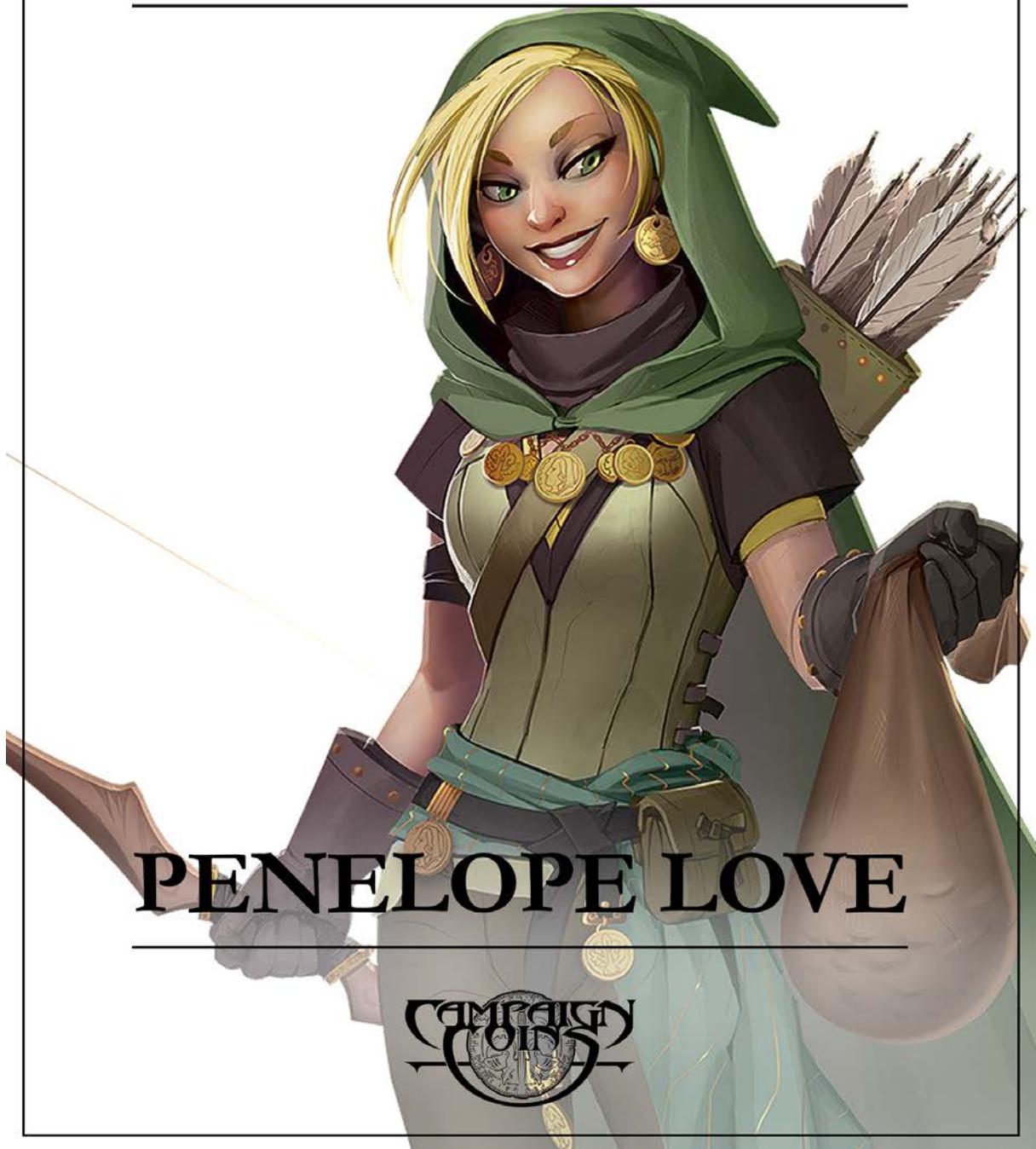


A CACKLE OF GNOLLS



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Warning: This story contains:

- Full frontal barbarian nudity
- Mild cussing

A dwarf stood on the back of covered tinker's wagon, waving a tin saucepan at a small crowd. A curtain hid the back of the cart from view and made a stage of the tailboard.

It was mid-Frir Season. The cobbled market square of Merchant's Rest shimmered in the heat, yet the dwarf wore a full travelling cloak. He clanked with every movement. It was almost as if the cloak covered a suit of chain mail, greaves, a breastplate, cuirass, vambrace, lower pauldron, several bits of fan-plate and a large axe.

'I could praise my cookware all day, but don't just listen to me,' Dhum said. 'Listen to one of my many satisfied customers. How about you, sir,' he pointed to a brawny barbarian who towered head and shoulders above the crowd. The barbarian wore nothing but trousers and a great sword. He had a bull aurochs tattooed on his chest and two hunting hounds tattooed on his broad shoulders. The only thing that spoiled his thick layer of genuine and unspoiled savagery was the omelet pan he clutched in a very unconvincing manner.

'May I ask your name, total stranger,' Dhum said.

'You know who I am, Dhum,' Hazzard said, surprised. 'We're travelling together, in that very cart you are standing on,' he reminded him. 'I know you forget things, but Olan's balls! You knew who I was at breakfast.'

'I have never met you before,' Dhum said loudly, through gritted teeth. 'You must be mistaken. Sir.'

'Oh! Oh yeah right!' Hazzard remembered. 'You are right sir. I do not know you at all. I was mistaken.' He snapped to attention. 'My name is Hazzard and I use this iron thingie here every day,' he said, and then recited, woodenly. 'Why. Nothing. Brings a slab of wild boar to life better than a splash of *sauce mariniere*.'

'Any questions?' Dhum asked, brightly.

An old lady raised a hand. 'What is an Olan warrior doing with a sauté pan?' she asked.

'Is that what it is?' Hazzard said. He gazed down at the pan in surprise. 'I thought it might be an armored sun shade.'

'What a barbarian! He doesn't know that *sauce mariniere* is only served with seafood,' a burly man behind Hazzard snickered.

The tattoo hounds on Hazzard's shoulders snarled. Hazzard turned and in one deft movement flattened the snickerer with the sauté pan. 'Any other questions?' Hazzard asked, surveying the crowd.

Silence reigned.

'Only 25 coppers a pot,' Dhum said brightly.

Under Hazzard's benevolent gaze, the crowd rushed forward, waving their coins in the air. It was a gratifying sight for any itinerant saucepan seller.

A tousled head thrust itself through the curtains at the back of the cart. 'Fools! Bumpkins! Dupes! Avariss the rogue cried, savagely, like a half-elven turtle. 'Don't buy these saucepans. They're cursed!'

'How do you curse a saucepan?' a disappointed bargain hunter asked, as the crowd slowly backed away.

'They will always burn the porridge!' Avariss cried, wildly. 'Anything cooked in them tastes like turnip armpits. Do turnips even have armpits? I don't know. I don't care!' She shot the assembly a blazing glare of unrestrained hostility and retired behind the curtain again, out of sight if not out of hearing. The fascinated crowd could still hear her chant of 'Boring! Boring! Booooring!'

Sales died away after Avariss's outburst, although the market square stayed crowded. Nothing this exciting had happened in Merchant's Rest since five years back when a goat ate Farmer Hopweed's long johns. They still had the goat.

