



THE DUNGEONS

CRYPT OF THE
MOANING DIAMOND
Rosemary Jones



CHAPTER ONE

Ivy punched the camel. It backed out of her tent and stood with its big, shaggy brown head still sticking through the opening. Its large half-closed eyes stared at her, and it opened its mouth and rolled its lips back over huge yellowed teeth. Ivy hit the creature again, square on the nose, and the camel sidestepped—wide-bottomed feet on skinny legs—onto the equally wide feet of its screaming owner.

The camel's driver took a swipe at Ivy as she emerged from her tent, swinging his open palm to slap the impudent female abusing his camel. He shouted something that Ivy decided was uncivil even if she did not know the dialect. She sighed—a sound only slightly less annoyed than the camel's snorts. After all, she had not hurt the idiot's mount (and the man's bruised toes were not her fault). Ivy lacked the time for a really good fight, a beat-his-head-into-the-dung brawl, especially after spending most of the morning clearing lost dromedaries and their droppings out of her crew's tents. One of Mumchance's strays slipped between her legs. The mangy dog snapped at the man. The camel's owner snarled and threatened the mutt, flipping a small dagger out of his belt to brandish at it.

Maybe there is enough time for a little fight, thought Ivy, as she moved between the stray and the Shaar mercenary foolish enough to swing a knife under her nose.

One kick from Ivy knocked the dagger into the dirt. A swing of her mailed fist caught the man under his jaw, rocking him back. A second kick landed him flat on his back in a less-than-fragrant pile left behind by his frightened camel. Gasping, his breath knocked out of him, the camel driver lay there, glaring up at her.

“Go away,” said Ivy, one booted foot resting on his dagger. “Take the camel with you.”

The camel driver glanced at the sword that Ivy had not bothered to unsheathe. Ivy cocked her hip slightly and grinned. She did not need the blade to keep him down, and—as they were fighters of the same siege force—serious maiming made little sense. The man apparently took her point of view. Rolling up in one fluid and slightly squelchy move, he picked up his dagger, grabbed his camel’s halter, and led the beast in the direction of his people’s tents. The cur just plopped its bottom in the dust and started scratching for fleas.

“You’re welcome,” said Ivy to the unconcerned mutt. “No problem at all defending your scruffy hide.”

The camels had slipped out during the night and rampaged through the camp—at least as much as a dromedary could rampage, which was more like a blundering through the tents. It was, Ivy considered, exactly what the Thultyrl deserved for hiring Shaar mercenaries to fill out his siege forces. Except, of course, the camels knew better than to shamle their way through Procampur’s neatly ordered pavilions. Instead, mercenaries like Ivy had to spend their morning shifting the smelly, spitting, four-legged, one-humped fleabags out of their gear while the Shaar drivers wailed and moaned and threatened terrible retribution to anyone who harmed their precious mounts.

Unless, of course, somebody taught them a well-deserved lesson in manners and kindness to small mongrels.

Cursing the loss of time, but not regretting the brief tussle, Ivy swatted the last stray camel out of the camp area. She almost chased off a few of the dogs panting at her heels as she searched the camp for something to eat. But a quick survey of wagging tails, moist noses, and panting tongues led her to the conclusion that every mutt was one of Mumchance's strays, and the dwarf would never forgive her if the whole pack was not there to greet him on his return from the dig. Ivy decided that she should be just thankful that Mumchance and the other Siegebreakers had set off earlier to the dig, leaving the camels to her. If they had stayed, she was certain that the day would have ended with a camel added to the odd menagerie that the Siegebreakers seemed to augment every time they went out on a job.

As she continued to search for a breakfast that had not been trampled or tasted by camels, Ivy tripped over Kid's pile of odds and ends. Since he almost always stole food as well as any shiny object that attracted his attention, she did a quick shuffle through his little bags and boxes. One leather pouch yielded up a quantity of stale—but still quite chewable—campaign biscuits.

Even as she crammed the first bite into her mouth, a soft cough interrupted her. Just from the tone of the cough, she knew who it was, who it had to be. Nobody coughed that decorously except Captain Sanval, the officer who escorted her every day to the Thultyrl's tent. In the courteous tone he always used, the captain said, "The Thultyrl requires an audience with you, lady. I am to accompany you."

Ivy took another bite of the sour biscuit and wondered if he had arrived just in time to see her stealing from Kid's gear, or if he had been standing there long enough to see her roll the

Shaar through the camel dung. While contemplating that last thought and avoiding Sanval's patient gaze, she stirred Kid's cache with a toe. Most of it looked worthless: odd scraps, lengths of rope, the purple leather pouch (containing the biscuits she had purloined), and a number of small utensils. There was nothing in Kid's trove that could not be explained or would attract an angry owner seeking to reclaim his property, decided Ivy, but she resolved to remind Kid again that this was a Procampur-controlled camp, and Procampur's officers took a very dim view of thieves.

