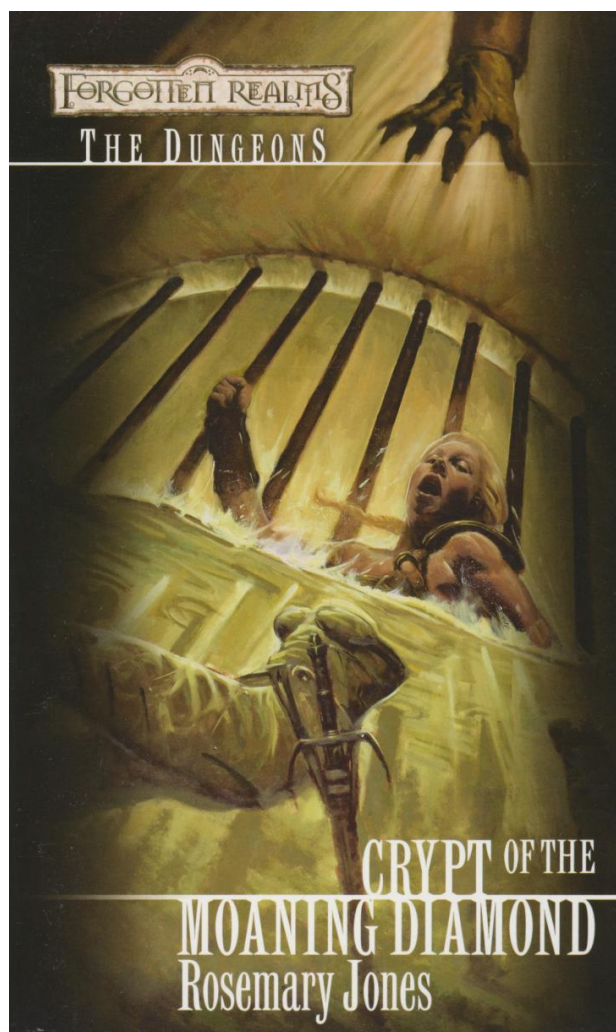


Pigs Explode

A Tale of the Siegebreakers

By Rosemary Jones



“Pigs? You want to use the pigs?” Ivy glanced across the muddy field filled with winter-dead vegetation and the gray bloated bodies of dead hogs. At the far end of the field, through the bare tree branches, the wizard’s crooked tower was clearly visible. The tower looked solid, really solid, rooted down into the ground solid. But the Siegebreakers had promised the pig farmers that the tower would come down.

“Pigs explode?” she repeated to Mumchance, who had suggested that they pack the deceased hogs in the tower’s dungeon. Ivy trusted the 329-year-old dwarf, especially when it came to destruction, but this was the first time they’d ever used dead swine.

“Look at the bloat of those bellies,” said Mumchance, his head tilted up and slightly to one side so he could see her clearly out of his one good eye. “Whatever spell that wizard used to kill those hogs, it left them as dry and bloated as a ten-day corpse.”

Mumchance was right. The hogs were definitely dead but something was keeping them from fully rotting. And the corpses were hugely swollen around the middle. “So explain to me again how this unusual bloat helps with our problem,” said Ivy. As the nominal Captain of the Siegebreakers, she tried to make informed decisions, the type of decisions that would get them home alive. Most of the time, she felt like her biggest talent was knowing when to scream “Run!” and when to shout “Stop!” Oddly, the others seemed to think she was really good at saving them—not that it ever made them less likely to argue with her or tell her what to do.

“It’s what those pig farmers told us, about that horrible cloud of stench the minute they cut into the dead ones. How they couldn’t even butcher them and save any of the meat, the smell was so bad,” Mumchance replied. “So I poked a couple as soon as we got here.”

“We noticed,” muttered Ivy. The resulting smell whistling from just a tiny hole in one pig’s belly had driven all the Siegebreakers out of the field and back to their wagon for this discussion. Ivy understood why the pig farmers were so very angry with the wizard. After all, he’d not only destroyed their swine, he’d made sure that they wouldn’t even get a nice slice of bacon or a single ham this winter. But, from the number of dead pigs littering the landscape, Ivy was glad that the hog-hating wizard had left the Vast for his annual pilgrimage to the South.

The pig farmers had assured Ivy that this particular wizard only used the tower occasionally and would certainly move on if he didn’t have a place to roost the next time that he came through. Ivy hoped they were right; otherwise she’d just accepted far too small a fee for far too much trouble. She didn’t need a feud with someone who could sling spells like the one that had left behind so many dead pigs.