As the last buyer left, Dhum pocketed their cash and raised the tailboard. He hoisted himself onto the box seat and slapped the reins on the backs of the mules. The wagon started, slowly, its load of tin pans rattled away behind him. As they left the square they passed the Frir-shrine, a mud brick dome garlanded with flowers. Within the shrine squatted a small statue of Frir, goddess of hearth, home and fertility, keeping a benevolent eye on her worshippers.

'By the Builder, I don't want to be critical but could you try to get a little more life into your routine?' Dhum asked Hazzard who ambled along beside him.

'Cookware isn't really my thing,' Hazzard said with a grin, while the mastiffs on his shoulders yawned.

'And Avariss, couldn't you just let me make a few sales,' Dhum muttered reproachfully through the curtain. 'We do need to keep up a pretense of being actual merchants and besides I enjoy having money again.'

'Coppers. Are you serious? I don't get out of bed for anything less than a chest full of gold. I tire of this charade and I want it over!' Avariss cried, in a muffled tirade from behind the curtain. 'I hate the country and everything in it, dung, sales patter, stooges, bumpkins and you two included. The sooner we get back to town the better.'

'Aw quit complaining,' Hazzard thumped exuberantly on the wagon cover. 'I thought elves loved Nature.'

This incensed Avariss so much that she poked her head out from beneath the curtain, despite the risk of getting covered in countryside. 'I'm only half-elf,' she snapped. 'The rest of me is all city. Nature is over-rated. It's hot, dusty, covered in flies, and smells of ass.'

'They are not asses, they are mules,' said Dhum, stiffly. 'And you could thank them for hauling your ungrateful arse across the country.'

They passed through the village gates and the twin statues of Rimbard that stood outside. Avariss leaned over to give the nearest statue a farewell pat. The statue showed Rimbard in the guise in which she walked the earth on moonlit nights, a crone hooded and cloaked with a suggestion of bat wings about the back. The stone was worn smooth from merchants seeking Rimbard's blessing as they headed out to travel the border lands between Merchant's Rest and the Fifth Duchy.

'Rimbard aid us, we are lost,' Avariss muttered.

'I'm not lost!' Hazzard cried exuberantly. 'I'm where I belong. I just love being back in the Great Outdoors!' He spread his arms wide to embrace the emerald forests and azure sky.

Avariss snorted, inelegantly. 'The Great Outdoors is for swineherds and barbarians and other deeply unfashionable folk. Give me a city, any day. Look at Tanzin, the greatest of the City-States. We were there only the other day. Why did we ever leave? We had the finest wines, the choicest foods, the most exquisite jewelry and the best dresses. How sublime was that darling little black silk sleeveless, floor-length gown with fitted bodice and spider web décolleté?'

'Which you bought so we ran out of money, and had to go adventuring again to get more,' Dhum said, promptly.

'It wasn't just me,' said Avariss, indignantly. 'You were spending hand over fist. You wasted a wad on that map.'

'I'll have you know this is a hand drawn map in wizard glow ink created by the finest cartographers in Tanzin,' Dhum retorted. 'It shows every contour line, dungeon entrance, bandit lair and pit trap on the borderlands. As an added bonus it is etched on dragon hide so it is totally fire proof,' he finished.

'Methinks he doth protest too much. And what did you waste your money on?' Avariss asked Hazzard cynically.

'I bought the night of my life,' Hazzard said, exuberantly.

'And what was that like?'

'No idea, but I woke up six days later in a gutter so it must have been *awesome!*'

'How did we end up here again?' Avariss moaned. 'I wasn't in on the deal making.'

'The Fifth Duke's sergeant, Yorck, turned up at my lodgings at the Tanzin Builder's Hall and said Hazzard had given his oath as an Olan warrior to retrieve the Fifth Duke's treasure chest, which was stolen by bandits in the borderlands. He had this wagon ready, fully laden, and gave a generous advance. I hauled Hazzard out of the gutter and you out of the dress-maker's and here we are,' Dhum said.

'This sudden generosity didn't strike you as a tad suspicious?' Avariss asked.

'We had run out of money and needed a job anyway.' He turned to Hazzard. 'Can you remember what happened? You must have impressed him. The sergeant is a legendary hard man.'

Hazzard shook his head. 'It all went a bit hazy after I drank him under the table and swore not to tell. I must have promised all that other stuff after.'

'Like the three of us can succeed when a band of armed men failed,' Avariss pointed out the glaring hole in the plan. 'I bet dear old Yorckie sent us out here to get killed to silence you permanently.'

'It's a great plan,' Hazzard said. 'We have the element of surprise. The bandits totally won't be expecting just three of us. They'll think we have reinforcements behind us and run, and then we cut them down.'

'I give you my better plan,' Dhum added, indicating the cart. 'We act like honest merchants and when the bandits attack we'll ambush them, get the chest back and get the Duke's reward.'

'You mean we'll get the chest back and keep it for ourselves,' Avariss corrected him.

'The men guarding the treasure gave their lives to defend the Duke's credit. Do not dishonor their sacrifice,' Hazzard said.

'They're not dead. They're missing. Because they've scarpered with a chest full of gold,' Avariss pointed out, exasperated.

'Apparently, I gave my oath as an Olan warrior to return that chest,' Hazzard informed her. 'Not that I remember, but it sounds like the kind of thing I would say.'

Avariss heaved a deep sigh. 'Trust an Olan warrior to be so stupid!' She cast a deeply hostile glance at the nearest tree and retreated into the wagon, grumbling. Scraping and notching sounds from within suggested that for all her complaints she was keeping her bow and arrows ready for action.

Hazzard dropped back to follow the wagon from a distance. Dhum kept the mules trotting along the road, hoping they looked like a plump and tempting target.

At first they passed through fertile groves and fields but then the land became wilder, hilly and forested. Snow-capped mountains rose on the horizon, a few days ride away.

Dhum spread his map out on his knee as he drove, and pored over it. He loved a good map. He was happiest underground where movement was pre-ordained by excavation, construction and cavern. Aboveground, maps gave a reassuring order to the infinite possibilities of unfettered direction. 'Merchant's Rest was the last big town,' he reported to the resentful curtain quivering behind him. 'We're now travelling into the borderlands between the City-State of Tanzin and the Fifth Duchy. There is only one small village on the road ahead. It is called Sunset. Then there's nothing until the border fort of Three Wolves.' He looked closer at the map. 'Three Wolves won't be much help. There's a note here to say that after the City-States and the Five Duchies signed a peace treaty the fort was abandoned and now it's a ruin. The treasure chest and the guards came from the Fifth Duchy towards Tanzin and went missing somewhere between Three Wolves and Sunset.'

The afternoon was uneventful, except for when the mules sat in the middle of the road and refused to move until Hazzard showed them his great sword and muttered about barbecued mule steaks. Several times Dhum stopped the cart at a lonely corner, but they were attacked by nothing more savage than Avariss's bout of cart-cleaning.

As the afternoon warmed and lengthened, the road got lonelier and the land rose towards the mountains. The trees pressed close to the side of the road. They were truly entering the wilderness.

'Good bandit country,' Dhum said happily to himself. The afternoon got warmer still. A gentle breeze played, birds sang in the trees. Despite the best attempts at vigilance, Dhum felt his eyes closing.