Sanval coughed again. As usual, no emotion showed on his handsome face. He never had any expression, other than polite and attentive interest. The captain looked almost exactly like his fellow officers, so much so that Ivy wondered if the Thultyrl had some clay mold that he used to stamp out row after row of stalwart, polite young men. Like all the other Procampur officials, Sanval wore the cleanest gear that Ivy had ever seen: every cord matched, every buckle gleamed. Even his boot heels were polished. The dust and the stink of the siege camp never seemed to touch him.

Today, although the sun was beating down hard enough to make even a Shaar sweat, Sanval wore his complete armor: from the shining greaves on his long legs to a brilliantly polished breastplate beneath his square shoulders, right up to a well-buffed helmet sitting absolutely straight on the top of his head. Once, and only once, Ivy had seen Sanval pull off his perfectly shined helmet. Then one little black curl had stood straight up on the back of his head, defiantly out of place from the rest of his clipped and well-brushed wavy black locks. Ivy had rather liked that freestanding curl.

When they had first met, Ivy guessed that Sanval was one of those that Procampur citizens would call "born under the silver roof"—a nobleman in service to his Thultyrl as a

matter of duty rather than financial necessity. Besides all the wonderfully well-polished and obviously expensive armor, the full list of his names was much too long for anyone except a noble. Common people made do with one or two names. But Sanval had recited a dozen sonorous sobriquets including, unless she had misunderstood, the rather unlikely name of Hyacinth. After a tongue-twisting moment of trying to repeat back all his names, Ivy had suggested that she just call him Sanval. He had mentioned that “Captain Sanval” would be more proper.

Other than the long list of personal names and the fact that he had brought three horses to the siege, Ivy had been unable to pry any personal information out of the discreet captain, despite her best and most congenial efforts at quizzing him. It wasn't easy asking questions of a man who insisted on walking either three paces in front of you (if you were going to the Thultyrl's tent) or three paces behind you (if you were going away from the Thultyrl's tent), but Ivy tried. After a short time (the duration of one walk up the hill to the Thultyrl's tent), Ivy gave up on being congenial and switched to the more familiar and comfortable tactic of being annoying. After all, just because none of her armor matched—or had ever been shined until it reflected sunlight like a silver mirror—did not mean that she lacked pride.

“I am eating my breakfast,” she said to the silent captain. “It took some time this morning to clear the camels out of here.”

Sanval's smooth brown brow creased, very slightly. Ivy waited. She kept waiting. In silence. Two could play that game.

“The animals,” said Sanval finally, when it became evident that Ivy was not going to say anything else or even move until he responded, “did not come into our area.”

“Of course not,” drawled Ivy in a perfect imitation of his even tones. She had been a gifted mimic since childhood and

matching the clipped, even cadences of the Procampur accent was a simple trick for her. “That would have been rude. Even camels have manners around Procampur.”

One corner of Sanval’s perfect lips almost quirked upward. The possible smile disappeared too quickly for her to be certain, and Ivy decided that it was just a trick of light and shadow playing across those finely chiseled features. The gods only knew what it would take to make the man bend, even for a moment, and indulge in a little camp gossip.

Sanval apologized again for interrupting her breakfast but insisted courteously that she make herself ready to meet with the Thultyrl.

“I can wait while you wash, but we must not take too long,” said Sanval, with a slight bow. Ivy knew that his quick glance had not missed a single spot of dust on her face, the grime on the mismatched armor that she wore, or the new patch on her unpolished boots. Ivy knew she looked every inch a grubby, uncouth mercenary, and—if she were forced to admit it—she rather enjoyed the dirt. It was certainly easier to maintain than the well-scrubbed look favored by the Procampur officers, especially when living in the middle of a siege camp in the last and hottest month of summer.

If Sanval had been an aristocrat out of Waterdeep, he might have sneered at her obvious lack of fortune and armor polish. But Sanval was from Procampur. Courteous Procampur officers never sneered. He just stood there, making no fuss at all, while she twisted up her sweat-soaked blonde braid and jammed it under her favorite leather cap.

Ivy located her armored gloves and thrust them through her belt. With her bare hands, she dug through Kid’s leather pouch and removed as many biscuits as she could. Ivy stuffed them into the top of her tunic, securing them behind her breastplate. Satisfied that she could eat some breakfast later, she rubbed the

crumbs off her mouth with her grimy sleeve.

“All done, and I’m as ready and as clean as I am going to be,” she said, figuring that this time she would get a response from him. Although she had not been certain about the smile earlier, she had definitely seen him wince when she deliberately smeared extra biscuit crumbs down her front. The crumbs, Ivy reasoned, would shake off in the walk up the hill, or she could brush herself down before she entered the Thultyrl’s tent. Annoying Sanval was one thing; revolting the ruler who was going to pay her a lot of gold to end an unprofitable siege was another.

Sanval turned to lead her to the Thultyrl’s tent, starting out at the regulation three paces in front of her. Ivy quickened her step so she was even with him. They were almost the same height, and her legs were as long as his. She could easily match him stride for stride. He quickened his pace so that he was again three steps in front of her. She wondered if she should push him into a jog this morning, just to see him sweat.

