can do a passable impression of an F-16 when he’s asleep. Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

Frodo filled in, “that their combined snoring is creating a harmonic effect not dissimilar to that of a minor earthquake?”

“Exactly!”

“Oh, I was thinking that since we were all up we could pop out for a kebab.”

“Well, that was the second thing I thought of.”

“You can’t sleep in the same room as each other, it might cause structural damage. And even if it doesn’t, none of us are going to get any sleep. You need to maintain separation, then you won’t reverberate.”

“I’m not going back to sleep on the sofa.”

“Gandalf?”

Boromir shuddered and nodded at the same time.

“You could sleep in our room.” volunteered Pippin.
They all turned as one and looked into Merry and Pippin’s room. They saw Festering Darkness. A black hole from which no laundry ever escapes. Something growled in a corner.

“Ummm... no.”

“He can’t sleep in Gimli’s room. After Merry and Pippin got in he’s had the place booby-trapped.”

Frodo looked at Sam, who shrugged. “You can take the futon in our room. But only temporarily.”

Boromir nodded and followed them back to their room. He lay down to sleep very quickly. That amount of chintz gave him migraines.

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Boromir, Frodo and Aragorn had gone out clothes shopping. Legolas and Gimli were drafting a letter to the Valar.

“Dear Elbereth - does that sound too casual for addressing a deity?”

“Och, not one you’ve met.”

“Ok. Dear Elbereth, how are you? The Fellowship are all well. Including Boromir. He seems to have reincarnated back here for some reason. I know you can take him back since you had Glorfindel bouncing back and forth between here and Valinor like an elven yo-yo. Take him back! Please. Please! Please! Yours sincerely Legolas of Mirkwood.”

“Started off well, but got a bit informal towards the end.”

“So you think I should re-write it then?”

“Just a bit.”

“But we should send the letter?”

“Yes! I don’t want Boromir hanging round here for the rest of eternity. He’s like an unholy cross between Pippin, Aragorn and my grandfather. And it’s crowded enough as it is. Och.” He added, for emphasis.

“Perhaps if I phrased it as a ‘lost and found’? Dear Halls of Mandos, we have found an unwashed reincarnated Man, do you want him back? We’ll pay the postage.”

“No, maybe if we wrote to the Valar like a formal extradition.”

“Boromir, extradited back to Valinor for crimes against personal hygiene?”

“Something like that.”

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“Boromir, would you stop that?”

“Stop what?”

“Playing with the indicator lights while I’m driving. You’re only supposed to use them when you turn corners.”
“But it makes the dashboard light up and it makes this weird clicky noise.”

“Just leave it alone.”

Aragorn turned off into the shopping centre car park.

“You just used it.”

“Yes, it’s called an indicator because you use it to indicate what you’re about to do. You don’t just use it randomly because you like the noise it makes.”

“There’s a space there, Aragorn.” Frodo decided it was best to distract Aragorn before he tried to kill Boromir and get blood all over the seats.

Aragorn, a proponent of manly driving, drove past the space, then slammed the landrover into reverse and swung it in so fast that Frodo and Boromir were flung up against the passenger door.

“You don’t have to drive like that, you know.”

“You sound just like Legolas.”

“Well, Legolas is a very sensible person.”

“Elf. He’s a sensible elf.”

“See, you admit it.”

“Oh come on, we’ve got to get Boromir some clothes of his own and it’s only five and a half hours till the shops shut.”

Boromir was forcefully dragged into the shopping centre, Frodo and Aragorn keeping hold of his hands. This caused them to receive some strange looks, but it had been decided that it was better to keep hold of his hands because they would get even stranger looks if he was allowed to let them wander.

While Boromir was staring in horrified fascination at the bright lights and scantily clad young women, and young men for that matter, a debate was taking place.

“But we can’t get him expensive clothes. Merry and Pippin eat more when they’re unemployed. We can’t afford it.”

“But it wouldn’t be fair if we got him things that fall apart the third time you wash them.”

“How do we even know he’ll be here long enough for you to wash his clothes three times?”

“Think of it this way, you’re both about the same size, so if he goes - when he goes - you can take them back.”

Aragorn grudgingly agreed and they pulled Boromir into a shop.

“What new devilry is this?” asked Boromir.

“It’s a clothes shop.”

“No it’s not, I’ve been in clothes shops. They have fabric and strange old men with tape measures. They’re definitely not like this.”
“The principles of clothes shopping have changed since you were last here. Now they make clothes that aren’t quite the same shape and size as anyone who really exists and you have to find the ones that come closest to not quite fitting.”

“It sounds horrible.”

“I know. I miss the good old days when clothes fitted and beer actually tasted of something, even if you didn’t want to speculate what.”

“Ah, the good old days, when your clothes fitted because they’d rotted on.” Frodo stopped, clapped a hand over his mouth and looked at Aragorn and Boromir in horror. “I made Legolas’ sarcastic comment because Legolas isn’t here? Is sarcasm a communicable disease?”

There was a pause. “No, I shared a room with him for years and it never affected me. Apart from getting annoyed with him.”

“It’s almost as if I was being controlled by some malevolent higher power.”

“That’s just normal paranoia, everyone gets it.”

“Oh. Are we going for casual, smart or smart-casual?”

“What does that mean?”

Aragorn shrugged.

“I like red. What have they got in a nice dark red? What about that?”

“Boromir, that’s ladies clothes.”

“Why?”

“It just is, and if you wear that you’ll look like a drag queen.”

“What is a drag queen?”

“Ummmm... we’ll talk about it when we get home. Just stick to the things in the ‘mens’ section.”

“None of them are red.”

“You’ll just have to deal with that.”

Boromir was finally harassed into choosing some clothes. Then he was introduced to the concept of ‘zipper’ (having borrowed button fly cast offs from Aragorn). He emerged from the changing rooms looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“I hate these clothes. But they are the best they have.”

“You look great.”

“Where do I keep my sword in this?”

“We told you before. The sword stays in a box, at home, under the bed, where Gandalf can’t find it.”

The collection of shop security that had gathered behind them took note of this with interest.

“Why don’t you put back on the clothes you came in in and we’ll pay for these. We have got enough
socks and underwear, haven’t we?”

There came back the reply from the changing rooms. “What do I need underwear for? I never used it before.”

“Hygiene!”

There were muttered grumblings from Boromir. They trooped over to the cash desk to pay, still followed with great interest by security.

“Hola Frodo!”

“Oh, Hola Sandra! Como estas?”

“Bien, gracias.”

Aragorn pointed an accusatory finger at her. “Who’s this?”

“Oh, sorry. This is Sandra, she’s in my Spanish conversation class. Sandra, this is Aragorn, my housemate, and Boromir... ummm...”

Sandra gave an understanding look as she put the clothes through the till. “He’s from your group therapy meetings isn’t he?” she said in a low voice, so people wouldn’t overhear.

Frodo nodded gratefully. “Yes, I, um, said I’d help him with shopping.”

“Oh, that’s nice of you. Coming to class on Tuesday? Cos me and Angela wondered if you wanted to go out for coffee afterwards.”

“Oh, yes, that’d be nice.”

Sandra finished running the credit card through, and Frodo signed the receipt. “See you Tuesday.”

As they walked out of the shop Aragorn looked at Frodo. “Conversation classes?”

“I do have a life outside the Fellowship, you know.”

“Really? None of the rest of us do.”

“Sam’s a member of the local horticultural society.”

“You live and learn. Is that where he disappears every Wednesday evening?”

“Yes. What did you think he was doing?”

“You hang round Merry and Pippin long enough, you learn not to speculate.”

Back at the house, Legolas and Gimli had received an unusually speedy reply from the Valar. On pink scented notepaper with flowers on it.

Dearest Legolas,

Thank you for your letter. Everyone here is well too. It is nice to hear that Boromir is settling in to the modern world so well, which is a good thing, because we have investigated his case and come to the conclusion that he belongs both alive and immortal.
“Looks like we’re stuck with him.”

“We could introduce him to Frodo’s psychiatrist. I mean, he thinks he’s been brought back from the dead, and that he’s a six thousand year old warrior.”

“But he really is a-”

“Yes, so that means he’s not going to admit to being anything else. And someone like that shouldn’t be roaming around the streets. He’ll be locked up, for sure.”

“That’s not fair on Frodo though. Means there’s less psychiatry to go around. And they might come after Aragorn as well.”

“And the problem with that would be?”

“Legolas, when they talk about the perfidy of the elves, they mean you don’t they?”

“Oh Elbereth! I’m turning into my father, aren’t I?”

A pink notelet was spat out of the fridge. Gimli picked it up and read it “Yes, you are, dear.”

“I was trying to blaspheme! And that was a rhetorical question.”

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That evening Aragorn and Boromir were sharing pints of ‘Curmudgeon’s Seriously Bizarre Ale’, and commiserating about modern life. They were making so much noise about this that all the rest of the Fellowship (with the exception of Gandalf and Gimli) had retired to the shed to play poker. But not, to Merry and Pippin’s disappointment, strip poker.

“Used to be heir of, of, thing. Now I’m living in a cupboard under the stairs. We didn’t even have cupboards under the stairs in Minas Tirith.”

“That’s because you had spiral staircases. They’re a complete bugger to put cupboards under.”

“And I hate modern. Hate it. I mean, take war. I liked war. Good career for a man. Show your mettle. Now it’s all from a very long way away. Not proper fighting.”

“I know, I know. No skill anymore. I got out of the war thing when gunpowder started happening. All downhill from there.”

“And all the women are like Eowyn now. It’s terrifying.”

“Noooo, some of them are like Arwen. That’s even worse.”

“Everything’s so, so, shoddy. Not built to last.”

“I know. I build things from the flat-pack and then they fall apart the next week.”

The conversation continued on the same theme for some time, bemoaning the lack of something, the decline of something else, and so on. As the amount of beer consumed increased they gradually became less coherent, more maudlin and less vertical.
The others came back from the shed, doing the complex mathematics required to work out exactly how much they all owed Legolas. This was not helped by Legolas demanding his metaphorical winnings be in Euros.

Legolas saw Aragorn and Boromir comatose on the floor, and formed a plan, but one for which he would have to have Gimli’s help.

The next morning the Fellowship was greeted with an unusual sight in the kitchen.

“Why is the fridge chained shut? And why is all the food in buckets of water? And what’s that thumping sound?”

Legolas folded his arms. “Boromir came in through the fridge. He can make his way back out through the fridge.”

“I don’t think he’s going back. And he wants to come out, by the sounds of it.”

“I don’t hear anything.”

“Pretending to be deaf is not convincing, coming from an elf.”

Aragorn tried to sidle past Legolas to open the fridge, but a hungover Ranger is no match for an unnaturally chirpy elf. He found himself pinned to the floor.

“Lets be reasonable. We need to use the fridge. Boromir does not seem to be leaving the fridge. We have to let him out.”

“No.”

“He’ll suffocate.”

“He’s been in there three hours. If he was going to suffocate he would have done so by now.”

“If you leave him in there for long enough he will die. Of hunger or hypothermia. Then we’ll have to deal with the body.”

“He’s immortal. Not a problem.”

“He’ll get really, really pissed off. And he’ll tunnel his way out. And then go after you.”

“Because I’m soooo scared of Boromir.”

The argument rambled on. Meanwhile, the hobbits were utilising cunning. Pippin had ventured forth, deep into the recesses of his room, between the peaks of the Forgotten Laundry, past the valleys of the Lost Dishes, battling the fell beasts evolved from last week’s takeaway, to the fabled Sock Graveyard. There he lifted the most fearsome sock-corpse he could find, using salad tongs to keep it at arm’s length.

The sock was brought out and placed in the sock launcher, a thing constructed of wooden rulers, elastic, rubber bands and garden canes. They sneaked to the door of the kitchen.

“Range - three metres.”

“Three metres, check.”
“Elevation - thirty seven degrees”

“Thirty seven degrees, check.”

“Wind speed - negligible. Fire at will.”

“I thought we were firing at Legolas?”

“Oh, good grief. Fire at Legolas.”

The sock was launched. The accuracy of the sock launcher could have done with some work, since it sailed past his left ear, but the virulence of the odour was enough to knock him out.

Boromir was released from the fridge and revived with large amounts of sweet tea.

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A week passed. Boromir was adopted back into the Fellowship, with all the arguing, hatred, petty jealousies, plots, violence and bickering about washing up that this entailed. Legolas’ attempts to remove Boromir from the house had failed. Poisoning him had just made him feel ill.

Then, at 3am in the morning, after a particularly horrible nightmare about being molested by schoolgirls on the train, while trying to explain to Elrond exactly why he was dressed as Heidi, inspiration struck.

He bounded downstairs, and, for the first time in about a year, voluntarily spoke to Gandalf.

“Do you want rid of Boromir?”

“Yes. Keeps talking over all my soaps, turns off the erotic thrillers. Last week, he broke my tape of ‘Xena: Warrior Princess: What They Don’t Show You On TV’. Do you know how rare that video is? And, much as I enjoy making your life a living hell, he manages to be more annoying than you are.”

“I have a plan. I know you are more powerful than you make out. I want you to return to Valinor.”

“No. I like it here.”

“Only temporarily. Tell the Valar when you get there, that they can either keep you, or swap you for Boromir.”

“Do you think it’ll work? I don’t want to be stuck there, I hate their bridge parties.”

“Believe me, neither do the Valar. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

Gandalf looked thoughtful, then nodded. “Just let me get together my magazines, and I’ll be off.”

And so it came to pass that at breakfast there was a flash, the sound of a celestial choir, the smell of burning rubber and a lot of swearing. As the smoke cleared it could be seen that where Boromir had been sat there was now Gandalf, apparently unconscious, with a note pinned to him.

Fine. You win. We take Boromir back. But try and pull one like that again and there will be righteous and vengeful smiting.

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Epilogue.

Frodo looked on anxiously as the workman examined the fridge. There was the obligatory sucking of air through the teeth.

“Ah, see here? That’s where your problem is. Coolant’s got down here, into the mechanism and created a portal into the Other Realm.”

“Can you do anything about it?”

“I can do you a quick fix now, but it won’t last. Happens a lot with these models, that’s why they don’t make ‘em anymore. Best bet’s to buy another one, soon as you can. I mean, you were lucky, it got posessed by someone you knew. I can tell you some tales about vengeful spirits in fridges I can.”

“Does this problem affect any other models?”

“Not that the manufacturers’l’ll admit. I’ll give you the names of some I know are good.”
Legolas had his arms folded. This was an internationally recognised sign of extreme danger. He was staring at Aragorn, who was shuffling uncomfortably.

“I had a phone call today.”

Aragorn was bright enough to stay quiet.

“Saying that you, after attending only one counselling session, have decided to attend no more. Pray tell me why this is so?”

Aragorn winced. First folded arms, now eighteenth century speech patterns. He was in really, really deep trouble. “Well, I told her my life story, and by the time I got to the bit where mum died she was crying. And then her secretary came in, and she told the secretary and she started crying. I can’t deal with crying women. I don’t know what to do. Arwen never cried, she just shouted.”

“Aha.”

“Umm, and, and it wasn’t really helping.”

“Mnhm.”

“I mean, she can’t help me get my Ranger skills back, can she?”

“This is what you believe your problem to be.”

“Yes.”

“And not, for example, why you lost your Ranger skills in the first place? Or, for example, your increasingly erratic behaviour, the paranoia, the shortness of temper?”

“Um, no, I just want my Ranger Skills back. I’m sure everything will just sort itself out once they’re back.”

“But what’s the point of having Ranger skills in an urban environment in the-” there was a pause as Legolas did the mathematics, “twenty-first century anyway? You don’t need to catch your own food, or avoid orcs.”

“Do you know the statistics on road deaths?”

“Why?”

“I need my Ranger Skills to avoid becoming one of those statistics.”

“No, you need the highway code to avoid becoming one of those statistics. Not driving as fast as you do would help as well.”
“But I can drive that fast, I have Ranger Reflexes.”

“You also have knackered brakes. Probably because you drive that fast and slam them on at the last minute.”

“I need my Ranger Skills for, for, um other things. In case I’m attacked. Young men are most likely to be attacked.”

“You’re not young and the only time you go out after dark is to the 24 hour supermarket. And you drive there.”

“... vicious hordes of shelf stackers?”

Legolas just looked at him.

“Sorry.”

“We need to do something about you. There isn’t an OU course in Ranger skills.”

The sarcasm bypassed Aragorn. “I wonder why not. It would be really useful.”

Legolas gave him a withering look. “Why don’t you suggest it as part of the Duke of Edinburgh’s award?”

“That’s a good idea. Where does the Duke of Edinburgh live?”

“Where do you think he lives?”

“Edinburgh?”

Legolas decided that he couldn’t deal with any more of this. He really needed some camomile tea. Now.

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A few days later there was a knock on the door. Frodo answered it, and was immediately swept up into a group hug.

“DUDE! FRODO! DUDE!”

Frodo was finally released from the hug, enough to breathe and recognise who was hugging him. “Elladan? Elrohir? What are you doing here?”

“Dude, that rhymed.”

The rest of the Fellowship appeared, mainly to find out who was making the suspect noises. They were all dragged into the group hug as well.

“Little Dudes! Mirkwood dude! Hairy Dude! Where’s medium dude?”

“Medium Dude?”

“Dwarf dude.”

“On nightshift.”

“Oh. Dude.”
“Aren’t you going to ask about Gandalf?”

“Dude, that’s how we knew it was your house, could smell him half way up the street.”

They all disentangled themselves from the group hug, and the brothers came inside. They started pointing at things of interest in the hallway, and going ‘Dude!’.

“Stop it.”

“Stop what dude?”

“The ‘dude’. I know it’s an affectation. Stop it now.”

Elladan and Elrohir looked at each other. They may have been a few thousand years older than Legolas, but he’d always been the more sensible one. Not that that was difficult. Aragorn was more sensible than Elladan and Elrohir.

“Like, sorry.”

“And no ‘like’, or ‘y’know’, or ‘totally’. It’s irritating. You were brought up to have better diction than that.”

“Very sorry Legolas.”

Legolas had long ago worked out that the best way of dealing with The Twins was to pretend to be Elrond, an impression that also worked very well on Aragorn.

“Legolas, this is such a great surprise!”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it.”

Aragorn looked confused at Legolas’ tone of voice. “You didn’t invite them? For me to learn back my Ranger Skills?”

“One, ‘learn back’ is not correct usage, and two, no I did not invite them.”

“No, he didn’t invite us. We just turned up. No-one invites us anywhere. Dad didn’t even invite us to his last party.”

“Why have you turned up?”

“Well, we were renting the house in Cornwall out to some people, while we moved into the garden in the camper van-”

“And he left the handbrake off and it rolled off the cliff-”

“It made a really cool noise-”

“But it was horrible! We’ve had that van since 1967! It had memories in it man!”

“It had most of our special lembas in it.”

“And Jimi Hendrix pissed on the back left hand tyre! Jim Morrison threw up on one of the back seats!”

“It might just have been a guy who looked like Jim Morrison. We’d had a lot of special lembas, and
he’d gone when we next woke up.”

Merry and Pippin were looking distinctly interested. “Special lembas? You still make that?”

“Dude, of course we still make it!”

“Ahem.”

“Sorry.”

“So, anyway, with the van gone, we had to stay somewhere—”

“So we got on a train. But after we’d been on the train for about two days they threw us off. So we got the bus to dad’s house—”

“Yeah, and he’s got these really unfriendly big dogs—”

“Big hairy dogs—”

Legolas knew about Elrond’s pets. “Aren’t they, um, lions?”

“Didn’t see them at the party.”

“Elrond’s under the naive impression that lions and drunk people don’t mix.”

“But, but anyway, these hairy things came after us. Really fast they are too.”

“What about that elvish ability to tame beasts?”

“Yeah, um, dad used that to train them to attack us.”

“So then we went to grandma’s—”

“She let us stay the night—”

“Then chuckus out in the morning and told us to bugger off—”

“Then we tried to find out where grandad was, but he’s in prison—”

“The people at Amnesty International were really nice to us, said that the letter writing campaign’s going really well.”

“Celeborn’s a prisoner of conscience?”

“Sort of. He’s not got a conscience, but they’ve got no real reason for imprisoning him—”

“We wrote to our other grandparents, but they didn’t write back. And we couldn’t go stay with Arwen and mum—”

“Cos, like, they’re Arwen and mum—”

“The Bitch Queens of Angmar—”

“So we came here. What’s for dinner?”

“It’s nice to know our friendship is so valued.”
After dinner Legolas attempted to make polite conversation. “So... how’s Cornwall?”

“It was still there when we left.”

“I’ll rephrase that. How is life in Cornwall? For the two of you.”

“Oh, um, pretty good.”

“Except for when the surf shop flooded.”

“Yeah, that kind of sucked.”

“It’s why we had to rent the house out.”

“There’s, like this stuff, called insurance or something-”

“We were supposed to have some.”

“That’s a shame. I didn’t know there were problems with flooding in Cornwall.”

“There aren’t in the rest of Cornwall, just in our shop-”

“Mostly in the bathroom.”

“Our mate Dave saw this policeman-”

“I think he might have been watching ‘The Bill’ again-”

“And he gets a bit paranoid-”

“So he flushed his stash.”

“And Dave’s got a really big stash.”

“Why was Dave in your shop at night anyway?”

“Well, we could either get a burglar alarm or let Dave live there.”

“And Dave’s cheaper.”

“Anyway, he tried to flush the stash, but it wouldn’t go.”

“But he could still see the policemen on the telly so he kept trying to flush it until the handle got stuck-”

“And then he gave up and went to bed-”

“And then the shop filled up with water.”

“Oh. Is Dave alright?”

“Yeah, he always sleeps on his board-”

“And the board floats.”
“I see.”

Suddenly, two pairs of Elvish ears began to twitch. Elladan and Elrohir exchanged meaningful looks.

Legolas blinked.

When he opened his eyes again, The Twins were holding Merry and Pippin upside down by the ankles.

“What were you doing in our rucksacks?”

“Nothing.”

“You were looking for the special lembas, weren’t you?”

This time, Merry and Pippin exchanged looks. “Um, yes. Sorry.”

“Little dudes! You only had to ask.”

Elrohir picked up his rucksack and emptied the contents on to the living room floor. Two t-shirts, three pairs of underpants, a lone sock and a suspiciously large quantity of lembas fell out.

“That’s all the clean clothing and underwear you brought with you? Two t-shirts?”

“No, one t-shirt. One of them’s Elladan’s. His rucksack’s just got lembas in it.”

“And we lost most of our stuff when the van fell off the cliff.”

“I thought you said you lost most of your lembas too? How much of it did you have?”

“Lots.”

“Yeah, lots.”

“Where did you sleep?”

“Outside.”

“Which was really handy when it rolled off the cliff.”

“Yeah, we’d have been screwed if it was raining that night-”

“Cos when it rains we sleep in the front seats.”

While this bizarre and rambling conversation had been going on, the Hobbits - Frodo and Sam having appeared at the sound of large quantities being emptied onto the floor - had disappeared into the garden with a generous amount of it.

“Oh well, at least it’ll keep them fairly quiet for the rest of the evening.” sighed Legolas

“So what’s wrong with Aragorn?”

“Yeah, he looks sort of...”

“Depressed.”

“Yeah.”
Legolas was momentarily shocked by this display of perceptiveness from The Twins.

“He thinks he’s losing his Ranger skills.”

“Oh.”

“That’s pretty bad.”

“But you can help him find them again, can’t you?”

“I’m not sure if we can.”

“Yeah, um, when a Dunadan loses his Ranger Skills-”

“It’s the beginning of the end.”

There was a solemn pause. “Oh. There’s really nothing we can do?”

“Nah, we’re kidding.”

“Had you going, didn’t we?”

“Ranger Skills are dead easy-”

“Part of their innate Dunadan-ness.”

“He just needs someone to remind him.”

“How do we do that?”

“Well, we need to start at the very beginning.”

“It’s a very good place to start.”

“You don’t have to sing do you?”

“Sing? No.”

“What we have to do is give him some special lembas.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“Not really.”

“We’ve just had a difficult week.”

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A career in twenty-four hour retail services was not exactly all that Graeme had thought it would be. Well, actually that was a lie. He got reasonably well paid to spend most of his time reading ‘The National Enquirer’ and other quality publications which the garage sold without paying for any of them. It was a pity that all the ‘top shelf’ magazines came in plastic wrappers, but you couldn’t have everything. And, of course, there was the entertainment to be had from the average three am clientele.

Tonight’s had been particularly good.
First, there was ‘Mini Night Of The Living Dead’. Four very short rotund men had come in, with blank, dazed expressions, muttering ‘muuuusssssshrooms, muuuuuusshrooms’. This did cause Graeme some mild confusion, since that wasn’t what normally what happened with mushrooms. However, this was explained by being what the short men wanted. He’d managed to fob them off with some chicken and mushroom Pot Noodle, along with about thirty pounds worth of associated snack foods.

About three quarters of an hour later four tall blokes came in. Or rather a four headed eight-armed cuddle monster came in, declaring that they loved each other, they’d missed each other, that this was like old times and that they had to do it more often. The monster split into its component parts when inside the shop. The blond effeminate one appeared to have an entire pizza stuck to the front of his shirt (Graeme had spent about five minutes of scrutinising before deciding that, in all probability, it was a he, not a she), and became entirely fascinated by the way the broken fridge light pulsated.

“Hehehehehe! Dude! Look at that!”

“Dude! You said dude!”

“Oh, dude, did I?”

“Dude, you said it again.”

“Dude, I so did not. Dude.” He collapsed on the floor in hysteric.

Graeme warned them that if the blond one was going to be sick they had to take him outside, but they reassured him that he’d been sick already and there wasn’t any left. The hairy man explained this while attempting to hug Graeme through the glass while the two men he took to be identical twins were ruthlessly tickling the blond man.

Then they bought up every prawn flavoured item in the shop and a packet of orange tic-tacs and left.

Graeme decided that he wanted a copy of tonight’s security tapes.

Later that night there was a debate going on down the local police station.

“What the hell are we going to charge them with?”

“They’ve got to be on something.”

“Course they’re on something. Just nothing that turns up on a urine test.”

“Some new stuff?”

“If it’s that new, it’s not illegal and we can’t do them for it.”

“Drunk and Disorderly?”