“I’ve sniffed that stench before, down in the mines,” continued Mumchance, breaking into Ivy’s calculations about how they could hide their tracks later and make sure that the wizard never knew who blew up his tower. “A smell like that was never a good sign. Get too close with a torch and...”

“Boom,” suggested Ivy and the dwarf gave a definitive nod. “It’s bound to be messy though. A big explosion accompanied by a rain of pig guts.”

“Ugh,” shuddered Gunderal. “That’s horrible.” Their dainty wizard was perched on the high seat of the wagon, keeping her fine woolen skirts as far from the mud as she could get. While the rest of the Siegebreakers tramped through the muddy field, scrutinizing the evidence of the wizard’s displeasure with his pig farmer neighbors, Gunderal sat and braided her hair into a new topknot with loose curls hanging down her straight little back. As usual, the arrangement both looked charming and probably hid one or two actual charms.

Ivy leaned back against the wagon’s wheel, ignoring Gunderal’s squeaks of “Ivy, you’ll get mud all over.” What did she care about more mud on her padded leather jerkin? It would brush off or it would add the interesting stains to the collection already there. She wasn’t the bright and shiny polished armor kind of fighter, the type who cared more about the gleam of their breastplate than anything else. Ivy had run into a few of the high gloss variety in various campaigns in the Vast. Anytime she was near someone like that, they just made her itch.

Ivy pushed her leather cap to the back of her head and checked for the two remaining members of their group. As usual, Zuzzara and Kid had let Mumchance and Ivy argue about the various possibilities, waiting for them to come to a decision. The big half-orc Zuzzara kept herself busy inspecting the harness of their mule, straightening out a tangled bridle and slipping a bit of dried apple to the cranky old creature. Kid had trotted to the edge of the field, hands in his pockets, kicking at various mounds of dead leaves to see what he could find, looking like a ten-year-old boy from the village from this distance. Closer up, someone might spot the two little horns barely concealed by the curls on the top of his head.

Ivy watched Kid for a moment. The little thief had an uncanny knack for stirring up trouble with his prying and prodding, but nothing emerged howling from the dead leaves. Satisfied that Kid was safely occupied, Ivy turned to Zuzzara. “You know,” she said, “there’s only one of us big enough to haul those dead hogs by herself.”

The half-orc grinned, showing off her pointed teeth. “I suspected as much,” said Zuzzara with a shrug of her wide shoulders. “I didn’t expect Gunderal to do it.”

“Quite right, my overly tall sister. After all, being big and strong is your talent!” Gunderal said, twisting one blue-black curl around her middle finger and letting it go. It fell in a perfect spiral around her shell-pink ear. As clearly as Zuzzara took after her orc mother, Gunderal had all the characteristics of her delicate genasi mother. But whenever they started up their light bickering, Ivy knew that those two were sisters, with bonds much stronger than just the same human father.

“Gunderal, we still need you to go under the tower, too,” said Ivy. “If this works the way that Mumchance thinks it will work, we may need a little water protection.”

“Eww, Ivy,” Gunderal sighed, “there will be cobwebs, and dust, and maybe, ugh, snakes.”

“Too bad. Zuzzara is carrying dead hogs, I’m helping to carry dead pigs—with Kid if he’d get back over here,” Ivy pitched the last part loudly. Kid gave a wave of his hand and skipped back to the wagon. Although he was as small as a human child, the cloven-hoofed mischief maker was actually as strong as any man. “Mumchance needs to concentrate on how we pack these pigs into the foundation.

Which means you get to keep watch, underground, with the rats and the snakes and the dust and the dirt and whatever else we find.”

“Rats! Keep them away from me!” said Zuzzara, who hated cleaning out the rat traps at the farm.

“Oh very well, big sister,” said Gunderal, hopping lightly off the wagon seat and landing on the one dry patch of ground that wouldn’t muddy her purple leather boots. “I’ll come along, just to keep you safe from rats. But it sounds messy.”

“Well, little sister, if you had the sort of spells that made towers tumble or walls crumble, I wouldn’t be hauling hogs underground,” pointed out Zuzzara as she hefted a dead pig over her shoulder.

“You know I don’t do fire and explosions,” said Gunderal. “But I do think that water would work just as well. There’s a lot of force in water, if you do it right.”

“Like that last rainstorm of yours! That’s why I’m carrying pigs, just to pay for a new barn roof!”

“That’s not fair! It wasn’t my fault the wind turned so quickly!” Their bickering continued across the field, clearly audible to the other three at the wagon.

