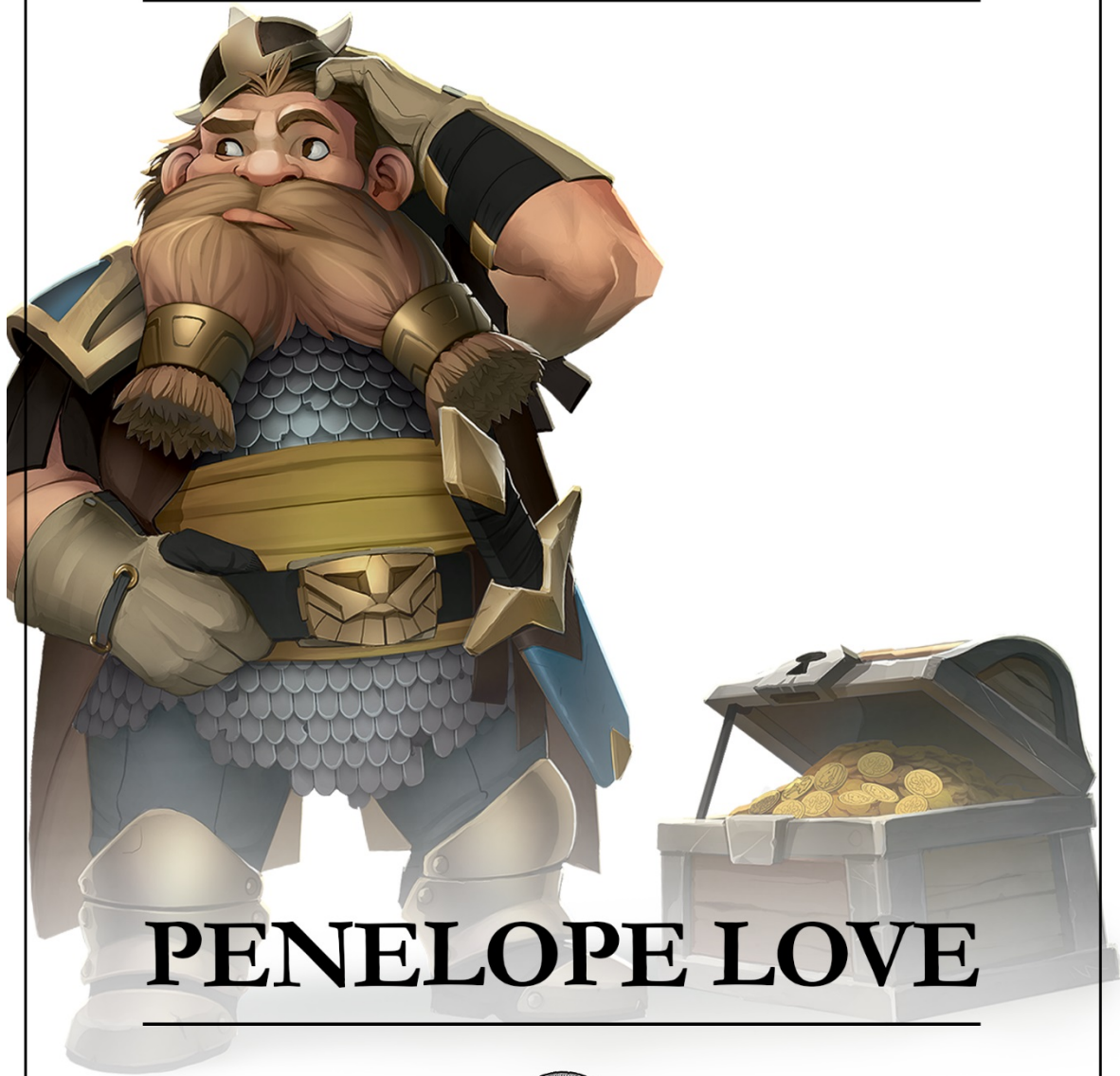


A NUISANCE OF KOBOLDS



PENELOPE LOVE



A Nuisance of Kobolds

A Three Dungeoneers Adventure

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Dhum cricked his neck to confront the dark tower. He was a dwarf and master Builder, undaunted by any architecture. Nevertheless this building made him dizzy. The rugged stonework was ancient, too ancient, as though not part of living lands. The tower was only six floors up yet it blocked out the sky. It was built according to the architecture of no living civilization and no dead one that he knew. Even the angles seemed wrong somehow. The plinth over the door looked crooked although his mason's eye told him it sat square and true.

He focused on the practical. The iron-plated timber door would have been an obstacle but it had been smashed in by an earlier visitor. He examined the splintered frame. Good axe-work too.

Dhum loosened his own two-headed axe on his back, and glanced over his shoulder to where a grey mist drifted between the gnarled trees. He was deep in the heart of the Poisonwood. The mist hid the path from sight and retreat would be long and perilous. Besides, he hadn't come this far to tamely retire. Rumor said treasure squatted within this tower like a toad, *treasure worthy of his greatest adventures*. He mentally summoned up a sea of golden coins in which jewel-encrusted swords, thrones and crowns drifted like sinking ships. He squared his shoulders and stepped inside.

The air was musty and stale. The chamber was as large as the tower itself and empty except for a sculpture of a skull on the opposite wall. Three large arched and glass-less window frames shed light upon a paved floor furred thickly with dust. On the other side a shadowed opening showed a glimpse of stone stairs leading up.

Above the doorway was a stone carving of a skull; goblin, gargoyle or devil. The skull's eyes were sunken pits, the jaws crammed with jagged fangs. Its appearance was not improved by the work of an unknown art critic who had cleaved the head cleanly in two. It was the same deft axe-work that had shattered the door, Dhum noted.

He knelt to examine the floor, whose dusty surface showed a profusion of tracks. He was not a skilled tracker but he saw enough. The tracks had lain there long enough to be covered with dust in turn. Their makers were long gone. The tracks overlaid each other in confusion, but there were no signs of a battle. It was as if a crowd of people had milled aimlessly then gone up stairs; the world's least decisive treasure hunters, maybe. None of the tracks disappeared mid-step with that abruptness that indicates a trap.