“Not a trace of alcohol in their systems.”

“Affray?”

“Not unless you count lying on the pavement looking at the stars, pointing and giggling as affray, no.”
“Disturbance of the peace?”

“They weren’t even giggling that loudly.”

“Why were they arrested in the first place?”

“Cos the guys who found them thought they were a danger to themselves.”

“I’ll say they were. I think they’ve told just about every bloke in the station that they love them, and that’s just asking for a kick in the teeth round here.”

The hobbits woke up in a pile under the kitchen table, and all wished they hadn’t. It was odd how they’d all managed to recall the fun aspects of special lembas, but not the killer hangover that went with it. It was no wonder they’d spent several months in Rivendell, it had taken Frodo that long to get over the amount of special lembas that the Twins had fed to him to celebrate his recovery from the stab wound. The twins had been quite apologetic - they hadn’t realised that it was only elves who were immune to the hangover.

The hobbits crawled out from under the table. Coffee was out of the question, far too strong. Perhaps some weak herbal tea.

Then they caught the smell from the sitting room. Gandalf, proving again that he cannot be killed by normal weapons, was eating toasted special lembas covered with nutella. As one they made a dash to the bathroom to be violently sick.

Aragorn woke up. He had a mild headache, a dry mouth, and a sense of confusion. Whose ear was that? He sat up, and realised that he was in the middle of a tangled heap of sleeping elves. Then he realised he was in a prison cell.

Legolas woke up. He hadn’t chewed on his braids in his sleep since he was about forty-three. He peeled open his eyes and took the braid out of his mouth. A black braid. Had the Twins persuaded him into dyeing his hair black? No, no, it was someone else’s braid.

What the hell was he doing chewing on someone else’s braid? And what the hell was he doing in a prison cell?

Elladan and Elrohir woke up. They were in a police cell. A new police cell. Well, this was a novel experience.

Legolas and Aragorn had caught up with the situation.

“Why are we in custody?”

“What were we doing?”

“No idea—”

“Last I remember—”

“You were singing—”

“A rude song in Sindarin—”
“The one about the elf-maid and Narsil and-”

“Yes, yes, we all know the song.” Legolas looked at Aragorn. “Makes a change from ‘I will survive’ at least.”

The cell door was opened. “Morning lovebirds. We haven’t found anything in your urine tests, apart from you having bloody weird urine, so we’re letting you go. With a caution.”

They were led through to collect their belongings.

“Two plastic bags, full of prawn flavoured snack foods.”

“When did we get those?”

“One handbag-”

“Hey, that’s an ethnic shoulder bag. Made by Tibetan refugees.”

“One handbag, contents: one wallet containing eight pence, three pfennigs and a marble, one twenty-four pack of condoms-”

Aragorn and Legolas looked at the Twins.

“You never know when you might get lucky.”

“Expiry date on condoms, September 2000.”

“Obviously not very often then.”

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The next day, after the hobbits had recovered enough from the lembas hangover to spectate, Elladan and Elrohir began their Rangering 101 course.

“First - be at one with your surroundings.”

Elladan put on Beethoven’s ‘Pastoral’ symphony, and the Twins began to prance round the garden.

“Feel the earth! The air! The life!”

“If you think that I’m doing that in front of witnesses, then you’ve got another thing coming.”

“It didn’t bother you before.” said Elrohir mid-prance.

“There weren’t any witnesses before.”

“That’s what you think.” said Legolas from the back door.

“That’s not fair! Why did you never tell me?”

“Because observing twenty Mirkwood elves sat up in trees sniggering and placing bets on how long it will take you to fall over is lesson two of Rangering.”

“Ah, but that’s easy now, the Mirkwood elf is - oh.”

Legolas was no longer standing in the doorway. Elladan and Elrohir exchanged looks. “We know where he is. Want to get on to lesson two before he gives you a wedgie?”
The twins were now shirtless, and less prancing as showing off several thousand years of working out. As per usual, an audience was gathering.

“Look, Legolas’ stalkers in the house over there are even looking at me now, can we get this over with?”

The twins turned in the direction of his gesture and caught sight of the girls at the window. They waved, and began flexing interesting muscles, to appreciative ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’.

“Take your shirt off. You’re not going to become at one with nature under that amount of cotton.”

Aragorn grudgingly peeled off his shirt, revealing scars, muscles and-

“You’ve got a beer gut.”

“Have not.”

“Have too.”

“It’s - it’s muscle.”

“Looks more like you’re pregnant.”

“It’s all Frodo’s fault.”

“I knew he was a hobbit of many talents, but I didn’t know he could do that.”

“I meant the beer gut.”

“So you admit you have a beer gut?”

“Damndamndamn. No.”

“Well, we’ll get round to that in lesson 27: Keeping a Rangerly Physique.”

“Now, come on, follow us.”

Aragorn found himself following the twins round the garden. At first he was most unwilling, but as time went on he found he was actually enjoying himself. He was becoming at one with nature. And Legolas was sitting giggling in the second tree from the left, three branches down. He gave the tree a swift kick as he went past and was rewarded with the ‘thunk’ and ‘bugger!’ of a falling elf.

Through the week the lessons continued. The twins insisted on being taken to work with Aragorn, to monitor his progress and give lessons in the forest as being more conducive to overall Ranger-ness. When questioned as to why they were there they told everyone it was ‘take your daughter to work week’ and ran away while they were still confused.

Much to Legolas’ surprise this did actually seem to be having a positive effect on Aragorn. He was less grumpy, less depressed and less paranoid. Unfortunately he was also less washed. But, the only person who noticed this was Legolas since the Twins spent a lot of their time round people who lived in camper vans with no shower facilities.

Friday night came around. Aragorn, pleased with his re-found skills, was Lurking in the back garden. He’d tried some Shadowing and some Sneaking, but had gone back to good old fashioned
Lurking.

Unfortunately, he’d chosen the same place to do his Lurking as Sam had chosen to do his after-dinner Gardening. Sam was in a happy mood, humming under his breath, and turning the soil over with his favourite pitchfork. Said pitchfork was over two thousand years old, with a few blade and handle replacements along the way. Aragorn was meditating on things past.

There was a horrible wet ‘schlup-crk’ noise.

“Sam?”

“Oh, I didn’t see you there, Aragorn.”

“Yes, that would be why you just stuck your pitchfork through my foot.”

“Oh. Oh, sorry, sorry. All the way through?”

“Yes.” There was the sound of Aragorn swallowing hard and taking deep, calming breaths. “Could you please get Legolas? Swiftly?”

Sam ran into the house, and came back with Legolas and the Twins.

“Are you alright?”

“Apart from the pitchfork, never better.”

Legolas knelt down to examine fork and foot.

“We’ll get something from the house for you to bite down on, and we’ll have that out in a jiffy. If it stings a bit you can take an aspirin.”

“I think he needs to go to hospital.” said Legolas.

“Yes, yes, I agree. I’d like to go to the hospital, they know me.”

“Wuss. I’ve had worse.”

Legolas looked at him. “No you haven’t.”

“I’ve been wounded.”

“You’ve been grazed and that’s about it.”

“Um, could we debate this another time?”

“Ah, yes, can you two drive?”

The Twins nodded enthusiastically.

“Let me rephrase that. Do you two have a driving licence?”

“What for?”

“Ah. Sam, could you phone a taxi and tell them that it’s urgent, please?”

The taxi duly arrived. The three elves and Aragorn piled into the back.
“Casualty please.”

“What’s he been doing?”

“Gardening accident.”

“Are you sure he doesn’t need an ambulance?”

“Nah, they take ages on a Friday night and we’ve given him some aspirin.”

“Legolas?”

“Yes?”

“Are we out of earshot of home?”

“I think so.”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOGOD IT HURTS!”

“Stop being such a baby.”

The Twins carried Aragorn from the taxi into Casualty held above their heads like some bizarre pagan offering. They managed to put his injured foot, complete with pitchfork onto the reception desk and pointed. The receptionist stared in horror.

Legolas, arriving a few seconds behind them coughed politely. “Um, I’m afraid my friend has a pitchfork stuck in his foot.”

The receptionist blinked. “Um...er...okay. Just hold on a minute and I’ll get a triage nurse. And a trolley.”

The casualty department was already starting to fill up with the usual weekend crowd of drunks, lonely hypochondriacs and small children who’d tried to copy things they’d seen on tv, such as using red felt tip pens to fake a meningitis rash in an effort to stay up late.

Legolas surveyed the scene in despair. It looked like it was going to be a long night.

Eventually Aragorn was dropped unceremoniously on to a trolley which was pushed into a corridor and told that a doctor would be with him as soon as possible.

Time passed. Then more time passed. ‘As soon as possible’ is a very relative concept on a Friday night in Casualty. The Twins became bored, even though most passing nurses attempted sexual harassment on the run. Seeing someone simultaneously chatting someone up whilst performing effective CPR is really quite impressive.

“Bored.”

“Bored.”

“Let’s just yank the thing out and go home.”

“No! I like being able to walk.”
“Let’s saw the handle off then. Make you more comfortable.”

“Won’t sawing the handle off be uncomfortable? And anyway, you don’t have a saw.”

“Yes, we do.” An amputation saw was produced with a flourish. Aragorn attempted to edge the trolley behind Legolas.

“Where did you get that from?”

“We found it. When you thought we’d gone to the bathroom we went exploring.”

“No. You are not waving sharp objects round him.”

“Spoilsport.”

There was a pause. Then Elladan seemed to have an idea. “Elrohir? Could you stand over by that wall?” He gestured to the other end of the corridor.

Elrohir did as he was told.

“Now, go into the starfish position, arms and legs out - you could hold onto the signs if you want. Good. Now stand very, very still.”

Elrohir grinned. “Shall I do the speech?”

“Yeah, go on.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, we present the Amazing Elfling Knife Throwing Twins.”

There was a round of applause from the other patients on trolleys.

“We ask you not to move from where you are, lest you are grievously injured. See the sharpness of the knives!”

Elladan produced about ten scalpels and demonstrated their pointiness. Then he took a surgical mask and tied it over his eyes.

“Please don’t do this.” Legolas despaired once more. “I’m going to have to come back to this Casualty department, you know.”

“If we could have silence please, so his concentration is not broken.”

Elladan got into position. The first knife hit between Elrohir’s legs. The second hit beside his left ear. The third wedged itself into the drip stand of a patient being wheeled past on a trolley at that point. The crowd made appreciative noises. The other scalpels managed to do Elrohir no harm, and he left the wall looking like it had been attacked by a group of surgical Red Indians.

“And for my next trick I’ll be swallowing this entire tray of medical instr-”

“No, for you’re next trick you’ll be sitting down quietly until Aragorn gets seen by the doctor.”

Elladan and Elrohir went into conference. The Casualty department had possibilities, and Legolas hadn’t said anything about what they could do after he’d been seen by the doctor.
Aragorn pulled on Legolas’ sleeve. “Um, Legolas, I, um, need to use the toilet.”

“We’ll get you a bedpan—”

“No, not out here in the corridor.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time you’d relieved yourself in a corridor.”

“Yes, but not sober. And not with people watching.”

“Not with people watching? Come off it, Aragorn, I remember you, you’re positively exhibitionist—”

“That was a long time ago. Please?” There was a note of desperation.

The Twins looked at each other and hoisted Aragorn onto their shoulders again.

Legolas looked at them. “How are you going to manage once you get to the Gents?”

“We’ll think of something.”

“Yeah, we’ll duck.”

“What?” But Aragorn’s objection was silenced by his being carried off.

Some time later, after Aragorn’s eventful trip to the bathroom, a doctor finally arrived. Well, it had to be a doctor, he had the name badge and they don’t give white coats to many twelve year olds.

“What seems to be the prob- oh. I see. A pitchfork.”

“Yes.”

“Um.” The very obviously junior doctor looked at it worriedly. “Ah. Have you had any painkillers?”

“Um, two aspirin a while ago...”

“Oh, um, I’ll get a nurse to give you some more, and we’ll send you up to X-ray. Any other symptoms, apart from the pitchfork?”

“No.”

“Good, good. Um, I think the Consultant’d better have a look at that.” With that, he left.

As he left he was passed by a man carrying lots of bags, from which enticing smells came.

“Got an order here for corridor three, trolley with man with pitchfork in foot... oh, there you are. You know, I thought they were taking the piss. Order for Peredhel—”

“Peredhel, yep, that’s us.”

“That’ll be £87.90.”

The Twins duly produced a large amount of money, and handed it over. The delivery man left.

“How much food did you buy?”
“He needs to keep his strength up after an injury like that.”

“I don’t think he should be eating...”

“Since when were you a doctor?”

“Actually, I have two PhDs.”

“But not medical. So we can feed him. And us. And some of this is for two of the doctors, heard us on the phone and asked if we could get some stuff in for them. I’ll just find them.” Elrohir set off on his mission of mercy.

Legolas looked at Elladan suspiciously. “Where exactly did you get that money from? You’re broke.”

“Borrowed it.”

“Who from?”

“Aragorn.”

“No you did not.”

“Well, not as such, but you do have a very easy pin number. We’ll pay you back. Promise.”

Legolas and Aragorn shared a resigned look as Elladan started investigating the contents of the containers. Aragorn made a grab for a set of chopsticks, but was batted away. “You’re ill. You can’t be trusted to feed yourself.”

“I have a pitchfork in my foot, everything else is fine. Really. And the pain’s dulled enough now that I’m actually quite hungry.”

Legolas, having admitted defeat, had found himself some fried rice. He took an experimental mouthful, then very delicately spat it out again. “Where exactly did you order this from?”

“Um, I know they’re a bit disreputable, but nowhere else would deliver to a man on a trolley in a Casualty department.”

“I see.”

Elrohir arrived back as Elladan got up onto the trolley and began feeding Aragorn Chinese takeaway. Legolas had collapsed into a chair with an expression of despondency, and Elrohir, seeing nowhere else to sit down, sat on top of him. Legolas couldn’t be bothered to object.

“Take a look at the FUCKING POOFS.”

The group of exceedingly drunk men were slightly off-put by the complete lack of reaction from the elves and pitchfork-enhanced Dunedan. So they tried again.

“Can’t keep yer fucking hands off each other even in fucking casualty!”

There was a pause. Elladan stopped feeding Aragorn. “Are you talking to me?”

“Yeah! Poof!”

Elladan got off the trolley and stood up. All the way up. The drunk men suddenly felt on the small
side, but still had enough alcohol in their bloodstream to be in fighting mood.

“Don’t think you can fucking scare us! Come on, y’bastard!”

Elrohir stood up. “I don’t think I like my brother being called a bastard.” The Twins subtly changed stance from ‘bored’ to ‘fighting’.

There was an increasing lack of confidence among the drunk men. “Jus’... jus’ cos there’s two of you, dun’t mean you can scare us!” This was said while shuffling backwards.

Legolas was fed up of this. “Oh, just bugger off.”

There was a level of drunk calculation. Six small pissed people versus three big, sober people with an indefinable air of danger about them. And then they caught sight of the scalpels embedded in the hospital wall. Retreat seemed the best option.

Elrohir looked slightly crestfallen. “I thought that was going to be more interesting. Men have got so wussy recently.” He sat on the end of the trolley resignedly. “Aragorn, open wide.” He did as he was told, and Elrohir started to flick morsels of Chinese food into his mouth.

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Aragorn had been to X-ray, and now the Consultant had arrived.

“Who played silly buggers with the X-rays?”

The entire corridor turned as one to look at the Twins.

“Why does everyone always assume it’s us?”

“Because when it’s not Merry and Pippin it is.”

“Using an X-ray machine as the equivalent of an instant photo booth is both dangerous and a waste of NHS resources. Even though the one with the obscene gestures is quite amusing.”

“But what about my foot?”

“Surgical case. You managed not to break any of the bones too badly. They’re broken, but you’ve managed avoid shattering any, or horribly displacing them, so they probably won’t have to amputate and you should be out in a few days, of course, that is if you avoid complications like gangrene and septicaemia!”

The entire corridor cowered, and Aragorn was reduced to making incoherent squeaking noises.

“We’ll send you up now.”

Aragorn grabbed on to Legolas and the wall with a vice like grip. “Not going.”

“Aragorn, be sensible about this, you need that taken out of your leg...”

Legolas’ persuasion was interrupted by the Twins settling the matter by wrestling Aragorn into restraints. Aragorn struggled and swore, but was held fast.

“You’ll be fine, it’ll all be over in a few hours.”

“Yeah, and we’ll bring everyone to visit.”
“Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

The next day Aragorn was on the ward with his foot bound up in plaster when a deputation arrived at the ward.

“I’m sorry, you can’t all see him, there’s too many of you.”

“But we’re the only family he has left since the accident.”

“But I thought he came in with a pitchfork in his foot...”

“Oh, um, the um, other accident. Yes. A few years ago.”

“He has got quite a large number of relatives left then.”

Frodo did some quick thinking. He grabbed Pippin’s hand and then tugged on Legolas’ sleeve, looking up with an angelic expression. “When is daddy coming home?” He and Pippin, who’d cottoned on to this, then looked at the nurse with the same expression. “Why can’t we see daddy?”

Pippin followed this up with, “Is he going to die?”

No human could withstand such an assault of calculated cuteness. She not only let them in, but gave Frodo and Pippin lollipops. The hobbits perched on the end of the bed and began writing obscenities, bad jokes and elven healing mantras on Aragorn’s cast.

Gimli seemed genuinely pleased to see that Aragorn was not dead. “How are you?”

“I’m bored, in pain, and haven’t had any sleep.”

“Och, sorry. We brought grapes.”

It was obvious that the hobbits had been in charge of shopping as several pounds of grapes were dumped onto the bed, along with copies of ‘Forestry Monthly’, “You and Your Landrover” and “Dr. Who Magazine” and large amounts of chocolate and lucozade.

“Um, thanks, but they did say I’d only be in for a couple of days.”

The hobbits took this as a signal to attempt to eat all of Aragorn’s food.

“What were you saying to the nurse?”

There were attempts not to meet Aragorn’s eye. “Um, they, um, said that we couldn’t all come in. So, um, Frodo and Pippin said they were your children.”

Aragorn looked at Pippin, who was attempting to simultaneously eat half a bunch of grapes and a handful of Milk Tray. “You said Pippin was my son. So the whole ward thinks I... spawned that?”

Pippin, hearing his name, looked up and gave a chocolate-grape grin.

“There is a passing resemblance.”

“Take that back. Now.”
The next day interest in Aragorn had diminished, so only the Twins came to visit.

“I want to leave. I can’t stand being here any longer. They want me to stay for another two days!”

The Twins exchanged looks. “Don’t worry. We’ll get you out of here. Be ready at seven.”

Seven came around. Aragorn had subtly packed all his things and sat on them so the nurses wouldn’t notice. Elladan appeared, disguised, in a wheelchair and pushing another.

“Get in and follow me.”

They tried to quietly leave the ward. “Is that your wheel squeaking?”

“I don’t know. But aren’t they going to notice me leaving?”

“Just you wait one moment.”

The tannoy sprang into life, and a familiar voice began reading out notices. “Dr. Williams to Cardiology, Nurse Anderson to Geriatrics, Crash Team to Ward Four...” the list went on for quite some time.

“We’ve rigged it so the whole place will be jammed up apart from one route. Like the ‘Italian Job’.”

“We’re not going down the sewers are we?”

“Don’t be daft. You can’t get a wheelchair down the sewers.”

The two of them snaked round the hospital, following a bizarre route, including through the Maternity ward, where they met Elrohir. The three of them made it out through a delivery entrance into the hospital car park, where Aragorn’s landrover was circling slowly.

“Who’s driving?”

“Merry and Pippin. Look, the ramp’s down, just line up your wheels and roll yourself in.”

“Are you insane?”

“It worked in the film, just go for it. Unless you want to go back in there?”

Aragorn wheeled himself into position. The Twins gave him a helpful kick and he rolled up and into the back of the landrover. Elladan lined himself up.

A head appeared from the driver’s window. “You can bloody well walk, I can see some angry people coming, just get in.”

The Twins grumbled, but abandoned their wheelchairs and leapt in. Merry and Pippin put pedal to metal and the landrover roared off.

The nurse who had been running after them stopped. “I only wanted to tell him he’d left his pain medication behind.”
Frodo wandered into the sitting room. And stopped. The sitting room had gone. Well, the room was still there, but the carpet, the furniture, the people and Gandalf had gone. There was one thing left though - a plug with an extension lead coming from it. Frodo followed the extension lead.

It led him through the house, out of the front door, down the front garden and out onto the street. There he found the sitting room, reassembled and complete with all its occupants. It had been enhanced though with various placards and posters, declaring such things as “Stop the War!”, “Don’t Attack Iraq!” and incongruously “US out of Vietnam!”

“What are you doing?”

“A sit down protest.”

“Do you want to join in, ‘Neighbours’ is on in a minute.”

Frodo found himself half sitting down before he realised what he was doing. “No! I am not sitting down until all this is back in the sitting room.”

“You can’t make us. We’re exercising our democratic right to protest.”

Frodo paused and looked at the assembled company. “You load of hypocrites!”

“Pardon?”

“You’re a load of homicidal maniacs given a good war! You’ve killed more people than Pippin’s had hot dinners! That’s more than the human mind can comprehend.”

“That’s going a bit far. I’ve killed more orcs than the human mind can comprehend. But orcs don’t count. And I’m sure the human mind can comprehend the number of actual people I’ve killed. Swordfighting’s more maiming.”

“But you always said you loved a good war, it got you out of the house.”

“That was before gunpowder. Horrible stuff. It’s just dishonourable.”

“Yeah, like, if someone shoots you through the chest with a longbow-”

“There’s, like, years of practice-”

“Skill, like and tradition-”

“And the craftsmanship and artistry of the bow-”

“So, like, you die in the knowledge that it was, like, a proper warrior who killed you.”
“So you’d support the war if they went over and fought it in handbuilt, aesthetically pleasing tanks.”

“Yeah, if the MOD had listened to us we’d be be over there fighting it.”

“But we’d like, prefer it if they were solar powered.”

“So none of you care about the humanitarian issues?”

“Nope, here because the telly’s here.” Merry, Pippin and Gandalf were obviously semi-reluctant parties to this protest.

“Or even the moral issues?”

“I care about the moral issues.” said Aragorn.

“You do?” Frodo was suspicious.

“Well, yes, it’s all been done before, pointless wars in the Middle East, I was there you know.”

“Aragorn, you weren’t in the Gulf in 1991. You spent most of that war on an advanced tree surgery course.”

“Not 1991. 1099. And again in 1191. The Crusades were great, going off with the lads.”

Frodo could feel a military anecdote coming on and forestalled it. “But you weren’t in Iraq.”

“Iraq wasn’t there then. And anyway, that’s where Merry and Pippin were conquering with whatshisname, short bloke.”

“Wee Alex of Macedon.”

“Yep, him. Anyway, I wouldn’t conquer anywhere they have. They’ve been there.”

Frodo sighed. This wasn’t getting him anywhere, and he might as well watch ‘Neighbours’.

Some time later the Police arrived.

“Would you mind moving this, it’s causing an obstruction.”

“Oh, like, we’re protesting-”

“Like, peacefully-”

“Are you trying to oppress us?”

“No, I’m not trying to oppress you, I’m trying to move you along, peacefully, so your neighbours can use the road.”

“Fascist!”

“Pig!”

“Shush! I’m trying to watch the telly!”

“Is that ‘Diagnosis Murder’? I don’t think I’ve seen this one.” The policemen both perched on the arm of one of the sofas.
“Would either of you two like a cup of tea?”

“Oh, if you’re offering. Two sugars, please.”

“Frodo! You can’t feed the forces of oppression tea!”

“Why not? They look like they could do with a break.”

“Yeah, we’ve had a bloody awful morning.”

Frodo swung into diplomacy mode. “Why don’t we all have a nice cup of tea and watch ‘Diagnosis Murder’. You two can have a nice break and tell your superiors we’re being terribly difficult, and we’ll try and sort something out at the end of the programme. Ok?”

There were nods from all but the Twins, who looked at Frodo, narrow-eyed.

“Quisling.”

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After ‘Diagnosis Murder’ it started to rain, so the policemen decided to go back the the police station to have a cup of tea somewhere warm and dry, and the contents of the living room were returned to the living room.

Gandalf, Aragorn, Merry, Pippin and the Twins were just settling down to watch children’s tv, when Frodo unplugged the television and stood in front of it with a expression most of the Fellowship only expected to see on Legolas.

“Well I hope you’re pleased with yourselves.” Pippin nodded and tried to crane his neck to look around Frodo at the tv as if to give him a hint. “I have never been so embarrassed in all my life. Showing me up in front of the neighbours like that. And not only have you shown me up, but you’ve shown yourselves up as well. Just as we were starting to be accepted in this street, you have to go and do something to make us look... abnormal again.”

“Like, we’re sorry.”

“Don’t you understand? It’s not just today! Merry, Pippin, you just sit in the house all day getting under my feet. You eat more than anyone else and what do you contribute to this household? Nothing! Find yourselves new jobs!”

“Like, calm down little dude. You shouldn’t get hung up on, like, society’s petty rules.”

Frodo turned to the Twins and Aragorn. “And you lot aren’t much better. You should get out there and do things.”

“But I can’t walk!”

“That’s no excuse. You’ve spent too long malingering already. You need to get outside for some Fresh Air.”

“But they said they can’t take the plaster off for another week and a half.”

“You are going out. No arguments. Tomorrow, you will all be out of the house by half past nine and if any of you are back before half past five there will be Trouble.”

“What about Gandalf?”
Gandalf was momentarily shocked out of his smugness and tried to make himself as inconspicuous as possible.

“He can stay. I’ve got used to him. You put the loop tape of Channel 5 on and if it wasn’t for the heavy breathing you wouldn’t know he was there. He even levitates his deckchair so I can hoover underneath.”

“But—”

“I don’t want to hear it. I will even make packed lunches for you. Just go.”

“Can we have cheese and curry sandwiches?”

Rosy fingered dawn stuck two rosy fingers up at the Fellowship. The Twins and Aragorn had got up, breakfasted and were now standing by the door awaiting military inspection. Frodo strode up and down the line.

“Where are Merry and Pippin?”

“Don’t know sir.”

“Are you trying to be sarcastic?”