The mules sensed their driver's attention was flagging and their pace slowed from a trot to an amble. A fly buzzed around Dhum's head. He yawned and waved his hand over his face to brush it away.

A sudden whizzing sound came from the back of the cart, straight past Dhum's right ear. He woke with a start.

The fly fell dead to the ground, skewered by the deadly point. Avariss hopped out of the cart to retrieve her arrow, which had lodged in a tree.

'You could have taken my ear off,' Dhum protested.

'Sorry. Thought it was a bandit,' she said. 'I might see more bandits the longer I stay in the country so let's keep those mules moving,' she added, meaningfully.

After that Dhum had no trouble staying awake.

Finally they stopped for the night and pitched camp at a small clearing off the road. Hazzard watered and fed the mules and tied them to the wagon shaft. Avariss shot a couple of rabbits for dinner. Dhum barbecued the catch of the day then potted around the campfire while he cooked the plum duff and damper.

As it got darker they drew lots for the order of watch to the accompaniment of their normal routine of threats, bribes and accusations of cheating. Dhum ended up with first watch as the other two settled in for the night.

'Hey, we're in the wilds now,' Hazzard realized.

'Tell me something I don't know. Is the ground supposed to be this lumpy?' Avariss reported, fretfully. 'What are you doing?' she cried in alarm as she noticed Hazzard hauling off his trousers, revealing the two horse tattoos on his calves.

'I am a Man of Nature and that means buck naked until we reach the next town!'

'Oh for the love of all that's elvish there is such a thing as over-sharing,' Avariss informed him.

'You're only half elvish,' Hazzard cheered her. 'If you don't want to see then don't look.' He flung his trousers at her head. She ducked and the trousers sailed into a bush.

'I'm gonna take a dump in the woods,' he announced enthusiastically.

'See what I mean about over-sharing,' Avariss moaned. She turned over and pulled her cloak over her head.

'Come on!' Hazzard invited Dhum, who declined, not because he wasn't happy to do some manly bonding but because he was a dwarf and took his ablutions like clockwork. Nine o'clock every morning, never more, never less.

Hazzard headed off into the woods and returned with a satisfied look on his face. He opened his mouth to speak only to have Dhum and Avariss cry as one. 'Not interested.'

Instead he took a turn around the fire, enjoying the cool breeze all over. All he really wanted now was a band of brothers, a bottle of grog and some woad. However he accepted the lack of two out of three philosophically, settled by the fire and soon snored peacefully.

Meanwhile Avariss tossed and fidgeted. 'This ground has rocks in it,' she grumbled, and got up and moved. 'Damp,' she complained, rising again. 'Mosquitoes.' A third move.

The night fell silent, the serene sounds of the woods at peace only disturbed by Avariss's discovery that Nature had made every bit of ground equally uncomfy.

A wolf howled from the forest.

Hazzard broke off mid-snore and bounded to his feet, hand on his sword, alert in an instant. 'Just what I need, a wolf pelt!'

The mules kicked up their hooves and flattened their ears.

'What is that smell?' Avariss wrinkled her nose. Then she realized she was downwind from the mules. She shifted upwind, cocking an arrow to her bow.

Dhum kicked up their dying fire and flung on fresh logs. He seized his weapon. 'If you want to eat me, first you have to eat my axe!' he growled at the surrounding forest.

A wolf howled again, nearer this time. Then a loping form silhouetted itself against the firelight, jaws agape, red tongue lolling.

The mules bucked and brayed but their halters held firm.

Hazzard raised his sword with a flourish. The tattooed hounds on his shoulders snarled in anticipation and crouched ready to pounce. 'Olan -!'

'Stop!' Avariss called.

Hazzard paused mid-invocation. 'What!'

'The wolf is not attacking. He mustn't mean to, or he wouldn't have exposed himself so openly.'

'So what do we do?' Hazzard said, still braced for battle.

'I'll try some old fashioned elvish courtesy,' Avariss said. 'I'm an elf and being polite to wild creatures comes naturally to me.'

'Then how come you're never polite to me?' Hazzard said.

'It all depends how you define 'creature'. I'd put you more under 'slimeball',' Avariss said.

'Hang on a minute. Is this the kind of courtesy that will get us killed?' Dhum asked.

'No this is good stuff. It really works,' Avariss insisted.

'Have you done this before?' Dhum asked, with a caution born of bitter experience of Avariss's previous claims to secret elvish wisdom.

'Yeah. No,' she said.

'Which one is it? Remember the time you said you knew how to read Dark Elf and then translated phylactery as prophylactic,' he said.

'No, I haven't done it before myself, personally, but I have seen it done,' Avariss admitted.

'Great, we're dead.' Dhum hefted his axe.

The wolf paced backwards and forwards on the fringes of the firelight. He lowered his head and stared at them.

Avariss curtsayed.

'Let me handle this,' Hazzard said to Avariss. 'Man of Nature, remember. That means Man Over Nature.' He stepped forwards and glared into the wolf's yellow gaze. There was a few minutes of intense staring, then Hazzard staggered back. 'Oh my eyes!'

'Nature 1 Man 0,' Avariss said. She knelt and reached out a hand to the wolf who slunk into the firelight. He was a huge shaggy brute, with white fangs and red mouth, but his sides were crusted with dried blood and he limped. He bowed before Avariss. She put her hand to his furry head. She listened intently to the wolf's whines. 'He's asking for our help,' she said.

'I can't believe this. You speak Wolf?' Hazzard said, in disbelief.

Avariss shrugged. 'A little.'

'I didn't even think that was an actual language,' Dhum put in.

'It's more the language of Mother Earth and all her wild creatures. We elves are naturally attuned to it. I don't expect you clods to understand,' Avariss said, loftily.

'As she's only half-elf, does that mean she only half-understands it?' Dhum muttered to Hazzard, who sniggered appreciatively.

'You can't trust a wolf,' Hazzard warned Avariss. 'That thing's a killing machine, a savage unstoppable force of nature.'

'I shall call him Wolfy,' Avariss cooed. She ran a hand over the wolf's injured leg, muttering soothing words. Then she fossicked in her pack for a genuine elvish linen antique handkerchief with silver moon embroidery in dainty cross-stitch. She used it to bandage his leg. The wolf licked her face, then whined some more. Avariss listened intently. 'He says he saw snail men go in a big rock.'

'Snail men?' Hazzard said, baffled.

'He means knights, men in shells, I mean armor,' Dhum said. 'Brick and stone!' he surveyed his trusty map, excited. 'By big rock, do you mean the border fort?' he asked the wolf, who stared back at him with cryptic yellow eyes. Dhum helpfully held up the map and pointed at the spot that indicated the fort.

'Don't ask him. He's a wolf. He can't read,' Avariss said.

Wolfy whined.

Avariss's eyes widened. 'He says there's something really bad up there.'

Dhum pored over his map excitedly. 'Bandits!' he exclaimed.

'Not bandits. A monster. It destroyed his pack mates.' The wolf flattened his ears distressed. 'I can't work out what he means. I don't want to be critical of any wild creature but he is using very simple words. I think he might be a bit thick. He keeps saying "Knoll".' She sat back on her heels and surveyed the scenery. 'I don't see why a wolf would be

worried about a small hill,' she said, 'but we are surrounded by them. Perhaps he shares my distaste for the country.'