Dhum pulled out a square of much-creased leather, torn at the folds. He regarded it fondly. He loved a good treasure map and this was a beauty. The parchment was etched with warnings of the Puzzle Tower, of treasure guarded by fiends. The last words were scrawled in a dried brown liquid that spattered like blood; 'It's a tra'. He had felt assured this sinister

treasure hoard was too well guarded for any to have plundered it before him. Yet such a large band as these tracks indicated might have beaten him to the gold.

Something small glinted from a crack in the paving stones. He stooped to pick it up. It was a shining black coin. There was no dust on it. He surveyed it, delighted and puzzled, then bit it. It was harder than gold. He gazed at it in wonder. It was that rarest of metals – electrum! A dark design was upon it, a skull identical to the shattered stone one he faced. A triangle on the back was faced with cryptic runes. He did not recognize the coin by nation or race. Still, his face brightened as he dropped the coin in his money pouch. Treasure was treasure. Where there was one coin there must be more.

Doubts forgotten he cautiously mounted the stairs. As he approached the landing above he crouched and peered over the top stair so that only his stoutly helmeted head presented a target from above, like a red-bearded turtle.

No attack came. He peeped over the lip of the stair then rose in surprise at the bizarre sight before him.

The chamber was again as large as the tower itself with three arched windows frames. At the other side a dim opening revealed more stairs leading up.

A colorful figure, surrounded by an eerie blue glow, was frozen impossibly mid-vault directly above the stair. He was a Skarfell barbarian and a worshipper of Olan, god of warriors, judging from the Olan-tattoos on his broad shouldered, lean, well-muscled frame. He had a horse tattooed on each calf, a savage hound on each bicep and an aurochs on his chest. He was barefoot, with leather trappings, fur leggings and a fur cloak that flowed frozen in the air behind him. His arms were over his head, with a two handed sword fixed in his clasp. Jewels in the sword's hilt indicated a barbarian of means. He had a mane of long auburn hair, which was odd as Skarfell barbarians normally shaved their heads. His handsome face was fixed in a berserk, gleeful grin and his blazing green eyes fixed on something below and ahead of him.

Dhum followed the line of the barbarian's gaze to a monstrous spider that squatted atop a pile of skulls in the center of the room. From its eight eyes a web of red beams pinned its hapless captive.

Dhum saw at once what had happened. The spider was stone richly painted to seem lifelike, with a carapace of polished jet black decorated with a diamond of venomous blood-red on its back. The barbarian must have thought it was a real giant spider and attacked, jumping neatly for the trap.

'Brick and stone! Olan-warriors always act before they think,' Dhum sighed to himself. 'If they can think at all,' he added, aloud, quite enjoying the opportunity to banter with an Olan warrior without getting a punch by way of reply.

He retired below the level of the stairs, then reached up with his axe, hooked the blunt end of the head over the barbarian's foot, and hauled down. The youth felt strangely light. It cost no effort to move him.

Dhum didn't expect the experiment to work, but the tug on the foot caused the young man to bob mid-air and broke the line of sight of the monster spider's gaze. The barbarian collapsed on top of Dhum. His sword dropped on the stairs beside him with an almighty ring.

'By the Builder, you're a dead weight!' Dhum pushed futilely at the body, then used his knowledge of the principles of leverage to wriggle free. He dragged the limp figure down a few steps, safely out of view of the spider statue.

The young man sat up with a groan. He eyed Dhum.

'Olan's balls! You are not a beauteous maiden,' he informed him thickly. As he sat his leather armor powdered to dust and his furs disintegrated, leaving him naked on the stairs in a pile of fluff.

Dhum picked up a fragment of fur, puzzled. It was dry, desiccated. *Old.* 'I'm Dhum,' he said.

'Don't undersell yourself, I'm sure you're very smart,' the barbarian said kindly. 'I'm Hazzard.' He clutched his head, winced and looked around. 'Where am I, the cellar?' He held out a meaty paw. Dhum took it. 'You must be the inn-keep. Fetch some wine.'

'I just found you frozen in time and space before a monstrous spider statue in the Puzzle Tower in the center of the Poisonwood,' Dhum brought him up to date. 'You're not in Skarfell anymore. Also, your clothes are gone.'

Hazzard squinted down his muscular frame complacently. 'I have no secrets from the ladies,' he remarked. He scrambled to his feet, suddenly dwarfing Dhum, and resolutely re-climbed the stairs to the level above.

'Stop. Don't look at the statue. That's what trapped you last time,' Dhum hissed. 'Here, use this.'

He handed up his shield boss-side reversed. Hazzard blinked at himself in the polished surface, then ran his hand through his long hair. 'I'm sure my head was shaved a moment ago.'

Dhum slapped his hand to his forehead and mustered patience and forbearance. 'Use the shield as a mirror to look into the room without meeting the spider's eyes,' he growled.

Hazzard surveyed Dhum with profound respect. 'You really are clever, aren't you?' He inched their impromptu mirror upwards and surveyed the room reflected in its gleaming surface. 'Its eyes are closed. Let's go.' He started to run.

Dhum hooked an elbow around Hazzard's knee. The dwarf was solid, strong and extremely low. His tackle flattened Hazzard. 'That's clearly what you did last time. That statue must open its eyes when it senses movement in the room,' he warned him.

'Wanna bet?' Hazzard asked, intrigued.

'I don't need to bet. I could just let you run up and try it again then leave you frozen in time and space so I won't be troubled by your moronic antics when I find the treasure,' Dhum informed him.

Hazzard's face clouded, unsure whether to take offence, but the last word decided him. 'I need treasure,' he said enthusiastically. He bounced to his feet again, handing back Dhum's shield.

Dhum had a bright idea. 'Get behind me, stay low and don't look at the statue,' he instructed Hazzard.

Dhum hefted the polished shield in his right hand and ducked behind it, then he belted across the room, shield raised between himself and the spider. Hazzard ran bent double beside him. The statue's eyes opened, and eight red beams fastened on Dhum. The polished shield intercepted the rays. With a sizzle, bang and roar they reflected wildly around the chamber. Dhum angled the shield so the rays shot right back at the statue. There was a final sizzle, then an ominous hum. Dhum and Hazzard reached the far side and the safety of the stairs.