“Stop the sir. And the Elrond. And go and find them. They are to be out of the house in precisely twelve minutes.”

“Yes, S-Elro-Frodo.”

Elrohir ran upstairs and hammered on the door. “Merrypippingetup! Or Frodo will kill you!”

“Not getting up. Staying here. He won’t notice.”

“He’s already noticed! Get up! Like, now!”

Merry and Pippin looked at each other. Elrohir didn’t actually sound stoned. This was very worrying indeed. They got up.

A few minutes later the military line up by the door was quorate.

“Hmmmmm. Tuck that shirt in. Stand up straight. You will have to do.” Frodo handed out bundles of packed lunches. “Everyone has their keys? And their wallets? Their own wallets, and not someone else’s? And a clean handkerchief?”

The line up nodded.

“Right. GET OUT! OUT! NOW!”

They ran for the door. As soon as the last one was out the door was slammed behind them and there was the sound of bolts being shot and the chain being put on.

“Frodo! I need the toilet!”
There was the sound of the radio being turned up from inside the house.

“What are we going to do with ourselves?”

“We, like got tourist stuff. We’re going to York.”

“Why?”

“Cos, like we found the ‘Come to York’ leaflet on the train when we came up-”

“And it says ‘Come to York’-”

“So we should go to York-”

“Otherwise they might, like be offended, cos we were invited-”

“And it’s rude to turn down an invitation.”

“Can we come too?”

“No. You are going to find a job. J-O-B. Job.”

“Yeah, like work.”

“Not, like, a bank job.”

“Like, you go somewhere and you do stuff and they give you money.”

“Are you telling them to be prostitutes?”

“No, no, that’s not a good job -”

“But it is well paid-”

“But probably not that well paid if you’re four feet tall.”

The Twins and Aragorn were on the train, with leaflets spread out on the table in front of them.

“Like, the ‘Come to York’ thing was a Sign-”

“So we got leaflets, so we knew what to do when we got there.”

“What are we going to do? I can’t walk properly, you’ve been having to push me round the place in the wheelchair.”

“We’ll manage. We can carry you.”

“And, like there was a Sign to go to York-”

“Yeah, like that destination board with ‘1045 York’ on it-”

“At the station?”

“Yeah.”
“Oh god.” Aragorn realised now why he hadn’t kept in closer contact with the Twins. While they were mildly amusing for a while, after a time trying to think down to their level was difficult. A small part of him wondered if this was how Legolas felt all the time...

Elrohir waved a leaflet. “Look! They’ve got ministers!”

“They’ve got a Minster. A big church.”

“Why is the church a minister?”

“What else have they got there?”

“They’ve got a pub in a bath.”

“Cool!”

“Could you pass me that leaflet?” Aragorn took the leaflet and read it.

“It is a pub, which has a Roman bath house in its basement.”

“Dude! Even better! We can take a pint into the steam room-”

“Warming vodka in the cold bath.”

“No, no, a Roman bath. From Roman times. In ruins.”

“That’s no fun.”

“But if you take a pint in the steam room it’ll evaporate-”

“There isn’t any steam in the steam room, it’s a ruin.”

“What’s the point of that?”

“Look! Jorvik!”

“Yeah! That looks so cool!”

“The Viking place?”

“Yeah! Vikings! Vikings are so cool-”

“It’s like, a Viking experience.”

“You met Vikings. You knew Vikings. You experienced a lot of Vikings, generally skewered on the end of your sword.”

“But, like that wasn’t an Experience.”

“But they were real Vikings! You can’t get a more Viking experience than experiencing real Vikings.”

“But, but it recreates the sights and sounds and smells-”

“You know what Vikings look sound and smell like. You killed a few, you know what a Viking looks like on the inside, do you reckon they’re going to show you that?”
“We’re all people on the inside—”

“Kind of sticky, sometimes dribbly. It depends.”

Aragorn gave up. “How about we see what looks interesting when we get there?”

“Yeah, there’ll probably be a Sign at the station.”

“I suspect there will be, and that it will have ‘Places of interest’ written at the top of it.”

There was silence as they watched the world go by.

“Hey, Estel Estel Estel Estel Estel—”

“What?”

“I’ve got a joke.”

“If it’s the one about the pink gorilla, you told me it yesterday.”


“Go on.”

“A Noldor and a Sindar walk into a bar and the Noldor goes ‘Nice hat!’” Elladan looked expectant.

“Yes?”

Elrohir looked at his brother. “Dude, that one only works in Quenya. I know a joke. Why did the Sindar cross the sundering sea? Oh, wait, he didn’t.”

Aragorn didn’t laugh. “Never. Ever. Tell that within twenty miles of Legolas. Or you will die.”

“Legolas is a Sindar? He hides it well.”

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At around ten to eleven the phone rang.

“Frodo? What’s a CV.”

“You don’t know what a CV is?”

“Neither of us drive, and even if we did we wouldn’t drive a French car.”

“It’s not a car Pippin. It’s a piece of paper where you lie about your previous employment.”

“That’s great, I’m good at lying!”

“They have to be plausible lies.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll try and write one anyway.” The next part of the conversation was slightly muffled as Pippin had put his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. “Merry, have you still got your bus ticket? What do you mean why? To write my CV on. Frodo says I’ve got to write all my old jobs down and if I write small they should all fit.”

“Pippin, wait. We’ll write your CV when you get home this evening, we can print it off from the
library computers.”

“Frodo, what kind of jobs are we supposed to be getting anyway?”

“Something that gets you out of the house and occasionally pays you.”

“Right, cos you see, I don’t really see myself as a marine engineer or anything like that.”

“That’s good, because neither will the people doing the interviews. How about something more like... retail, for example?”

“Are you trying to get us back to shelf stacking?”

“It’s the only thing you’re qualified for.”

“Hey, I have qualifications! I can do stuff!”

“Such as?”

“Ummm... I’m quite good with a short sword. And throwing stones. I can cook if I have to... ummm...”

“So, you can shelf stack, work in MacDonald’s or become a very unsuccessful mercenary.”

“The mercenary idea sounds good.”

“You’ll have to go abroad.”

“Oh. To places that speak Foreign?”

“Yes.”

“I can speak some Foreign.”

“You can speak Saxon. And Latin. That’s not going to get you far.”

“There’s a place called Saxony, do they need mercenaries?”

“I don’t think so.”

“------------------------

“They are like, so hung up-”

“Tied to social conventions-”

“Like, totally unreasonable.”

“Some of the people did look really very scared though.”

“Yeah, but like we brought emotion to it-”

“Like, a proper Viking experience-”

“I was shit scared of the Vikings, so like other people should get that experience.”

“I thought we were just going to go round Jorvik normally, but no, you get out of the cars, sit very
still pretending to be an exhibit and then jump out at people screaming Old Norse curses.”

“Yeah, like a proper Viking experience-”

“Most of the Vikings I experienced were swearing at me.”

“Was it really worth a life time ban from Jorvik?”

The Twins looked thoughtful. “Yeah-”

“Just wish I’d had a camera-”

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“Frodo! Frodo! Please let us in!”

There was silence from the house.

“I’ll pee in the garden.”

A window opened above them. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“If you don’t let us in soon I’ll have no choice.”

“Cross your legs. Think about deserts. You’re not coming back in here for another three hours.” The window slammed shut.

“What if my kidneys explode?”

“Come off it, I doubt that can happen. Tinkletoes.”

Pippin launched himself at Merry, hurling abuse and fists. After a few moments they realised that no-one was going to break up the fight, or do anything interesting, and let go of each other. They sat dejectedly on the path.

“Merry?”

“What?”

“I’m hungry.”

“You’re like a bloody broken record you are.”

“But I am hungry!”

“You’re always hungry! Apart from when you’ve eaten yourself sick. Then five minutes later you’re hungry again.”

“You’re no better.”

“Yeah, but I don’t whinge.”

“I do not whinge.”

“You do. Whinge whinge whinge. ‘I’m hungry, I haven’t had sex in three weeks, I need a pint.’ Whinger.”
“Just because you’re a bloody silent monk!”

“What?”

“I’m always the one who has to do the talking, who has to lie and say we haven’t any idea where Aragorn’s underwear is.”

“That’s just cos you’re a gobshite.”

“You’re dull. Dull dull dull. Stuck in a rut, never do anything interesting.”

“When did you last do something interesting I didn’t?”

“Got a moped licence.”

“Ooooh, oooohh, I’m so dull because I can’t ride a jumped up bicycle.”

“And you’re crap at sarcasm.”

“If time travel is invented I’ll go back and chuck you off Caradhras.”

“And then you’ll die, cos I won’t be there to save you from the orcs.”

“Better than eternity here. Like bloody purgatory.”

“Didn’t know you were a Catholic.”

“I’m not, I just approve of any religion that involves you in eternal suffering and damnation.”

“Why did we end up friends in the first place? Cos you’re a lot older than me.”

“Cos no-one else could stand either of us, Pip. And they still can’t.”

“Oh. Right. Let’s never fight again!”

“No, that means we’ll never talk again.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

“Tea! Tea! TEA! Teateateateateatea!”

“Oh my god! TEA! Tea! Tea!”

“What?”

“Legolas and Frodo saw the leaflets and said that while we were here we had to get special tea.”

“They wrote where to go on our arms.”

“But look! It’s like, run!”

“That might have been when you both fell in the river.”

“Oh. Yeah. It would. But tea!”

“Legolas is gonna kill us. Like, really kill us.”
“Can you remember the name of the shop?”

“I think it began with a ‘B’. Or a ‘G’. Or an ‘E’. That kind of letter.”

“Can you remember where it was?”

“Yeah!”

“Where?”

“York!”

“More specifically?”

“Dunno-”

“I think it was somewhere big. Or medium-”

“Probably not small. But I’m not sure-”

“Let’s run. If we run, we go to more places.”

The Twins each grabbed a handle of Aragorn’s wheelchair and began running round the streets of York, making car noises and occasionally stopping, yelling ‘tea!’”, pointing wildly before heading off again.

“Stop! Stop! Cobbles! In pain!”

“Oh, like sorry.”

“Perhaps we could ask someone.”

“For some tea?”

“No, where any tea shops are.”

“But that’s like, talking to normal people-”

“And they’re scary.”

“I’ll do the talking.”

Aragorn was wheeled in the direction of some people who didn’t look like tourists.

“Um, excuse me, we’re looking for a tea shop, but we’ve forgotten the name. I think it’s a, um famous one...?”

“Oh, yes love, back the way you just came, second left and it’s right in front of you at the end of the street.”

“Thank you.”

The Twins wheeled Aragorn away, still looking suspicious. The tea shop was duly found.

“Like, hi. We need tea. Lots of tea.”

“Yes, sir. What kind?”
“There are different kinds?”

“Yeah, like don’t you remember? They both told us names of tea. Special tea—”

“Not like special lembas?”

“No, just ordinary tea, but special—”

“Cake! They have cake—”

“And chocolate—”

“Aragorn can we have cake and chocolate for the way home?”

“Can we can we can we?”

“Um, since you have your own money, yes.”

“Well, some of it’s your money.”

“Cake money - wait! Tea! We need tea!”

“Yes, sir, you said you needed tea. What sort of tea?”

“It wasn’t Darjeeling… or Earl Grey—”

“The one Frodo wanted sounded silly—”

“Like, silly but… Hendrix—”

“Yeah, like Woodstock—”

“Trippy Assam! Trippy Assam!” Elladan started jumping up and down triumphally.

“Um, would that be Tippy Assam?”

“Actually - yeah. Like a bag of that.”

“What did Legolas want?”

“Can’t remember. Aragorn?”

“Yes?”

“Can you, like read out their list of tea in a really sarcastic voice? We’ll get it that way.”

“-------------------------------

“We’re very sorry. We tried our best. But nature was against us.”

“Don’t think of it as us pissing in the garden, but fertilising the plants.”

“Legolas does it all the time.”

“Not directly, and this is the important difference.”

The Fellowship were at dinner. The Twins and Aragorn had managed to get home by themselves, a
feat that they were all feeling very proud of. The tea had duly been presented.

“I asked you for Lapsang Souchong. You bring me Moroccan Mint. Forgive me if I fail to see the connection.”

“Like, we tried. Really hard-”

“But Aragorn’s not that good at being sarcastic-”

“And we fell in the river-”

“And they had cake-”

“So, like, everything was against us.”

“You managed Frodo’s tea.”

“It was like trippy tea-”

“Really easy to remember.”

“I see.”

Frodo tried to lighten the mood. “So, Aragorn, did you have a nice day?”

“I got out of the house. I got some fresh air. Um, yes?”

“We went round Jorvik, and the walls, and the Minster, and we went up the Tower, and then we came down the tower really fast, which was fun-”

“And then we fell in the river, but Estel didn’t which was good, cos his cast would have dissolved, and then we got lost and then we bought tea.”

“You managed all that with a wheelchair?”

“We carried him round some bits-”

“He’s not as heavy as he looks-”

“But then again, he does look very heavy-”

“Maybe he’s got hollow bones-”

“Nah, it’d’ve shown up on the x-rays-”

“How do you know they were his x-rays? Hospitals make mistakes all the time-”

“But a pitchfork through the foot’s quite unusual-”

“Oh, and we’re banned from ever going back to Jorvik ever again. It was great.”

Legolas and Aragorn made eye contact, and an unspoken agreement was reached.

“A Sign! A Sign!”
“What? Like where?”

“Like, I came down here and it was just sat there, on the table.”

“Really? That must be magic or something.”

“Yeah, cos it wasn’t there last night.”

“What does the sign say?”

“Um ‘Travel the Trans-Siberian railway’.”

“Cool! Where does it go?”

“Trans-Siberia, I think.”

“We’ve never been to Trans-Siberia.”

“It must be really cool if they built a railway there specially, cos it’s a long way away.”

“But is it a proper sign?”

“Yeah, cos I found like our passports, and visas, and, like, plane times to Moscow.”

“Wow. That’s, like such a Sign.”
The Breaking of the Chair

Chapter Notes

Story notes: The concept for this episode is based on '24' but it doesn't matter if you haven't seen it because neither have we.

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My name is Istar Gandalf the Grubby. And this is the worst day of my... well, okay, the worst day in the last few months.

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20:00

Gandalf shifted his weight in the chair. It creaked. A lot. The rest of the Fellowship looked over at him. He leered back at them.

"I think it may be time for some more duct tape."

Gandalf's chair had been in a state of imminent collapse for a number of weeks now. A new chair had been ordered, but was conspicuous in its absence. So the current heap of cloth, cushion, blanket, deckchair and uncontemplatable Stuff was being shored up with large amounts of duct tape. Pippin, on his turn to tape up the chair had got somewhat over enthusiastic and had taped the stuffed auk to the stuffed hedgehog to create a bizarre hybrid.

"It's not my go to tape again."

There were other murmurs about it not being their go from everyone. All attention focused on Legolas.

"I think you haven't done the taping for a while."

"No."

"That's unfair! You make us do it."

"I am the major breadwinner of the house. Thus I have slightly less domestic responsibility."

"I'm sure Aragorn earns more than you do."

"Fine. I am the secondary breadwinner of the household. This brings rights and privileges that I am exercising."

"You haven't done any taping for aaaaaaaaaages. Your go."

"I am an elf. Duct tape is plastic and unnatural and I will have nothing to do with it."

"We don't care if you tie it back together with string, it's your go."
"Isn't it Gimli's turn? I haven't seen him tape it back together for a while and he's really good at it."
"Och, it's time I was going to work, I think I can hear a car outside, that'll be my lift." Gimli hurried
out the front door into the suspiciously quiet street.
"Well, I suppose that means it's Legolas' go again."
There was a pause as Legolas ignored them.
"We'll sing."
A brief look of worry flashed over Legolas' face before he regained control. "Trying to intimidate me
will not work."
Merry and Pippin looked at each other and took a deep breath. "And
Iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii will always love
youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu
aaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii will always love youououoououoooooooooouuuuuuuuuuuu..."
Legolas tried to ignore them. He tried to put his fingers in his ears. But it was no good. He got up
and picked up the duct tape, at which point Merry and Pippin ceased singing. Outside there was the
distant sound of dogs howling, babies crying and car alarms going off.
There was an art to the duct taping of the chair. It involved isolating areas of structural weakness,
covering them in duct tape and, (and this was most important) making no physical contact
whatsoever with either Gandalf or the chair itself. Sam had accidentally brushed the back of his hand
against an outlying part of the chair and had developed a strange rash and fungal infection that had
taken weeks to clear up.
The distasteful task completed Legolas returned to the sofa.
"Why can't you tape it back together yourself?"
"Can't reach."
"You could stand up."
"I can't. It's bad for me. I'm legally dead you know. I really should be lying down."
"What about using magic?"
"It is an affront to the dignity of a wizard to use his powers in the service of DIY."
"And using your powers to pin people you don't like to the ceiling's fine?"
"That is using magic to wreak vengeance on mine enemies."
"And Social Workers."
"If they are not in league with the dark powers then I don't know who is."
"Will you all be quiet? I'm missing the gardening."
Since it is a foolish man who gets between Samwise and tv coverage of the Chelsea Flower Show,
peace descended for the time being.


There was no warning. No portent, no premonition. It just collapsed. There was a relatively restrained crash, since much of the body of the chair was made up of soft furnishings to muffle the sound. Gandalf tipped backwards as the chair collapsed, leaving his feet stuck up in the air. The Fellowship as one turned to look at him and then turned back to the tv.

Silence reigned for a few minutes. Gandalf neither moved nor made a noise.

Frodo looked over to him nervously. "Do you think he's ok?"

"Yes."

"He hasn't moved."

"He rarely does."

"What if he's dead?"

"He'll get over it."

"Should we get him up?"

"That would involve touching him."

Gandalf's feet waved ineffectually. "You will help me up."

"No."

"We have to do something, I can see his shins and that's disturbing."

Aragorn looked over. "We could lasso him. Drag him up. I'll get some rope."

Frodo and Legolas both opened their mouths to say something then caught each other's eye. There was a shared thought - 'he's going to do this anyway, whatever we say. Let's save our breath for sorting everything out when it all goes wrong. Because it will go wrong.' Aragorn strode out of the room towards the shed, and returned with the garden hose. He swore and strode out to the shed once more, this time returning with a length of rope.

Aragorn assumed John Wayne stance. The difference between this and how he normally stood was slight, but noticeable to the trained observer. He formed his lasso. He swung the rope twice round his head, accidentally looped it round the light fitting, fell over and dragged the light fitting off the ceiling. The room was plunged into darkness.

"Bollocks."

Legolas turned the standard lamp on. "Aragorn, please reassure me that you will get a trained electrician to replace that and not attempt to do it yourself."

Aragorn looked shifty, a difficult feat when you're wrapped in rope and live electrical wire. "Of course Legolas. Could someone turn the switch off?"

Aragorn was freed. Sam took the rope of him and gently dropped a loop round Gandalf. By dint of much heaving the rest of them managed to get him upright.
Frodo looked at Gandalf concernedly. "Are you alright?"

Gandalf concentrated on looking pitiful. "I've had a shock. I need... a large brandy."

"Oh, good, you're fine then."

Gandalf was installed on the sofa, and since they had the slowest reactions in this field Legolas and Aragorn were left sitting on the floor. It was either that or share an item of furniture with Gandalf. Relative normality was restored, but with mood lighting.

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22:00

"Come on. Pyjamas on."

"Frodo. It's only ten o clock. We're all grown up."

"Yes, but I don't think there was a single night last week when any of you got a full eight hours sleep. You've got to make up for it."

"Frodo, we're all old enough to decide that for ourselves."

"Just listen to yourself, grumpy and argumentative. That's because of lack of sleep."

"It's not faaaaaaaaaiiiiiiirrrrrrr."

"I'm not going to make you go to bed just now, cocoa and biscuits first."

The hobbits filed out of the room. Frodo turned to Aragorn and Legolas. "You too. I know you haven't been sleeping much."

"I'm an elf. He's part elf. We don't need that much sleep."

"You'll feel better for it."

"What about Gandalf?"

"He has naps all day."

"Look, we'll have the cocoa, just let us stay up and watch the tv..." Aragorn trailed off as he caught Frodo's expression.

"You can have until the next adverts." On cue the next set of adverts started. "There see, you've seen some more tv. Now, Pyjamas."

Aragorn and Legolas gave in. There were being treated like children, but at least this meant they were going to be fed biscuits.

A few minutes later they all appeared back in the kitchen. Legolas' pyjama choices were hidden beneath his treasured full length Edwardian dressing gown. The hobbits were all dressed in sensible pyjamas - Merry's had Star Wars designs on them, Pippin's had the Simpsons and obscene slogans, Sam's were striped and sensible and Frodo... looked like a short version of Noel Coward. Aragorn, to annoy Frodo, was dressed in an elderly and distressed pair of boxers, a dishelved t-shirt and hiking socks.
Frodo handed out mugs of cocoa and a plate of chocolate digestives. These were eaten in companionable silence.

"Now, teeth."

"It's twenty past ten. This is ridiculous."

"So, you think oral hygiene is ridiculous do you?"

"No, I think treating us like children is ridiculous. Even Pippin can clean his own teeth perfectly well."

"Just because I take an interest! Just because I care! You think it's fine to belittle me, to mock my attempts to look after you all!" Frodo seemed on the verge of tears.

"Um, sorry Frodo..."

"You won't even clean your teeth for me!"

"Yeah, um, sorry, we're all going to clean our teeth now, aren't we?" Sam gave a meaningful look to the rest of the Fellowship, who all nodded.

They trooped upstairs and crowded round the sink, elbowing each other and dropping toothpaste on each other.

"You're not going to tuck us in now, are you?"

"No! Half of you are bigger than me. It'd be undignified."

"Goodnight Legolas."

"Goodnight Aragorn."

"Goodnight John-Boy."

"I heard that, Pippin."

"Goodnight Merry-Ellen."

"Pippin, stop it."

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23:00

Frodo slunk out of the bedroom as soon as he was sure Sam was asleep. He made his way down the stairs, carefully avoiding the creaky floorboards. In the kitchen he opened a cupboard and moved aside some tins. He pressed part of the panelling and it slid open, revealing a stash of junk food. Frodo had realised long ago that if he wanted sweet things to stay uneaten they had to be somewhere where Merry and Pippin couldn't find them. He took out two bags of popcorn and headed for the sitting room.

He threw one of the bags of popcorn into Gandalf's lap and settled himself on the other sofa in front of the tv.

"And now on Channel 4, the Director's cut of "Braindead" with lots of extra gore."
Frodo grinned. Everything had gone according to plan. Watching films with the rest of the Fellowship was not fun. Merry and Pippin gave a running commentary, Legolas disapproved and Aragorn constantly asked who people were and what they were doing. Sam was fine, but couldn't be trusted not to accidentally tell another member of the Fellowship.

00:00

Frodo had fallen asleep in front of the tv. He'd had a hard day, and however entertaining the film was he'd got warm and comfy on the sofa and had nodded off. Gandalf had prodded him with his staff a couple of times, but he'd just mumbled and turned over.

Gandalf was satisfied that Frodo was deeply asleep and got up, leaving the tv going so that any member of the Fellowship making a late night bathroom dash would assume that he was watching it.

His first port of call was the kitchen. He opened the fridge. There were three types of milk in the fridge. Unpasteurised organic full fat milk for Aragorn, who didn't hold with having it 'mucked about with'. Organic goat's milk for Legolas. A huge four pint bottle of semi-skimmed was for the hobbits - Sam liked semi-skimmed, and Merry and Pippin added Nesqik to it as a matter of course, even when they put it on their cornflakes, so never noticed. The bottle of semi skimmed had barely been opened. Gandalf opened it and drank. And kept on drinking. He stopped just at the point where there was a dribble in the bottom that was almost, but not quite, enough to put in a cup of coffee.

Then he started hunting round the house moving things. Aragorn's hammer was moved from lying on a shelf in the garage to being balanced precariously on top of the central heating boiler. The bookmark in Legolas' copy of 'Orlando' by Virginia Woolf was moved from page 134 to page 95. He ventured into the shared laundry basket, retrieved selected items of Pippin's clothing and strew them about the landing. He turned on the light in the understairs cupboard. He chewed on the end of a ball point pen until it split and then put it back into Merry's pencil case. He gave all the non-stick pans in the kitchen a quick wash with a metal scourer. In the upstairs bathroom he poured a small amount of Legolas' fiendishly expensive shampoo down the sink. He then spent some time outside in the garden moving Sam's newly planted bulbs around.

Then, satisfied that he had created enough potential mayhem to make his life at least a little bit interesting, Gandalf returned to the sitting room.

01.00

Some non-specific soft porn was playing on the tv. Gandalf, however, was ignoring it. He was grovelling inside the depths of the remains of his chair. He found what he was looking for - his copy of 'Das Schloss'. While Gandalf projected an image of being a dirty old man with no other interests apart from porn and violence, he did have a finely honed intellect. An intellect that he had no intention of letting atrophy, but at the same time he had no intention of letting anyone else find out about this. They might start expecting him to do things and Legolas might start talking to him. The less time he had to spend talking to a poncey git who felt he was more at one with the universe than everyone else the better.

Sometimes Gandalf felt guilty for making Frodo look after him. After all, Frodo had been though a lot. Then he remembered exactly how much pain he'd gone though on Frodo's behalf and how much of a little bastard Frodo had been when young and felt that this was appropriate payback. As for Aragorn, Merry and Pippin, yes he did make their lives a misery, but he felt sure that they'd make
their own lives a misery without his intervention. He just ensured that they did it in an amusing fashion.

Literature kept his mind occupied. All the better that it was gloomy literature on the essential futility of human existence.

02.00

Frodo mumbled and seemed to be about to wake up. Gandalf sat on his book and turned his attention to the tv. However, it had ceased to be soft porn and had turned into a documentary about puffins. Gandalf was prepared for the Fellowship to think that he was a pervert, but not that much of a pervert. He flicked the remote and managed to find some repeats of Buffy just as Frodo sat up.


Gandalf made a non specific leering noise and kept his eyes on the television. When Frodo had left Gandalf unscrewed the head of the stuffed auk and extracted a bottle of single malt whisky. One of the things that Gandalf did not fake was his drink problem. Sometimes it was nice to have vadko between him and the rest of the universe. Because after you'd drunk vadko balrogs held no terror, and Maurice the green dancing okapi agreed. But sometimes a nice single malt was rather more civilised.