'He's a wolf. He lives in the woods,' Hazzard impatiently.

'Just because he lives in them doesn't he likes them. He might enjoy a taste of the city.'

'They make you wear trousers in the city,' Hazzard told the wolf, glumly.

'He's a wolf. He doesn't wear clothes,' Avariss retorted.

'I'm a barbarian. Why do I have to?'

'It's called civilization, you savage,' Avariss said.

'Remember the deal,' Dhum soothed Hazzard. 'Next time you nude up in a city and get arrested, I ain't baling you out. Done it three times already.'

'My old dad had it right,' Hazzard grumbled. 'He always used to say to me, "Don't go into cities son, keep on the borderlands."''

Wolfy whined again, and nudged his muzzle beneath Avariss's hand. She gave him a scratch. 'I will revenge your friends. I swear that by Rimbard's road,' she said.

The wolf threw back his head and gave a piercing howl of agreement, then limped off. His shaggy form disappeared into the darkness.

Hazzard sheathed his sword and held out a brawny hand to haul Avariss to her feet. 'You swore an oath. In the name of your god. Respect,' he said.

Avariss shrugged. 'It's not like it's a binding oath. The old bat lies all the time,' she said.

They stayed wakeful the rest of the night, but nothing else disturbed them apart from Avariss's wails at dawn as she made the discovery that the entire ground was covered in actual dirt and it had completely covered her chic wilderness outfit.

Their journey continued through hilly country, gradually rising towards the mountains. The road became steeper and rockier. Mid-way through the morning they crested a rise and saw the small village of Sunset laid out below them. It consisted of about a dozen houses within a log palisade in a bowl of a valley surrounded by mountains.

'We're going into the village to see what we can find out,' Dhum announced. 'And perhaps sell a few saucepans,' he added, hopefully. He rallied his troops. 'Hazzard, just remember your lines and say them convincingly, and Avariss.... Just please stay out of sight and don't start yelling that the saucepans are cursed, or poisoned, or made of rust.'

'Hazzard, you need to put on your trousers,' Avariss directed.

'Can't,' Hazzard said, smugly.

'You were wearing them yesterday,' Avariss spluttered indignantly.

'I left them in the bushes where we met the wolves.'

'Great,' Avariss said, bitterly. 'I was hoping to dazzle the Frir-maids of Sunset with my elvish style and elegance and now I'm just going to be remembered as that 'that sheila who showed up with a naked bloke.'

'We won't sell any saucepans if you get marched off to the sheriff's office for public indecency,' Dhum pointed out.

'You will sell a bucket load once the Frir-wives get a load of me,' Hazzard smugly.

'Look, let's compromise. You put a saucepan – there.' Dhum handed Hazzard a saucepan to place at a height that saved any maidenly modesty.

Hazzard surveyed the village, eyes narrowed. He absently let the saucepan drop. Dhum hastily lifted it again. 'There's something wrong,' Hazzard said, brushing Dhum effort's away absently and almost braining him with the saucepan.

Avariss poked her head between the curtains of the cart. 'Just keep the saucepan at waist height. It's not that difficult,' she advised him.

'I mean there's something wrong in Sunset. There's no smoke, no noise, and there's no-one in sight.'

'Perhaps everyone's having a lie-in,' Avariss suggested.

'Frir-wives and hunters rise early.'

'Yet another thing to hold against the country,' Avariss muttered, savagely.

'Everyone should be out and about,' Hazzard scanned the surface of the road. 'There's no recent tracks. Nothing since it rained and when was that?'

'Last week,' Dhum said. The serene peace of the blue sky and green forest became suddenly ominous. 'This could be our chance to get ambushed. Everyone in position.'

Avariss nocked an arrow to her bow and ducked back behind the curtain. Dhum made sure his axe was stowed beneath the box seat and clapped a helmet on his head, then hid it under a wide, floppy tinker's hat. Hazzard hefted his saucepan and vaulted into the wagon, out of sight.

Dhum drove the cart through the gates and into Sunset, between the two watchful Rimbard statues, whistling off-key.

After a long, hot and bumpy silence Avariss could not wait any more. 'What's happening out there?' she whispered.

'There's nobody around,' Dhum reported, removing his tinker's hat.

'That can't be right.' Avariss leaped from the tailboard, glad to leave the covered wagon, which was stuffy and stank of mule with bonus barbarian. She crouched, bow ready, then slowly rose. Dhum was right. Sunset looked deserted.

She slapped the side of the wagon. 'It's okay Hazzard, you can come out now without being a threat to public morals. There are no public to be moralled.'

Hazzard leaped down and searched the ground. 'No tracks since last week,' he reported.

'Is everyone dead?' Avariss asked in dread.

'No dead,' said Dhum. 'Just ... gone.'

Dhum and Hazzard performed a quick search while Avariss stood on the wagon and kept watch. Doors stood open, stables unbarred and uninhabited. The houses had been emptied of small and portable belongings but the large furnishings remained, bedsteads and wardrobes. There were no people and no animals.

They met in the village square before the homely little mud dome of the Frir-shrine. The flowers were withered around the shrine and the statue of the goddess was gone.

'The bandits have kidnapped everyone in the village!' Dhum exclaimed.

'If the bandits did this they were neatest bandits I ever saw,' Avariss observed.

Hazzard agreed. 'There's no sign of damage, no forced doors, no blood,' he pointed out. 'And bandits wouldn't take a Frir-statue. She'd curse anyone who took her without permission. Looks like the villagers just grabbed what they could and left in a hurry. They took their cattle and ponies and dogs.'

'I don't think this is a time to worry about household pets,' Avariss snapped.

'I am just saying they had a lot of dogs. Big ones from the tracks,' Hazzard said.

'We won't learn anything more here. Let's move on,' Dhum said.

'Sure. This is creepy,' Avariss said. She surveyed the abandoned houses. Leaves drifted in through the open doors, as if the forest was already reclaiming the homes of men. Stillness reigned, and in that silence the empty houses seemed to be listening intently for the return of their missing owners. She shuddered. 'I never thought I'd give good gold to hear a few rubes talking out the back of their noses,' she said.

Dhum started the tinker's cart and headed out the gates. He surveyed the Rimbard statues thoughtfully. 'Brick and Stone! If only these statues could talk, they could tell us what happened,' he said.

Avariss crouched to examine one of the statues. 'They can talk!' she exclaimed. She pointed to a rune carved at the base. 'This is Rimbard speech,' she said.

'And let me guess. You can read it,' Dhum sighed.

'Yes, I can read it and it's the way merchants communicate, and thieves,' Avariss admitted. 'A merchant left this to warn fellow Rimbard worshippers. It says the villagers have left and gone to Bald Hill.'

'Bald Hill?' Dhum consulted his map. 'That's in the Fifth Duchy on the other side of Three Wolves,' he said. 'Did they say why?' he said.

Avariss peered at the small line of hastily scratched runes. 'It says they felt threatened by knolls,' she said.

They turned as one to survey the rolling hills that surrounded the village.

There was a pause.

'I really don't feel threatened,' Hazzard said.

Avariss shuddered. 'Perhaps the hills move - in the night,' she suggested.

'That's ridiculous!' Dhum said.

'I don't know anything about the country, I told you already. Maybe they loom?' Avariss said.