Mumchance’s mutts decided that Ivy and Sanval were playing a new game. A little brown-and-white shaggy one barked and leaped for Sanval’s ankles, apparently intent on slowing him down for Ivy. Sanval neatly sidestepped the dog without even looking. Not even a spot of drool from its lolling tongue touched his highly polished toes. Ivy was impressed. The rest of the mutts came boiling out of whatever patch of shadow they had been panting in and ran toward them. Sanval came to a complete and rock-solid halt. He and the entire pack of dogs looked back at Ivy. She shrugged. This time, Sanval waited until she did what he wanted.

Ivy snapped a Dwarvish command at the dogs. The motley troop dropped to the ground with drooping tails. A yellow cur, a three-legged dog Mumchance had brought back yesterday, whined piteously. Ivy dug a biscuit out of her tunic. She broke

off a piece and threw it to the yellow dog. The rest of the mongrels whined too. She pulled out the rest of the biscuits and tossed them to the dogs. So much for breakfast—she hoped that the rest of her company had thought to bring food to the dig site.

“Your dogs seem . . . hmm . . . better behaved today,” said Sanval. He was right. None of them had jumped up on him today. Ivy knew that the dogs appalled him, but she could never get the polite captain to yell at them, swear, or even grumble. So she had stopped saying “jump” in the Dwarvish dialect that Mumchance used for training his mutts and that Sanval didn’t speak.

So the dogs had failed to annoy him today. He had not reacted to her usual grimy state, no matter how much it contrasted with his own shiny image. And it really was too hot to try to make him trot through the Procampur tents—probably the only person who would end up sweating would be her. Ivy considered other options to tease some human response out of Sanval. Restraint like his, in Ivy’s experience of war camps, was not only uncommon, it was positively uncanny. She suspected that it might even be unhealthy.

But it was typical of a citizen of Procampur, a city so regimented by manners and so enamored of its laws that they had banned the thieves’ guild and, even more surprisingly, made the ban stick, keeping the guild permanently out of the city. Like the highly polished officer now leading her through the camp, Procampans made civility seem ordinary and the picking of pockets the height of bad manners.

Such things weren’t natural. Take this war, thought Ivy, which had started because Procampur’s ruler decided to honor his treaties. Now, most kingdoms and city-states had treaties with one another, but rarely bothered to read them, let alone act upon them. But Procampur had a treaty with Turlagol that

they would protect the city from outside invasion or, if invaders managed to take control of Tsurlagol, free the city. When the inevitable happened, and Fottergrim's ramshackle army of orcs and hobgoblins (and a few humans and half-breeds who should have known better) captured Tsurlagol, Procampur's ruler decided to go to war. Unfortunately, the orderly city had only an orderly army—just enough to serve its own needs, but not nearly enough to defeat the forces encamped in Tsurlagol.

To free Tsurlagol, Procampur needed more than its own citizens. It needed, as its senior nobles and officers had most reluctantly admitted, to hire mercenaries. After a long hot summer of paying the untidy and decidedly disorderly mercenaries, Procampur's Thultyrl desired a quick end to the siege. The Thultyrl was a king who could afford to pay to have the siege broken, and the Siegebreakers had all the technical, practical, and magical expertise needed to make that happen—or so Ivy had spent the last tenday assuring the Thultyrl. The Siegebreakers also badly needed the payment promised by the Thultyrl, but Ivy felt that Procampur's ruler did not need to know that. It might make him inclined to haggle, and she preferred to be the only haggler in a transaction.

Now, all Mumchance and the rest of her Siegebreakers needed to do was collapse a section of Tsurlagol's sturdy walls. All Ivy had to do, and she considered her job the harder of the two, was persuade the impatient Thultyrl to give her friends enough time to complete the task. For the last tenday, she had trudged far too many times up the hill to the Thultyrl's tent to explain once again why the walls could not fall instantly. She wondered if the Thultyrl would believe her this time.



Ivy skipped over the ditch that separated Procampur's section of the camp from the mercenaries' tents. Shallow and

narrow, the ditch served no defensive purpose. It existed to warn mercenaries returning from the latrines in the dark to head down the hill rather than up the hill.

As they climbed the hill to the Thultyrl's pavilion, located squarely in the center of Procampur's tents, Ivy paused and turned to the north. From here, she had the clearest view of the city on the opposite hill. As usual, a few mounted troops were trotting back and forth in the valley, well out of range of Fottergrim's archers. The horsemen raised a fine cloud of dust, as the grass and any other vegetation had long ago been trampled. The sun caught a glint of armor along the tops of the walls. Ivy squinted. Tall shadows and bright helmets were clustered thickest along the southern wall. Fottergrim had stationed the bulk of his troops there to watch the horsemen in the fields below. According to reports from the Thultyrl's scouts, another array of orcs and hobgoblins, well mixed with a few bugbears, kept watch along the eastern wall, ready to raise the alarm if any charge came up the harbor road. Looking south and looking east was exactly what Ivy wanted. Let Fottergrim keep his attention fixed in those directions. She had no intention of entering the city through the eastern gates or by a charge up the steep southern hill. Ivy preferred Fottergrim's army to mass their largest numbers where she was not going.