02:30

"Laaarrrrfuuuggggginlooooonnnnvvvveeeeeeyou."

Gandalf heard the sound of a woman in distress. A drunk woman in distress. It was his duty to investigate.

"Larrrryfuggggginseeeeeeexxxxy."

"Wannnnnnnnnaahayouurbabies."

Ah. Multiple drunk females.

"Lllllaaaaaaarrrrrrwaupanshagme."

Gandalf got to the front window, and was again grateful for Frodo's insistence on net curtains. In the front garden were four drunk girls, obviously at the end of a night out. And all, very obviously, underage. They were yelling up at the windows. Along the street lights were coming on and windows were being opened.

One seemed on the verge of tears. "Lllllllllllllllllllllllrrrrrmymine."

Gandalf wondered why they looked so familiar. Upstairs Legolas had been awoken by the noise and was making his way downstairs, closely followed by Frodo and Sam, who was holding a frying pan in a belligerent manner.

"What is going on?"

Gandalf pointed out of the window. Legolas peered though the gap in the net curtains, then leapt
back and pressed himself against the wall. "Ohmygod."

"What's the matter?"

"It's Them. They live behind us. They want my body. Pippin told them my name, where I work and
that I'm single."

"Llllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrs! Llllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrs!"

"At least he only told them your work name."

"The one that makes me sound like a Swedish porn star."

Gandalf leered. He felt this was expected of him.

"We have to do something. They should be at home in bed."

Gandalf leered again, since he just couldn't let that one pass.

"I am not going out there."

"I'm going out there."

"Frodo, no!"

"Get ready behind the door and shut it as soon as I'm through. Under no circumstances let them
inside." They stood behind the door. "Wish me luck. Now!"

Legolas and Sam pulled the door open, Frodo leapt out and the door was slammed behind him. The
girls had leapt for the door but were too drunk to make it in time.

"Go home."

"N'want Lars."

"Go home, or I shall go and fetch your parents."

"No. Lars. Lars. Lars. Lars."

"Fine." Frodo turned and walked off. A few minutes later he returned, followed by a middle aged
couple in nightwear.

"Lorna. Andrea. I hope you are ashamed of yourselves. And you, Stephanie, Nicola, what do you
think I'm going to tell your parents?"

"Very sorry Mrs. Stewart."

"Home. The lot of you. Now. And don't think you're not going to school tomorrow, because you
are, understood?" She turned to Frodo. "I'm so sorry about this Mr. Baggins, what on earth must you
think of us..."

"It's no bother really, we were all young once, we've all had a little too much to drink. But could you
talk to them about, um, following my housemate around? It's starting to upset him."

"You mean the blond gentleman?"

"Yes, um, they seem rather keen on him."
"Oh, yes, I'll talk to them about it. Thank you for being so understanding."

"Oh, anytime. Goodnight."

Frodo turned and went inside. He and Sam helped a trembling Legolas back to bed.

03:00

T'was the night before Wednesday and all through the house, nothing was stirring, not even a mouse because if Frodo had even the merest suspicion that there was a mouse in his house he would have had the whole place covered in traps, poison and finally fumigated.

Out in the garden though, there was movement. A black shadow moved along the garden fence, a creature bred for the sole purpose of killing, wearing a collar saying "Fluffikins". It was currently looking to expand its territory, and here had come across a new garden with a very odd scent. It jumped off the fence.

It moved with caution... something was wrong here, very wrong. There didn't seem to be anything else moving round the garden - no mice, no hedgehogs, not even any squirrels. Fluffikins had a very bad feeling about this. About thirty seconds later this feeling was confirmed as Fluffikins triggered the catapult. He was caught round a paw and flung high into the air. He landed, feet first and unscathed three gardens away. He was furious, and set to attacking the first thing he saw - unfortunately, a much prized garden gnome.

04:00

"Msnnnnnnn foooddddd... msnnnnnnn foood..." neeeddd foood...

There was a low grade chuntering coming from the upstairs landing, coming closer to the stairs. Then there was a series of muffled thumps, almost as if a four and a half foot tall person had fallen downstairs. There was a brief scrabbling at the foot of the stairs and the chuntering continued.

"Neeeddd foood... mssssnnnnnnn foood..."

There were some more thumps as the small figure bounced off the walls in the hallway, heading for the kitchen. It paused in the doorway.

"Marmalade."

Pippin headed towards a cupboard, opened it and produced a jar of marmalade. He opened the jar and stuck his hand in, scooping out great handfuls to eat. However, as he got towards the bottom his hand became stuck in the jar.

"Msssssssn?"

Pippin licked the outside of the jar. Then he shook it. This, though, did not make the glass taste of marmalade.

"Mysn. Bed."

He tromped back upstairs again dripping marmalade from the jar and leaving orange handprints on
05:00

Merry's alarm clock went off very, very quietly. He leapt out of bed and silenced it, then looked over at Pippin with trepidation. Pippin, however, was sleeping peacefully, in a starfish position on top of the laundry heap his hand wedged into a jar. Merry relaxed - Pippin had evidently already gone on his sleep-eating excursion.

Merry slipped out of the bedroom and slunk downstairs. As he was half way down the stairs he heard the front door open as Gimli came home. Merry retrieved his books and pencil case and went into the kitchen in search of caffeine.

"Och, morning. How's the Open University course going?"

"G'd."

"Yes, self improvement is a wonderful thing."

"Y."

"I've always said you had potential, young hobbit."

"Sdfn."

Merry looked at the toaster and looked at the slice of bread in his hand. Cooking was far too taxing at this time in the morning. He ate the bread, poured himself a glass of water and picked up a jar of coffee granules and a spoon.

"Mind if I join you?"

Merry shrugged and walked into the sitting room. He sat down heavily on the sofa, turned on the tv, spread his books across his lap, and took his pen in one hand and a spoonful of coffee granules in the other.

"Why don't ye record the programme?"

"Ismd." Merry indicated Gandalf, still asleep on the other sofa, since he had no interest whatsoever in programmes about economics.

"You mean he'd record over them? That's not proper behaviour for a wizard."

Merry looked at Gimli in confusion, and ignored him.

"Have ye no got a better pen?"

Merry focused blearily on what had been his best pen, now chewed almost to oblivion. He threw it in the bin and got out a pencil, incidentally covering part of the sofa in black ink. He started concentrating in earnest on the tv.

At 5.30 Legolas awoke, took off his sleeping pyjamas, put on his pristine white tai chi pyjamas and went out into the back garden. The first four and a half minutes of Legolas' routine was the normal, standard moves. Then there were the ones he'd invented himself. Then, since he was worried about his personal safety there were the high speed fighting manoeuvres, developed through years of orc...
fighting, bar brawling and getting Aragorn out of trouble. He finished with a perfectly executed flying turning kick that squarely hit Aragorn's brick-built barbecue. The barbecue exploded in a cloud of brick dust.

"Whoops."

Merry and Gimli came out to investigate.

"It was an accident."

"Och, you hate barbecues."

"I still did not do that on purpose. I assure you." Gimli and Merry looked unimpressed. "I am going for a shower."

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06:00

Frodo awoke. He always made sure that he was up this early to make sure that everyone was ready and sorted out before going to work. It was a nice, relaxing start to his day, pottering around the kitchen before anyone else was awake, making breakfasts and packed lunches for the rest of the Fellowship while listening to the radio and submerging himself in the joys of one of the easier forms of domestic drudgery.

However, in the past few weeks, this had been disturbed by a sleep-deprived, food-deprived, caffeine crazed hobbit demanding the recently invented meal of 'Preliminary Breakfast'.

This morning Frodo had tried a new tactic in dealing with Merry, pretending that he didn't exist. As a result, Merry was now sitting on the worktop dipping a banana into a jar of peanut butter and eating it while attempting to carry on a somewhat one-sided conversation at double speed.

"And then of course their knock effect to the tiger economies in the marmalade? Haven't had marmalade in ages can I have marmalade sandwiches for second breakfast please please please?"

"No, it's not marmalade, and you can't have marmalade on your sandwiches for second breakfast because there isn't any."

"Oh. Can I have pepperoni instead?"

"Yes, you can have pepperoni. Why don't you go upstairs and see if Pippin's awake?"

Merry bounced off the worktop and ran up the stairs. There was a crash as he fell over the laundry on the landing and the sounds of doors opening as other members of the Fellowship came out to investigate.

Frodo breathed a sigh of relief and resumed his task of sandwich making. Two loaves of bread later, it was complete and he jammed the sandwiches (and several pieces of fruit) into the correct plastic boxes and left them in the fridge for their owners to collect as they went out to work. With a few minutes to spare before he had to start on the breakfasts, Frodo poured himself a cup of coffee. Bugger, not quite enough milk again.

"Merry? Do you want to go to the shops for me?"

There was a clatter on the stairs again, followed a few seconds later by the appearance of Merry at
"You know milk is a dying industry very economical non viable want to know why?"

"I don't really care why, Merry, just go to the shop and get me two pints of semi-skimmed."

07:00

Legolas was finishing his muesli and his conversation with Gimli, who was about to go to bed, when Sam and Pippin came downstairs for breakfast, the latter with the marmalade jar still stuck to his right hand, but as he had been given neither coffee nor food, he probably hadn't noticed yet.

Legolas gave Pippin a confused look, but decided he didn't want to know and so didn't ask. However, Frodo did.

"Pippin, you do know you've got a half-empty marmalade jar stuck to your hand?"

"Oh? Really?" Pippin lifted his hand up to his face and looked at the jar as if it was some new scientific discovery. He tugged at it ineffectually, then, realising it was futile, decided to try licking marmalade off his wrist instead.

"Oh for goodness sake, Pippin, give it here." Frodo pulled Pippin out of his chair by one arm and attempted to remove the jar with the use of brute force alone. Being that he was only one Hobbit of relatively slight build, this wasn't a lot of brute force and he enlisted Sam and Merry's help.

When Aragorn came downstairs a few minutes later, Merry was holding on to Pippin's waist, Sam was holding on to Frodo's waist and the two pairs were attached in the middle by the jar on Pippin's wrist and Frodo's grip on it; all four Hobbits were attempting to move in different directions. Aragorn took one look and decided he really didn't want to know.

"So, um, Legolas, how are you this morning."

"I'm fine Aragorn, how are you?"

After another few minutes of pulling, the Hobbits decided to give up and have breakfast while they waited for a better solution to present itself. Breakfast was obviously much more important.

Breakfast is, as everyone knows, the most important meal of the day and Frodo never took his culinary responsibilities lightly. The first course consisted of cereal for the Hobbits and salted porridge for Aragorn. There was then an intermediary course of toast, assorted rolls, croissants and fruit, before the fried items were served. Well, fried items for the Hobbits, but because Aragorn had expressed concern over his waistline, which everyone else in the house referred to as his 'beer gut', his was grilled. However, he did have one weakness: fried bread. This lead to the daily ritual of foiled attempts to steal fried bread from the Hobbits, for Hobbits do not give up their fried bread lightly.

Breakfast finished, attention was turned back to Pippin. However amusing it may have been, letting him go to work with a jar wedged onto his hand wasn't really on. Aragorn came up with the solution - the jar was filled with cooking oil, the Aragorn held the jar and a suspended Pippin over the bath until eventually Pippin fell off.
One by one, they left for work. Legolas had left first, while everyone else was still eating breakfast, then Aragorn went, driving off at speed before anyone else could ask him for a lift. Sam usually walked to work and left at varying times, depending on where he was working that day, and Merry and Pippin usually took the 8.12 bus.

On their way to the bus stop, Merry and Pippin passed a group of girls in short skirts, high heels and school blazers. As usual, they whistled their appreciation, and were given their customary single-fingered salute, although with less enthusiasm than usual from some of them, who looked like they were probably too ill to be sent to school, but were going anyway as a punishment. Out of sibling solidarity, the other two girls were bouncing up and down and singing.

Back in the house Frodo relaxed and sat down to watch some breakfast TV. He always allowed himself half an hour to rest his mind between dealing with the Fellowship en masse and facing the rest of his day. When he felt that he had sufficiently recovered he phoned the company dealing with Gandalf's non-existent chair.

"The chair has been dispatched and should be with you at some point this afternoon."

"Are you sure? Mr Grey is a very old man, a very, very old man and since his other chair broke he's been having real difficulties standing up and sitting down. He's all but stuck in that chair all day now." Frodo decided not to mention that for Gandalf, being stuck in the chair was a matter of choice.

"Yes, sir. It should be with you after 1 o'clock this afternoon."

"You're really sure..."

"Yes, sir, I'm really sure."
"About Science Fiction?"

"Yeah, um, mainly like Star Trek and Star Wars."

"Do you know why she does this?"

"I think it's cos, like, she's attracted to Captain Picard. I mean, she made me shave my head and start wearing lycra..."

Gandalf gave in and turned the television off. Chat show mayhem was good, but slightly portly middle aged men in skin tight lycra was too disturbing, even for him.

10:00

The kitchen floor dried, Frodo turned his attention to cleaning the bedrooms. Legolas' room and the room he shared with Sam got a full going over, with every speck of dust chased out of existence. The door to Gimli's room got polished. In Aragorn's room Frodo picked up everything off the floor and dumped it on the bed so he could hoover.

Then it was the turn of Merry and Pippin's room. Frodo stood in the corridor, preparing himself. He took a can of air freshener in his right hand, and a can of fly spray in the other and started unconsciously humming the theme to "The good, the bad and the ugly". There was a pause. Then he kicked open the door, emptied both barrels into the room, slammed the door and leaned heavily on it.

After recovering he went back downstairs, and was about to start hoovering the dining room when he saw the spider. He froze. It didn't matter that the spider in question was about two centimetres across and entirely harmless, in his mind it transformed itself into an enormous dripping fanged monster. He screamed, leapt onto a chair, then onto the table and finally wrapped himself round the light fitting, still screaming. The light fitting couldn't take the weight and dropped off the ceiling, dropping him back onto the table.

The sound of screaming coming from the next room was disturbing Gandalf. He turned to look at the source of the noise, saw that it was Frodo and tried to ignore it.

"Her! Her! Geeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaagh!"

Gandalf paused. Her. It was another sodding spider. He pressed the mute button on the tv and turned back to see if he could see the spider. Ah, there it was, motionless on the carpet. He grabbed his staff, lashed out and killed the spider, then wiped the spider corpse off on one of the sofa cushions.

"It's gone Frodo."

Frodo gingerly opened his eyes. "Gone?"

"Gone."

He shakily made his way to the sofa and sat down. "I could do with a cup of tea after that."

"So could I. Put the kettle on Frodo."

11:00
To the casual observer, it looked as if the wheelchair was making its way up the hill by its own power. But then, to the casual observer, it would also appear that the wheelchair was talking, or rather, swearing to itself because language issuing from it couldn't possibly be coming from the bearded old man sitting in it unless he was a very skilled ventriloquist.

"-Fucking bastard, why can't you fucking walk, or at least give me some fucking help pushing the fucking wheelchair, the only reason I take you out is because if I don't the fucking neighbours'll think I've fucking killed you, you're fucking heavy, you know that."

"Gwaihir said I was light."

"Gwaihir was a fucking giant eagle, not a fucking Hobbit."

Inside his head, Gandalf made comments about Frodo's sex life, or lack thereof, but because he knew what was coming next, he kept his mouth shut.

Frodo's monologue had declined into a series of muttered swear words by the time they reached the top of the hill. While Gandalf could occasionally be helpful, for example, when it came to killing spiders, most of the time, he just got on Frodo's nerves. Sometimes, when it all got too much, Frodo felt that he had to express his annoyance to Gandalf, and he usually found that the combination of swearing and violence worked for him.

At the crest of the hill, to a casual observer it would appear that Frodo stumbled, let go of the wheelchair and helplessly watched it roll down the hill with an expression of horror on his face. However, the closer observer would have noticed that there was nothing for Frodo to have stumbled over, and the expression of horror was rather overlaid with one of glee.

Gandalf reached down to pull the brake lever, only to find that it had been unscrewed. This was his own fault though, as he had tried to prevent earlier walks by jamming the brakes on to make Frodo's life that little bit more difficult. By the time he was half way down the hill, Gandalf had resigned himself to his fate. It was at least six months since he'd last died.

Unable to steer, Gandalf hit the wheelie bins outside one of the houses and was catapulted over them into a flowerbed. Frodo rushed down the hill after him, the horrified expression starting to slip, and seeing no one else around, dragged Gandalf back into the wheelchair and carried on towards the shops.

12:00

"-And who's fucking idea idea was it to move so far from the fucking shops?"

As the walk to the shops continued, so did the tirade of invective against the world in general. Once the Co-Op came into sight and there were more people in hearing range, he turned it into an internal monologue as sometimes it was useful for people to see him as helpless, loveable, and generally inoffensive despite his 'problems' and he didn't want to do anything to damage his reputation. However, it was a very long way from the new house to the shops for a small person pushing a wheelchair - he'd applied for a driving license, but the DVLA didn't think that someone as heavily medicated as Frodo should be allowed to be left in charge of a vehicle. The rejection letter had been most disappointing, it had even gone as far as to suggest that he shouldn't even go out on a bike.

Frodo pushed the wheelchair up to a lamppost just outside the Co-Op and attached both Gandalf and the wheelchair to it using a very long bike chain. When he was satisfied that no one as going to steal
the wheelchair and the Gandalf couldn't escape, Frodo went into the shop.

13:00

After a trip to the shops which was actually quite uneventful and not worth talking about, apart from the bit where a small child took one look at Gandalf and started screaming, which isn't even that funny and happened to Gandalf a lot, Frodo made some lunch for himself and Gandalf.

While Frodo never really fancied cooking at lunchtime, he felt that there was still an art to preparing instant food. Carefully he pulled the lids off the two pot noodles (spicy curry flavour for Gandalf, chicken and mushroom for himself) and added boiling water to the fill level - not higher, not lower, but exact. Then came the scrunching action to make sure that all the powder from the bottom of the pot didn't go sludgy and as a final touch, the addition of a sprig of parsley because these things matter and he was sure that Gandalf really did appreciate it even if he didn't express it any way other than hurling abuse.

Frodo gave Gandalf his pot noodle and then sat down in front of the tv. Fortunately his attention was almost entirely focussed on the tv and he didn't notice when the chemicals in the pot noodle dissolved the parsley. He looked at his watch. Twenty past one and still no sign of the chair.

14:00

2.10: Doctors - Mac is surprised by someone he thought he knew.

Well, Frodo wasn't surprised. When you'd spent as much time watching daytime tv as Frodo had you learned to predict the twists and turns.

2.35 Suspiciously early arrival home of Sam.

2.40 Coverage of the Royal Horticultural Society Chelsea Flower Show.

The two above facts may well be connected.

As Frodo had already seen more than enough gardening programmes for one week, he decided that this would be a good time to phone the electrician about the light fittings.

"What do you mean, 'not until next Tuesday'? I've got two broken main light fittings, what am I supposed to do in the meantime? ... No I cannot just tape a torch to the ceiling! ... Yes, I know candles are atmospheric, but they're also a fire hazard... Yes, okay. Tuesday afternoon will be fine. Thank you."

Frodo hung up and swore quietly in the general direction of the phone.

15:00

When the kids tv started a little after three o'clock, Frodo and Sam decided that they probably had something better to do. Then they remembered the chair.

"You said it would be delivered this afternoon when I phoned earlier."
"Yes, sir. It will be delivered this afternoon, just later this afternoon, probably towards five o'clock, there are a lot of deliveries scheduled for today."

"But you said any time after one."

"Five o'clock is after one, sir."

"But it will be here today?"

"Yes, sir, it will be delivered to you later this afternoon."

"Um, thank you then."

Frodo put the phone down.

"So, Sam, is there anything that needs doing in the garden?"

"No, all the plants are planted, the weeds are weeded out and I watered it last night and it doesn't need watered again yet."

"Oh."

"Is there anything you need help with around the house?"

"No, cleaned the whole place from top to bottom this morning."

"Really? All of it?"

"Except Merry and Pippin's bedroom. Maybe we could go and clean it, it would be easier with two of us."

"Yes, we could."

"Yes."

"Let's play backgammon then."

"Good idea."

16:00

"So I won that one, so that means it's 194847 games to 214382."

"Everything to play for."

"Yeah, there was a point in 1890 when you were ten games ahead of me."

"Should we try phoning up about the chair again?"

"No, Frodo, they said it would be here by five and it's only just gone four now."

"They said it would be here by five, and that implies before, five is the latest point at which it will arrive. I just want to make sure that it is going to get here, that they haven't forgotten us, or couldn't find the house."
"I'm sure if they can't find the house they'll phone and ask for directions. Why don't you go and watch Countdown, you always used to like playing it."

"But it's too easy..."

"Play it in elvish then."

"But you can't play it in Elvish, there's a different number of letters and they don't all transliterate properly-"

"Then it'll be nice and difficult."

"Alright then."

"I'll put the kettle on. Gandalf? Do you want a cup of tea?"

"Fuck off!"

"I hate it when he pretends to be more stupid than he actually is."

"Yeah, but you what happens when you say anything about it."

"Do not meddle in the affairs of wizards', and then he pins you to the ceiling or makes your underpants shrink."

17:00

"I was told that the chair would be here by five o'clock at the latest and it's almost a quarter past now and I still don't have a chair-"

"I'm sorry, sir, but they're running a bit late today, I'm sure they'll be there soon."

"You've been telling me that all day. I've been messed about, kept in the dark, I had to change my plans to stay in all afternoon waiting for it."

"I really am sorry, sir, if you would just stop shouting-"

"I AM NOT SHOUTING! I demand to speak to your supervisor!"

The doorbell rang and Sam went to answer it.

"We've had the most terrible service from you, I've got half a mind to ask for my money back-"

"Frodo...?"

"And I think I shall be reporting you to both 'Watchdog' and to Trading Standards. Mr Grey is a very old man and he needs-"

"Frodo." Sam tugged on Frodo's sleeve.

"Shut up Sam, this is not the time. And he needs this chair-"

"Frodo, the chair is here."

"Because he's... Pardon?"
"The chair's here."

Frodo paused, and took a deep breath. "I'm very, very sorry. Goodbye."

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18:00

Aragorn, Merry and Pippin arrived home at the same time. Aragorn opened the door and stopped. Something was wrong and he didn't know what. Pippin paled.

"I... I... can't smell cooking."

The three of them looked at each other worriedly. If it was six and there was no smell of food in the house it generally meant that Frodo had been Sectioned again, and when Frodo wasn't there everything went horribly wrong.

"Hello? Is there anyone in?"

"Ah ha! That's not part C, it's part U turned on its side."

Aragorn, Merry and Pippin looked at one another. Maybe Frodo had lost it again, but hadn't been sectioned yet.

"Have you got the screwdriver? I can't find in, oh, no, here it is, Gandalf was sitting on it. I'll go out to the shed for another one."

Sam? He wouldn't just look for screwdrivers if Frodo needed to be sectioned. Unless of course he needed to be sectioned too. Aragorn momentarily considered what life would be like with two insane housemates, but then remembered that this was very unlikely - Sam just wasn't the insane type. He decided to approach the situation with caution and tact.

"Um, Frodo?"

Aragorn opened the living room door to see bits of chair and many small screws and assorted bits and pieces strewn across the room.

"What?"

"Why isn't there any tea?"

For a second, Frodo looked shocked. He never neglected his domestic responsibility when he was in a normal frame of mind. He was about to apologise when he stopped himself.

"How dare you! How dare you assume that I will always be here to make the tea when you come home from work! You all just take me for granted sometimes."

"No we don't. Sometimes you're in the loony bin." Pippin received a hard stare from Sam for this comment.

"So that's all I am to you, is it? A loony who sometimes provides you with food? What would you do if I decided to stop making your meals altogether?"

"Eat more kebabs."

"Well if that's the way you feel about it, why don't you just phone for a bloody pizza!"
"Good idea."

Frodo looked as if he was in imminent danger of exploding.

"What Pippin meant to say," said Aragorn, "is that since you're busy putting Gandalf's new chair together, he'll take over the arrangements for dinner. Didn't you?"

"Er... yes."

"Does this mean we still get pizza?" asked Merry.

Aragorn's answer was interrupted by Gimli coming down the stairs.

"Morning everyone, is breakfast ready yet?"

"No there isn't any sodding breakfast yet, and no one's getting any until I finish putting this chair together."

"Och, give me the screwdriver, I'll have a go."

"Do you want the instruction booklet?"

"What would I need that for?"

Gimli set to work on the chair. Within three and a half minutes the chair was up and running with Gandalf sitting in it, control in hand, making full lecherous use of the vibrate function.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

19:00

When Legolas arrived home a little later, the living room was still covered in the chair's packaging and empty pizza boxes, but Gandalf had moved on to making the chair go up and down.

"Evening Legolas, want some pizza?"

Legolas looked at the cold, congealing substance in the bottom of the box Aragorn was offering to him and shuddered.

"You really think that I would like to eat a half-cold pizza where I can see the fat rising to the top of it. And what exactly is that on top of it anyway?"

"It's their meatily supreme extra meat topping, with chilli."

Legolas tried to edge away from the box. Legolas was a great believer in slow food, and refused to eat anything that came with a 'if it's not there in half an hour it's free' guarantee. Elves didn't approve of food that took less than an hour to prepare, although they made an exception for muesli.

"I think I'll just make myself some toast."

Equilibrium had returned to Gandalf's world. He finally had his chair back, well, it would take a few days for the new smell to wear off and the Gandalf smell to settle in, but it was more or less his chair. He had already managed to hide four cans of Tennents, a bottle of gin, all the remote controls and certain small personal items belonging to each of the other members of the Fellowship in the storage compartments in the arms and the auk had been installed over his head. Everything was as it should be.
He drew a deep breath. "Well, I'm back."
An Apology: First for the lateness. We sort of fell out, but neither of us can remember why. We’re assuming since we can’t remember it can’t have been that serious. Secondly, this is Not Very Good. Our brains have rather rusted up over the summer, so we’re sorry, and we promise (cross hearts and hope to die) that the next one will be better. Thirdly, it’s short. But since it’s also Not Very Good, this probably A Good Thing.