Dhum risked a glimpse of the spider's blood-red back, then relaxed. The statue had become a prisoner of its own powers. It was petrified in time and space within a glowing red web.

'Awesome!' Hazzard pounded Dhum on the back with muscular enthusiasm.

It was the kind of cheery blow that would have felled an ox but the solidly built dwarf barely noticed. A sheepish smile spread slowly across Dhum's face. It seemed like a long time since one of his bright ideas had worked. A very long time. 'That's only the second level,' he said. 'We have four more to go.'

'The wah -.' Hazzard gazed at Dhum with the look of a man whose mathematical ability ended with 'one, two, many'. Then he noticed a black gleam on the floor behind the spider

statue. He picked it up. It was an electrum coin. Its face depicted the spider they had just vanquished. The reverse showed a triangle with runes scrawled around the edge.

‘Let’s compare,’ Dhum held up the coin he had found on the ground floor.

The second coin was larger than the first and spiked at the sides around the spider’s legs. Like Dhum’s find, the strange black metal of its manufacture shone untouched by rust or age. ‘They’re the same runes,’ Dhum realized, but he did not know the language and could not read what they said.

Hazzard’s fist closed over the coin. Then he realized he had nowhere else to stash it besides his fist. ‘Double or nothing,’ he tried.

‘I never bet with naked barbarians,’ Dhum informed him, holding out his hand.

Hazzard reviewed his options, which consisted of holding onto the coin and fighting one-handed until he found some trousers, or swallowing it and waiting for it to come out. He ran his fingers over the spiked edge of the coin and his eyes watered. With a sigh he gave the coin to Dhum, who dropped both coins in his money pouch.

They climbed the stairs but halted before the room above. ‘Stick your head over the top,’ Dhum instructed.

Hazzard halted suspiciously just as he was about to oblige. ‘What if I get frozen again?’ he asked.

‘That was the last level. They won’t try that again. Besides, you’re taller,’ Dhum hissed at him.

Hazzard risked a glance over the edge. There was a long tense ominous moment, then he withdrew. ‘It’s a wardrobe,’ he reported.

Dhum had been expecting many horrors, but not that. He took a cautious peep himself. The room was like the two previous chambers, taking up the entire floor of the tower with three arched window frames and an opening on the other side showing the upwards stair.

The room seemed smaller because it was packed wall to wall with exotic fabrics. Fabulous silks, rare furs and jewel-bedecked satins were piled on every surface. Racks of costly dresses, skirts and silk-sewn bodices, fur-lined cloaks and glittering robes lined the walls. Extravagant head-dresses lined the top of the shelves, while from hooks and brackets hung silk scarves fine enough to thread through a ring, tiers of silk stockings, and trays of elegant gloves. An exquisite perfume scented the air.

A dress-making mannequin stood before a mirror in the center of the room. The mannequin was draped in a dazzling variety of garments and accessories, as if pinned in the center of a clothes-changing typhoon.

Dhum retired below stairs again, shaken. 'A lady's wardrobe,' he elaborated.

Hazzard perked up. Before Dhum could stop him he leaped vertically upwards. 'One at a time, ladies, there's plenty for everyone!' he cried, arms spread.

Dhum ducked and raised his shield to cover his face, awaiting some fiendish explosion.

A long moment passed.

Nothing happened.

As Hazzard was still alive and didn't seem demonically possessed Dhum cautiously rose and joined him.

'Pity they're ladies clothes, otherwise I could use them,' Hazzard reached out to touch a bottle green cloak that would have fitted him well if not for the delicate high collar of silver-filigreed lace that screamed "Antique Elf".

'Don't touch!' Dhum slapped his hand away. 'Look around. There's no dust on any of the clothes. No moths. No sign of age or wear.' He lowered his voice to a sonorous whisper. 'They're enchanted.'

'Enchanted?' Hazzard whispered back.

'Enchanted.' Dhum mouthed portentously.

'Why are we whispering?' Hazzard asked.

Dhum surveyed the room suspiciously. Hazzard gazed at the floor. He picked up a glittering coin and wordlessly handled it to Dhum. It was another electrum coin, larger than the previous two and of weird shape and design. Upon its face was a blank-faced queen with bat wings, no eyes and dainty rosebud lips pouting over a mouthful of fangs.

Hazzard's eyes were fixed on the place where he had picked up the coin. 'That's weird,' he indicated the stone surface.

'That's quality craftsmanship that is,' Dhum objected to good work being so casually dismissed. 'Bull-nose edges. Tongue-in-groove trim.'

'No, I mean the tracks,' Hazzard pointed out. 'There's a lot of tracks here but one set is less dusty than the rest. Pointed toe, leather soles, ladies size 5. They go from here to here.' He paced forwards, following the tracks in a zig-zag course across the room that took in most of the clothing hoard, 'and stop here,' he finished. He rose, and found himself nose to nose with

the dress-maker's mannequin. He jumped back, startled and raised his sword. 'It's alive!' he yelled.

The mannequin slumped crookedly before the mirror, a life-size doll with a blank cloth face. It was layered with costly dresses, robes and furs. A score of fine gloves clothed its stick hands. A dozen silk scarves draped around its neck. A pair of ladies slippers stuffed within bejeweled boots stuffed within fine dragon leather riding boots were sheathed on its lifeless feet.

'Ladies size 5!' In his astonishment Hazzard yelled out the clincher fact. 'The tracks match. Wow. Someone was really trying to find the perfect look,' he finished, impressed.

Dhum didn't know what the look was, unless it was crazy rich bag lady. As the final demented touch, buried beneath all the costly robes and rich dresses were glimpses of a full set of elvish battle kit – leather armor, bow and a quiver full of fine-fletched arrows. 'Uncomfortable,' he muttered. Apart from anything else, the quiver definitely ruined the cut of the clothes. On the dummy's head was an elaborate headdress. With an uneasy pang he realized it was like that of the queen on the coin.