"Any sign of Fottergrim today?" she asked Sanval.

He did not pause in his steady march up the hill, but answered over his shoulder. "Earlier. Shouting insults as usual and daring us to try the gates."

"Then he's got hot oil, hidden archers, or a good spell set there," said Ivy. "Your Thultyrl's restraint is spoiling all his fun."

"*The* Thultyrl," said Sanval in the faintest rebuke of her casual tone, "cannot wait forever."

“Your officers are pressing him to go home again?” It was less of a question than a statement. It was an unpopular war, and costly, and Procampur’s nobles and merchants liked to see a profit in their ventures. Since Sanval was apparently willing to talk politics, if nothing else, Ivy wanted to obtain as much information as possible. The more the officers pressed the Thultyrl to end the war quickly, the faster the Siegebreakers had to dig. If the walls of Turlagol did not fall soon, the Thultyrl was going to try some other tactic to draw out Fothergrim and engage him in a decisive battle. And that, in Ivy’s opinion, would be a disaster. Nobody was going to pay the Siegebreakers for failing to make a wall fall down.

“Another petition has come from the merchants. They protest the loss of the Thultyrl’s leadership and demand that he return to his duties in the city. There are a number of civil cases that need his judgment,” Sanval said.

“And none of your green-roof merchants can settle their own disputes?”

Sanval started to say something and then thought better of it. Obviously it went against his personal code of conduct to criticize his fellow citizens. Ivy sighed and wished the gentlemen of Procampur were more like the humans of Waterdeep or the gnomes of Thesk: ready to slander anyone of low or high station. If Ivy knew what the various factions in the camp wanted, she could always bargain in such a manner that made it seem like everyone was going to be satisfied (even if the only ones who really benefited were her Siegebreakers).

“It is impossible to explain to an outsider,” began Sanval, apparently responding to the deep sighs that she heaved behind him. “Our customs and our laws are very ancient and must seem strange to someone like you.” He stopped and looked over his shoulder at her. Obviously he felt unable to describe what he thought “someone like you” meant, but Ivy had a good

idea, and she was more than a bit annoyed by his judgment. Looking messy did not mean that she lacked understanding of the way that silver-roof nobles lived. She understood all too well—she just chose to live differently.

Ivy began to sing in her crow's voice. Daughter of a bard, she couldn't carry a tune to save her life. But she had the same wicked memory for lyrics that she had for accents. Also, only last night, she had found a minstrel with a goodly collection of bawdy songs favored in the worst parts of Procampur. "I'm quite the red-roof girl, in fact, all the warriors declare . . ."

Now Sanval sighed, turned around, and quickened his pace through Procampur's tents. The Procampur pavilions followed the same straight lines of their city's famous Great Way, not at all like the mercenary section of the camp where the canvas coverings randomly clustered. There, mercenaries pitched their tents in whatever order they liked. Far from the latrine pits was considered a prime location for most mercenaries; other than that, they didn't pay much attention to their surroundings. But in this section of the camp, tents were planted in perfect formations, with the rustling banners and ribbon tent edgings matching the colors of Procampur's famous roof tiles: gold for the Thultyrl's personal enclave, silver for the nobles, yellow for their servants, black for the priests, and so on. The only color not showing was red. That was the symbol for adventurers as well as the areas that housed those adventurers passing through Procampur. That element, as far as the Procampur army was concerned, was already too thoroughly represented by the mercenary camp.

Ivy marched behind Sanval, doing her best to uphold the mercenaries' low reputation. She continued the song that was worth every drink that she had bought for the harper's parched throat. By the time she reached the second verse, with the rousing line of "Once the men lived for my sighs, but now

they want a peek of . . .” the back of Sanval’s neck shone pink beneath the rim of his helmet.

The Thultyrl’s pavilion dominated the center of Procampur’s section, much as his palace reigned in the center of the city. One enormous tent, with silk walls dividing the interior into multiple rooms, housed the Thultyrl and his many retainers.

Only their arrival at the Thultyrl’s tent prevented Ivy from completing the ballad. Even she didn’t have quite enough nerve to sing the last three lines of *I’m Quite the Red-Roof Girl* in front of the Thultyrl’s stone-faced bodyguards, members of the famous Forty who followed him in every pursuit.

The two on guard today were standing rigidly at attention and staring into space. The one on the left was very young, and Ivy noticed his cheeks were very flushed under the flanges of his helmet. Her voice may not have had the quality of her mother’s, but she could pitch it to be heard over long distances. She must have been singing even louder than she had intended. She glanced at the other bodyguard. He was older, and he was not blushing, but he did wink at her as she passed him.

During the day, the canvas outer walls of the Thultyrl’s pavilion were rolled up to allow the breezes to blow through the tent; but the gold silk walls were down—probably in a vain attempt to keep the dust from covering the scrolls belonging to the scribes busy working inside the pavilion. The dozen scribes assigned to the Thultyrl’s Great Codex fought a constant battle with the grit of the camp, which clogged their inkpots and stained their fine parchments. Still, as far as they were from their cool halls, they continued their mission to copy Procampur’s many laws into one great law book. Behind them paced the legal scholars, already debating the exact wording of each law, consulting the original crumbling texts that were being copied, and occasionally leaning over a scribe’s shoulder to correct a comma there, a dash here.