Hyde Park, London: 1948

It was early afternoon, but it felt much later. The rain was managing to dampen down most of the smog, but it couldn’t completely and only a few weak beams of sunlight were filtering through.

A figure walked purposefully through the rain, tall and slender and wearing a very expensive suit, coat and hat and sheltering under a large umbrella. In his other hand he carried a nondescript package, so nondescript in fact, that any passer-by might have been suspicious. He approached the empty bandstand, waiting for the few other people in the park to disperse before lifting a loose step and replacing the package underneath with the one he arrived carrying.

He left as purposefully as he came, making sure there was a good distance between him and the bandstand before examining the contents of the package. As he read the first line his heart sank. Orders from Moscow. Oh bugger, not again. This was starting to get really embarrassing.

He stalked back to the bandstand and settled down to wait. Five minutes later another well dressed man appeared.

“Forrester.”

“Philby.”

“It’s happened again, hasn’t it.”

“I believe Hyde Park is lacking in suitable... points for exchange.”

“Indeed.”

“My discretion is of course guaranteed, with the return of the package you are carrying.”

“I’ve learned that nothing is guaranteed in this game, Mr Forrester.”

“And I have learned that this is not a game, Mr Philby.”

They exchanged packages.

“Forrester, I’ve read the contents of your packages. I’ve taken them to our code experts and no one
has even seen an alphabet like that before. Who exactly are you working for?"

Legolas just smiled enigmatically and walked off into the rain.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

Summer, 2003, somewhere in the north of England:

“It is a balanced diet!” said Pippin.

“No, it’s not.”

“Look, the milk in the chocolate has calcium and protein in it, and the nuts have got protein and vitamins in them, and the sunny-d has vitamin c in it. Balanced diet.”

“Look, when you said you were going vegetarian I did loads of research! I cooked you whole food! I bought lentils!”

Sam tried not to make a face. Frodo, having large amounts of lentils left over, had fed the vast majority of them to Sam. Sam had eaten lentil soup, lentil stew, lentil cutlets, lentil a la lentil, lentil bisque, lentil melba and chocolate lentil surprise (lentils in a chocolate torte had indeed been very surprising). He was half the hobbit he used to be.

He tried to reason with Pippin. “Why do you want to be vegetarian anyway?”

“Birds.”

“I thought it would come back to that eventually.”

“Look, women like a man who looks after himself, and cares about stuff.”

“Stuff.”

“Yeah, animals, the environment and all that shite. And I need to keep myself sexy.”

There was a pause, as no-one could think of a reply.

“Erm... wouldn’t fruit and nut chocolate be a bit better for you?”

“Hate raisins.”

Merry dragged Frodo off to one side. “I’ve got a plan.”

A few minutes later there was the sound of frying from the kitchen. Pippin went to investigate, and found Merry, Frodo and Sam gathered round the frying pan, eating hot, fresh bacon sandwiches. There was a general mumbling of ‘mmmm, bacony goodness, sweet, sweet bacon, pass the ketchup’.

Frodo looked sympathetically at Pippin. “Oh, I’ve got a recipe for lentil sausages if you want some.”

Pippin twitched. Then he leapt across the kitchen, grabbed Merry’s bacon sandwich and had swallowed half of it before he hit the ground.

“Good to have you back, Pippin.”

“There’s something missing.”

“Nope, bacon, bap, ketchup—”
“I meant something else.”

“There - there’s no shouting. No sarcasm.”

“No Legolas, you mean.”

“He’d tell us if he was moving out, wouldn’t he?”

Frodo paused. “No, he wouldn’t. He’d make sure we didn’t know.”

“All his stuff’s still there.”

“How do you know?”

“Borrowed a pair of his socks this morning.”

There had been a general drift towards the lounge and tv.

“Found him.”

“What?”

“Legolas. Look, on the telly.”

Merry pointed. Legolas was indeed on the tv, standing at the front of the crowd at the Albert Hall, watching a concert.

“Ah. Proms again.”

“What a lot of elves.”

“I wonder why no-one notices? I mean, it’s so obvious that they’re all elves.”

“No wonder you can’t get tickets.”

“Pippin, you’ve never been to a proper concert in your life.”

“Yes I have.” Pippin stuck his nose in the air. “I’m not entirely uncultured.”

Frodo and Sam looked at Pippin. There had to be something more to it, and Pippin was just dying for them to ask. So they didn’t.

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St. James’ Park, London; August 2003

It was hot. Very hot. Not as hot as much of the rest of Europe, but pretty darn hot. The natives were reacting with the usual British reaction to the weather - complete and absolute surprise. You mean it gets hot in the summer? But that only happens in Spain, not here. Legs that should never have been shown the light of day were gaining an airing. Ill advised midriffs were popping out. People were stripping off and quietly melting. Even the St James’ Park ducks, doyens of the spying world, able to tell MI5 bread from CIA bread at twenty paces, were lurking in the shade.

Through this sweaty tableau two figures walked. In defiance of the weather, both were dressed in immaculate three piece suits. They were, however, cream summer suits.

“So, Legolas, how goes life among the great unwashed?”
Legolas gave Glorfindel a filthy look. “Do you particularly care?”

“No, I was making polite conversation. How are the Fellowship?”

“As they normally are.”

“You reported that Aragorn had a crisis.”

“Which has been dealt with.”

“He’s still alive? How tiresome.”

“Indeed.”

“And what about the short hairy rude one?”

“Which? You have a choice of up to five on a bad day. And they all continue much as usual. I must ask, is there any end in sight for this?”

“Legolas, you do your job with them so well. Who else could we have to monitor and look after them without causing suspicion?”

“But surely they wouldn’t cause that much comment-”

“I saw one of Aragorn’s job applications. He listed ‘overthrow of Sauron’ as his proudest achievement. And that itself is even a lie.”

“But-”

“Legolas, we will brook no argument. If these people,” he gestured around him with no little disgust, “found that the Firstborn still walked among them we’d never get any peace. You do a most valuable job.”

“I do not feel particularly valued.”

“Yes, I have been told that you asked Elbereth if you could quit.”

“I asked Elbereth if I could die.”

“You always were far too over dramatic. You have leave to spend time away from them, why don’t you take a holiday?”

“Because things are so much worse when I get back.”

“We need to go to HQ anyway. I’m sure you will be able to discuss matters further there.”

“Why-”

Glorfindel nodded to a ‘woman’ in a burka sat on a park bench, and lowered his voice. “See there? The name’s William Sawyer. Head of MI6’s Middle Eastern Section. Convinced that we’re some kind of Al-Qaeda offshoot. Also convinced that I don’t know I’m being followed. Nice chap, I knew his great-grandfather. Of course, his great-grandfather was convinced I was working for the Kaiser, but even so, it pays to be a little cautious.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Aragorn had reacted in the only possible manly way to the heat. He was wearing Shorts. It took extreme heat to force him into his Shorts, and so this particular pair had been bought in 1907, and had only been worn about once a decade ever since. They were a pair of Shorts that had helped build an empire. Indeed, you could probably build an empire on these Shorts. They were knee length, khaki and everything about them screamed ‘sensible’. This image was reinforced by their being teamed with desert boots, sensible socks and sensible shirt.

He was stood on Huddersfield station waiting for a connection home after his tree surgery conference, when a passing train managed to hurl some grit into his eye. He blinked and tried to deal with the pain in a manly way - blinking, rubbing his eye, and muttering under his breath.

“Stop that. Stand still. Look up.” Someone delicately dabbed at his eye with a handkerchief and the grit was gone. “There. All done.”

Aragorn blinked a couple of times and looked blearily at the person. “Thank you.”

“Not at all. Are you ok?”

“Um, yes.” Aragorn was relatively unused to conversation with women. He had a vague feeling he should talk about babies or other female things, but also had a feeling that this was not a good opening gambit. “So... what brings you here?”

“Erm... I’m catching a train. I’m told a lot of people do that in stations.”

“Oh. Me too.”

The station speakers crackled into life. “Due to a signal malfunction we regret to inform passengers that all trains running through this station will be running at least thirty, three-zero, minutes late. On behalf of Network Rail if you haven’t got used to this by now, sod you.”

The woman looked at Aragorn and shrugged. “There’s a pub on the other platform. Fancy a pint?”

This was more territory he was used to. He nodded enthusiastically.

“Morning G”

“Morning R”

“Why the code names? We know it’s Galadriel in a power suit.”

Galadriel gave Legolas a withering stare, “Because L there is supposed to be some semblance of proper organisation round here. We are the International Elf Service-”

There was a discreet cough from Glorfindel, “Erm, we’re not. We got sick of the jokes after 1948. We’re now ‘Board for the Advancement, Defence, and Guidance of the Evlish Race’."

“BADGER’. We’re calling ourselves ‘BADGER’.”

“Well, for a while we were ‘BEAVER’, but we decided that it was actually worse than International Elf Service.”

Galadriel sighed and turned back to Legolas. “We here at BADGER are pleased with the work you’ve been doing so far L. Though you did refuse a certain number of missions-”
“I still refuse to go to any ‘Dr Who’ conventions.”

“Which is why R has been forced to feign an interest.”

Glorfindel shrugged. “It’s not that bad. I think I look quite dapper in a velvet suit, personally. And no-one’s ever dressed me as Romana...”

Galadriel looked at Legolas and smiled. “No, he doesn’t have the legs for it, does he?”

Legolas had to suppress the ‘stupid telepaths’ thought before it landed him a serious migraine. He changed the subject. “Why am I here exactly? If you’re pleased with my work-”

“We have a mission for you. There is a historian doing work on influential landowners of the nineteenth century. He has decided to concentrate on Elrond. This threatens to blow Elrond’s cover - he could well put two and two together and work out that Sir Edward Roundwell and Leonard Ormond are the same person.”

“Elrond’s calling himself Leonard?”

“Shush. We need you to do some destruction of documents for us, specifically any photographs of Elrond from that period that may still exist, and a couple of the more incriminating contracts. R has all the details for you.”

“Why can’t Elrond find someone and pay them to do it?”

“Because that would mean revealing to Elrond the existence of BADGER. If he got wind of this it would transform itself into the Organisation for the Advancement and Financial Gain of Elrond.”

“OAFGE?”

“I was making a rhetorical point, it wasn’t supposed to have a good acronym. The idea is that certain, more power hungry, elves are left unaware of our existence, since that makes our operations much easier.” Galadriel paused. “You were thinking ‘then why’s Galadriel involved’ - well, it is very hard to keep secrets from a telepath.”

Legolas started concentrating very hard on the lyrics to ‘The Twelve Days of Christmas’ to stop any stray thoughts getting through. “Why me in particular then?”

“The archivist in question is... somewhat easily swayed by a well turned ankle.”

Legolas looked at his ankles. “Pardon? This doesn’t involve dressing in drag does it?”

“No, no. I was meaning that the archivist is middle aged, female, and, erm, receptive to your charms.”

“How do you know?”

“We sent her your photograph.”

“What?”

“You’ll be fine L, now get going.”

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

“-and so Pippin says ‘I’m not a penguin, I always look like this’.”
Aragorn’s companion, who’s name turned out to be Mhairi Sine, laughed in a manner not unlike Sid James. While to most men this would be deeply off-putting, Aragorn found himself thoroughly enjoying the company of a woman who was the absolute antithesis of Arwen (who had spent centuries perfecting a laugh that sounded like tinkly silver bells, and thus now sounded like a broken wind chime).

“Buy you another pint?”

“No, they seem a bit more hopeful with the announcements. We’ll be going soon.”

“Oh,” Aragorn tried not to be entirely crestfallen. “I could give you a ring, next time you’re in town-”

“I’m not going to be in town for quite a while. I’m going to South America, to volunteer in a reforestation project.”

Aragorn tried not to look stunned. “Oh. Erm.”

Suddenly Mhairi grabbed his hand. “Come with me. Come away from all this. We’ll plant trees in Argentina and be happy.”

“Erm-”

“You’ve told me about your flatmates. What is there for you here?”

“But, but, South America, I don’t have my passport-”

“We can go back and get it.”

Aragorn was in a quandary. To leave everything he’d ever known, to take a gamble on a new life with no going back... actually, it sounded like a really good idea. “Yes, yes, I’ll do it!”

“Wonderful! Isn’t that the train you were going to catch?”

“Yes, we’ll go get my passport and then - South America!”

They held each other as the train came in. But then a figure stepped off the train, and Mhairi suddenly let go of Aragorn.

“Jeremy?”

“Mhairi?”

“But- but- they told me you died in the Congo!”

“No, but it was a dashed near thing.”

Aragorn was momentarily drawn out of his shock. This man had actually used the phrase ‘dashed near thing’ without apparent irony.

“I - I still have your ring.” Mhairi drew a wedding ring on a chain from her shirt.

“I never stopped wearing mine.”

Aragorn sighed. It had indeed been too good to be true. He boarded the train without a backward glance.
Legolas sat down next to a dejected figure on Leeds station. Aragorn acknowledged him with a dejected nod.

“Bad day?”

“Worst for a long time.”

“Why?”

“I was promised a better life, then fate farted on me again. You?”

“Met irritating people, got molested by a middle aged librarian, got first degree burns on my hand, had to evade the police.”

“Is that all?”

Legolas looked at Aragorn, who did indeed look terrible. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”
The Drivers of Amsterdam

Chapter Notes

Note: As promised longer and funnier than the last one.

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“Right, does everyone have a pocket handkerchief?”

“Yes, Frodo.”

“And does one designated member of each group have the emergency contact folder?”

“Yes, Frodo.”


“Yes, Frodo.”

Frodo visibly relaxed. The ‘Center Parcs’ disaster behind them, the Fellowship had decided to go on holiday separately. Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli were going munro bagging in Scotland. Merry and Pippin were being slightly evasive but claimed to be going to France on a ‘Mission’. Frodo and Sam were going to London. And Gandalf...

Gandalf awoke in a chair. It wasn’t his chair. And there was a strange sensation of acceleration. He opened his eyes. He was in a plane, and the plane was taking off. The bastards. They’d done it again.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Legolas had managed to book three of the four seats at a table on the train for himself, Aragorn and Gimli. Five minutes into the journey and Aragorn had opened the Ordinance Survey maps.

“And then we go over there-”

“Isn’t that the symbol for a scree slope?” Asked Legolas.

“Doesn’t matter. And then over here-”

“Aragorn, that’s a river. A really big one.”

“It’s been a dry summer. And then we go over here...”

“You really shouldn’t be standing on the back of that chair.”

“And up here...”

“That’s a cliff.”
“We’ll go round it then. And then we end up here, at the top of our first munro.”

“All tickets please. And if you could get out of the overhead storage sir, it’s only designed for hand luggage.”

“The bastards! The complete motherloving, sheep fancying, inbred, weak chinned, limp wristed, fuckwit wanker arseholes! They’ve abolished duty free!”

Pippin took this opportunity to stop and take a breath. He had been swearing solidly for ten minutes, and as far as Merry could tell, hadn’t repeated himself yet. Since the last time Merry and Pippin had been abroad, at least on purpose and with money and passports, duty free in Europe had been abolished. Five minutes later, Pippin ran out of inspiration and took to pacing up and down the deck muttering “bastards, bastards, bastards” under his breath.

Merry thought it would be best to give Pippin half an hour or so to let him get it out of his system.

“Pippin. We have planning to do. We are on a mission you know.”

Pippin stopped pacing and looked up. “The mission?”

“You remember. The painting?”

“Of course I remember the painting, but when did we start calling it a mission?”

“It sounds better than calling it ‘Operation Sein’ and then Legolas would have been on to us.”

“We’re on a mission from God.”

“No we’re not, Elbereth hasn’t written in months.”

“Mint imperial?”

“Don’t mind if I do.”

The rest of the carriage were trying to work out exactly what was going on between Frodo and Sam. There were two very short, but apparently young men, acting like an elderly married couple. They had a thermos of tea. And not just sandwiches, but copious amounts of them, and a sensible helping of fruit too. The dark haired one was currently engaged in timing himself in an attempt to beat his personal best for completing the Times crossword.

“Opera by Wagner...?” Frodo clicked his fingers and stared at the ceiling as if the answer might miraculously appear there.

“Why don’t you put the crossword down and do something else?”

“But I’ve only got another three to do.”

“Oh, would you look at that. I’ve spilt my tea, I’m so sorry, Frodo.”

“Never mind, I was way behind my personal best. Let’s play ‘I Spy’ instead.”

“We’re going at over a hundred miles an hour.”
The trained slowed to one of those patented British Rail unexplained and unexpected stops.

“You just had to jinx it, didn’t you Sam?”

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Gandalf was seething with rage. How could they do this to him? He had had it all planned out. He was going to really enjoy having the house to himself and getting the chance to go through everyone’s things without Frodo being there to stop him. He was going to keep the neighbours up all night because there would be no one to confiscate the tv. He’d even invited Radagast round to visit.

But you had to make the best of these things, so Gandalf decided to start going through his pockets to see what Frodo had equipped him with for the journey. There were the obligatory sandwiches and even a few oranges. There was a passport, and this one actually looked real, and attached to it with a paperclip was a note.

Dear Gandalf

I hope you are keeping well, the aeroplane food isn’t too bad and there aren’t any hijackers on board. I expect you are wondering why you are here, well, we decided it was time you got out for a bit of fresh air and that the change of scene would do you good - I’ve heard that the weather in the South of France is very nice and that it should be good for your health. Unfortunately, I haven’t been able to arrange for anyone to meet you at the airport, so you’ll have to get yourself into a taxi and ask them to take you to Villa Peredhel. You’re staying with Elrond for the next fortnight and don’t even think about trying to get home early.

I hope you enjoy your holiday and don’t do anything the air hostesses could press charges for.

Frodo.

Gandalf immediately cheered up. He was staying with Elrond, the stinking rich, easily manipulated, well wine cellared, elf lord. Elrond was easier to wind up than a clockwork mouse. Gandalf was going to have fun.

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“And now that the older two are off at uni and the youngest’s old enough to stay at home by herself we’re out walking every other weekend. We’ve already bagged 14 munros this year.”

Legolas and Gimli could see the competitiveness switch being flicked in Aragorn’s brain.

“Really? But then I suppose you do live locally.”

“Oh no, it took us two hours on the train to get here.”

“It took us seven and a half.”

Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli had made their first ‘friends’ of the holiday at the youth hostel. An overbearing, talkative middle aged woman who dressed more than a little too young and her quiet, balding, mild-mannered husband. The woman was surreptitiously adding rum to her glass of coke from a small bottle concealed in her handbag, while Gimli had added a generous amount of whisky to his, Aragorn’s and, after a certain amount of meaningful eyebrow raising, the husband’s coffees.

“Well of course I have been up Ben Nevis…” The competitive instinct was obviously strong in the woman as well.
“So have we. And Snowdon”

“In shorts?”

“Um…”

“We did. It was hailstoning the first time we tried, but we had to turn back because the kids were complaining about it.”

“But I’ve found that my main strength is in endurance.”

“We’ve done six hours without stopping for a break.”

“We’ve done seventy two.”

The man gave Legolas and Gimli a questioning look and they replied with exhausted looking nods.

“I’ve been walking in Switzerland.”

“I’ve walked all the alpine passes.” Aragorn didn’t bother to add that this was because it was the only way to get to Italy in the Middle Ages.

“I sunbathed topless up a mountain.”

Legolas and Gimli gave her husband a ‘really?’ look. He returned an embarrassed nod.

Legolas took a delicate sip of tea. “You wouldn’t believe the number of places Aragorn’s ended up naked.”

“Such as?” Demanded Aragorn and the middle-aged woman.

“Well, on Pelenor Fields in front of about two hundred people.”

“That wasn’t my fault, Eomer stole my swimming trunks! But I stole his back.”

“I’ve quartermastered at Guide camps!”

Legolas kicked Aragorn in the shins before he could mention the number of times he’d been left in charge of tactical supplies for an entire army.

“You know, we’ve got a long day of walking ahead of us tomorrow. We should probably be going to bed. Now, Aragorn.”

In the dormitory, which the three of them had managed to get to themselves as it was near the end of the summer season, Aragorn started flinging off his sensible layers of clothes while muttering loudly to himself.

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“Excusez Moi? Nous cerchons la peinture qui s’appelle ‘Notre Dame des grandes nichons’.”

The security guard in the Louvre did a double take. Had the short gentlemen really just asked him about a painting called ‘The Madonna with the Big Boobies’?

“Pardon?”

“‘Notre Dame des grandes nichons’. C’est une peinture tres celebre!”
“Grandes nichons?”

“Oui! Oui!” The small men made the international sign language motion for ‘enormous hooters’.

Ah. So this wasn’t one of those ‘mistake with the phrase book’ situations. A thought struck him. This could all be some plan to distract him while their accomplices ran off with one of the paintings. He looked around suspiciously, but there didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary going on. He directed them to the information desk.

A few minutes later the two hobbits were sat dejectedly on the pavement outside the Louvre.

“I think that was a bit off, throwing us out. I mean, we were looking for a painting in an art gallery, what’s wrong with that?”

“Maybe it’s in a rival gallery.”

“But we even knew who painted it. I mean, a gallery that big, you’d think they’d have at least heard of Van Klompf.”

“Hmmmm.” Merry was thinking. “We know it was in France during the war. Buuuuuut... they might have taken it back to Germany. Or Austria. They might have even dropped it off by accident in Holland or Belgium.”

“What- what if it was destroyed in all the fighting.”

“Pippin - just don’t even think about it. We’re on a mission.”

“Where next then?”

“Belgium’s nearest.”

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“Oh my.”

“Wow. Och.”

“Look at the view, all the colour of the heather in the sunlight-”

“Those rock formations.”

“Come on! Don’t dawdle! We need to bag another one before nightfall!”

Legolas and Gimli pointedly ignored Aragorn.

“Do you have the camera, Legolas?”

“In here somewhere. Can you see a nice big rock for the cairn?”

“This is no time for cairn building! If you want a picture, buy a postcard!”

“Aragorn, we are on holiday. You may not understand the concept but we are here to Enjoy Ourselves.”

“Let your hair down a bit laddie. There’s nothing you need to prove.”

Aragorn knew when he was defeated. He sat down heavily, and repeatedly checked his watch as
Legolas and Gimli proceeded to take pictures, point out wildlife to each other and build up the cairn.

Then the Muttering started again. ‘We’re behind schedule, we’ll never get anything done, we should have set off hours ago’. Legolas and Gimli gave up and started walking again. The Muttering continued all the way up the next munro, but wasn’t too distressing as Aragorn insisted on walking about ten feet ahead of them.

It was almost dusk when they reached their campsite for the night.

“‘It’s a swamp.’”

“Good flat ground. The only bit of flat ground for miles, according to the map.’”

“But it’s got those lumpy hairy symbols that mean ‘swamp’. ”

“Och, there’s a bit of dry ground over here. Should be enough room for the tents. The midgies on the other hand...”

“It’s all right. They don’t bite elves or dwarves. The only person they’re going to bite is the stupid bugger who chose this campsite.”

“This is the only place we could have camped, and.”

“Never mind. Aragorn, give me the camping stove and I’ll get dinner on.”

“Camping stove?”

“Don’t tell me you forgot it.”

“Don’t need it. Modern rubbish. Look, I’ve been collecting firewood.”

“So, instead of having a nice, convenient stove, we have heavy, difficult to burn wood. In a swamp. A damp swamp.”

“I brought matches. And a zippo.”

“You won’t bring a camping stove, but you will bring a zippo.”

“Yes. You can’t live in the dark ages forever.”

“You are making a valiant attempt.”

“Och, stop bickering and get the food on. What are we having?”

“Venison.”

“You promised me we were going to bring food, not kill food.”

“Yes, but then I saw on the news that there are far too many deer in Scotland and so I thought I’d help their ecosystem.” Aragorn unpacked from his rucksack his broadsword and longbow. “And anyway, I brought some pasta to go with it. Nothing like a bit of carbohydrate when you’ve got a long walk ahead of you. So if you and Gimli do the tents and the fire, I’ll get dinner.”

“Aaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhh...”
“Mmmmmmmmmmmmmnnnnnnnnnnnn...”

“Kiiiiitchen....”

“Look at the size of those ranges. Look at them.”

“You could do proper cooking in here.”

Frodo and Sam were at Hampton Court Palace, staring hypnotised at the kitchens.

“That cauldron. I mean, not even Pippin could eat that amount of casserole.”

“Ovens, as well.”

“Such cake potential.”

“Excuse me, sirs, but you have been in here for three hours and we’re closing now. You are welcome to come back and drool at the kitchens tomorrow.”

An open top 2cv with a grey wizard’s hat pointing out the top careered round a corner. Gandalf changed down a gear, hit the accelerator and took the next corner at fifty miles an hour and on two wheels.

“Ahahahahaaaaa!”

He hadn’t had this much fun for ages. Every time he hurled the car round a corner the vast collection of bottles in the back of the car made a huge racket. He’d had a productive day, taking Elrond’s credit card on a tour of all the major vineyards in the area.

Gandalf took another corner on two wheels and then slammed on the brakes. Another bus load of nuns! He seemed plagued by them. Why was it that people leading such humble and penitent lifestyles came to the South of France in such large numbers? And, if they’d renounced the poverty part, why did they have such elderly, wide and difficult to overtake buses?

Belgium had been a bit of a disappointment. Apart from the chocolate and the waffles, but since they could get those just as easily back home, it had hardly been worth it. The art galleries in Belgium had been just as unhelpful as the ones in France, so now they were on a train to Amsterdam.

“- and then I said ‘look, y’bastard, I fucking know that Wittgenstein’s-”

“Excuse me? Sirs?”

“Yes pal, you’ve seen our tickets haven’t you.”

“Yes, but the lady at the other end of the carriage says that her daughter does speak English, and she’d rather not have her daughter speaking those words.”

“Oh.” Pippin stood on the seat to see the lady in question. He waved. “Sorry hen! Can’t help myself sometimes!”
“Three days and nights walking, no food, no rest.”

“Hm. Do you think he’s noticed we’re not following him anymore?”

Legolas and Gimli were sat on a rock, eating sandwiches. Aragorn was halfway up the next hill, apparently oblivious to being abandoned.

“I mean, why? He must have climbed more hills than anyone else alive, with the possible exception of us. He’s probably climbed these ones before, just forgotten.”

“He’s not even normal for a human, and humans are quite strange.”