His axe in his hands he surveyed the mannequin thoughtfully, ready to chop it to matchwood if it so much as waggled a glove. 'Let's get out of here, Ha –,' he said, then realized that Hazzard was no longer by his side. 'Hazzard!' he spun around.

Hazzard had returned to the bottle-green cloak. 'Not a lot of barbarians wear lace but I'm comfortable with my masculinity and I really think I could pull this off,' he muttered to himself.

Dhum surveyed the cloak suspiciously. It seemed like it was deeper green than before and now boasted a nonchalant spatter of sweat and blood stains.

A sing-song silver voice rang softly in the air. *Wear us. Wear us.*

Hazzard reached out to touch the cloak, irresistibly drawn like a child before a sweetmeat.

'Stop!' Dhum yelled.

'You don't think I can wear green?' Hazzard turned on Dhum belligerently, hands on hips. 'Look I've got auburn hair, dummy. Blondes can't wear green, auburns can. Besides it matches my eyes.'

'Listen to yourself,' Dhum shouted at him. 'You're a barbarian, not a courtier!' He took comfort in being a dwarf. He cared nothing for clothing as long as it kept off the rain and had serviceable chain ring with matching axe accessory.

Wear us. Wear us.

Then he noticed the unmistakable glint of an outfit in the rack.

'Is that mithril!' he gasped.

The racks of clothes stirred and moved, and *changed*. Female fashion changed to male, and half the room's racks changed to dwarven sizes 6-11.

Dhum summoned up all his formidable will power and resisted the gleaming mithril.

'Must take cloak. Just - my - style,' Hazzard drooled. He reached out to touch.

There was no time for half measures. Dhum threw the axe. Hazzard snatched his hand back just in time. The axe plunged into the bottle green cloak.

Wear -. The soft silver chiming voice cut off mid-sentence.

The cloak sagged, then all the clothes around billowed outwards and spurted blood; massive, bloated leech-fulls of blood, like someone had burst an artery in every outfit. The blood-gout hit Hazzard full in the face with the force of a water spout. He staggered backwards flailing his arms and spluttering. Gore painted the walls and splattered the dwarf.

'Rimbard's Road!' The cry came from behind Dhum. He turned to see the mannequin had animated, but not in the way he expected. A very live and astonishingly tall half-elf with yellow hair hurled the queen's headdress from her, then divested herself of costly apparel in a wild speed whirl of blood-soaked silk and satin. She finally emerged wiping blood from her face, dressed in what were presumably her original garments on arrival – leather armor, bow and quiver full of arrows, and ladies boots size 5 with leather soles and pointed toes. Her clothes were finer than the first glimpse had showed. Ornate lacing and needlework embellished the leather and delicate lace frills frothed at the wrist and throat of her armor. The glamour archer look was spoiled only by the fresh bloodstains from her discarded finery.

She wiped her face. 'Ugh. Thanks. Trapped. Clothes,' she explained.

Hazzard whirled around, fixed his gaze on her, and registered that she was female. He beamed and spread his arms. 'Madam!' he began.

'Oh wipe off the blood and put on some pants,' the half-elf snapped.

'This is Hazzard,' Dhum performed the introductions. 'He had pants. They disintegrated. I'm Dhum.'

'I'm Avariss. Pleased to meet me.' The half-elf mounted the stairs ahead of Dhum. She had her bow and arrow ready with one fluid movement then with an appalling lack of strategic caution she vaulted up the stairs to the top, arrow cocked and ready for any enemy. She stood a moment, poised aloft.

'This level is empty,' she reported. 'Really empty. Empty with a capital E.' She lowered her bow.

Dhum and Hazzard followed her up.

The room was identical to those below, with the same three arched window frames and shadowed stair opening across the other side of the room. It was as advised completely empty and the paving stones were carpeted with thick dust.

As they watched a coin materialized near the ceiling and dropped spinning with a slow ebony gleam to land in the center of the room.

'Mine!' Dhum and Avariss lunged for it at once.

'Stop!' Hazzard bellowed. The unexpected note of command in his voice froze Avariss and Dhum mid-step. 'Nobody move,' Hazzard crouched down, eyes fixed on the ground.

'You've spotted a trap?' Avariss asked, impressed.

'No, tracks,' Hazzard frowned in thought.

Avariss lowered her raised foot. 'I feel like I've been frozen on the spot for years,' she complained. She tenderly massaged her calf. 'So what are you guys here for?'

'Treasure,' Hazzard said, at once. 'My brother the king exiled me, so I need cash to raise an army to march straight back into Skarfell, lay siege to Skullstone, seize the crown and -.'

'Skullstone?' Dhum interrupted.

'Skullstone, capital of Skarfell,' Hazzard said, annoyed at having to pause in his sweeping introductory narrative.

'Skullstone was burned to the ground two centuries ago. The capital shifted south, to Herohorn,' Dhum said.

Hazzard looked at him blankly.

'Hazzard,' Dhum said, in a kindly, saintly tone, 'When I met you, you were wearing leather and furs. They disintegrated when you moved. Like they were old. Really old. And your hair has grown long. I think you've been frozen in time.'

'Two centuries,' Hazzard repeated, blankly.

Dhum realized the source of Hazzard's confusion. 'That's two hundred years,' he translated. 'At least,' he added. 'Besides, no Skarfellian dynasty has ever survived longer than two generations. You're no longer anywhere in line for the throne.'

Hazzard staggered back against the wall for support, then slid down to sit on the stone flags. A cloud of dust rose up. 'Two hundred years,' he sneezed.

Avariss knelt and clapped Hazzard on the shoulder. 'I'm seventy four years old so it's not often I get to say this,' she said, sympathetically. 'Cheer up, old man!'

'At least,' Hazzard repeated, slowly. He clearly hadn't processed Avariss's not-so-comforting words.

Avariss rocked back on her heels and shrugged. 'Rimbard aid him, he is lost.'

'You're a half-elf,' Dhum said. 'It's different.'