“It’s a good thing that the wizard isn’t home. I think we just lost the element of surprise,” observed Ivy as she shoved her long blonde braid under her leather cap and hauled on her gloves. Ivy picked up the back half of a dead pig and nodded at Kid to take his place at the front.

“I don’t know, my dear,” said Kid as he grabbed the forelegs and hoisted them to his shoulders. “If the wizard heard them coming, he might run away.” And a sly little grin at his own joke slipped briefly across Kid’s face as he glanced back at Ivy.

“Get moving,” she said, trying not to laugh and drop her half of the pig.

“Wait,” Mumchance called from the wagon. “I forgot Wiggles.” He reached into a basket and pulled out the little white dog who had been sleeping there since they’d left the farm. Wiggles yawned, displaying her pink little tongue, and yipped a greeting to her master.

“No! No! Not that dog!” said Ivy, hampered by trying to keep her grip on the slippery pig corpse. “I’m not going underground with that yapping mutt!”

The dwarf ignored her, as he so often did, and popped Wiggles into the wide pocket on his vest that he’d specially sewn for her. Kid shrugged and Ivy sighed. Mumchance was convinced that some day they would discover some useful talent in that small white dog. Rather than waste time in pointing out the obvious, Wiggles had no talent other than to be annoying, Ivy began trudging through the mud towards the tower.

Mumchance didn’t think that two pigs were enough, so they spent all morning hefting more and more hogs into the base of the tower. Then, because of something that Mumchance called a keystone, they had to shift the pigs down a long corridor and into a nook on the north side of the

tower's dungeon. All the time, Wiggles had pranced around their ankles, doing her usual yip-yip-yip, until Ivy threatened to kick her to the top of pig pile. And Mumchance muttered in one of the more obscure dwarf dialects about her lack of charity and Ivy pretended that she didn't understand him.

Kid kept disappearing to poke through the piles of trash littering the wizard's dungeon, which appeared to be the sort of place just used for storing all the stuff that nobody wanted but nobody was willing to get rid of. Broken chairs tangled with smashed chests lacking locks and contents, old books and scrolls so water-stained and chewed that nobody could ever read them, even a pile of bones that proved to be kitchen refuse rather than anything more dire. There were also rats near the bones, which made Zuzzara yell when one ran over her foot and her little sister laugh at her. This started off another argument that almost ended with Gunderal soaking her sister with one of her water spells, except Ivy intervened and pointed out that nobody, and she meant nobody, wanted to be wet and cold as well as covered with remnants of pig hauling.

"Well," Gunderal sniffed rather loudly in Ivy's direction, "some people might benefit from bath."

"Don't even think it," said Ivy.

Once the pigs were stacked to his satisfaction, Mumchance had them haul the more burnable trash to pile around the bloated. Then he set the fuse and trailed the long cord through the stone corridor to a little room that wasn't nearly close enough to the exit for Ivy's comfort.

"We'll have plenty of time to get out," grumbled the dwarf, who was on his knees with flint and tinder trying to light the fuse. "Of course, if we had a wizard who was any good with fire..."

Gunderal ignored him. Zuzzara started to defend her sister as she always did when anyone but her criticized Gunderal. Ivy cut off the dwarf's complaints and Zuzzara's automatic defense with a quick shake of her head. "I want to get out of here before winter sets in," she said firmly to the pair.

The fuse fizzed and spat sparks and finally seemed to catch fire. The line of fire burned around the bend in the corridor and out of sight.

"Now can we go?" asked Ivy.

"Hush," said Mumchance, signaling for quiet, "that doesn't sound right." The dwarf cocked his head and then stamped forward to peer down the stone hallway. "It went out!"

So the Siegebearers continued to wait in the dusty smelly cramped little room, as Wiggles sniffed around their feet and Mumchance fussed with his fuse. "It's too damp down here," said the dwarf, "or too many drafts or something. It just won't stay lit. And I'm not sure that it will set that tinder on fire even if it does stay lit."

"And if we have no fire burning under the piggies?" asked Kid.

"No explosion," replied the depressed dwarf.

“Why not just go in and light the wood under the swine?” Zuzzara wanted to know.

“The explosion might happen too fast,” said Mumchance. “Of course, you could all clear out of here, I could go back with a torch, and...”

“And end up with a roasted dwarf? Bad plan,” said Ivy. Mumchance was spry for a dwarf of more than 300 years, but he was definitely the slowest runner in the group. “If anyone lights anything with a torch, it should be me.”