As Ivy stood there, brushing biscuit crumbs onto the canvas floor, she reflected that she had known commanders who went to battle with their entire families, often dragging whole harems of lovers and children to a siege camp. But the Thultyrl was the first that she had known who brought his secretaries and lawyers to the edge of a battle. When she had first heard of the Thultyrl's personal passion—the Great Codex to be placed in a library to eclipse all libraries—she had expected to meet an old man, white-haired and wrinkled, determined to build a monument that would outlast his death.

Instead, this Thultyrl was her own age, an energetic young man who adored hunting so much that he had also brought his hounds, his hawks, and his master huntsman with him. It was the hunting that had led to his present incarceration in bed. While coursing a stag in the hills above Turlagol, his party had surprised a troop of mountain orcs coming to reinforce their kin inside the city's walls. During the ensuing dust-up, the Thultyrl had been speared in his leg, breaking the thighbone.

Now the Thultyrl commanded from his camp bed with all the sweetness of temper of a lion tied to a stake. Ivy could hear him roaring as they paused beside the scribes scratching at their scrolls. Sanval conferred with two more members of the Forty, sitting on stools in front of a silk curtain embroidered with flying griffins—the personal symbol of this Thultyrl. A scribe's apprentice pushed past Ivy to pull last night's guttered beeswax stubs from the silver candlesticks. The Thultyrl was rich enough to keep his pavilion lighted all night long for his scribes, but not wasteful enough to allow them to throw away good beeswax. The incense pots were already lit, in a vain attempt to stifle the usual morning stink wafting through a war camp. No one was smiling, and everyone was working in absolute silence, which meant the Thultyrl was in worse humor

than usual. After a long whispered conference, Sanval gestured for Ivy to follow him. He lifted aside the gold silk curtain to let them pass into the inner room of the Thultyrl's tent.

The Thultyrl was clutching a snow white towel to his freshly shaved chin. The barber was crouched on the floor, his bowl clutched to his chest and his forehead pressed against the purple wool rug hiding the canvas floor of the pavilion. The barber appeared frozen in the traditional bow signifying absolute obedience (and terror) that former Thultyrls had instituted in their courts.

"Oh, for the sweet suffering of every black-roof priest," swore this Thultyrl, "get up, man! You will not be beheaded for nicking the Thultyrl's royal chin. Beriall, pay the poor fellow something extra for his fright."

Beriall, the Thultyrl's personal secretary and the camp steward, swept forward with a swish of perfumed robes and whispered to the barber. The man nodded and tentatively smiled, bobbing his head as he retreated backward out of the tent.

"A man should be able to curse when his chin bleeds without his barber collapsing on the carpet," grumbled the Thultyrl, still dabbing at the nick with the towel.

"If he is a commoner, the barber will swear back at him. If he is a king, the barber will grovel. It is the way of the world," answered the Pearl in her deep voice. Behind every Thultyrl stood a Hamayarch, the highest rank of wizard in the court. The Hamayarch ruled the magic users of Procampur as the Thultyrl ruled other citizens. But the Hamayarch always bowed to the Thultyrl and ruled under the Thultyrl's blessing. The Pearl had held the title of Hamayarch for at least three generations. Her true name, her age, and even her race were unknown. Tall and slender, with hair the color of snow and the face of girl barely in her teens, some whispered that the Pearl

had elven blood. Others claimed demon ancestors for her.

Having met many strange inhabitants of the North in a tumultuous childhood spent wandering behind either her bard mother or her druid father (but rarely the two together), Ivy doubted the Pearl of Procampur was either elf or demon. There was something very human about the Pearl's eyes, even though they were a strange aquamarine color and slanted slightly down at the corners.

According to camp gossip, the Thultyrl had left the Pearl behind to govern Procampur. But the day that he was speared in the thigh, she had appeared inside his tent and had overseen his physicians as they dressed his wound. Since then, the Pearl remained always close at hand. She seemed to have arrived without servants of her own, coach, horse, or baggage, but she appeared each day in clean linen and silk. Today, the Pearl's white hair was looped up in an elaborate coronet of braids, baring her ears, which were pierced and studded with three diamonds on the left lobe and two rubies on the right. Her hands were covered with rings of both silver and gold, many set with gems. The Pearl favored linen as her undertunic, topped with a layer of embroidered silk displaying white peacocks on a dark blue background. She rustled when she moved, a sound like dead leaves stirred by a cold wind.

If the Pearl was winter in her dress, then the Thultyrl was all warm summer. A thin silk tunic lay open across his smooth brown shoulders, baring a chest already gleaming with sweat. A light blanket was draped across his lower body, hiding the wounded thigh and preserving the Thultyrl's modesty.