'Hey, I am questing for treasure myself,' Avariss said. 'I'm from the elvish city to the north of this wood. When I turn seventy five I come of age and gain my inheritance. Mother is very fond of me, you see, but my aunts aren't keen on sharing. It's only thanks to Rimbard that I've survived two poisonings, a chandelier crash, a rabid bat -.'

'Rabid bats can happen to anyone,' Dhum pointed out. He had faced a few in his time.

'Yeah, but in my *bedroom*?' Avariss asked. 'Anyway, the night before my birthday Mother sent me here on an urgent treasure quest.' She thought for a moment. 'Now I see perhaps she was just trying to get me away from my aunts,' she concluded.

'I've got some news for you too,' Dhum said.

'Why are you using a saintly tone?' Avariss asked suspiciously.

Dhum ignored the question. 'There isn't any elvish city to the north. Hasn't been for thousands of years.'

'Have you had a bang on the head?' Avariss asked, sympathetically. 'Just look out that window. There's a whacking great elvish city just to the north about a hundred miles. From up here you can probably smell the sweetly scented smoke.'

'There are the ruins of a city,' Dhum corrected her.

Avariss turned to Hazzard in appeal. 'You can't miss it. Castle, towers, pennants, horses. Really well dressed people.'

'I saw only ruins,' Hazzard said, flatly.

'No-one knows what happened,' Dhum said. 'People still sing sad songs about it.' It didn't seem tactful to mention that the dwarven refrains started with 'Good-bye and good riddances you pointy-eared excrescences,' or to explain that this was simply because there weren't that many words that rhyme with 'riddances' especially as 'nuisances' was required for the next line. 'There are still elves around,' he added, kindly. 'So perhaps your clan just went south for the winter and forgot to come back.'

'Thousands of years,' Avariss slumped by Hazzard.

Then they both looked at Dhum. 'What about you?' they said, as one.

Dhum came to an unwelcome realization. He faced it squarely. 'By the Builder, I have no memory of my life beyond standing outside the tower looking at the shattered door. Everything else is grey mist.' He unfolded his beloved treasure map. The blood-scrawled warning snagged his eye.

'How did you know your name then?' Avariss demanded.

Dhum gestured helplessly. 'I just – knew.'

'Do you know any other names?' Avariss asked. 'Father, brother, wife, daughter.' Dhum despondently shook his head. 'A pet?' she suggested.

'Nothing beyond standing at the door.'

'Yet Mr Convenient Memory here remembers all about the disaster that happened to my city,' Avariss said, resentfully.

'I've got news too,' Hazzard interrupted. He pointed to the dusty flags. 'These are the same tracks, over and over. One is bare-foot, one is booted and short of stride, and one is ladies size 5 with leather soles and pointed toes.'

'Hey that's us!' Avariss yelled.

'We've been here before,' Dhum said, grim.

'Many times,' Hazzard said. He gestured apathetically at the dust. 'There are too many sets of tracks to count, and they overlay each other. But they are all the same three. Us,' he finished, ungrammatically.

Dhum let the treasure map drop. 'That's why some of the levels are empty. They're places we've already cleaned out.' It was his axe that had smashed down the door, and cleaved the stone skull in two. Was his amnesia a result of his sojourn in this tower, or had it existed before? Perhaps his lost memories were the treasure he sought. That was too metaphysical for his hard head but the realization hit home. 'This tower is designed to keep us here forever.' He quoted listlessly from his discarded map. 'It's a tra.'

Avariss snatched the map. 'But you remember our history,' she pointed out. 'So you must be the most recent arrival.'

Dhum slumped on the floor and put his head in his hands. He strove to think of a concrete memory of his life, but none came.

'I liked my brother,' Hazzard decided. 'I mean, he did exile me rather than kill me. Offered me the chance to gather an army and face him in battle all fair and square, Olan style. But too bad, he's dead so I guess I won the long way.' He rose to his feet, heartened.

'I'm sure Mother is still around somewhere.' Avariss cheered up. 'I just have to find where she's gone then I can pop in, catch up, and give my aunts heartburn.'

A buoyant, joyous, comradely mood filled the room.

Hazzard helped Avariss to her feet then did a double-take as he finally paid attention to their previous conversation. 'Did you say you were several thousand and seventy-four years old,' he asked.

'Sure.'

'I'm only two hundred and something. I don't date older women,' he said.

'Nobody asked you, ape-face,' Avariss snapped.

The comradely moment passed.

'We must leave this accursed place,' Dhum said, heavily.

'I can't,' Avariss said. 'I mean it. I can't go back past those clothes again. It would kill me.'

'I understand your pain,' Dhum started, sympathetically, but Avariss wasn't listening.

'I'd just have to try some more on,' she said. 'Especially that lacy little number with the shirred bodice in silver-shot spider silk.'

'But they're cursed,' Dhum said, in disbelief.

'Cursed, sure, but really stylish,' Avariss said, wistfully.

'I still need treasure,' Hazzard added. 'I mean, I don't even have the cash to buy clothes. Speaking of which.' He picked up the coin lying on the floor, and handed it to Dhum. It was an electrum coin with a hole in the center, showing a snarling maw set into the palm of a monstrous hand.

Dhum examined it. Avariss peered over his shoulder. 'Why do I get the distinct impression that the makers of these coins were not very friendly?' she asked. She squinted at the runes on the reverse. 'I'm pretty sure that middle rune means "demon",' she said.

'How do you know?' Dhum asked, startled.

'I can read a bit of Dark Elvish. Not a fun language. It has twenty-seven different words for "disembowel". These runes look similar. Dark Elvish is descended from Demontongue so maybe...'

'These runes are Demontongue?' Dhum surveyed Avariss suspiciously and edged away, surreptitiously scanning her hairline for devil horns.

'Who cares about what is written on the coins as long as they are good money?' Hazzard cried impatiently. 'They say this tower is packed with treasure. *Treasure worthy of your greatest adventures,*' he quoted dreamily.

'I haven't seen any treasure,' Avariss said flatly.

'There's always upstairs. There's two more floors,' Dhum put the new coin in his money pouch.

Hazzard led the way up the next stairs. He crouched at the top and peered over with exaggerated caution, then immediately ducked.