“I am much faster than you, my dear,” said Kid with an emphatic stamp of one little hoof on the stone floor.

“I’ve got the longest legs,” pointed out Zuzzara.

“If everything was drier, would that help?” asked Gunderal. “Then we could use the fuse.”

“How are you going to dry it out?” asked Mumchance.

“Dry is easy,” said the wizard reaching into her velvet pouch and pulling out a potion. “Just sprinkle this on the fuse and on the tinder, and they will be completely dry. Even a little warm.”

“Hey, isn’t that the stuff that you use to clean your shoes?” asked Ivy, who remembered Gunderal pushing that bottle at her more than once with a request to get the muck off her boots before she walked through the house.

“Of course,” said Gunderal. She extended one dainty foot for them all to see. “And look how dry my boots are.”

“Can’t hurt,” said Mumchance. “Let’s use it.” The dwarf walked the line of the fuse, carefully sprinkling drops as Gunderal called out instructions. He even went back to the dead swine and sprinkled more over the pigs.

The fuse caught fire on the first spark from Mumchance’s tinder and burned with a distinct crackling sound. The fire raced away from the Siegebreakers towards the pile of tinder and hogs.

“Let’s go,” suggested Ivy.

“Hold on, hold on,” muttered Mumchance. “I want to hear the wood catch fire. We’ll still have enough time....”

Even as the dwarf spoke, Wiggles suddenly stiffened and turned in the direction of the dead pigs. The little dog let out a volley of barks, each higher and more ear-piercing than the last, the sheer energy of her yipping causing her to bounce up and down in place.

“Shut her up!” cried Ivy, clapping her hands to her ears.

Kid's ears folded straight back into his curls, and he gave a sudden sniff. "Smoke, rather thick smoke, my dears!" he said, stepping away backward.

"Oh," said Gunderal, one delicate hand flying up to cover her nose. "There's a couple of ingredients in that potion that might make smoke. I forgot about that. Mumchance, how much did you use on the bonfire?"

"All of it," coughed the dwarf as the billows of greasy black smoke poured into the room.

"Blast, blast, and blast!" yelled Ivy over Wiggles' continuous barking. All the Siegebrowsers who weren't barking their heads off were choking and coughing. "Gunderal, do something!"

The little wizard spun her fingers, muttering incantations as fast as she could. A wall of cool water sprang up, blocking the advance of the smoke. The air cleared slightly.

"How long will it hold?" Ivy asked.

"Not long enough," muttered Gunderal, her pale forehead lightly dewed from her efforts.

"Then we better run!" Ivy shouted. It was the one order that they all obeyed without arguing. Zuzzara scooped up Mumchance and tucked the elderly dwarf under her arm. Kid flashed ahead, holding high his lantern to give them the best possible light as they sped back the way that they had come. Gunderal nimbly vaulted over a pile of old bones and other moldering trash as Ivy crashed her way through. Wiggles yipped and yapped as she wove in and around their ankles. Ivy leaned down and grabbed the little dog by the scruff of her neck. She shoved Wiggles into the front of her jerkin and doubled her speed. Behind them, there was a crashing sound, rather like a wave hitting a rock or a wall of water dissolving with some force.

"Come on!" Ivy yelled. "Move!"

They tumbled outside and were halfway across the field before the pigs finally exploded. Rubble rained around them, including bits of well-smoked pork. A large hole was clearly visible now in the base of the tower. The crooked stone tower swayed above the trees, leaning more and more to one side, and then crashed to the ground.

"See," said Mumchance, "I told you that pigs would work." He strode up to Ivy and plucked Wiggles up from where Ivy had dropped her and tucked the little dog into his pocket with a few loving strokes.

"And, weren't you a good dog?" he said very loudly to his pet, making sure that everyone could hear him. "Didn't you save us all?"

Sitting on the ground, her head between her knees, her breath heaving her ribs almost out of her body, Ivy groaned. "There has got to be an easier way to pay for the barn roof," she finally said.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Zuzzara with great calm as she lifted Gunderal onto the wagon seat. “The tower is down, just like we promised.” Kid nodded in agreement.

“And next time, we can use water,” said Gunderal shaking out her skirts. “That will be much less messy than dead pigs!”

Ivy lifted her smoke-stained face. They all looked back at her with their usual expressions of confidence that “next time” would be just fine. After all, they’d survived. She climbed to her feet and grinned. “You’re right. Next time will be easier,” she said as she limped towards the wagon. “But let’s collect our payment and go home now.”