When he saw Ivy, the Thultyrl called for his campaign desk. Pressing a hidden spring on the brass-and-wood box, the Thultyrl watched with the satisfaction more typical of a young boy than a king as the campaign desk sprouted shelves and drawers and a long flat surface on top. Beriall rushed

forward to pull out a map scroll from one polished drawer; from another drawer, the man unearthed bronze map weights in the shape of rearing griffins with their wings outstretched. With the fluttering of his plump fingers, Beriall unrolled the map and positioned the weights carefully. With a growl of impatience at Beriall's usual fussiness, the Thultyrl beckoned Ivy forward. Beriall stepped back to allow Ivy a clear view of the map, sniffing loudly as Ivy passed him and whisking his silken robes close to his ankles as if he were afraid that her mere presence would stain his beautiful peach-colored skirts. Used to Beriall's sniffs and occasional muttered comments about barbarians in the tent, Ivy examined the map as the Thultyrl had indicated.

Ivy loathed the map. She had peered at it at least once a day for the past eight days, always conscious of the Thultyrl watching her. The map showed the walls of Turlagol in exquisite detail: every gate, every tower, every turn.

"Well?" asked the Thultyrl. "Do you remain satisfied with your choice?"

"Very satisfied, sire. As we expected, the ground is soft and unstable at the base of the western wall," said Ivy, who had walked that section of Turlagol's walls two nights ago, skulking in shadows, and praying that she didn't twist an ankle in one of the ruts and holes. She had not told the rest of the Siegebearers that she was checking the walls again (she knew how much they would protest), and it would have been incredibly embarrassing if the sun had come up and caught her lying in full view of Fothergrim's archers, just because she'd put her foot in a rabbit hole.

"The weakest section is here, the southwest corner, where they joined a new wall to an old wall." She tapped that turn on the map with one grimy finger, noting the smudge that she had left yesterday from the same gesture. "We're already shifting

ground water toward that spot, and it is running deep enough that Fottergrim's watchers won't see anything. But water alone won't be enough. We need to tunnel, as we discussed earlier, and crack the foundations from underneath. Then the water can do its work and bring the wall down."

While Ivy was talking, one of the Thultyrl's officers approached him. Beriall tried to block his way, but the Thultyrl waved the officer closer. The man carried papers for the Thultyrl to stamp with his personal signet. Once that was done, Beriall hustled the man away. No conversation with the Thultyrl went uninterrupted, but the man had a ruler's ability to focus on three things at the same time. Ivy stayed where she was. When the Thultyrl wanted to, he would start asking her questions again. It wasn't as if he didn't already know the answers.

"Another draft on the treasury," the Thultyrl said to the Pearl. "These mercenaries will drain us dry if we don't end this soon." Beriall returned to his position at the Thultyrl's right shoulder, nodding at the last comment and staring directly at Ivy. One of the codex scholars appeared at the Thultyrl's side with a stack of rolled scrolls. The Thultyrl nodded his thanks and dropped the scrolls into an already overflowing basket by his side.

"Once inside the walls," said the Pearl, "we can recover our expenses from Tsurlagol's treasury. The treaty does allow for that."

"It does," sighed the Thultyrl. He popped open a drawer in the campaign table and pulled out an ivory message chit, which he handed over his shoulder to Beriall. The secretary beckoned one of the Forty to him and handed off the chit. That man bowed and rushed away to fetch whomever the chit signified. The Thultyrl ignored the passing of the chit and concentrated on his conversation with the Pearl. "But we

can't bankrupt Turlagol—we are supposed to be saving the city after all.”

“Once inside the walls,” repeated the Pearl in her deep voice, “we can make some equitable arrangement with all concerned. After all, we were not the fools who let Fothergrim dance his army through an open gate, all the way to Turlagol’s main square.”

Ivy suspected that the fools who had let Fothergrim into the city were long dead. That was the problem with thick walls and high towers: people forgot that such defenses were only as strong as an underpaid gatekeeper’s resistance to bribery. Unfortunately, Fothergrim’s troops were all that was left of the Black Horde. Having avoided the debacle at Waterdeep, they’d been moving steadily north for the last ten years. Years of constant attacks had made them extremely suspicious of strangers and fanatically loyal to the big orc who had kept them from being slaughtered.

In their first attempt at breaking the siege, Ivy and Mumchance had disguised themselves as a Gray Forest goblin and orc, as these creatures had been flocking to Fothergrim’s banner since the orc commander had arrived back in the North.

“Won’t they notice that I am barely the height of a goblin?” the dwarf had asked her.

“And I am no orc,” Ivy admitted. She was a tall, hard-muscled woman, but still. The orcs were huge. Ivy had added padding and oversized armor until she could barely bend her knees and elbows. “I’m hoping that when they look down from the wall to identify us, the perspective will confuse them.”

The dwarf merely grunted in reply.

“Also, I am counting on bribery,” she added.

But they had been driven back by a hail of arrows before they could even start jingling coins at Fothergrim’s sentries.

The next morning, at her first meeting with the Thultyrl, Ivy recommended undermining the walls as the most logical way to enter the city. As she told the rest of the Siegebreakers that night, a rain of arrows tended to make her cranky, and there was no point letting the Thultyrl know that one of their favorite tricks had already failed.