'Dragon dragon! Two-headed dragon!' he yipped.

A frozen moment followed. Then he took another peep.

'Sorry, statue of a two-headed dragon. Statue. Relax,' he said.

An unmistakable sound came from above, a burp, long, rich and sonorous.

'Excuse me,' Hazzard said.

'That wasn't you,' Dhum informed him crisply.

'Wanna bet?' Hazzard asked.

Avariss held up her hand for silence. The belch from above was followed by a pair of high pitched yaps, then twin light thumps and an ominous scuttle.

The three adventurers popped their heads over the top of the stairs.

They saw a round room, the full width of the tower, with three arched window frames. A dark opening on the other side revealed a further stair. Nothing unusual there.

In the center of the chamber crouched a vividly painted timber statue of a black two-headed dragon. Its wings were raised and its tail wreathed around its body. Its four triangular eyes were transparent crystal with yellow slits.

'What scuttled?' Avariss asked, suspiciously.

'Rats,' Dhum suggested.

A coin materialized near the ceiling and dropped spinning with a slow ebony gleam to land in the center of the floor.

'Mine!' Dhum and Avariss lunged. Avariss was quicker but Dhum grabbed her knee to slow her down. Hopping hard she backhanded him in the face then twisted his nose.

'Stop!' Hazzard bellowed, with such authority that they froze mid-wrestle. He squinted at the dusty floor, on eye level, carefully, and shook his head. 'No rat tracks. Only the same three sets of footprints as usual,' he reported, glumly.

They pondered this in silence. Despite the indisputable evidence of their own tracks on the floor none of them could remember ever being here before. Some artefact of this tower must wipe their memories every time.

The belch came again. The dragon heads dropped long green jaws like gangplanks with red carpets of tongue and spat out two tiny forms.

They were horned and scaly humanoids the size of rats with dog-like snouts and rat-like tails. They slid down the long red tongues, and landed at the bottom with tiny thuds. The diminutive pair advanced, with needle-like dagger in their paws.

'Miniature kobolds. Aw, how cute!' Avariss cried. She knelt and held out her hand to them. 'I could just eat them up!' she crooned.

The creatures flinched from the giant looming over them. They gave out a volley of a high pitched yaps of such intensity that their hind paws left the ground. Then they vaulted backwards over the dragon's tail and disappeared from sight. From the dark recesses behind the dragon statue they were greeted by another volley of shrill yaps. Then silence descended, a stealthy, furtive silence charged with diminutive guile and miniature menace.

Hazzard followed Dhum and Avariss into the chamber. As soon as he entered there was a giant grating sound. The stairs behind them folded into the wall and the entrance ahead disappeared.

'The coins are part of the trap, dropped to lure us into each room,' Avariss realized.

Dhum remembered there had been a dragon belch before they entered the room. 'Yeah but four miniature kobolds,' he said, unimpressed. 'What are they going to do? Yap us to death?'

The twin dragon heads belched again. Another pair of miniature kobolds tumbled in, took one look, and scrambled away.

'Six miniature kobolds,' Dhum amended.

'They're going to just keep coming until they fill the room and squash us to death,' Avariss guessed.

'Why miniaturize kobolds? They're small enough already,' Dhum scratched his head, puzzled. 'So they'd fit in the dragon statue?' Avariss suggested.

Burp – another pair of miniature kobolds slid down then promptly escaped behind the dragon.

Dhum squinted at the statue and performed mental calculations. ‘No way they’d never all fit. There must be a dimension door in the back of it.’

‘Perhaps they’re normal size on the other side and they shrink once they pass through it,’ Avariss guessed.

Braaaa-aap... More kobolds slid down the dragon-tongue ramps.

‘You debate philosophy while these pests multiply. There is only one way to deal with such trash,’ Hazzard vaulted forward, sword scything overhead in an arc of death. He dealt the statue an almighty blow then staggered backwards, vibrating like a bell. The timber statue was as hard as steel.

‘O-o-o-l-l-a-a-n-n’s b-a-a-l-l-s!’ he stuttered.

Dhum crossed the room to the vanished stairs. He tapped walls for hollow sounds, pushed and pulled at likely stones, and tested the edge and center on every paving stone for triggers to a secret door.

Brap! The dragon heads belched, but he ignored them. *Brap*, again. Then *Bur-hap*.

Hazzard combed the floor for tracks that disappeared mid-step, that might indicate a hidden exit.

Avariss fetched the coin that had dropped from the ceiling. She was disappointed. It was the smallest they had found so far, a tiny coffin-shaped coin with a skeleton neatly tucked in it. ‘Rimbard’s road, what bad luck!’ she muttered. It wasn’t fair that she, follower of the goddess of rebirth, got the coin that reeked of death. She flicked it to Dhum with a cry of ‘Catch’, then glanced into the mini-kobold lair in the crook of the dragon’s tail. ‘Eugh!’ she squealed.

The largest of the kobolds had butchered their weaker brethren and made a catapult out of the guts, tendons and bones. As Avariss loomed in view they hauled back their miniscule artillery piece and fired. Tiny kobold heads hit her with stinging velocity, leaving tiny smears on her leather vest. She leaped back spluttering. ‘I think one touched my mouth!’

The dragon heads belched.

A teeny horde charged over the summit of the dragon’s tail. With shrill yaps of wrath they hurled themselves on the most vulnerable of the foes.

Hazzard had no armor against a low blow from a low life. Any barrier would have helped between him and his diminutive foes; a cup, a guard, a gourd, even a g-string. He

instinctively doubled over and cupped both hands protectively over his groin. 'Gerremoff,' he appealed.

The dragon heads belched.

The tiny horde swarmed Hazzard, biting, clawing and stabbing at his ankles and toes. A sharp needle stabbed him in the shin. He hopped around the chamber, swearing. Mini-kobolds were crushed underfoot, smearing the floor with noxious fluids. He slipped in the blood and fell heavily, cracking his coccyx.

The dragon heads belched.

Swearing frightfully Hazzard leaped to his feet. He kicked hard and sent a kobold soaring through the air to splat into the wall. The tiny corpse peeled off slowly, leaving a kobold-shaped bloody outline.