“Umhum. Are there any more cucumber sandwiches left?”

“No, but we’ve got lots of venison and pickle.”

Legolas shuddered. “I am not eating any venison ever again. Ever. He didn’t even think to take down a small one, nooo, he has to kill one of the big, stringy, tough old ones. It hasn’t even been hung.”

“The lad thinks he’s got something to prove. It’s all ‘I could be king, really I could’.”

“I don’t see Prince Charles trying to outrun him. And Aragorn can’t wave properly. Or graciously shake hands.”

Gimli shrugged. “We can’t change him.”

“No, but we can ignore him.”

On the other hill Aragorn stopped, and looked around. Finally he spotted Legolas and Gimli, who gave him a cheery wave.

“What’s he saying?”

“Just swearing.”

“I gathered that from the way he was jumping up and down and waving his fists at us.”

“Oh, and demanding we follow him.” Legolas gave a very expressive hand gesture. “Ah, now he says I’d better come over there and gesticulate that. And he thinks this is going to give me an incentive why?”

“He’s coming back. Looks angry.”

“We can take him down. Easily.”

“He is armed.”

“Yes, but the sword’s in his rucksack, underneath all the venison sandwiches.”

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“Amsterdam. To the Rijksmuseum!”

“But Merry - we’re in Amsterdam.”

“Yes. We’re going to the Rijksmuseum.”
“But- but Amsterdam! Cheap beer! Cheap women! Proper pipeweed!”

“Pippin, we are on a mission. We are not to be distracted by fripperies.”

“Beer! Women! Drugs!”

“Pippin-” Merry had adopted a stern tone.

“Women! Drugs! Beer!”

“I said-”

“Pancakes!”

“No- actually, we could just stop for a few pancakes. Then go to the gallery.”

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“So when was this bus due?”

“An hour ago! A whole hour. I mean, yes, I am now adopting a more relaxed approach to this-”

“But we have agreed that if you sing the ‘Val-de-ree val-de-raa’ song again we are allowed to disembowel you.”

“Yes, I know. But where is that bus?”

“You have read the timetable properly, haven’t you, because there are often less buses on a Sunday.”

“It’s Sunday?”

Legolas and Gimli looked at each other and then at Aragorn.

“Erm... well, round here it’s not so much that there are less buses on a Sunday, more no buses on a Sunday. I think it’s supposed to be sinful.”

“Wonderful. You two, hide.”

“Why?”

“I’m going to try and hitchhike, and I think that we’ll be rather more successful if they don’t know they’re picking you up as well.”

“Oh. Fine.” Aragorn and Gimli lurked behind a convenient rock. Legolas stood next to a passing place, looking as clean and respectable as possible.

A van, driven at speed, went past without even slowing down.

“And you mate!”

Then a smaller, more battered car appeared and slowed down.

“Hop in, can only take you and your friends who are hiding behind that rock as far as the main road, though. You’ll be able to get another lift from there.”

“Thank you.”
The three of them piled in and the car set off at speed. Legolas tried some small talk. “Um, you look quite young, not long passed your test?”

“Test?”

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In Villa Peredhel the phone was ringing. By dint of tripping Elrond up, and kicking Haldir in the shins Gandalf managed to get to the receiver first.

“Yes, yes I will accept reverse charges.”

Elrond made a strangled noise and tried to rip the phone cord out of the wall, but Gandalf swatted him away with his staff.

“Elladan! Elrohir! Nice to know you still keep in contact with your family. No, no, you can’t talk to your father right now. Why? Because I’ve just kicked him in the stomach and he can’t breathe. Yes, I will tell him you called, and that you hope he feels better soon.”

Gandalf paused, listening, while giving a fairly decent left hook to Haldir, who was trying to sneak up to unplug the phone.

“You busted Celeborn out of prison? Why? Oh, yes, if he was going in front of a firing squad in the morning, I can see that. Where did you leave him? Beijing? Are you sure? Oh, it might have been Shanghai, you’re not sure, but it was definitely in a brothel. Why? You’re not sure. Fine. Where are you now? You think you’re in Tokyo, but you’re not sure. You want to come home? Oh, yes, I’m sure your father would love to see you.”

This managed to spur Elrond to try and make a last desperate attempt to get the phone back, by sinking his teeth into Gandalf’s leg, but he couldn’t hang on long enough.

“Sorry about that, your father’s got his teeth in my leg. No, he hasn’t got false teeth, they’re still attached to him... I’ll explain later. You need two tickets? First class? I’ll see what I can do. And where are you staying?” Gandalf nodded and made ‘mnhm’ noises as he carved Elladan and Elrohir’s address into the eighteenth century plasterwork with a swiss army knife.

“Anyway, I’m sure that your father and Haldir would both send their love if I hadn’t just beaten the shit out of them. Byeee!”

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Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli had survived their first lift, and were now stood, thumbs out, looking hopeful once more. Another small car slowed down and stopped. A middle aged mumsy woman looked out of the window. “You’ll be heading for the Youth Hostel? Well get in, don’t stand there looking like stunned sheep.”

They got in.

“You on holiday up here? Aye, I expect you didn’t know there’s nae buses on Sunday, gets a lot of people that does, so how many munros have you bagged so far?”

The three of them couldn’t answer, since they were trying to work out how on earth this woman appeared to know everything about them. Was she another member of BADGER?

“Cat got your tongue, or are you foreign?”
“No, no, sorry. It’s been a long day, we’re a bit tired.”

“Aye, sorry, sorry. Oh, on the way we’ll be picking up the bairns from my mother’s, I’m sure there’ll be room, after that we go straight past the hostel’s front door, oh, and I must remind you to say hello to Jamie and tell him Elspeth sent you, that’ll be good for a discount, see.”

“Oh. Thank you. Oh, I’m sorry we haven’t introduced ourselves. I’m Legolas, this is Aragorn and Gimli, yes, our parents were hippies.”

“Oh, it’s terrible, one of my best friends is called Rainbow Peace Lovechild McCorquodale. See over there? See that? It’s a standing stone...”

The journey continued, with every single place of interest pointed out. They stopped outside a remote cottage and Elspeth honked the horn. A horde of children ran out, screaming, followed by an elderly lady.

“Elspeth, your brother rang, you’re to take his ones home as well.”

“Right. Everybody in! Dunnae stand on the hitch hikers! Rory and Flora, you take out the parcel shelf and you can go in the boot.”

“If it’s any trouble we can get another lift.”

“Oh, it’s nae bother, they like going in the boot.”

The car set off, now riding dangerously low at the back. Aragorn and Gimli found themselves covered in children.

“Who are you?”

“I’m Aragorn, this is Gimli. We’re here walking.”

“Why?”

“We like walking.”

“Why?”

“Because.”

“Is that beard real?”

“Yes. Och.”

“No it’s not.”

“Donald, if you pull his beard you’ll feel the back of my hand!”

“Robert the Bruce had a beard. There’s pictures of him in armour putting an axe in another man’s head.”

“Very nice.”

“We’ve been doing about Robert the Bruce and how he fought this huge maneating spider...”

“Donald, you haven’t been listening properly again.”
“And then he went and defeated the whole English army, just him and five ninjas—”

“Donald, if I’ve told you once I’ve told you a thousand times – there were no ninjas at Bannockburn!”

Sam approached a door in an overgrown wall in Kew Gardens and knocked eight times on it in a complicated rhythm. A hatch was slid open and a pair of eyes appeared.

“Sorry, this area is out of bounds. Rampaging contagious leaf mange.”

“It’s me. And Frodo.”

“Sorry. Can’t see anyone under five foot because of the hatch. Come in.”

Inside the building, another elf was standing ready with the blindfolds, but tried to hide them behind his back when he saw who it was.

“Welcome, welcome to Calas Cuedhon—”

“Never mind any of that, how are my trees?”

“They’re fine, nothing we can’t handle.”

“I heard one of them got frost damaged...” There was a hint of accusation in Sam’s voice.

“No, really, everything’s fine.”

“Erestor. Show me the tree.”

Sam and Frodo were lead through a bower to a large open lawn, in the centre of which stood a mighty mallorn tree. Stood round the tree were elves, singing and looking ethereal.

“What are they saying, Frodo?”

“I think they’re singing to the tree. They’re saying ‘please don’t die, please, really don’t die. We’re completely screwed if you have a relapse and we’re making you a nice warm scarf for the next frost, please, please don’t die’.”

“Erestor...”

“It’s better now, they just want to make sure it stays better. And they really are making it a new scarf, it’s got a healing mantra woven into it.” Erestor grinned in a terrified way. He was in trouble and knew it.

“Hmm.” Sam took one look at the elves and relented; he’d never been good at staying angry.

Meanwhile, Frodo swung himself up into the tree. The elves gasped.

“He climbed the tree! You can’t climb it, it’s The Tree!”

“No, you can’t climb the tree. Mr Frodo is allowed to climb the tree. No-one else.”

Elrond, Haldir and all Elrond’s servants had given up on the ‘Gandalf situation’ and were trying, as
far as possible to pretend he didn’t exist. However, Gandalf could be very difficult to ignore. Elrond was sat in an armchair, having his head massaged and drinking ginseng tea. Haldir was laid on the chaise longue with a face mask over his eyes.

Gandalf was on the phone again.

“Hello? Yes, yes, I heard you had a vacancy for Pope... oh, still alive? Really? But I understand there will be a vacancy opening soon - could you take my details and keep me on file. Chosen by the cardinals? Yes, yes I know that. I can provide references. Am I a Cardinal? Actually, yes, yes I am a Cardinal. I think. Yes, no, I’m definite, it just was a while back. Who was I invested by? Boniface, Boniface the eighth. I am not taking the piss! I told you it was a long time ago. No I am not a timewaster-” Gandalf looked at the phone. “Bastards.”

“Where is my gracious lord of Canterbury?”

“Aragorn?”

“Send for him, good uncle!”

“Aragorn! Wake up!”

“Isfn... what?”

“You were talking in your sleep.”

“He was doing Henry V in his sleep.”

Legolas shot Gimli a warning look, and tried to mime ‘don’t mention Lawrence Olivier’, but since that’s a very difficult mime involving waving hands about and pretending to be a hunchback Gimli just looked at him like he was insane.

“I would never do any Henry V impersonations. I am merely kingly, unlike certain overrated actors who mimic me. Poorly.”

“Why don’t we all try and go back to sleep-”

“I mean, the diction, the delivery, I’m far better at giving pre-battle speeches.”

“Why don’t you join the RSC then?”

“Can’t do iambic pentameter. I get confused. I can do the important, rallying bits, but not the metre.”

“So, getting back to sleep-”

“I mean, listen to this,” Aragorn cleared his throat, and as an afterthought got the broadsword out of his rucksack and waved it in a heroic manner. The pyjamas rather spoiled the effect. “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he today that sheds blood with me shall be my brother, be he ne’er so vile-”

The lights snapped on. The warden of the youth hostel was standing in the doorway with a face like thunder. “What the HELL do you think you’re doing?”

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“Ooooooohhhhuuuurgh.”
“Nnnnnnnnnnnnnnn.”

“Never going to eat another pancake again as long as I live.”

“That’s what you said last time we came to Amsterdam.” Merry looked round himself. “Pip - I don’t think we’re in the Netherlands anymore.”

“Why?”

“Cos there’s hills. And all the signs are in Italian.”

“We’ve done it again.”

“And we never even got to the Rijksmuseum” Merry had a sudden thought, and checked his wallet. “And we blew all our money on pancakes. We’re skint.”

“What time is it?”

“Three in the afternoon... and my watch says its Wednesday.”

“Three days. I can’t even remember Tuesday at all.”

“Too much sugar. Too much bacon. Right. We’re still on a mission. We need to find that painting.”

“But first we’ve got to stop somewhere so I can be sick.”

“Pip. We are stopped. We’re in a gutter.”

“Oh. That’s convenient.”

After losing some residual pancakes to an Italian gutter, and managing to find enough loose change for a reviving coffee they had a planning meeting.

“We need money and transport, fast.”

“Ok. We go on the game.”

“No, there’s not exactly the demand for it.”

“Hmm. Right, we fiddle the traffic computers so there’s this huge traffic jam, and then-”

“Just because we’re in Italy doesn’t mean we can pull off the Italian job.”

“Busking? Stripping? Waitressing? Street theatre?”

“We can’t do any of those things.”

At that moment Destiny and Providence stepped in.

“I DEMAND that you replace this cup of coffee, I refuse to drink anything that has COW’S milk in it. It’s so undignified! My word carries weight in these parts, and I assure you that if I refuse to patronise this establishment again others will follow my lead.”

Merry and Pippin looked at each other and smiled. They knew that voice. Celebrian, mother of Arwen, Elrond’s biggest financial outgoing, known to her sons as the Bitch Queen of Angmar, was
in Italy. Obviously New Zealand didn’t have enough designer labels for this elf.

Merry grinned evilly. “I think we should go and say hello. I mean, she’s virtually family.”

Merry and Pippin plonked themselves on two spare seats next to her. “Hello.”

“Waiter! I demand these... things are removed from the premises immediately!”

Pippin sidled over to her. “But Celebrian, are you not pleased to see us? I mean, we’ve got so much to tell you about your son in law.”

“He’s no son of mine.”

“You mean you don’t want to hear about his nervous breakdown-”

“Oh, or about how he got stabbed through the foot with a pitchfork?”

“No. Out! Waiter! I refuse to associate with lesser races.”

The waiters spent some minutes managing to pretend they spoke no English, before eventually throwing Merry and Pippin out since it was so much quieter that way. Three streets over, the two hobbits shared their trophies.

“Wallet. Mobile. So she can’t ring to cancel the cards.”

“Car keys. It’s a remote locking one, and we can just wave it about till we find the car.”

The car was eventually found, a flashy jaguar. The hobbits climbed in, and took full advantage of electrically adjustable seats so they could see out of the windows. Merry put the keys in the ignition and turned the stereo up.

“It’s a long way to the Rijksmuseum, we’ve got a full tank of petrol, half a packet of biscuits, it’s dark and I’ve found her sunglasses in the glove compartment.”

Elrond and Haldir had both volunteered to drive Gandalf to the airport, mainly to ensure that he really did leave the country. The bag he checked in clinked. A lot.

“Did you pack this yourself?”

“Yes. But you’re welcome to check. And I know that strip searching is just doing your job.”

The woman ignored him.

“And you are aware that no glass bottles or sharp objects are to be taken aboard the plane as hand luggage?”

“Just a minute.” Gandalf opened his bag and removed from about his person three flick knives, one Swiss army knife, a machete, a knitting needle and a half bottle of “Le vooodka”. He was on the point of zipping the bag up again, when a though occurred to him and he took two long hatpins out of his hat and put them into the bag.

“Is that everything?”

“Unless I can buy you a drink.”
“That’s everything then. Thank you for choosing British Airways, please don’t do it again.”

Gandalf then walked towards departures. Elrond and Haldir followed Gandalf, not happy until they saw that he’d passed through passport control. They breathed a sigh of relief and headed back out to the car.

“Dad dude! Smug Marchwarden dude! Dude!”

Elrond and Haldir froze in mute horror.

“Dude, I told you they’d be pleased to see us-”

“Yeah, anyway dad, we were like, so screwed-”

“But like Mithrandir totally came through for us-”

“So we’re like back! And like, we’ve been thinking-”

“Like, that family is the most important-”

“So like, we’re moving back in.”

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“A red sky - blood has been spilled this night.”

“Och, red sky means it’s going to rain.”

“Since when could you commune with nature?”

“I can observe nature! It’s going to rain. We’re in Scotland, I think I’m on better ground than you.”

“Blood.”

“Rain.”

“Blood.”

“Rain.”

“I’m going to spill some blood in a minute if you don’t stop arguing.”

Both Legolas and Gimli turned on Aragorn. “WE weren’t the ones who got us chucked out of the Youth Hostel at three in the morning. We weren’t the ones who got our membership cards torn up and a lifetime ban from Youth Hostels everywhere.”

“Look, I just got a bit carried away.”

Aragorn looked very lost. Legolas and Gimli looked at one another. They relented. Whenever Aragorn got them into trouble it was usually through over-enthusiasm or incompetence rather than malice.

“Come on. If we keep up this pace we can get the earlier train.”

There was some companionable silence.

“We have had a good holiday though, haven’t we?”
“Better than last time, certainly.”

“No hobbits. No Gandalf.”

“We should do this more often.”

“But we never get the time.”

“We’re immortal. We have all the time in the world.”
The Mince Pies

Chapter Notes

We know that we've simplified what we've said about which groups of Elves certain
characters belong to, but if we'd explained it properly we'd be here all night.

Notes, apologies and whatnot: It might have taken us a while, but we've managed to get it finished in
plenty of time for Christmas. It turns out that we've got these things called 'deadlines', so we've been
a bit busy. And we know that we've simplified what we've said about which groups of Elves certain
characters belong to, but if we'd explained it properly we'd be here all night.

18th October

“Calling to order the Official Christmas Meeting.”

The Fellowship were sat round the kitchen table. Christmas (as a celebration of eating and drinking
far too much, rather than anything religious) was very important to the hobbits, and as such was
worth planning. The Christmas cakes had already been made in July, and Gimli had devised a drip
feeder to force vast amounts of brandy into the cake.

“Merry, Pippin, is the mince pie production line ready for operation?”

“All ready. We propose a twenty percent increase in mince pie production on last year, to take into
account both natural wastage in the production process-”

“Which would be you eating them-”

“-and the fact that we are expecting more visitors.”

“Yes, I am reminding everyone that we are expecting Thranduil, Boromir, Radagast and possibly the
Twins.”

“The Twins?”

“The message on the answering machine went along the lines of ‘like dude, we’re like in France
beep beep beep dude it needs more money beep beep beep like, where would you put the money
beep beep beep I’m pressing all the buttons beep beep beep beep beep please hold the line beep
yeah, like, the thing with the turkey beep beep beep we’re like - no dad, we’re not using the phone.’
Which could either mean they’re coming for Christmas, or they’ve got a turkey for a pet.”

“Where’s everyone going to sleep?”

“Thranduil gets Legolas’ room. Legolas, and possibly the Twins, go in a tent in the back garden.
Radagast goes in with Gandalf. Boromir goes in with Aragorn, as long as they both promise to wear
those anti-snoring strips.”

“So Boromir’s going to be incarnate?”

“Apparently the Valar have decided on joint custody.”
“Oh, great. So now we have to buy presents for someone who’s going back to the afterlife in a few weeks.”

“Just get something we can all use.”

“Christmas puddings and cakes are made, the freezer is being filled. You will all be issued with further orders closer to December. Any other matters arising?”

“Yes. Just because there is a water shortage it doesn’t mean that certain members of this fellowship can stop washing and insist that they will only drink imported beer.”

1st December

Merry and Pippin woke up and were instantly disappointed by the lack of snow. They tried a couple of verses of ‘In the Bleak Midwinter’ to try and encourage the weather to co-operate with their Christmassy mood, but all this achieved was abuse from the rest of the house. So they went downstairs to look for their advent calendar.

Frodo had excelled himself this year. The calendar occupied a whole wall in the hallway.

“Now, there’s only one chocolate in each day, so you’re going to have to share.” yelled Frodo from the kitchen.

“Awwwmaaaaammmmmmm.”

“It’s a 200g bar of chocolate in each one. It’s not that much of a hardship!”

Merry let Pippin, as the younger, open the door.

“And today’s picture is - Zoe, 23, from Coventry, who is a veterinary nurse.”

“Wow. Thanks Frodo!”

Frodo smiled, in the knowledge of a job well done. Every day up to Christmas Merry and Pippin would find a different topless Page Three girl in their advent calendar.

23rd December

The Fellowship were sitting around in tidy clothes in the living room looking respectable. They were in ‘waiting for visitors’ mode. Or at least, most of them were sitting around looking respectable, Legolas on the other hand, was rushing around the house in full Elven dress clothing trying to see to any last minute tasks that Thranduil might notice that they hadn’t done.

“Legolas, I’m sure you’ve put enough oil on those bows. And do you really need both of them?”

“I don’t know, I mean maybe I need the Mirkwood bow, or maybe I need the Lothlorien bow... he might have given the Mirkwood bow to me because I’m sure I remember getting it as a begetting present from someone, but it might have been mum, and if I got it from mum I can’t let him think that I like it, but then what if he’s fallen out with Galadriel and I use the Lothlorien bow...”

Aragorn looked at him sternly. “Pick one.”
“Which one?”

“Just close your eyes and pick one.”

Legolas closed his eyes and reached out for the Mirkwood bow, but his hands slipped on the amount of oil on it and it fell on to the floor and rolled under the coffee table, so Aragorn handed him the Lothlorien bow.

“You’ve got fingerprints all over it!”

“No I haven’t, it’s dripping with oil, which you should possibly wipe off it you want to have any chance of shooting anything with it ever again. And pick the other one up before Frodo complains about what it’s doing to the carpet, he only had it shampoosed last week.”

Frodo came through from the kitchen, carrying an assortment of mince pies and other christmassy snack foods arranged tastefully on the best plates. “What time are we expecting everyone?”

“Thranduil said he’d be here at eight, so he’ll be here in about half an hour complaining about the trains, the nursing home said they’d bring Radagast whenever they could be bothered and Boromir should be manifesting at about nineish.”

“I’ll put the kettle on then.”

There was a squeal of brakes in the street outside, some loud swearing and the noise of the nursing home van’s engine as it sped off into the distance. Radagast barged into the house, breaking the door chain and set the deckchair he was carrying next to Gandalf’s armchair.

“Olorin!”

“Aiwendil! What have you done with your pets?”

Radagast opened his cloak and several hairy creatures emerged. “I’ve got a few more now. And look what else I’ve got.” Radagast produced a three litre bottle of surgical spirit.

“That’s us sorted for the next few hours.”

Gandalf and Radagast performed a complicated handshake at high speed.

Frodo was looking at the pets. “I would really rather appreciate it if they didn’t live in the house. Animal hair is so difficult to get off the furniture.”

“They’re like family to me.”

“I Would Really Rather Appreciate It If They Didn’t Live In The House.”

“But-”

“Please don’t set him off before Christmas. We’ll never manage without him.”

Radagast looked at the faintly crazed look in Frodo’s eyes and backed down. “If they could just stay in the porch...?”

“As long as you clear out the litter tray.”

“Fine.”
Everyone let out a sigh of relief.

“Legolas, would you please stop jiggling your leg?”

“Am I...? Oh.”

“Why don’t you just calm down, have a cup of tea.”

“I’d rather have a cup of valium.”

There was a knock at the door. Legolas gripped the sofa so hard that his knuckles turned white.

“Legolas, do you want to answer the door.”

There was no response.

“Legolas?” Frodo waved a hand in front of Legolas’ face. “It’ll make a good impression if you answer the door.

Legolas stood up stiffly and walked to the door as if it were the gallows. Taking a deep breath, he opened it.

“Ay oop, lad. ’Ere, I thought tha said tha were livin’ somewhere posh.”

“Err... aright, dad.”

“Am I comin’ in, or am I spending Christmas on t’doorstep?”

Legolas stepped aside to let Thranduil into the house. “Why is the hallway papered with pictures of lasses in the buff?”

“It’s an advent calendar... for the Hobbits.”

“Never did hold with things like that. Can’t say I think much of what you’ve done with the sitting room, but needs must; it was either this or spend Christmas with your mother.”

“Hello Thranduil.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m Frodo, I’m a Hobbit, and this is Sam, Merry and Pippin, they’re Hobbits too. And this is Gandalf and Radagast, they’re Istari, and Aragorn.”

“I know him, round our palace all the time, eating all the food and drinking all the wine.”

“I only ever visited once.”

“Really? Legolas, who am I thinking of then? Anyway, at least you’re not still hanging round with that bloody dwarf.”

“Actually, he lives here too, he’s just at work at the moment.”

“Oh.” Somehow, Thranduil managed to express aeons of disapproval in one short syllable.

Legolas tried to change the subject. “So, how’s mum?”

“Still immortal, still bloody annoying. She’s spending Christmas with some cousins of hers who’re
even more annoying than she is, I wouldn’t want you to think I’m spending time with humans, hobbits and.” Thranduil took a deep breath, “dwarves out of choice.”

“Mince pie?” Offered Frodo to diffuse the tension.

“What’s it got in it?”

“Well, um, dried fruit and sugar and spices and pastry and brandy...”

“Any bananas? I don’t hold with bananas.”

“No... They don’t normally have bananas in them.”

“That’s alright then.”

Thranduil took a mince pie and chewed on it sullenly.

“I must say I prefer homemade to shop-bought.”

“It is homemade.”

“Oh.”

Frodo decided to make another attempt at conversation. “Well, this is pleasant isn’t it?”

“Is it?” asked Merry, who received a kick in the shins for his comment.

“Yes. It is.”

They sat in silence until nine o’clock.

“When are people supposed to be incarnating?”

“How time now, really.”

They sat in uncomfortable silence for another five minutes. Boromir may have been annoying, but at least he created conversation. Usually it was along the lines of ‘Boromir, put that down, it’s not supposed to do that and you’re just going to electrocute us all’, but it was better than spending the evening looking at the walls.

Eventually a portal opened and sounds of distant fighting emerged from it. After another thirty seconds or so, a hairy man was thrown through it with considerable force. He landed on the floor with a thud and made an obscene gesture towards the portal as it closed.

“Rohan 1, Gondor 0.” He turned round. “Evening everyone. Where do you keep the beer in this century?”

“Eomer? You’re not Boromir.”

“I know, and every time I bump into Elbereth I make sure that I thank her for that.”

“Why are you here instead of Boromir?”

“Well, me and Faramir found out about the joint custody arrangement and since neither of us wanted to spend Christmas with our wives we decided to jump him and fight it out for who gets to come through the portal. But because Boromir and Faramir are brothers and have a lot of experience of
fighting each other, they were far more interested in kicking the shit out of each other and I jumped through when they weren’t looking. But more importantly, is there beer? If there’s no beer, I’ll settle for mead, but beer is what these midwinter festivals are all about.”

At 2am the Fellowship awoke to a strange noise and gathered in the kitchen.

“Who the hell drives an ice cream van playing ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ round and round the same streets at 2am in the... oh no... it can’t be...”

“It’s got to be the Twins. Who else could it be?”

“Legolas, go out and flag them down before they wake anybody else up.”