Dhum threw up his hands. 'Look, fine. We're leaving. At least we know the villagers didn't all just disappear. Let's get on.'

Three Wolves was easily visible from a distance, a ragged finger of stone atop a mountain ridge. Stones had tumbled from the roof and higher battlements.

The road got steeper as it climbed the mountain. Avariss protested bitterly as Dhum made her get out and walk to spare the mules. He led the beasts while Hazzard stayed out of sight to tempt the bandits to attack. Not that he paid the cart much attention. Every now and then Dhum and Avariss caught a glimpse of Hazzard scaling rocky cliffs and moving through dense undergrowth as easily as if on level ground.

'He looks like he's goofing off. I bet if we were attacked he wouldn't even notice until we were dead,' Avariss muttered as she panted resentfully in the wake of wagon. 'Could you not raise quite so much dust!' she complained, bitterly, when they paused to allow the mules to rest. She mopped her face with Dhum's kerchief.

'Hey! Where did you get that?'

'Pick-pocketed it at the last rest stop. Don't you ever pay attention,' she handed it back and glanced up the mountain to the ruined tower. 'Want to know something else,' she said derisively. 'Your map's wrong.'

'We've been through this. My map is never wrong. It is totally up to date and drawn by the finest cartographers in Tanzin,' Dhum said, hotly.

'It's wrong if it says that tower is uninhabited,' Avariss said. She pointed to a column of smoke rising through the roof of the tower. She sniffed, delicately. 'Someone's up there and alive, unless ghosts enjoy a good barbecue.'

They hurried over the final climb, to find the Three Wolves fort freshly but roughly repaired. Logs had been cut to barricade the door from within. A litter of abandoned gear lay at the bottom of the tower. Among the rubbish was a torn banner of the Fifth Duke, showing a gold helmet on a red shield.

Hazzard re-appeared from the forest and strode on ahead of the panting mules. He hailed the tower. 'In Olan's name, who's there?'

There was a long silence.

'I know you're in there. I can see the smoke,' Hazzard pointed out.

Silence.

'Don't make me knock,' he warned.

A rough wooden panel opened in base of the stone wall of the tower. It looked like a hastily barricaded window into a basement.

A burly man peered up at Hazzard through the window, with the unmistakable look of a snail without a shell that always accompanies an armored man when he is out of his armor.

'Sunburned stripes on the eyelids. That's what I call a knight tan,' Hazzard sneered. 'Not so brave without your armor are you?'

The burly man ignored his jibes. 'Help! We're trapped,' he said.

'Are you from Sunset?'

'No, we passed the villagers on the road. They reached Bald Hill long ago. We were taking the Duke's treasure chest to Tanzin when knolls attacked.'

'What is this about knolls!' Hazzard was glad to at last find an answer to this mystery, to be able to thrash it out man to man. 'How does a low wooded hill attack!'

'Not that kind of knoll,' the knight explained. 'It's spelt with a g, not a k.'

'I don't read,' said Hazzard impatiently.

The knight spelled it out anyway. 'G-noll.'

'Nope, nothing,' Hazzard shook his head.

'You know. You must know. Two-legged hyenas,' the knight explained, as Dhum and Avariss rolled up.

Hazzard was instantly enlightened. 'Those are gnolls? I call them dogbastards,' he said. His face darkened. 'If those fiends are about what are you men doing in there?'

'We're not paid enough to fight gnolls,' the ex-guard whined.

'Coward!' Hazzard shot a brawny fist through the opening and seized the man's throat. 'You know what they do!'

'Nothing to do with me! We were just passing through!' The guard struggled to release Hazzard's grip as Hazzard started pulling him slowly and inexorably out the window. The guard was too big for the frame and risked being squeezed through the narrow gap like toothpaste with added bone splinters.

'How many are there!' Hazzard growled at him.

'Hundreds!' the ex-guard choked.

Avariss and Dhum hurried over and tried to pry loose Hazzard's hold.

'He can't help us if you squish him,' Avariss pointed out.

'And the treasure chest?' Dhum put in.

'The gnolls have it,' the ex-guard squealed. 'They attacked us. We dropped it and ran while they were distracted.'

'What would wilderness beasties want with a chest?' Dhum wondered, but the knight didn't really have the time or opportunity to follow up.

'You betrayed the Duke's trust! You spineless wimps!' Hazzard let go his hold. The guard staggered back and hastily slammed the shutters. Hazzard strode away from the

tower, fists clenched. 'Leave the mules,' he shot over his shoulder. 'Perhaps the cowards might find the courage to guard *those*.'

Avariss stared at her easy-going friend in astonishment. She had never seen him so angry outside of battle. 'So what's with him?' she asked Dhum, who shrugged.

'If it's anything underground I'm your dwarf,' he said. 'Goblins, hobgoblins, bugbears, orcs up to and including evil sentient mushrooms and ambulant carnivorous slime, including rectangular and/or rhomboid. But this is a wilderness beastie. That's clean out of my area of expertise.'

'There's only one way to deal with dogbastards,' Hazzard growled over his shoulder. 'Don't you know?'

'Course I do. Get down low and go, go, go,' Avariss said, promptly. 'Wait a minute, that's fire.'

'Kill 'em!' Hazzard said. 'Otherwise they multiply. The leader of a pack is a Fang. The Fang corrupts wild animals and turns them into dogbastards.'

'That's what happened to Wolfy's pack mates,' Avariss realized, appalled. 'They weren't killed. They were turned into these – what do you call them again –'

'Dogbastards,' Hazzard supplied.

Avariss's mental elvish dictionary rejected the word as simply too loutish for words. 'Furry miscreants,' she improvised.

'And those gutless guards are hiding in a tower,' Hazzard snarled. 'They should have fought. They should have done something. Any *man* would have. Olan's balls! When I tell the Yorckster about this they'll be doing push-ups for weeks. For now, we must deal with the Fang!'

Dhum came to a dead stop in the middle of the road.

'Look I'm as incensed about this as anyone but let's show some common sense. We can't deal with a hundred *anything* no matter what you call it, gnolls, furry miscreants or dogbastards. Let's go back and report to the Fifth Duke. He can send his army.'

Hazzard kept walking, forcing Dhum to scurry after him. 'There aren't a hundred,' Hazzard said. 'Those cowards were swayed by fear and multiplied every monster by five.'

Dhum started talking while Avariss was still mentally calculating. 'Twenty gnolls is still way too many for three,' he said.

'There's only ever one dogbastard at a time,' Hazzard said. He hefted his sword and the hounds tattooed on his shoulders snarled.

'That's madness!' Dhum protested. 'We can't deal with a gnoll pack. We are seriously outclassed. There is no shame in fetching help. Avariss, you agree with me. Avariss! Avariss?'

'I'm with Hazzard,' Avariss said, shortly.

'But you don't even like the country.'

'I promised Wolfy.'

'But you said it wasn't a binding oath!' Dhum appealed.

'You never know with Rimbard. She's tricky.'

'Dogbastards have no backbone. Once we kill the Fang the rest will scatter,' Hazzard assured his friend.

'You make it sound so easy,' Dhum said, unhappily. 'But as you are both set on it, I see I have as little choice as you do pants. I'm in.'