Bra-haaa-aap!

'That's what you little bastards get when you mess with me!' Hazzard cried, triumphantly. A rear guard took advantage of his distraction to climb to the window ledge. They leapt for his hair. Hazzard drew his sword then realized they were too small and too close to kill without slicing off parts of his body that he was in no hurry to lose, so instead he seized a handful of his own hair and lopped it off at the halfway mark. Some of the kobolds fell but others leaped for his shoulders and capered in triumph. They set up a war standard and yapped kobold obscenities into his ear.

Dhum rushed over to help.

The dragon heads belched.

Hazzard shook himself like a dog ridding itself of flees and stomped at his tiny tormenters as they lost their hold and dropped.

Braa-aap!

The kobolds leaped from Hazzard's shoulder onto Dhum's helmet. From there they descended, stabbing viciously at his eyeballs. Dhum swung at his attackers with a mailed fist, a juicy roundhouse blow packed with righteous dwarven fury.

He hit himself square in the right eye.

He saw stars. He bellowed, blind with pain, and swung his fists wildly, sending tiny forms flying with every smack. Kobold recovery teams dragged the dead and injured back to use as fresh ammunition. The catapult pounded away from the crook the dragon's tail, hurling hails of severed heads as hard as marbles.

The dragon heads belched.

Avariss squeamishly plucked a kobold from Hazzard's shoulder and put it down safely on the window ledge. 'Go away, shoo,' she instructed it.

Bur-hap!

Avariss's kobold bit her deeply in the wrist. 'Let go!' she appealed.

It didn't.

She waved her arm wildly in the air. Her own blood sprayed everywhere. 'I'm going to faint,' she announced. Then she glanced down at the smear of kobold blood, brains and guts on the floor. 'But I'm not fainting in that,' she said, changing her mind.

She thrust her arm over the window, shut her eyes and bashed her tiny foe against the outside wall. 'I don't feel good about this,' she informed the kobold. It stirred, feebly. She bashed it six times more to make sure then flicked it out the window. 'Sorry,' she called after it.

Somewhat to her surprise the kobold corpse fell upwards. She craned her head out the window to take a second look up, but the exterior of the tower was hidden by a thick grey mist.

Puzzled, she decided she must have imagined it. She looked down at the blood still leaking from her wrist. She turned back to the room, waving her injured hand in horror. 'Do you know how hard it is to get stains out of lace?' she asked.

No-one was listening to her laundry concerns. Hazzard wildly stomped his foes with a crazed grin fixed on his face. Dhum methodically smacked kobolds together. The floor was littered with the dead and the dying.

'Stop!' she cried.

Dhum paused with a kobold in each fist, poised to smash. Hazzard halted mid-hop. Even the mini-kobolds stopped for a look.

'What are we doing? Why all this blood and death? We're better than this!' she cried, passionately.

The dragon heads belched.

The kobolds yapped in derision and renewed their attack. From behind the line of the dragon's tail a new, larger and improved catapult wheeled out.

The three adventurers drew together against the frenzied yapping assault, fending the tiny terrors from their ankles. Within the dragon's eyes they saw hundreds of kobolds pressing their snouts to the inside of the glass, leaving snotty smears.

'There's too many of them,' Hazard realized. 'They're never going to stop.'

'The stairs are concealed by magic. There's no way out,' Dhum panted.

'Who needs stairs when we have windows!' Avariss cried. Without waiting to see if the others followed her, she vaulted nimbly over the sill.

Perspective and scene changed in an instant. The world swooped sickeningly. Gravity whirled wildly around every point of the compass then firmly reversed. Her stomach performed a somersault with a double pike twist. Too late, she realized why the kobold corpse had fallen upwards.

The whole tower was now impossibly tall and had flipped upside down so it hung from a slowly churning grey maelstrom of cloud that reached to the horizon in all directions. The top of the tower was below her, and the ground level was high overhead. The windows from the previous four levels had all vanished. A smooth blank featureless face of stone reared upwards out of sight into the grey clouds.

Flashes of sinister lightning raged through the maelstrom and thunder rumbled. From within the cloud vast voices argued at a pitch and depth beyond human comprehension.

She risked a glance between her toes, all her weight dragging her what should have been upwards, but was now down. The tower ended below her in the final level. An arched window like the one she clung to was framed between her dangling legs. Below that final window was nothing. Infinity. A void of starry inkiness. She gulped, and fastened her eyes on the rough stone immediately before her nose.

She made a wild grab for the window ledge above her, but missed. She lost a toe-hold and dropped a body length before she snagged a finger hold and clung lovingly to the rough stone. Clutching for every finger, toe and tooth-hold she inched herself down towards the only point of safety – the window below.

Focused on survival she had no chance to see if the others had followed her or how they were faring. She was only thankful that the tiny kobolds did not pursue, because she was sure their idea of being helpful was a dozen sharp needles to the thumbs. Perhaps the magic of the tower kept them within their own level.

After an eternity she reached the window ledge below. The reversed position and gravity of the tower meant she swung beneath the broad flat window sill with the arch of the window below her.

She swung herself through, and was in a room like the others, with three windows and a flat paved floor and ceiling. The problem was the floor was now the roof. Or at least it was right up to the moment that her feet touched it. Then gravity reversed itself – or re-established

itself. She plummeted down and smacked into the floor so hard that she gained a red square crosshatch impression on her skin, showing every inch of the bullnose trim.

The floor was once more the floor. The ceiling was the ceiling. She was way too winded to do anything except gasp with relief. Then Dhum came in the other window while Hazzard clambered in the third, both flopped to the floor as she had. The air filled with curses as they massaged their cramped fingers and toes.

'Well, that was weird,' Avariss remarked at last.

The other two nodded wordlessly.

Eventually they found the energy to look about the room.

They were at the very top of the tower. There were no stairs and no more levels above. The stone flags were covered in dust. The three windows allowed light.

In the center of the chamber sat the treasure they sought; a very small chest bound with iron bands and padlocks.

All three regarded it in silence.

'My greatest adventures are worthy of much more than that,' Hazzard said, flat.