So far, the Thultyrl of Procampur had agreed with her suggestion, but now he seemed inclined to argue.

“You have been digging for how many days?” said the Thultyrl, startling Ivy with the swift change of his attention from the Pearl to her.

“Only two days, sire,” she answered, trying to meet his gaze calmly. “And I need three more days at least. We had to start the tunnel well back from the walls, behind some scrub trees, to avoid Fottergrim’s sentries spotting us.”

“But you are still aiming for that corner?” Without looking down, the Thultyrl tapped the map in the exact spot where Ivy had pointed. She wished she knew how he did that trick. It was impressive, she had to admit.

“Yes, sire,” said Ivy, risking a quick peek at the map to make sure that she had not suddenly chosen a new corner of Turlagol’s walls before tapping that section herself. “The walls are always weakest where there is a turn, especially in this case. It is better than trying to go under a straight section or one of the gates. Besides, it is the southwest corner, and Fottergrim keeps his strongest watch on the eastern wall. He expects you to come up the harbor road.”

“Of course,” said the Thultyrl. “Just as we would like him to come charging straight down that road.” Procampur’s navy had sailed into the harbor at the beginning of the summer siege. Fottergrim had no sailors in his horde and had retreated quickly up the harbor road, shutting himself safely behind Turlagol’s high walls and well-fortified gates.

Another officer entered the chamber, led by a member of the Forty. The gray-bearded man carried the Thultyrl's ivory chit in one hand. He was short and heavy, and his armor gleamed more brightly than Sanval's breastplate. He also had the distinctive bowed legs of a horseman. The man bowed and handed his chit to Beriall. Ivy almost missed the Thultyrl's next question, so distracted was she by the entry of what was obviously a very senior officer of Procampur. "Can you dig faster?"

"We might be able to reach that corner faster, but we still need adequate time to prepare the wall," said Ivy, concentrating on the Thultyrl and ignoring the officer so obviously impatient to be noticed by his ruler. "Making walls fall down is easy, sire. Making them fall down where and when you want is a little harder. Myself, I prefer not to be standing directly underneath when the walls start to fall."

The Thultyrl smiled. "We understand your point of view," he said. "But we need you to excavate more rapidly. In two days time, Enguerrand will begin the charge that he has been so eager to lead."

The graybeard bowed at the mention of his name. "Sire," he said, "I promise you that our assault will free the city."

"And you are certain that Archlis is gone again?" asked the Pearl.

Enguerrand nodded. "He's not been seen since yesterday."

"So," said the Thultyrl to Ivy, "you understand the need for haste." It was a statement and it was obvious that the Thultyrl was not going to listen to any arguments. "Archlis only disappears for four or five days at the most. We cannot be certain of even that amount of time. We need to strike while he is off the walls."

Ivy could sympathize with the Thultyrl's desire to rush the walls when the wizard Archlis was gone. According to camp

gossip, Fottergrim's personal spellcaster had engineered most of the orc's recent victories, including the successful occupation of Tsurelagol. Most annoyingly for the Procampur troops, Archlis was an expert at throwing fireballs and appeared to own a nearly inexhaustible supply of fire spells.

Unless Archlis was standing on the section that collapsed, and Ivy rather doubted that they would get that lucky, his fireballs would still be a formidable problem. Luckily the wizard had a tendency to disappear for several days at a time. In fact, that was how they'd learned his name, by hearing Fottergrim screaming for him to come up on the walls and attack Procampur's troops.

She stared at the map and considered the route of Enguerrand's charge. North and south was where the hill was steepest, and it was clearly marked so on the Thultyrl's map. East was the well-watched harbor road.

"The west is the only approach," said the Thultyrl. Keen-eyed as a griffin, the Thultyrl had spotted what she had seen: the faint dotted line that marked an old route leading to Tsurelagol's west gate. "There's a good road leading north from Procampur, well west of Tsurelagol and out of range of Fottergrim's patrols. We will move our people, south out of the camp, angling toward the road, then turn and come north fast."

"And turn again and come at the wall at sundown, when any sentry looking west might be dazzled by the sun." Ivy knew that trick. "And mercenaries, with their stinking camels, roaring up the harbor road to distract Fottergrim and split his strength." Old tricks and half-forgotten tactics—the kind of information that a Thultyrl's scholars might find in the histories of war and ancient maps tucked in the baskets with the legal scrolls. But they were clever tricks and it took a clever man to think of them—a man who went hunting deer on the west-

ern side of the city just to see if the ground matched what his maps had shown. No wonder the Thultyrl had been so furious to be surprised on his hunt by mountain orcs and so intent on riding them all down before they got to Fottergrim.

“I walked the length of the western wall,” said Ivy, “the day my company came here and two nights ago. There is a gate there.”

“We know,” said Enguerrand. “It is on the map.”

“The map doesn’t show the size,” said Ivy, looking at him with pity. “It’s a nightsoil gate. One horse wide, and barely that. If you breach it, you still need to go in one by one. A big orc with a large axe could hold that gate forever. He will just pile your dead in the doorway.”

“Then we will use ladders to scale the walls,” said Enguerrand.