“It’s a bit late for that.”

The Fellowship (with the exception of Frodo, who believed that all guests should be welcomed with food and was thus now frantically making cheese on toast) all gathered in the front garden and waited for the ice cream van to come back.

“Eomer? Shouldn’t you be wearing something more than boxers?”

“Why?”

“It’s cold, for one thing.”

“Not that cold. I don’t see why I have to wear them anyway, I never wore anything in bed in Rohan.”

Pippin turned to Merry. “See? I told you real men don’t wear undies.”

Before an argument could erupt an ice cream van came round the corner slowly. Elladan had one foot on the serving shelf of the van, and was holding on to the ‘Mr Whippy’ sign with one hand and shining a torch at house numbers with the other. He caught sight of the Fellowship and leapt off the van.

He flung his arms around everyone one in turn. “Mirkwood Dude! Big Mirkwood Dude! Little Dudes! Gondor dude! Rohan dude!” There was a slight pause as important information made it’s way through Elladan’s consciousness. He pointed at Eomer suspiciously. “Dead dude?”

“More ‘temporarily incarnate dude’.”

“Oh. Dude.” He hugged Eomer again for good measure. By this point Elrohir had managed to park (or rather abandon diagonally) the van, and went through the same greeting. Thranduil was visibly fuming. They headed towards the house, but the Twins stopped suddenly.

“We forgot something.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

They went back to the van, and retrieved an unconscious figure from halfway into one of the freezers. They put him down on the lawn and shook him a bit.

“Dave? Dave!”
“DaveDaveDaveDaveDaveDaveDaveDaveDave-

“What?” The figure tried to focus two bloodshot eyes on the Twins.

“We’re, like, here.”

“Where’s here?”

“Where we were going-”

“You, like, said you were going to visit your parents-”

“Who like, live round here.”

“Yeah, yeah. I did. Right. Ok then.”

“Where do they live?”

“Dunno. But if I walk around it’ll come back to me.” With that Dave staggered off into the darkness.

“Are you two sure he’s going to be all right?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?”

“He’s stoned off his face, has no idea where he is, it’s December, the middle of the night and he’s only wearing shorts.”

“He’ll be fine-”

“Like, he always is.”

There was a collective shrug and they filed into the house. The Twins (and incidentally the hobbits, who were never ones to let a late night snacking opportunity go to waste) were plied with mince pies and other festive foods. The hobbits then decided to go to bed, apart from Frodo, who felt that this was a good opportunity to make a start on the next day’s cooking.

“Frodo? You really should go to bed. Really. Look, your masterplan says you have to be up at seven tomorrow and you need your sleep.”

“But I can make headway! And if I get this lot done I might even have time to make the extra four hundred mushroom vol-au-vents that Merry and Pippin want.”

“Four hundred. Now, Tell me how much freezer space, as measured by Gimli yesterday, there is left.”

Frodo mumbled into his shirt. “Four cubic centimetres.”

“And how were you going to get all those vol-au-vents into that space?”

“I was going to rearrange things, and we’ve got to defrost some more stuff now the Twins are here.”

“Frodo, you already spent six hours this week playing freezer Tetris. And anyway how many mushroom vol-au-vents are there in the two chest freezers in the fallout shelter?”

“Three hundred and forty-three.”

“Frodo, just go to bed.”
Frodo gave in and went to bed muttering “I can handle my cooking, I can stop any time I want, really...”

Legolas went back to rejoin the others in the sitting room. The Twins, Aragorn and Eomer were all piled onto one sofa, watching ‘Gladiator’ while nitpicking about fighting techniques and reminiscing. Gandalf and Radagast were playing a magical version of ‘pin the thong on the Playboy centrefold’, though neither had any incentive to win. Legolas joined Thranduil on the other sofa, sitting upright and failing to make any conversation.

After one anecdote had left the other sofa in fits of laughter Eomer looked over at Legolas, “That reminds me - remember the time when we were in Minas Tirith and got completely slaughtered on Elrond’s home brew and persuaded the Captain of the Tower Guard and the Second Marshal of the Mark to get up in drag and stand on a balustrade singing that song about the Maid from Ithilien, you know, the one with the actions.”

Legolas froze.

Eomer looked at him, puzzled. “Come on, you must remember. That was the first time you managed to persuade me that elves weren’t humourless gits.” Eomer looked at Aragorn. “Oh yeah, and you were on the terrace below, with that ambassador from Harad-”

“That was you? I knew someone must have put them up to it. Bastard!”

“It was funny though.”

“Not for me! I had to say that a lot of Gondorian women were butch and hairy.”

“That just makes it funnier. Anyway, you were the one who gave me that set of guest chairs for the Meduseld that made a farting noise any time anyone sat on them.”

The conversation continued along much the same lines, so no-one noticed Thranduil dragging Legolas out of the room by the point of an ear. He dragged him into the larder, turned the light on and shut the door.

“Daaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaad-”

“Shurrup son. I never thought I’d live to see a son of mine living with the worst sort of humans, dwarves and-” Thranduil shuddered, “Noldor.”

“They’re not proper Noldor, dad.”

“No, they’re part bloody human and that makes it worse.”

“Just because you’re a bloody speciesist who’s still stuck in the Second Age doesn’t mean you have to make me like that!”

Thranduil cuffed Legolas across the head. “Don’t you dare talk to your dad like that! Didn’t I teach you any bloody manners?”

“No, you just taught me ways of killing giant spiders!”

There was a pause. “I only ever wanted the best for you, lad.”

“Oh, so that’s why you had me out in t’forest killing spiders when I were forty-five!”

“That’s our way son, and it was the same for your brothers and sisters-”
“Which is why I don’t have as many brothers and sisters as I should have!”

“Well, we did learn after the first two. And that’s why you were one of the greatest archers in Middle Earth!”

“It was learn or die.”

“Character building. Made you what you are today.”

“Depressed and selling tea and coffee on the trains?”

“That’s not the point. We brought you up proper. Not like those degenerates in the sitting room.”

“Whose dad owns half of Scotland-”

This earned Legolas another cuff around the ear. “Money isn’t everything, lad. We were poor, but honest.”

“We weren’t either! We were moderately rich underhand bastards!”

“Yeah, but we weren’t Noldor.”

Legolas knew this was an argument that couldn’t be won, so he turned on his heel and stormed out of the larder. This resulted in a crash and large amounts of swearing as he knocked over the Twins, Aragorn and Eomer who had been listening at the door.

“We were, erm, just leaving.”

The argument in the larder had resulted in Thranduil storming off to bed, and Legolas sulking in a tree in the back garden. The others had gone back to the sitting room for yet more reminiscing, but were now hungry.

“Like, we need food-”

“We should get out of the house-”

“Because, like, Frodo’s going to kill us if we eat anything out of the fridge-”

“We like, need kebabs.”

“What are kebabs?”

“You don’t know what kebabs are?”

“Noo...”

“Like, I bet you don’t know what pizza is either.”

“Noo..?”

“You need, like, cultural education about the twentieth century-”

“Yeah, and Legolas needs cheering up-”

“Does Mirkwood dude like pizza?”
“He liked it last time-”

“Yeah, but he’ll eat anything after he’s had special lembas.”

“Have you brought any with you?”

“No, like, on the way up-”

“Service stations are like so expensive-”

“And Dave was, like, really hungry-”

“So he ate some of the lembas-”

“Which made him more hungry-”

“So he ate the rest of the lembas-”

“Which made him even more hungry-”

“But only for a bit, because then he passed out.”

“Right. Come on Eomer, I’ll lend you some clothes.”

“Why does he need clothes?”

“Because wandering the streets in only your underwear is not generally acceptable.”

“Oh. Really?”

“Since when?”

“Always, just that people have generally been too polite to tell you two.”

“Oh. Ooops.”

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Eomer had taken to kebabs like, well, Gandalf to Stolichnaya. He was more suspicious of pizza, involving far too many vegetables for his liking, but had been won over by the festive turkey and stuffing pizza (without the sprouts). They were now taking a long time meandering home, since the nearest all-night kebab shop was a very long way away.

“Legolas, why did you agree to have your dad over for Christmas?”

“I didn’t agree. The old git just wrote and told me he was coming.”

“Oh. Right. Sorry about dropping you in it.”

“S’allright Eomer. It’s not your fault. It’s their fault. He hates Noldor, why did you have to turn up for Christmas?”

“Because mum and dad and grandma threw us out.”

The Twins suddenly looked rather lost. “You wouldn’t want to make us spend Christmas on our own, would you?”
“Since ‘Christmas’ is fairly meaningless to people whose grandma is on first name terms with gods, I don’t see what the problem is.”

“Oh, like, sorry-”

“But, like, the damage is done-”

“So we might as well stay.”

“You’re probably right. It’s not like we don’t have enough food.”

Eomer was worried about Legolas. When he’d known him he was a positive (if a bit aloof, but nothing a large amount of alcohol couldn’t cure), forward looking elf, not this cowed wreck. He flung an arm round Legolas’ shoulder. “We need to boost your morale. Get you back to your old self. Aragorn, any orcs left in these parts?”

“Nope, all gone years ago.”

“What about them?”

Eomer pointed to a group of nylon be-tracksuited drunks staggering along the opposite pavement.

“Nope, not orcs. Actually human, or so I’m assured.”

One of the not-orcs heard this. “What the fuck are you saying about my fucking girlfriend?”

This was a bad idea. If there had been a bar brawling Olympics Rohan would have taken the gold every single year. And since the Rohirric concept of the afterlife basically involved drinking and fighting, Eomer had had thousands of years of practice.

So he was ready with a comeback, “Nothing, only that I’ve seen more attractive horses!”

“Just you fucking come over here and say that!”

By this point the Twins were muttering under their breath ‘fightfightfightfightfight’, and Legolas and Aragorn were debating whether to call the ambulance now or wait until someone was actually bleeding in the gutter.

“No, why don’t you come over here - oh, wait, men with small dicks can’t balance properly. Just you take your time, I’ll wait right here.”

“I’ll fucking have you!”

“So, you’re a poof as well, ah that explains it, your girlfriend’s a man.”

The tracksuited man made an incoherent noise and launched himself at Eomer, who waited patiently until he was within range before throwing a punch that knocked the man half way across the road.

“You just going to lie there?”

The next few minutes were a little confused. One of the women started screeching at Eomer, who traded insults for a bit. Then she launched herself at him, but he batted her away. Then all hell broke loose, as the entire rest of the group decided to attack Eomer. Aragorn and the Twins retired to a safe distance to observe, and give marks out of ten. After a moment’s reflection on Legolas’ state of mind they rudely shoved him into the middle of the fray.
Legolas found himself in the middle of a large scale fight, where Eomer was just about holding his own. Then a fist went past only millimetres from his nose.

“Not the face.”

That was rather the end for the pub fighters. Legolas was angry and he’d had a bad day. A few moments later they were surrounded only by groaning bodies. Eomer gave Legolas a manly slap on the back. “That’s the elf I know!”

Legolas readjusted his hair. “Are we on CCTV?”

They looked round themselves and shook their heads.

“In that case, we do a runner before the police turn up.”

24th December

Those members of the Fellowship in regular employment had gone to work, in the case of Merry and Pippin, in a better mood than normal, since in today’s advent calendar was a Playboy centrefold and a kilogramme of Dairy Milk. After the events of the previous night it was eleven before Eomer crawled out of bed and demanded breakfast, while the Twins had been up for hours ‘communing with nature’, which mainly seemed to consist of playing leapfrog in the back garden. This was cheering up Legolas’ stalkers no end, but their view was slightly obscured by Thranduil, who was sat up a tree muttering about the state of the world.

After Eomer had had breakfast, then had the concept of showering explained to him, then the workings of the shower explained to him, then told that he wasn’t getting any more beer until he had a shower, he was stood in the kitchen trying to be Helpful. Since Eomer knew nothing about cooking that didn’t involve an open fire and a stick he was basically performing the role of ‘stepladder’.

Frodo was in the midst of stuffing a world record sized turkey. To assist in this he had acquired a set of vet’s shoulder length rubber gloves, and was now up to his armpit in turkey, feeling for new gaps to shove sage and onion into. Eomer was hovering in the background, ready to pull Frodo out by the legs if necessary.

At this point the doorbell rang, and Eomer jumped.

“Just the doorbell. Like knocking, but louder. Go and answer it, would you?”

“Don’t you have people to do that?”

“Yes, I’ve got you, go and answer the door.”

Eomer went and opened the door. A woman was stood outside, shaking slightly.

“Hello?”

“C- c- c- C- Cockroaches.”

“Yes?”

She managed to make eye contact with Eomer. “Cockroaches.”
“Are you selling cockroaches?”

“Frodo?”

Eomer turned round and yelled to the kitchen. “Frodo, there’s a woman at the door trying to sell you cockroaches!”

Frodo paused in stuffing the turkey. “You what?”

“There’s a woman who seems to know you, gibbering about cockroaches.”

“Bring her in here.”

The woman was duly shown into the kitchen.

“Sandra! I’d give you a hug, but I’m covered in giblets. Have a sit down, Eomer, put the kettle on, now, what brings you round here?”

“Cockroaches.”

“I think we heard that. Where?”


“Can’t you get someone in to deal with them?”

“Coming on the 27th.”

“Oh, dear. Can’t you go round your mum’s?”

“No. Gone to Australia to see Auntie Susan for Christmas. Didn’t want to go because Australia’s full of creepy-crawlies. Now my flat’s full of creepy-crawlies.”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll be very welcome here, Sam and I will move into Merry and Pippin’s room, and you can have ours.”

“Don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“I’m not having you spending Christmas with cockroaches. Now, if you’ve only got that handbag you won’t have any clothes, so you’ll have to go out and buy some. Eomer, will you take her out shopping?”

Eomer did a passable impersonation of a deer in car headlights. Frodo, having finished stuffing the turkey, removed the gloves with a flourish. “I’ll just have a quick word with Eomer here, and then you should be heading off so you’ve got a reasonable time to shop.”

Frodo dragged Eomer into the sitting room, where he explained decimal currency, buses, modern etiquette, the concept of lingerie (which simultaneously confused and intrigued Eomer), and the nightmare that is shopping on Christmas Eve.

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Out in the back garden the Twins had decided that Thranduil needed cheering up, and were doing impersonations.

“Look, look, Thranduil, this is Galadriel—”
They both tried to look regal and ethereal, by looking up and waving their arms about like string puppets.

“And, and, this is Elrond-”

They both folded their arms and tried to look very grumpy.

“And this is Haldir-”

They poned about a bit looking smug.

“And this is the Witch King of Angmar-”

They both pulled their shirts over their head and hissed ‘eeeeevil, eeevil’. Then one straightened up.

“Dude! Like, Frodo!”

“Ooops. Right, right, we need better impersonations. Do your Julius Caesar, go on.”

“Ok then.” Elrohir cleared his throat, and stood up in stentorian mode. “Veni, Vidi, Vici! Veni, Vidi, Vici! Ner-ner-ner-ner-ner, I rule Rome! Noooooo, Brutus! Erk!” With this he dropped onto the ground and writhed in unconvincing agony for a few moments.

“Dude, he doesn’t look cheered up.”

“But, like my Caesar impression cheers everyone up.”

“Thranduil-dude? Like, what wrong?”

“What’s wrong? You pair of inbred, ill-bred, uneducated, part human Noldor bastards are asking me what’s wrong?”

“Yeah, that’s what we’re asking.”

“If you have to ask it’s not worth telling!”

“Dude, you so sound like mum. And Arwen.”

“Like, do you think he’s got PMT?”

“We could, like bring you cake, or like mince pies.”

“Bugger off.”

“No! Like, you’re a fellow elf in distress, we can’t leave you.”

“I won’t stop being in distress until you go away.”

“Why?”

Thranduil stayed silent. Then a window opened and one of Legolas’ stalkers leaned out. “Look, he just doesn’t like you. Really. I mean, read that body language. All confrontation.”

The Twins turned back to Thranduil. “You don’t like us?”

“No, I bloody well do not!”

“Why?”
“Cos, like we did impersonations and offered to bring you cake.”

“Why? Why? Did your father never teach you anything about family history?”

“Well, yeah, but we weren’t paying attention.”

“Noldor and Sindar do not get on. End of story.”

The Twins turned back to the stalkers’ house. “Scuse me?”

The window was opened once more and a head was struck out. “Yes?”

“What’s he talking about?”

“Sounds like a family feud to me. Takes ages to get over them. Two of our cousins aren’t speaking because of a broken lasagne dish five years ago. Best let him sort it out by himself.”

Eomer, Sandra, Merry and Pippin arrived home together. Frodo was surprised at how chipper Eomer looked, and dragged him to one side.

“How did it go? Are you alright?”

“Fine.” Eomer caught Frodo’s disbelieving expression. “Look, if you’re talking about clothes to a woman everything she wears looks lovely. It’s not that difficult. But I must admit that some of that lingerie stuff looks dangerous.”

Thranduil had deigned to come into the house to see what the commotion was about. He took one look at Sandra, muttered ‘bloody humans’ and skulked back into the garden.

“Did he just say ‘bloody humans’?”

“No, erm, bloody women. Doesn’t like them, sorry, he’s Legolas’ dad, we didn’t invite him, he just turned up.”

“He looks a bit young to be his dad...”

“His family all age well. Mince pie?”

Sandra took a mince pie. “Am I going to be the only woman here?”

“Yes.”

“Oh... erm, I mean, is everyone else here, erm, you know, I don’t like to pry, and it’s not like I mind, but...”

“Oh, no, not like that at all. Thranduil, Eomer and Aragorn are all here because they can’t stand the thought of spending Christmas with their wives. Sam’s wife died, but that was a long time ago now, and Merry and Pippin are divorced.”

“Repeatedly” added Merry.

“Yes, and I don’t know if Gandalf’s ever been married-”

“There was that time in Vegas-”
“Oh, yes, but he got that annulled as soon as he sobered up. She was a female Elvis impersonator, if I remember rightly. Legolas doesn’t really see the point in relationships. Oh, and there’s Gimli, you haven’t met him yet, he’s a bit of a dark horse.”

“What about the twins playing leapfrog in the hall?”

“Well, I’ve always assumed that they never sobered up enough to really be sure about things like gender.”

“Dude, are you talking about us?”

“No, the other twins playing leapfrog in the hall.”

“Oh, okay.” There was a pause. “Heeeeey!”

“We were asking which team you batted for.”

The Twins looked blank.

“Which way you swung?”

“Both ways-”

“Like, cos when you’re on a swing, it has to go both ways-”

“It doesn’t work otherwise.”

“No, no, we were asking about your sexual orientation.”

Both the Twins looked horrified. “It has to be orientated?”

“Like, do you need special equipment?”

“Never mind. Didn’t you say you wanted to go out carol singing?”

“Yeah! Like, we so need petrol money. We’ve been running the van off some oil this nice Chinese restaurant gave us for the last hundred miles and it smells funny.”

“Makes you want to eat wan-tons all the time.”

“Why don’t you take Merry and Pippin with you? Get them out of the house.”

“It’s cold outside and there’s food in here, don’t want to go.”

“You need the fresh air.”

“We’ve just had all the fresh air between here and the bus stop.”

“You won’t leave the house all tomorrow, and you’re all good singers and might make some money.”

This incentive was finally enough to get them to leave the house, though Frodo had to persuade the Twins to put some more clothes on, since wandering round in surfing shorts and hawaiian shirts was a little conspicuous in the middle of december.

Aragorn, Legolas and Sam arrived home just as the Twins were leaving, and just in time for the ‘Weakest Link’ Christmas special. Gimli woke up early, to try and get his body clock in synch for
being awake on Christmas day.

Just before dinner the carol singers arrived back home.

“Dude, that was like, so cool!”

“Yeah! Like, we were great! Really great!”

Legolas was sorting through the understairs cupboard, in search of apocryphal lost Christmas presents, and only giving the Twins partial attention. “Really? What did you sing?”

“We’ll sing it for you.”

The Twins linked arms and began to sing, swaying in time to the music. Every harmony was perfect, every crescendo approached with gusto. After they were two words in Legolas put down what he was working on and looked at them with increasing confusion. They finished and looked expectant.

“What do you think?”

“That’s not a Christmas carol. That’s the anthem of the Soviet Union.”

“But everyone we sang it to gave us money and told us how good our singing was.”

“Because most people round here don’t speak Russian. But you do.”

“It’s Christmassy!”

“Since when were lyrics about the triumph of Communism and Lenin Christmassy?”

“When we were in Moscow at Christmas they sang it.”

“And when would that have been?”

“1980?”

“Yes. So they just happened to be singing the national anthem.”

“We did sing something else.”

“Go on.”

The Twins sang again.

“You know, I really didn’t think that people would put the time and effort into translating ‘I’ve got a brand new combine harvester’ into Latin.”

Later that evening Frodo and Sam were moving their things into Merry and Pippin’s room. This was after Frodo had managed to co-opt Eomer and Aragorn into battling the most fearsome laundry and crockery piles, and fighting them into specially reinforced bio-hazard bags. The room had then been hoovered and filled with air freshener. Then there was the question of the camp bed.

“Look, if you take the camp bed I have to share a bed with Aragorn.”

“Yes, but if you don’t give me the camp bed I have to sleep on this floor.” Frodo lifted his foot from the floor as demonstration. The carpet took about five seconds to gradually peel off the sole of his
foot.

Eomer sighed. "You win. But if he kicks me in his sleep I will come through here and kick you."

As Eomer and Aragorn closed the door behind them Sam noticed the list pinned to the back of it.

"Things Thranduil Doesn’t Hold With."

They looked at Merry and Pippin. "Well, he doesn’t hold with such a lot of things we thought we’d better keep a list. Might come in useful."


"Because he really, really doesn’t hold with them."

Sam continued. “Smoked salmon mousse. TV remote controls. Hobbits.”

“Hands up for moving before next Christmas and not telling Thranduil where we’ve gone?"

All the hobbits put their hands up.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~ ~

T’was the Night Before Christmas...

“What the hell was that?”

“I thought it was one of those modern noises.”

“No, no, definitely not. Modern noises tend to be mechanical. Not yodelling.”

“Well, go and find out what it is then.”

“Why me?”

“You live here, I don’t.”

“But this is my bed, so you can go and look.”

“Whatever it was just did it again. All the more reason for you to go and find out.”

“Why don’t we both go?”

“And lose all the bed-warmth? No, I’ll stay here and keep the duvet warm.”

“I thought you said you didn’t feel the cold?”

“I don’t, but there’s no sense in you coming back to a cold bed after getting up. You’ll catch your death.”

“But you’re already dead, so you don’t need to be warm. Cold is your natural state.”

“So’s being maggot-infested and you don’t see me inviting any of them to bed.”
“We need a compromise. We’ve done diplomatic negotiations, we can figure this out.”

“Ok, you get up and I won’t hit you. It’s still bloody yodelling.”

“No, more complex diplomacy.”

“Sword, rock, parchment?”

“Well, I was going to suggest scissors, paper stone, but we’ll do it your way.”

There was some confused movement.

“How about we do that again with the light on?”

Aragorn got up to turn on the light. Eomer grabbed the rest of the duvet and wrapped himself in it, like an overfed caterpillar.

“Since you’re up...”

“Bastard.”

Aragorn went over to the window and opened the curtains. Now he was here the noise seemed to be coming from the roof. He opened the window, leaned out and looked up.

“Dude!”

One of the Twins’ heads appeared upside down over the guttering, causing Aragorn to jump and knock his head on the windowsill.

“Ooooh, sounded painful.” The Twins vaulted in through the window.

It was at this point, with Aragorn still half out the window, the Twins half in, and Eomer dragging the duvet over to help, that Sandra and the hobbits came in.

“Erm...?”

“We heard yodelling.”

“Like, we were on the roof waiting for present-dude-”

“And we were bored, so we yodelled-”

“And we heard a noise, and saw Estel-”

“And he, like, hit his head-”

“So we came through the window to help.”

“Who’s Estelle?”

“Oh, like, that’s what Aragorn was called when he was little.”

“His parents called him Estelle?”

“No, like, our dad called him Estel.”

“Your dad? What?”
“Erm, he was fostered when he was younger, and Estel means something different where the Twins come from.”

“Where do they come from?”

“Like, this valley with trees and rocks and waterfalls and Glorfindel and flowers and plants and dad and-”

“Right, thank you.” Sandra turned to Frodo. “I don’t want to know what glorfindel is, do I?”

“Don’t worry, he’s a person.”

Legolas came in through the window.

“Do none of you use doors?”

“It was locked. The drainpipe was easier. What’s going on?”

“Like, you all have to go to bed-”

“Present-dude won’t come when you’re awake.”

There were wary looks between the rest of them. It was Sandra who broke the silence. “Aren’t you a bit old for this?”

“Like, present-dude has never disappointed us before-”

“We, like had to get used to presents coming on different days-”

“But there are always presents.”

“So, like, we want to meet this guy!”

“He must be so cool.”

“You still believe in Father Christmas?”

“Well, like, he’s got lots of different names-”

“So, if we meet him, we can ask him what his real one is-”

“So we can address his letters properly.”

Sandra took a deep breath. She looked at the others in the room, who nodded.

“Elladan. Elrohir. I hate to be the one who has to break this to you-”

Frodo grabbed Sandra’s arm. “Actually, no, look at them.” The Twins were staring unfocusedly at a lampshade and a bookcase respectively. “Could you do that to them? It’d be like kicking a puppy.”

“What’s she going to do?”

“Dude, I think she wants to kick us.”

Both the Twins tried to hide behind Aragorn. Orcs they could deal with, but they knew from experience with Arwen that girls fought much dirtier than orcs. And that kicking could be very painful.
“Erm, ok, right, I hate to be the one that breaks this to you but Father Christmas won’t come unless you’re really asleep and not pretending.”

“Oh. So no yodelling?”

“No yodelling. Sleeping.”

25th December

As per usual, the hobbits managed to wake everyone up at about four thirty in the morning. Merry and Pippin had special glam-rock pyjamas with which to start the morning by doing Slade impersonations in the hall (just in case anyone managed to stay asleep). Everyone managed to get up, and were immediately plied with bacon rolls by Frodo (keep the strength up for present unwrapping). As soon as the presents were unwrapped (which we won’t bore you with, since most of those present were people who ran out of present ideas quicker than new things could be invented) everyone disappeared to put on their Christmas clothes.