Avariss was the first to overcome her bitter disappointment. 'It might be small but valuable, like a bag of diamonds,' she suggested. 'Three way split,' she added.

Dhum reminded her. 'It's a tra'.

Hazzard was puzzled. 'What is this tra you keeping talking of? Is it ... a tarrasque! I would win the favor of Olan forever for destroying such a fell beast. Lead me to it.'

'No, it's a -. ' Dhum started to explain but Hazzard was too lost in thought to hear him out.

'What is it then?' Attra...? Is it a triple breasted bra? Olan! I've seen some half orcs -.'

'It's a trap, you idiot,' Avariss hissed. 'We'll just have to be careful. I can pick the lock.'

Dhum was thinking this through. 'Are our tracks here?' he asked Hazzard.

Hazzard squinted at the dust. 'They're either ours or we have identical twins,' he remarked.

'And lots of them?' Dhum asked.

'As usual,' Hazard said tersely.

'Do a set of Avariss's tracks lead to the chest?'

'Many times.'

'It's probably one of them chests with teeth,' Avariss broke in. 'Hazzard, sneak up on it and give it a whack. Let's see if it can still bite through a mouthful of broken fangs.'

'Done that.' Hazzard pointed out the tracks of bare feet in the dust. The tracks approached the chest with such caution that they looked like the owner was practicing dance steps.

Avariss turned to Dhum excitedly. 'Perhaps it's your memories in there, stuck in a magic memory trap. Open it and stick your face right in. You can suck the memories back.'

Dhum looked at Hazzard, who wearily indicated the short booted Dwarven footprints. They had already tried that.

'If this chest does cause us to forget,' Dhum said, heavily, 'perhaps I have opened it too many times and my memory is gone for good. I don't want to open it again, or have you open it for me,' he added quickly as Avariss started forwards eagerly.

'I think we've been here again and again,' he continued. 'I think we've done everything we can do to that chest. Yet each time we wind up back where we started. How many times have we stormed this tower, alone or together? How many times have we reached the top?'

'It doesn't matter. We're trapped in here. We have to find some way out!' Hazzard shouted in frustration.

Avariss's face lit impishly. 'I vote we open it! Just to find out.'

'How about we do the one thing we probably haven't done before.'

'What?' they others asked.

'Nothing,' Dhum said, simply.

'What! Sit here and starve?' Avariss said, angrily.

'I'm hungry,' Hazzard said immediately.

Avariss turned to Hazzard. 'Are there any tracks that look like three loser bums just sat down and gave up?'

Hazzard scanned the dusty floor. 'These are my buttocks. Those are wide dwarven buttocks and -.'

'Keep your eyes off my arse-print, you perve,' Avariss snapped. 'Anyway, forget I asked. We're not going to do nothing. We're adventurers. Let's adventure! Let's venture to the one place we haven't tried.' Avariss flung out her arm in a dramatic gesture. 'Back out the windows,' she cried.

'Into the inky blackness of the void?' Dhum asked. 'That's crazy.' He felt a rush of excitement. 'On the other hand, I doubt we've tried that before,' he admitted.

'There's no tracks going back out the windows,' Hazzard said, with a glimmer of hope. 'And it's better than sitting here waiting to die.'

They looked at each other.

'So this is it. We jump,' Dhum voiced their insane decision.

'Bet I hit the ground last.' Hazzard rushed to a window.

'Look at me, I'm pretty!' Avariss followed suit.

'Better luck in the next life,' Dhum dived, head first.

Three figures plummeted through the inky void. The maelstrom raged and lightning crackled above, around the hanging finger of the impossible tower. Thunder boomed.

A cacophony of titan voices raged from the maelstrom, but a vaster note amidst the rest rumbled something about 'a gathering of suitable heroes', and 'time for our rebirth', with a final mutter of 'dumb luck.'

Avariss fell about three feet. She landed shoulders first on soft grass with a squawk of surprise. She opened her eyes. Around her was grey mist and gnarled trees. Above her loomed the dark bulk of the Puzzle Tower. She raised her head cautiously. She looked intact.

Dhum had plummeted head first into the turf. His helmet had buried itself in the loam and he struggled to wrench himself out. Hazzard lay face-down in the grass, arms and legs spread-eagled starfish fashion, as though he tried to glide down.

Avariss bounced to her feet. 'We did it! We're out!' she sang. 'Clever me!' She threw her arms out and cut a gleeful elvish caper.

Dhum hauled his head from the dirt. Hazzard rose and spat out a mouthful of grass. They turned to look back at the tower.

'Now we'll never know what was in that chest,' Hazzard said.

'Why don't you go back and find out,' Avariss suggested. Hazzard surveyed her in wonder then let loose with an enormous belly laugh. He slapped her on the shoulder, making her stagger and cough.

'Can you remember anything more?' she asked Dhum, who shook his head. She surveyed his glum face, touched. 'Perhaps we should go back,' she started.

The Puzzle Tower folded into itself with a snap, and vanished from the Poisonwood. The mist rolled in to fill the vacuum.

They turned their backs on the place where the tower wasn't. Before them lay a path through gaunt trees into grey mist. What strange new world lay beyond? Was it even the same world as the one they had left? But more important concerns weighed on their minds.

'We didn't find any treasure,' Avariss mourned.

'We won our freedom, the greatest treasure of all,' Hazzard exulted.

'Freedom is all very well but it doesn't pay for fine dining and elvish wine,' Avariss grumbled.

'We do have five electrum pieces,' Dhum cupped them in his palm. The mystery coins snarled up at him like a handful of hate. 'A collector would pay handsomely for these.'

'Handsomely enough to outfit a barbarian, buy some styling evening dresses, and pay for a five course banquet and two private bedrooms, mine with hot running water?' Avariss asked.

'I don't know,' Dhum said, taken back by the readiness and length of the list of demands.

'It'll be enough,' Hazzard said, confidently. 'I've just been trapped in the same dungeon for two hundred years without pants. If that was not my greatest adventure, I don't know what is.' He clapped a brawny arm around each of his new friends. 'To the pub!' he said.

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