Hazzard slapped him on the back, causing the low slung dwarf to stagger. 'We must find them and attack during the day, when they're asleep on a pile of rotten old bones. They hunt at night and can see in the dark while we can't.'

'Speak for yourself, human,' said Avariss, smugly. 'Elves can see in the dark.'

Dhum nudged Hazzard. 'As she's only half-elf does that mean she can only half-see in the dark?'

'Hey, dwarves can see in the dark too,' Avariss muttered.

'Yeah but we don't gloat about it.'

Hazzard glanced down at the road. Now that he knew that the dog tracks were gnoll tracks he had no difficulty in finding their trail. The gnoll band had chased the fleeing Five Duke's knights into the tower and then turned back. Their trail soon left the road and plunged into the forest, heading back down the mountainside towards a low wooded hill in the valley below.

'They went way!' he pointed with raised his sword. 'Onwards, to Gnoll Knoll!'

'Not that way!' Avariss moaned. 'We've just climbed up that slope and this bit is even steeper. It's practically vertical.'

Hazzard strode downwards, undeterred.

Dhum hurried after him. 'Wait, we need a plan!' he shouted.

'I have a plan,' Hazzard said over his shoulder. 'We burst in on the foul pack in a whirlwind of fury and violence, dealing death and destruction on all sides.'

'That's a terrible plan,' Avariss hurried after him.

'Hasn't failed me yet,' Hazzard boasted.

'It only needs to fail once,' Dhum pointed out.

Going downhill cross-country and off-road was a more precipitous descent but Hazzard's wilderness survival skills and Dhum's Builder-knowledge of paths and stone guided them safely back to the valley. Then both the tattoo hounds on Hazzard's shoulders bayed.

Ahead a prick-eared, hump-backed figure with a hyena-like rounded muzzle and a piebald hide rose up on two crooked legs. It wore mismatched armor, stolen from dead warriors, ear piercings of human finger bones, and carried a rusted sabre. Its deep set eyes were invisible, showing only as a lurid red glow.

The gnoll sentry had been asleep in the shadows beneath the trees and it blinked around sleepily. Then it scented them. It snarled, showing crooked yellow fangs, and raised its muzzle to cackle a warning.

Hazzard leapt forward sword scything overhead in an arc of death. 'Olan-' he started.

Avariss' arrow embedded itself in the gnoll's throat. It choked and gagged. Hazzard's mighty blade swept over its head as it dropped dead.

'Well, they're not immune to arrows,' Avariss remarked.

Hazzard glared at her. 'Can you once, just once, let me finish calling on Olan?'

'And let it raise the alarm? Too slow.' Avariss waved her bow in his face.

'Stop bickering!' Dhum said. 'What's our plan?'

'Kill them all before night falls!' Hazzard ran ahead.

Dhum turned to Avariss. 'The plan is that we catch up, then you trip him up and I sit on him until he calms down,' he said.

They ran after Hazzard. Unfortunately, Dhum was handicapped by running in full armor while Hazzard was naked. Avariss had the elvish ability to slip through the trees unhindered. She kept pace with the barbarian but to Dhum's annoyance made no attempt to trip him as previously instructed. Both ran silently. However any element of surprise was spoiled by the constant stream of plate iron clanking and dwarfish invective behind them.

They could smell the gnoll camp well before they saw it. Avariss wrinkled her nose at the stench of rot and death, with a hideous undercurrent: the reek of pure evil. 'This is going to cost you a lot of lavish baths,' she hissed. 'I hear the reek of pure evil is real expensive to wash off.'

'You can bathe in a merry mountain stream, communing with nature,' Hazzard suggested.

'I prefer not to bathe in mosquito larvae and animal waste,' Avariss said.

Hazzard peered through the trees and raised a hand for silence.

'You're just trying to shush me because I'm winning at repartee,' she whispered.

She followed his gaze. The forest ended in a grassy slope. A bald knoll rose before them. It was surmounted with a simple but effective palisade created by ranks of savage spears pointed outwards. Within a pack of gnolls were piled atop one another, sleeping through the heat of the day. Their bodies were furred and misshapen, with doglike heads and tattered batlike ears. Their crusted eyes wept yellow ichor, their dung-caked mangy fur crawled with lice, and their crooked piebald backs were patterned with ringworm. Their fangs were brown, their talons stained yellow. They radiated more than the stench of filth and blood. They gave off a palpable aura of threat, chaos, evil and disaster.

At the top of the knoll was a rough cage of bones and antlered skulls standing on a pedestal made from a huge iron-bound chest. The chest was stamped with the crest of a gold helmet on a red shield.

Atop cage and treasure chest lolled a huge gnoll. Its colossal frame was twisted and distorted, a scarred mass of malignant muscle with one blood-red eye and shredded ears. Its fangs protruded from its misshapen jaws. Skulls of baby animals circled its neck in a mean-minded trophy. It used a heavy spear with a feathered head to goad a wolf trapped in the cage below.

'The Fang!' Hazzard whispered.

'The Fifth Duke's treasure chest!' Dhum puffed up.

'Wolfy!' Avariss yipped.

'That's never Wolfy,' Dhum insisted.

'That wolf in that cage has my bandage tied around his foreleg,' Avariss said.

'It could be anyone's bandage,' Dhum argued.

'If I can't tell genuine elvish linen with silver moon embroidery at a one hundred paces you can call me a dwarf,' Avariss snapped.

'I don't want to alarm anybody but the sun is going down,' Dhum said. 'It will be night soon. We've found the gnolls' camp. Let's vote on a plan. My plan is we sneak away and come back in the morning.'

Hazzard broke from cover. He ran up the hill, in eerie silence, holding his sword overhead.

'That's not even Plan C.' Dhum said blankly. 'The new plan is we stay here as back up,' he said to Avariss.

On the height of the knoll the Fang lazily raised its spear high over the trapped wolf. The jagged edge gleamed. The wolf flattened his ears and cringed.

'Stop that at once, you big bully! Wolfy! I'm here to save you!' Avariss shouted. She ran after Hazzard.

The Fang leaped to its hind feet with a snarl of alarm.

Avariss knelt, judged wind speed, relative humidity and angle of altitude then took aim in one lightning quick instant. Her arrow thumped square into the Fang's chest. It toppled from the top of the cage. She rose, dusting her hands. 'Thank me later,' she said.

'There's only, oh, another nineteen gnolls to go,' Dhum informed, her sarcastically.

'Remember what Hazzard said. Once you kill the Fang the gnolls scatter,' Avariss loftily informed him.

It appeared the gnoll pack did not play by the rules. Roused in an instant from slumber to fury they hurled themselves over the fallen Fang and towards the three adventures in a yelping, foaming, verminous tide. They snatched up their spears as they ran forward, conveniently opening a gap in the palisade.

'Why are they running the wrong way?' Avariss asked, bewildered.

Dhum got his back against a tree and hefted his axe. 'Come along little doggies,' he growled.

Hazzard hit the first gnoll square in the head. 'Sit,' he told it. He snatched its spear from its paw as it fell. 'Stay' he instructed another, transfixing it to the ground with the stolen spear. 'Die for the King!' he ordered a third, and lopped its head from its fowl shoulders. The severed head, a gruesome and bloodstained ball, bounced and rolled down hill to land at Dhum's feet.

Then the wave of gnolls went right over the top of Hazzard. He disappeared in a whirling, heaving, snarling, biting, foaming whirlpool. He did not re-emerge.