Ivy shook her head. “There are old holdings on the top of that wall.” Seeing everyone but the Thultyrl and the Pearl giving her puzzled stares, she sketched in the air the shape of the wooden-roofed balconies that overhung the western wall. “There will be arrow slits in the floors,” she explained. “They shoot straight down on your ladders. It will be bloody fighting to climb over that wall.”

“Then what do you suggest, lady?” asked the Thultyrl, who obviously had considered this drawback. His face was too calm in Ivy’s judgment for this setback to be a surprise.

“Burn the holdings if you can.”

“Fire arrows,” suggested the Pearl.

“No spells?” asked the Thultyrl. The Pearl shook her head and spread her hands wide, displaying them as empty. Ivy wondered why so powerful a mage (by reputation if not demonstration) could not throw a little fire here and there. Certainly Archlis had been almost careless with his power over the past few weeks.

“They may have thought of that and laid some protection into the wood. Then again, they are orcs, never the cleverest at defensive warfare,” advised Ivy. “But expect to lose half your force right there. The holdings may burn, but the wall is stone, and it will hold. Also, such a fire will bring everyone running from the other towers. Best to follow the plan we gave you: wait for the wall to fall down and make your charge into Turlagol across the fallen broken bodies of your enemies.” It was a stirring speech, and with luck none of the Procampans would recognize that the last few words came straight from the chorus of one of her mother’s favorite ballads.

“Then bring that wall down,” said the Thultyrl, sitting straighter and wincing as the movement pulled on his unhealed wound. “At sunset, in two days time. We have decided.”



The Thultyrl has decided. The Thultyrl has decided. The refrain echoed through Ivy’s head as she marched back down the hill, trailed by a silent Sanval.

“The Thultyrl may have decided,” said Ivy, “but we’re the ones who have to dig! Can’t be done. Not that fast. Not safely. But maybe. If Gunderal can speed up the underground water. Mumchance would know. There might be old tunnels on that side. We could use those. If Zuzzara ever finds them. Can’t be done. Could be done. The Thultyrl has decided! Oh, blast!”

She was arguing with herself because Sanval was not saying a word. In fact, he seemed stunned into even deeper silence than before. He had stayed completely rigid in his burnished armor the whole time they had been in the Thultyrl’s tent. Then the Thultyrl had addressed him directly.

“We regret,” the Thultyrl had said to him, “that we must refuse your request to rejoin Enguerrand’s regiment. We need your services as assigned for two more days. To bring us word,

you understand, of the success or failure of this lady's work." The Thultyrl nodded at Ivy.

Sanval had bowed, very deeply, to his ruler. Ivy thought that she had heard him sigh, but it had been a very, very soft sigh.

But it was the Pearl who apparently had mystified Sanval. She waited until they had left the Thultyrl's presence and then stopped them.

"You will find your glory easier underground than in Enguerrand's company," the Pearl said to Sanval. "If you remember who you are and forget your vanity." Sanval stared at the white-haired woman and did not seem to know what to say to her.

The Pearl turned to Ivy next. She picked up one of Ivy's gauntlets. The armored glove had slipped from where Ivy had tucked it into her belt and had fallen to the ground. The Pearl handed the gauntlet back to her, fingering the little silver token sewn onto the leather cuff. The token felt surprisingly warm to Ivy when she slid the glove back under her belt.

"You need no prophecy from me. You have always known your way and are wise enough to trust your luck. Continue to believe in your luck when you make your plans," said the Hamayarch of Procampur. Then the Pearl glanced down and smiled faintly. "But I would suggest that you clean your boots." The Pearl rustled back inside the silk-draped pavilion.

Now, marching down the hill, Ivy muttered to herself, which meant she was loud enough for only Sanval to hear clearly. "If she can see the future, I wouldn't mind knowing it. I can take a prophecy as well as the next woman. It's not like my mother or my father wasn't always meddling in some great magic. There were long prophecies, short prophecies, incredibly cryptic prophecies all naming one or the other at some time. But do I get some prediction of glory? Of course not!

The woman just tells me to clean my boots. What is wrong with my boots?"

"They have camel dung on them," said Sanval from behind her. "On the back."

Ivy ground to a halt. She pulled up one foot and twisted it to look at the back of her boot. She put her foot down slowly. She pulled up the other leg and looked at the back of that boot. Both of them were liberally splashed with dung. She had walked through the Thultyrl's silk-lined, wool-carpeted, incense-scented pavilion with dung-mired boots. Even for her, that was a bit much. No wonder Beriall had been sniffing so loudly today.

"I would have told you," said Sanval, "but you kept singing that song."

Ivy thought about hitting him. But they were still in the Procampur section of the camp, and somebody was sure to make a fuss if she knocked down a Procampur officer and ground his face in the dust.

"Come on," she said. "I need to tell the others that they have two days to do a tenday job. The Thultyrl has decided."

But even as she hurried toward the tunnel, she wondered if she could make good on her promise. No matter how fast the Siegebreakers dug, she was not at all sure that they could bring down the wall in time to save the Thultyrl's troops from disaster.