This was fine with everyone except Eomer and Aragorn, who had been given England rugby shirts. Normally this would have been a well received present, were it not for the unfortunate redesign. They were skin tight, and incredibly revealing. Both of them were very uncomfortable, and had a strong feeling that the phrases ‘rugby shirt’ and ‘visible nipples’ should not be associated.

Thranduil had retreated into a silent disapproval of everyone and everything around him, which suited everyone else, since they could just ignore him. It probably suited Thranduil as well, because, as far as they could tell, he liked Not Holding With Things.

After everyone had recovered from Christmas lunch enough to move (about 5pm) there was the air of anticlimax and boredom that always comes on Christmas afternoon. Taking the piss out of how much you could see of Eomer and Aragorn’s post-turkey beer guts only amused for about fifteen minutes.

“Let’s play some party games.”

“Chase my neighbour up the passage!”

“Pippin, do you remember the list of Forbidden Games?”

“Oh, sorry, there was that one, and beggar my neighbour, and postman’s knock, and, and-”

“Scavenger hunt, because you can’t tell the difference between scavenging and theft. And murder in the dark.”

“How about British Bulldogs?”

“No. Let’s see if we can make this two Christmases in a row where no-one ends up in casualty, shall we?”

“Tig?”

“No. Pippin Rules Tig is more dangerous than British Bulldogs.”

“Charades then?”

“Yes, on the proviso that you use no porn titles.”
“But I had a really good one worked out for ‘Faster Pussycat, Kill! Kill!’.”

“No.”

“We’ll go first! We’ve got a good one!” The Twins were bouncing up and down.

They started miming.

“It’s a book—”

“Lots of books—”

“And— and— a scroll?”

The Twins nodded.

“Nine words. In what language is this nine words?”

“Like, English. We’re not that mean.”

They continued to mime.

“Fourth word—”

“Constipation?”

“Lower back pain?”

“Epilepsy?”

“Wasps?”

“Fighting?”

The Twins made encouraging gestures.

“War? So it’s got war in the title.”

“Like, I think it would be easier if we mimed the subject matter.”

“Isn’t that what you were doing?”

They continued miming, including using props, furniture people and interesting acrobatics. Eventually light dawned on Legolas.

“Are you trying to mime ‘A History of the War Between Athens and Sparta’?”

“Yes!”

“Dude, it must have been your Thucydides impersonation.”

Meanwhile, in the Halls of Mandos...

“Why are we doing this again? I think our mere presence here has come down quite firmly on one side of the religion question.”
“Because, dear,” the word was used as a weapon, “in Rohan we always remembered Midwinter festivals. And wedding anniversaries.”

Faramir cowered away from Eowyn.

“I think what my brother was trying to say was, why today, because we don’t have much in the way of time or weather.”

Eowyn looked at Boromir. “Oh, I’m sorry, is it wrong to want to do something nice with your family for once? Oh, I remember, not in your family, your idea of a good family get together involves homicide. I know, you get your father, I’ll get some firelighters and we’ll have a good old fashioned Gondorian family get together!”

“Look, he wasn’t himself, driven out of his mind by a very evil Evil. And he’s apologised.”

“Only because you made him! If you think I’m going to forgive someone who nearly chargrilled my husband, then you have another thing coming!”

Faramir tried to be placatory. “Look, let’s not mention father, shall we? We just avoid each other now. And anyway, we’re non-corporeal and so not flammable.”

“Are those new tapestries?”

They all turned to look at Lothiriel. “No.”

“Oh. When’s my husband coming back?”

“Since he’s incarnated somewhere where there at least twenty types of beer he’s never tried before, who knows?”

“That’s good, I can get my embroidery done then.”

They ate in silence for a bit. Boromir turned to Faramir. “Tell us a story.”

“Look, you know all the old ones backwards.”

“You were in the middle of a new saga, and you stopped just at an exciting bit.”

“Oh, so I was. Right. Lord Vader stepped towards Luke Skywalker, and....”

The evening everyone was watching the tv and being fed a combination of turkey sandwiches and mushroom vol-au-vents. Or in the case of Pippin, turkey, mushroom vol-au-vent and ketchup sandwiches.

Then there was that terrible moment, dreaded everywhere at Christmas...

“Let’s all play Trivial Pursuit!”

“In teams! I’m not playing on my own.”

“There aren’t enough pieces anyway.” Frodo had got the box out and was starting to set it up.

“Right, I’m assuming the normal teams; me and Sam, Merry and Pippin; Legolas and Gimli; I suppose Radagast and Gandalf, you can play together, but not cheating!”
“Us? Cheat?”

“Would we do such a thing?”

“Yes, repeatedly. Anyway, the Twins can be a team, so can Aragorn and Eomer. That’s six, and we’ve only got six pieces—”

“I’ll be on your team, Frodo.” said Sandra, possibly a bit too quickly.

“So what team do you want to be on, Thranduil?”

Thranduil was seething again. “You’re rather implying I’d be happy to be on a team with any of these... things. I never thought I’d see my son taking the side of a dwarf against his father!”

“Right, you take that back right now!” Thranduil had been getting up Sandra’s nose since she’d first met him, and this was the final straw. “How dare you speak like that! None of us can help how we’re made, and quite frankly I’d rather be him than you!”

“At the point that I’d ever take advice from a woman—”

Thranduil was cut off by a stinging slap across the face from Sandra. He sat there, completely shocked. then he pulled himself together.

“Right son. You’re disowned. I’m leaving now, get my suitcase from upstairs.”

“There’s no trains till the 27th, dad.”

“Oh. Right. Well then. You’re still disowned, but I can’t leave.”

“How many times is this that you’ve disowned me now? Seven? Eight?”

The circular argument continued as Sandra went to talk to Gimli.

“Are you alright?”

“Och, I’m fine. Seems I only get talked to to be insulted.”

“Oh, I know the feeling. Why do you put up with it?”

“Deep down, they’re all good people. Apart from Gandalf.”

26th December

The paper had been cleared up, the turkey fricasseeed, the sprouts hurled into the dustbin and everyone was bored again. Frodo strode into the living room, determination written across his face. Outside, the temperature dropped by three degrees and the wind picked up.

“We are going for a walk.”

“Oh, no we’re not.”

“It’s Boxing Day, you’ve all eaten far too much, you haven’t been outside in over twenty-four hours, so you’re all going for a walk.”

“We’ve got things to do.”
“Such as?”

“Well, Pippin and I were thinking of Power Napping. It sounds interesting.”

“Walk, then nap.”

“But it’s all concrete and—”

“We’re going to the park, Aragorn.”

“We should go riding instead.”

“No, walking. No horses, ok? Right, everyone, wrap up warm, don’t forget hats, scarves and gloves, and be at the front door in five minutes. And that includes you two.”

Gandalf and Radagast looked utterly shocked. They both rather assumed they were operating under diplomatic immunity.

“We are elderly wiz—”

“Bollocks. Up and out!”

After much cajoling, threats and abuse they were all eventually lined up outside the house. Gandalf was in his wheelchair, and Radagast was busily harnessing his various pets to the front of the chair.

“What are you doing?”

“Boxing Day Hunt. Traditional. Tally ho!”

“It’s not traditional in a wheelchair in suburbia.”

“Most foxes are now suburban.”

“I thought you liked animals?”

“I do.”

“Then why are you going to chase down and rip apart a fox?”

“Rip apart?” Radagast looked horrorstruck. “No! It’s been lonely since Basil died, and my neck’s cold. I need a new fox to keep my neck warm. I take very good care of them.”

“Oh. Erm, that’s nice for you.”

Radagast climbed onto the back of the wheelchair and pulled out a hunting horn. He blew a call, yelled “View Halloa!” cracked his whip and they were off.

“How long do you give them before they’re arrested?”

“An hour, tops.”

They started walking. After about ten feet Merry and Pippin managed to persuade the Twins to carry them. They finally managed to make their way to the park.

“Why are you throwing bread at the ducks?”

“Because. It’s what we do.”
“Ah, I see, fattening them up for later.”

“No, we just feed them.”

“This century is downright weird.”

Sandra turned to Frodo, after listening to this exchange between Eomer and Aragorn. “What is he on about?”

Frodo sighed. “Look, I come clean. We’re all immortal, we’re all at least six thousand years old, only Aragorn and Eomer are even human, and up until a couple of days ago Eomer was dead, he’s just visiting for Christmas from the afterlife.”

Sandra paused, then laughed. “That’s dead good, you should do stand-up, you know. But I think the not human bit’s going a bit over the top. Oh, yeah, and why are Legolas and his dad talking to trees?”

“They’re not talking to trees. They’re bitching to trees about each other.”

“Ok, why are they bitching to trees?”

Frodo considered the truth, then decided against it. “They’re hippies. Releasing the bad feeling back into nature.” Although Frodo had a feeling that Legolas was hoping to persuade a tree to drop something heavy on Thranduil.

“Ah, that explains it. Is that why they don’t get on, ‘cos Legolas is a corporate sellout?”

“Nah, I think they don’t get on because Thranduil’s a bit of a bastard.”

A few days later Eomer had been ‘persuaded’ (read: threatened with terrible, horrific tortures of his immortal soul) to return to the Halls of Mandos. He was wandering along past the various halls of his, and other people’s, ancestors, carrying large amounts of beer (or possibly the celestial souls of beer) and humming to himself.

Then he suddenly felt an arrow-point at his neck and a sword point at his groin.

“Welcome back, Eomer.”

“Oh, shit.”
878. England is beset by waves of Viking invaders. The last free English King, Alfred, has retired to Athelney, the last stronghold of the Anglo-Saxons; a small fort, in a swamp in Somerset.

“AAAAAAARRRRRRRAGORN!”

“Yes, dearest?”

Arwen just looked at him and seethed.

“Um?”

“Why? Why? Why did you do this to me?”

“Do what?”

“Bring me here. I was quite happy. The Roman empire in the east has architecture. It has culture. It has SHOPS! And BATHS!”

“Yes?”

“Aragorn, when I married you I did not intend to end up living in a swamp with a group of unwashed inbred Rohirrim-alikes! Why do you think I waited until you became king before marrying you!”

“Ummm... I thought that was your father’s idea.”

Arwen suddenly looked edgy. “Yes. Yes it was. But only because he has my best interests at heart.”

Being that all the buildings were made of wood this argument was carrying the length of the island. In the mead-hall King Alfred sighed. “Tell me, brother Frodo, where does the lady Arwen come from?”

Frodo jumped slightly. Since the argument between Aragorn and Arwen was being conducted entirely in Sindarin he’d been listening in with some amusement. “Erm- The East.”

“Anywhere I would have heard of?”

“No. Erm, more east than Constantinople or Jerusalem or anywhere you’d have heard of.”

“So why did they end up here?”
“Eeeeerrrrrm... heee... yes, he went on a pilgrimage, to, to the Holy Land, yep, got over enthusiastic, carried on going and converted this heathen family. Who gave him her and in marriage as a present.”

“Not a punishment?”

“Apparently not.”

“What about her brothers? Why are they here?”

“Erm-” Frodo paused, and considered that Alfred had met the Twins. “Er... I think they just followed them here because it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

There was a distant crash. Aragorn ran into the hall, buckling on armour as he went. “Just going out, northmen need killing, be back in a few days.”

“Oi! Remember to bring something to eat back with you!”

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“Frodo? Are you ready to write this down?”

Frodo nodded and leaned over his wax tablet. Bishop Legolas, the king’s chief advisor, hovered in the background.

“Right. Meeting of King’s Thegns. Any matters arising that don’t in some way concern the northmen? Everyone accept the minutes from the last meeting?”

“Being that only you, your monk and Ceolwulf here can read, I think that we have to.”

“Good, good. Right, analysis of the situation. Resources available to us: Shire armies (parts not having been already slaughtered). King’s Thegns (that’s you, and Aragorn if he hasn’t been killed yet, and he did look quite depressed when he went out). Horses. Spears, shields etc. One insane warband -”

“This would be those twins, yes?”

“Yes - actually, I haven’t seen them for about a month, put them down as a maybe. Arwen. The power of the Almighty.”

“A goat.”

“A goat?”

“It’s a very irate goat.”

“Ok, write it down. Any other suggestions?”

There was a silence.

“Now, resources the heathen invaders have. The land and resources of the rest of my Kingdom that isn’t this swamp. The land and resources of the kingdoms of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia and Kent. Boats. Big axes. Hordes of well trained, insane warriors.”

“This doesn’t look too good-”

“We have the Lord on our side!”
“Fat lot of good that’s done us-”

“Right! Church! Now! I want you face down in penitential prayer before I can finish saying the Lord’s Prayer! Our father who art in heaven-”

There was the sound of running feet as the unfortunate Thegn sought to appease both his lord and his Lord at the same time.

“Continuing where I left off. I have a plan. Step one: summon Shire armies. Step two: kill heathens. Step three: show remaining heathens the Glory of Our Lord. Step four: kill heathens who do not wish to be shown the Glory of Our Lord. Step five: acquire base that is not in swamp. Step six: educate the people in the worship of Our Lord, so that we may assuage His wrath and once more become good Christians. Actually, put that as Step One. Step seven: repeat steps two to six until heathens gone. Step eight: find out where the lady Arwen comes from and send her back there.”

“What’s the timescale for this?”

“Ermm... well, first we have to find some Shires to summon armies from... we should be able to start on Step Two in a couple of years. I believe the pace should pick up a bit after that.”

The Thegns very carefully avoided eye contact.

Legolas cleared his throat. The Thegns suppressed a groan. This meant trouble, as Legolas’ plans always involved them actually going out and doing things, and these things often ended in there being fewer Thegns than there were to start with. Alfred’s plans were much less taxing, usually involving him drawing command structures with a stick on one of the more solid parts of the swamp apt, and bible study when it rained.

“I believe that the rulers in Frankia have had success with fortifications. I believe we should build on their example.”

Alfred looked at Legolas. “We’re living in a fortification.”

“Lots of fortifications. If you would peruse this list of centres to be fortified, and amounts of land needed to support them,” Legolas gave Alfred a piece of parchment, “and if you could just sign where it says ‘by Royal decree of’?”

“This all looks rather complicated.”

“It’s all the rage on the continent, technological warfare. You wouldn’t the Pope to think that this was some kind of cultural backwater...?”

Alfred took a quill and signed.

Legolas looked at the signature. “Must you insist on signing yourself as ‘rex swamporum’?”

“But I am king of a swamp!”

“Yes, but modern politics is all about image. You need to project yourself as a great king, a leader of vast numbers of men, with huge tracts of land.”

“Rex magnus swamporum?”

“No, that isn’t that much of an improvement. How about ‘rex Anglo-Saxorum’?”

“But most Anglo-Saxons are under the rule of the Danes.”
“Yes, but all those who aren’t under the rule of the Danes are under your rule. And it sounds much more impressive than ‘king of a big swamp’.”

Alfred crossed out part of his signature and re-signed the document. “But since I am king and everything, I think we should still raise the shire armies and attack the heathens.”

“Hmm. A diversion. That could work. I will have messengers sent out immediately. Brother Frodo, take a letter. ‘Dear Ealdorman [insert name here]. It has come to our attention that Wessex is overrun by heathens from the north. Your attendance with your army will be required on... check my diary would you, no, no don’t write that bit down...”

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The messengers had left the previous day, and some of the more efficient ones who’d only been sent a couple of miles down the road were returning.

“My lord! Ealdorman Hrothgar sends word ‘All right, I suppose so’. Ealdorman Werwulf says ‘If you must, but only if everyone else is’.”

“When I said ‘raise the Shires’ I anticipated a better response. Brother Frodo - put ‘more enthusiastic noblemen’ on my ‘To Pray For’ list.”

Frodo nodded, and retrieved a wax tablet from his robes, and found a small space in the corner. As he wrote it began to pour down, and everyone went inside the main hall. There was much enthusiastic polishing of swords and oiling of chainmail.

Suddenly, as if by magic, there was a bang and the doors flew open. Silhouetted against the rain was a hunched figure, swathed in a huge cloak. It limped forwards towards the central fire, muttering under its breath.

“Fucking hate this fucking island, fucking rains all the fucking time.”

As it came to a table the figure dramatically threw off the cape, revealing that the hunch was the unconscious form of Aragorn, and the rest of it was Gandalf. He dumped Aragorn unceremoniously on the table.

“What were you doing in a Danish camp?”

“Ummm... spreading the word of the Lord?”

Legolas stepped out of the shadows. “And would the word of the Lord in your case be ‘do you have anything to drink?’”

“Legolas, nice to see you, you’re looking well.”

Legolas turned to Alfred. “My Lord, if this man is holy then I am the Roman Empress.”

“But he has saved the life of one of my Thegns, and I am indebted to him.”
“Fine, give him some money and tell him to sod off, it works well enough with the northmen.”

Frodo coughed. “Erm, as royal treasurer I’ve been meaning to tell you for a couple of weeks that we’ve got no money.”

“But what about those silver pennies I told you to save for a rainy day?”

“Um, you know that new Danish-style dress that Arwen’s got? She, erm, found them and spent them.”

“Didn’t you try and stop her?”

“She’s twice my height and more terrifying than any northman!”

“Good point. Looks like the only repayment I can offer you Gandalf is my hospitality. Oh, one more question. How did you find this place?”

“I asked directions.”

“This place is secret. Who gave you directions?”

“Big ginger bloke with an axe... Said his name was Ragnar.”

Complete silence descended. Then one of the Thegns murmured “We are so screwed.”

“No, we are not. We are in preparation for a great battle. I want messengers to give momentum to the preparation of the armies. I want the horses ready, the armour, prepared and everyone ready for battle. Everyone who’s not doing anything useful, pray for victory. Oh, and someone find a healer for Aragorn.”

Everything was in bustle as Sam came into the hall, bearing a bucket of water in one hand and a handful of herbs in the other. He nodded to Gandalf, who was perched on the edge of the table Aragorn was laid on.

“Ah, I thought you would be with Frodo. How are you?”

“Doing fine, thank you. The monastic gardening suits me.”

“You can do monastic gardening in a swamp?”

“In a window box or two. I do the healing herbs as well, so I’m the doctor round here. Could you move a minute? Thank you.” Sam methodically tore up the herbs and put them in the buck Aet of water. Then he threw the bucket of water over Aragorn’s head.

Aragorn woke up spluttering. He sat up, and managed to focus on his surroundings. “Why did you stop me, I could have taken them!”

Gandalf and Sam shared a look. “No, you couldn’t. Now, there’s a big battle coming, why don’t you get ready?”

“Why are you here?”

“Rome this time of year, it’s terrible, full of pilgrims, you can’t get a table for dinner anywhere.”

“You tried to kill another Pope didn’t you.”
“Look, if they would just make me Pope, none of this would happen. So, why were you trying to take on a whole heathen army?”

Aragorn looked at his feet and muttered. “Argument with Arwen.”

“Arwen’s here?”

“Yes.”

“Arwen’s here. In the swamp.”

“Yes?”

“It may have been a kindness to let you die.”

“Just because you’ve never liked her doesn’t mean she’s a bad person.”

“No, but the fact that nobody else likes her either—”

“Why did you even bother coming here?”

“Do you talk like this to everyone who saves your life?”

“Only the annoying wizards!”

They stopped as they realised that everyone had turned to look at them, and were muttering ‘wizards?’.

“Erm... wizards... it’s an insult where he comes from. Means his mother had carnal knowledge of sheep.”

Gandalf knocked Aragon out for the second time that day.

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(Extract from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, signed F. Baggins) Then Alfred rode to Brixton by the eastern side of Selwood; and there came out to meet him all the people of Somersersetshire, and Wiltshire, and that part of Hampshire which is on this side of the sea; and they rejoiced to see him. He proceeded to Edington; and there fought with all the army of the northmen, and put them to flight. Then the army gave him hostages with many oaths, that they would go out of his kingdom. They told him also, that their king would receive baptism.

Alfred was having doubts about the baptism. “Are you sure that Gandalf’s a priest?”

Legolas and Gandalf were in priestly robes, in the middle of a river. Two vikings cautiously waded in to receive baptism.

Aragorn gave a noncommittal gesture. “Well, Legolas says he is. And Legolas is a bishop.”

“I suppose so. Erm, are you supposed to hold their heads under water for that long during a baptism?”

“Not normally.”

Frodo looked up from his wax tablet. “Well, they are murderous heathens, so they’ve committed more sins, so you’ve got to give them more time under the water to wash them all away.”
“Even if that involves drowning them?”

“Well, they would go to the Lord in a state of Grace, I suppose.”

Alfred looked horrified. He yelled at Legolas. “Don’t you dare drown any of them! This is supposed to be sealing a peace treaty for goodness sake!”

Legolas looked at Alfred, then hoiked the unfortunate viking out of the water by his hair. He thumped him under the chest a few times, until the viking coughed up a couple of lungfuls of river water and started breathing again, and sent him back to the bank.

The next two short vikings half swam out into the middle of the river. Legolas was about to dunk them, when he picked one up and looked at it suspiciously. Then he picked the both of them up, and waded out of the river. “Frodo. I think these are related to you. Deal with them.”

Alfred looked at Frodo. “You didn’t tell me you had Danish relatives.”

“These aren’t Danes.” Frodo yanked off a pair of big ginger false beards to reveal Merry and Pippin, looking sheepish. “These are my ner-do-well cousins.”

“Frodo! How are you doing?”

“I’m fine. What the he- what on earth do you think you’re doing?”

“We were getting baptised. And before that we were looting, pillaging and fornicating. You should try it, it’s fun.”

Alfred looked aghast. “But you are incurring God’s wrath!”

Pippin looked smug. “Well, we haven’t seen much wrath for the amount of incurring we’ve been doing.”

“Yes, but did break my finger in Northumbria.” said Merry.

“You desecrated an altar the day before.”

“It wasn’t my fault I was sick all over it, I told you Olaf can’t cook, but you insisted on letting him.”

“Shut up the both of you,” said Frodo, “And get down and give me thirty ‘Hail Marys’ while I think of a suitable penance. Hmmm... I think you should walk-”

“Barefoot-” added Alfred.

“Backwards-” added Aragorn.

“To Canterbury-”

“And no stopping at any alehouses-”

“And indeed, no consumption of alcohol for the entire journey.”

“Aaaaawww, but, but-”

“Keep quiet, you’re in enough trouble as it is. Any more noise out of either of you and it’ll be Jerusalem. The long way round. And you’ll be hopping.”
Some years later...

“So, Brother Frodo, what do you think of my biography of Alfred?” Asser, jobbing priest looked hopefully at Frodo.

Frodo looked shifty. “Um, well, nicely written. Very nicely written. Pretty.”

“You hate it, don’t you.”

“Um, well, maybe just a little bit. It’s a very good effort. I like what you’ve done with the illumination.”

“You’re just upset that I missed out the bits that you told me.”

“Well, you did! You just skipped all the bits with my cousins in them!”

“Look you, I’ve got an international readership to think of here. How convincing is it going to be if I send out stories of short northmen with false beards? This manuscript is going to make my name boy, I’ll be known from Dyfed to Constantinople!”

“By lying! You are supposed to be a holy man!”

“I am not lying! I just left bits out, because nobody would be interested in them.”

“You were fine with putting in all that detail about his stomach trouble. It’s not exactly dignified. How’s he going to feel when his piles are known from Dyfed to Constantinople?”

“Look, if he doesn’t want them to be written about he shouldn’t hark on about them at every given opportunity. Thinks he’s so special because God gave him piles. I’d have been more impressed if he’d given him a better singing voice.”

Frodo looked sulky. “You left me out.”

“Well, that I did. Because you don’t have mass literary appeal. No-one wants to hear your life story. It’s the kings that are important.”

“You put yourself in.”

“That’s author’s privilege. I have to put myself in otherwise people will think I don’t know him.”

“You don’t know him. All the bits you’ve got in there with him talking to you he was talking to me!”

“I see him all the time.”

“You see the back of his head every week in chapel.”

“He had me called to his court all the way from Wales I’ll have you know!”

“Only because he believes in the value of a diverse multicultural workplace environment. And Welsh was the only minority he hadn’t got one of yet.”

“It’s all the same with you English. Always had it in for the Welsh.”

“It’s all the same with you Welsh, a set of bloody paranoiacs!” said Frodo, in a truly awful imitation
of Asser’s accent.

“That just proves it!”

Just at the point when they were about to have a go at each other they found themselves separated by a hoe. Sam had arrived in the nick of time.

“Mr. Asser sir, don’t you think you should be going an attending to things in chapel?”

Knowing when he was beaten Asser slunk off, mumbling things in Welsh.

“I’m sorry Sam. But he’s written all I about Alfred and left out half of the important things! I never did that.”

“Well, you did leave out some things about Gandalf.”

“Only in the interest of public decency. I didn’t want to know those things, so I didn’t think I should inflict them on anyone else. But he left out Merry and Pippin, and all that trouble they had with the archbishop of Canterbury and the altar wine, and Arwen managing to get Aragorn banished and—”

“Don’t you think that’s all for the best?”

“Why?”

“Because we don’t want to be going round making ourselves all conspicuous. It’ll cause problems in the future.”

“But he left out Gimli, and Gimli was dutiful and non-controversial.”

“Gimli was also very dull. You can’t remember what he did. I don’t go round expecting to have myself put into any fancy history, because I do the things that need doing, not all this heroic nonsense.”

“I suppose you’re right Sam. So, how’s the garden?”

“Well, there’s some lovely strawberries just coming ripe now, Mr. Frodo.”

Chapter End Notes

The end.
31st May 2004
This is it. The end. No more Bagenders. We had intended for there to be a nice finishing episode, with ends all tied up and so on, but we both had our Finals, and suddenly we got to the point where we are now - as I write this Lady Alyssa is at the opposite end of the country to me. So I’m afraid I have to leave you with a rather mediocre Pointless Historical Episode as an ending.
I've enjoyed writing this. I hope you've enjoyed reading it. Thank you to everyone who's every sent us a nice e-mail, left a lovely message in the Guestbook, or drawn us a picture - all those have made me smile, and sorry to everyone who never got a reply. If you want to continue and write your own adventures for the Bagenders crew, then go ahead and do it, with our blessing (as long as you don't pretend to be us. That would be weird and creepy).
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!