Gnolls rushed Dhum, yelping with rage and excitement. Their eyes were fixed on the severed head at his feet. 'Barking dogs never bite!' he settled to his work. 'By the Builder! Give me room!' he bawled. He fought methodically as the stinking vicious throng piled on top of him, like the world's worst soccer game. 'Steady on lads.' He chopped a head in half. 'Give me space.' He removed a gnoll from the knees up. 'Ah breathing room at last.'

Meanwhile Avariss sprinted upslope to the cage of bones. Gnoll technology was not the most advanced so the cage was merely fastened on the outside with a bone through a skull. She shot the bolt. 'You're free, Wolfy,' she cried. 'Fight with me! Side by -.'

Wolfy shot out of the cage, yelping, tail tucked between his legs. He vanished into the forest. His yelps died away in the distance.

'Is it that hard to say thank you?' Avariss shouted after him. She looked around the cage for the Fang's corpse. To her surprise there was no Fang to be found.

'Rimbard's -.' She started. Then her elvish reflexes alerted her to danger. The Fang was crouched among the boulders. She dived aside as it lunged up at her, and its savage spear thrust just missed.

Her arrow had lodged in the Fang's armor. Its jaws foamed and its eyes gleamed rabidly as it pulled back its feathered spear again, attempting to be the first Fang to perform an intricate half-pike and twist with elf on top.

Only Avariss' deft lightness of foot and fondness for sheer fabrics saved her. She stepped sideways and sucked her stomach in. The spear head shot past, slicing her shirt into a crop top. It was a fashion disaster but she would have to deal with it later.

'Full Fang alert! It's not dead. Repeat, the Fang is not dead!' she reported at the top of her lungs as she dashed in a circle around the cage with the Fang in hot pursuit.

'This is your fault!' Dhum shouted to Hazzard, who was still buried beneath a piebald pile. 'Your Fang, your fight! Call on Olan for help!'

A noise came from within the slowly turning furry whirlpool. It sounded like the kind of noise a warrior would make if he tried to call on his god with his mouth full of gnoll fur.

Thinking quickly, Dhum pitched the severed head at the melee around Hazzard. 'Fetch!' he cried. The gnolls instinctively chased the ball, lifting the pressure on Hazzard, who fought his way to his feet.

Dhum chased the running gnolls, dealing out juicy whacks to their undefended backs. 'Don't lick your own balls!' he shouted. He slew the last of the gnolls as the severed head bounced into the forest. 'Out of bounds,' he chuckled.

Then the ball bounced right back out. Another mob of gnolls crouched in the darkness beneath the trees, with yellow fangs bared. Their eyes were red sparks in the gloom.

'You wouldn't bite the hand that feeds you,' said Dhum. He squared his shoulders and raised his axe and backed away, slowly. The gnolls advanced, snarling, in an unruly mob. More and more appeared in the darkness, drawn by the sound of battle. It was clear that the pack sleeping on the knoll were only the tip of a gnoll iceberg.

'Hazzard,' he shouted over his shoulder. 'That knight was right,' he bawled. 'There are hundreds of gnolls.'

Meanwhile Avariss was still running around the cage. 'Somebody throw this thing a bone,' she yelped. She had no time to turn and loose an arrow. The Fang would be on her before she had time to raise her bow. The dagger at her belt was far too dainty to inflict any kind of deadly blow. She most used it for cleaning her nails and she doubted the Fang would sit still for a manicure.

In the absence of any other option, she kept the cage between them but the Fang was bigger and faster than her. It gained with every circuit. It was only a matter of time before it caught up. She felt the breeze on her back as its fangs gnashed for her cloak, and tore the cloth.

'That was antique elven weaving, you philistine!' Rage gave her wings. She vaulted for the top of the cage. The Fang ran right through the place she had been. It darted round the corner of the cage and pounced, convinced she was just ahead. Surprised by her absence it sprawled on the ground.

'Ha! Downward facing dog!' Avariss informed it from above. Then she shot it again, square in the back. The arrow, to her chagrin, bounced off its armor plate.

'In the neck, you elvish half-wit,' Hazzard roared, dealing with the last of his knot of gnolls.

The Fang snarled venomously, then clawed his way up towards Avariss. The cage shook and trembled beneath its weight. As the cage tottered, she quickly jumped off the other side.

With the Fang's weight dragging it over, the cage tilted and dropped on top of it with a dreadful crash. The Fang squirmed then collapsed. 'It's dead! I killed it!' she exulted. 'Again.'

The Fang came to life again. It snarled and struggled to lever the cage off itself.

'Adorably wrong again,' Avariss corrected herself. 'The Fang is still going.' She saw that Hazzard had finished his battle and was charging up the hill towards her. 'Hurry up!' she called.

'Distract it!' Hazzard bellowed.

Avariss scrambled on top of the cage and jumped up and down, trying to crush the Fang with her weight. She failed to even crush the baby vole skulls on its armor. 'Curse me for being so slim and debonair!' she cried.

The Fang flung the cage over onto its side and scrambled to its feet. Avariss was thrown from the top and sprawled winded on the ground. The Fang raised its spear over her as she rolled away, trying to get to her feet. 'You smell!' she cried, the prospect of imminent death robbing her of the time to think of a more choice insult.

Then help arrived in a rush. Hazzard reached the top of gnoll knoll, sword raised in salute to the sky.

The Fang turned to face him, ears flattened and muzzle wrinkled, bared fangs drooling. It drew back its muscled arm to hurl its spear.

'Olan-' Hazzard stopped instinctively assuming that Avariss was going to interrupt.

'Pray, do continue,' she said, politely.

'-Aid me now!' he finished.

Lightning blazed down from a clear sky and struck the tip of Hazzard's upraised sword.

'Ooh, big mistake. Tallest metal point on a knoll in a summer storm!' Avariss clapped her hands over her eyes rather than see her friend instantly incinerated.

Finding that the noise of battle kept on going she opened her eyes. She saw the inside of her palms, and moved her fingers a trifle so she could peek through the gap.

The lightning strike had done Hazzard no harm at all. In fact the reverse. A blue glow radiated around his body along the lines of his tattoos. Both hound tattoos gave a great bay of triumph as the radiance of Olan's blessing engulfed them.

Then the tattoos swelled in size and burst from Hazzard's skin. They united into a great hunting hound, etched in blue ink, standing around the figure of the man. The beast snarled at the cowering Fang, which raised its paw before its eyes in a useless attempt to block out the dazzling divine aura.

Hazzard's great sword flashed in the last of the sun as he swung the sharp blade down and split the Fang from shoulder to sternum. The two halves split neatly down the middle and flopped to the ground.

This time, there was absolutely no doubt that it was dead.

In an eye-blink it was all over. Hazzard was standing over the Fang. The hound tattoos were tattoos again.

'That's never happened before,' Avariss said, deeply impressed.

'Olan is god of storms as well as warriors. Just needs some open sky,' Hazzard said, airily. He slung his sword over his shoulder. 'Told you these dogbastards have no stomach for a fight,' he said.

Avariss wrinkled her nose and edged upwind from the stinking pile that was all that was left of the Fang. 'Right now, literally,' she agreed, politely.

Then Dhum came puffing up. He doubled over, put his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath. 'They're - not - running - away,' he puffed. 'And there's more of them than ever - and - they're really - pissed,' he gasped. He waved at the western horizon

where crimson orb hung swollen and orange amid a sea of red-stained clouds. 'Sun – going – down.'

A horde of enraged gnolls swarmed out of the forest on all sides, and onto the knoll. A sea of crooked spines, bat ears and red eyes surrounded them. From their twisted bodies rose the stink of dung, blood and fur fungus mingled with the reek of pure evil.

'Why aren't they breaking and fleeing like you said? Haven't they read the manual?' Avariss asked Hazzard.

Hazzard spun in a circle in an attempt to face the entire horde at once, sword in both hands. 'Dunno,' he said, simply.

Yellow crooked fangs, lolling bloody tongues and piebald backs pressed upwards while wicked red eyes blinked in the last blood-stains of sun.

Dhum stood stalwart to the end. 'The Builder has no name to be spoken but one to be builded in stone,' he chanted. 'His people build him a Temple of living souls. We will be made welcome in the Builder's Hall,' he assured his friends.

Hazzard raised his sword. 'We adventured together. We die together!'

'Speak for yourself, mortals. I'm not dying on knoll of gnolls with my hair in a mess and my nails chipped. If I ever do die, and I plan to live for ever, I die old and rich and with nails you could kill for,' Avariss snapped. 'But gnolls aren't the only thing that come out at night. Look!' She pointed to the eastern horizon, where a silver moon shone low, round and full. She raised her hands in the direction of Rimbard's Roost. 'Rimbard aid us! We are lost!'

The sun sank below the horizon. The gnoll pack pressed forwards until all the bare ground around was swallowed.

'Rimbard! Aid here. Right here! X marks the spot.' Avariss waved frantically trying to attract the goddess' attention.

The last of the sunlight vanished. A hideous cackle rose from all around, gloating and malignant, an omen of pain, blood, chaos and death.

Avariss gave up on all hope of divine intervention. 'Thanks for nothing, you craven old bat!' She gave the finger to her goddess, and picked up her bow.

Then a single howl rose from outside the tightening circle of death. The moon rose over the gnoll-infested knoll, and laid a long finger of silver light into the forest.

Out of the forest and along the moon-road limped a wolf with a bandaged leg.

A gnoll cackled malevolently at the sight of the feeble reinforcement Rimbard had sent.

'Oh shut up!' Avariss said, irritably. Her bow twanged and the cackling gnoll dropped, an arrow struck through the head. 'At least she tried,' she told the corpse.

The wounded wolf raised his head and howled. A crashing chorus answered him, howls, roars, grunts, snarls and growls, the massed choir of all the risen wrath of the forest.

Along the moon-road charged a huge pack of wolves, fifty strong, a bevy of bears, a pride of mountain lions, a sounder of wild boar and a warren of really enraged rabbits. They crashed into the gnolls, and fought brute to brute, tearing, biting and snarling.

'Go Wolfy! Yay me!' Avariss' bow hummed and snapped as she sent arrow after arrow into her piebald foes. 'I knew you'd come back!' she called.

'They do know that you despise Nature, right?' Dhum asked, in astonishment.

'Dhum, now is not the time,' Avariss whispered through her teeth while bestowing a wide, fixed grin on their rescuers. She raised her voice. 'Nature! What's not to love!' she called.

Hazzard needed no encouragement. 'Olan!' He charged into the foul pack smiting on all sides.

'Brick and stone!' Dhum followed at his heels, wielding a mighty axe.

The gnolls were trapped between the forest dwellers on one side and the adventurers on the other. They lost their nerve. They broke and ran, every gnoll in a different direction, pursued and dragged down by beasts as they bolted. Their malevolent cackling died away in the distance. The last were silenced by an ominous gnash of lapin incisors.

With the gnolls gone, the wolf with the bandaged leg limped up to join them.

'Wolfy! You saved us!' Avariss cried. She knelt to embrace him.

Hazzard thrust an arm before her. 'You can't trust a wolf. Its jaws are steel traps of death,' he reminded her.

'Isn't that sharks?' Avariss asked.

Hazzard pointed to Wolfy, then himself. 'You. Me. Round 2.' He glared into the wolf's eyes in total concentration.

Wolfy sat back on his haunches and glared right back.

Meanwhile Dhum cleared the ruins of the bone cage from the Fifth Duke's treasure chest. The lock was broken and the timber covered with the scratches of gnoll claws. Dhum dragged the chest free of the clutter. 'Brick and stone! It is heavy!' he gloated.

'Let's see what goodies are within,' Avariss suggested.

Hazzard broke concentration. 'We're returning it to the Fifth Duke. Contents intact.'

'Nature 2 Man 0,' Avariss said.

'What? No! Hey, that's cheating,' Hazzard protested as Wolfy sat back with a lupine snort of derision.

'The contents will be intact,' Avariss argued. 'Mostly. I mean this chest is heavy right. We'll just skim a little off the top, lighten the load. Help ourselves. The gnolls broke the lock, not us, and they're dead so they can't talk. Clearly any treasure missing from here they took it and buried it somewhere in the woods. The Fifth Duke won't know any different.'

'We bring the chest to the Duke, exactly as it stands,' Hazzard said.

Avariss knelt to pet the wolf, and listened to his whines. 'Oh isn't that sweet,' she translated. 'Turns out he was watching from the forest. When we killed the Fang he recovered his nerve. Now he's embarrassed by his cowardice. You are very right to be ashamed, Wolfy. You deserted me in my hour of peril. Bad wolf. No biscuit.' Then she kissed him on the top of the head.

'Woah. Talk about mixed signals,' Hazzard remarked.

'Goodbye Wolfy,' Avariss embraced him. 'You don't belong in the city and I would rather wear a dwarven onesie than live in the country.'

Wolfy rose, shook himself, nosed Avariss and then loped off.

Avariss sniffed, and wiped away a tear, then took refuge in sarcasm. 'See ya, see ya, wouldn't want to be ya,' she called after him.

'Smell ya, smell ya, shouldn't have to tell ya,' Wolfy retorted over his fore-shoulder.

Avariss put her nose to her shoulder and took a deep sniff. 'Rimbard's road! He's right. That's the reek of pure evil,' she called after Wolfy. 'It'll wash off.'

Hazzard saluted her. 'Who'd have thought. Rimbard did actually aid us,' he said.

'I think that might have been coincidence,' Avariss said, doubtfully. 'Besides, Rimbard can't take all the credit.' She patted Hazzard on the shoulder. 'Olan *helped*,' she said.

'Here we go. Lid is ready to lift!' Dhum announced. He gave himself a moment to reckon the daily rate of interest on a chest full of gold, then squared himself to the treasure chest, spat on his palms and raised the lid.

Avariss craned in to look, face bright. Hazzard, despite his best intentions and Olan oath, grinned broadly in anticipation.

The next instant three faces fell.

Turns out Avariss was right. The gold was gone and with it all hope of the Duke's reward. The gnolls had hidden it somewhere in the woods and they were dead so couldn't tell. The chest was full to the brim with treasure, but it was a treasure only a gnoll would hoard.

It was full of rotten old bones.

If you have enjoyed this story visit campaigncoins.com for more adventures from Dhum, Hazzard and Avariss.