

Chapter Seven

I figured Michelle or Nytoi would give their horse a slap on the behind or jab their heels into the horse's ribs and we would hightail it out of there in a cloud of dust and the *clippity-clap* of hooves. Elves are too smart for that sort of thing, though. We just clopped down the street as though we didn't have a care in the world. It was safer that way. With cowls covering our heads, we didn't draw any attention to ourselves, not even me, and I figured everyone would want to gawk at a dwarf on a pony. I suppose it's a common thing now because when folks did see me, they just tipped their hats or nodded their heads in greeting. Maybe they just mistook me for a short human, but whatever the case, nobody made a fuss.

By mid-day, we rode well outside of the city. Hours had passed since breakfast, and my stomach rumbled with hunger. I guess Michelle had an appetite too, because she spoke elven to Nytoi. He replied with a nod, and she turned to me. She asked, "Are you hungry?"

"Yep," I replied.

She pointed to a building half a mile away. It sat on the edge of the road, half hidden by oak trees. A chimney billowed white smoke that smelled of roasted meat. My mouth watered. "Good, because we're stopping to get some lunch."

That sounded awfully good to me. Getting some food would be great, but getting off the pony would be even better. My bottom and thighs ached from the odd arch I had to sit in, and the constant bouncing stride. I kept the soreness to myself. I didn't want to complain and look like a sissy in front of the elves. Also, I was sore in places that self-respecting dwarves don't talk about. Fifteen minutes later, Michelle and I sat around a table while a heavysset middle-aged woman took our order. The lady looked tired and worn, but so did the building around us. A half dozen humans sat on barstools in front of a long counter along the far wall. They drank coffee, read papers like the one the guard handed me while I was locked up, and ate pie, or chicken, or one of the few other meals the place served. A few humans sat in booths and quietly visited. An elderly couple drank their coffee and ate their lunch at a table next to a wooden support surrounded by lanterns. Windows provided plenty of light, so the lanterns remained dark.

Nytoi stayed in a clearing on the side of the road with the horses. His gear would have given him away, but he wanted Michelle and me to have a sit down dinner, and hear whatever news we could. I think he was looking for information on the dryad. He reminded us to keep our cloaks on. Elves didn't exist in the Federation outside the Enclave, but dwarves, though not common, were mostly free to come and go as they pleased. As long as the hood was pulled up, she would just look like a pretty human.

Michelle ate her baked chicken and mashed potatoes with slow and careful precision. She carefully cut up her poultry into tiny pieces and placed the slivers of meat in her mouth. I could hardly tell when she chewed, just a slight tightening of the jaw gave it away. I suppose I looked like a durned orc next to her as I grabbed a drum stick and bit a huge chunk out of the side, chicken dribblings greasing up the hair around my mouth. I didn't care. I was hungry.

I would have rather had bacon, or a slice of ham, as I favor pig over bird, but the waitress said they didn't have any. The restaurant sat in the woods well outside the city, and they raised a good portion of the food themselves. Tracy, the waitress, said the latest batch of pigs were still nursing and it would be a few months before any pork was available on the menu unless somebody came in and made a good offer on a pig. She said they had cougar on the menu a few weeks ago. A local hunter shot it and sold the meat cheap. Several months ago, they even had bear. I wished we had showed up then. I liked bear.

We didn't hear nothing about Malvalhone other than Tracy mentioning what a shame it was.

There wasn't any real sorrow in the waitress' comment. She just stated a fact. At Michelle's request, she brought us a paper. Michelle read while I finished up my mashed potatoes.

When she was through with the paper, she tossed it down and fumed. "The paper just says that enforcers were sent to the forest to ask Malvalhone a few questions about an escaped prisoner. It says she refused to answer, then became violent, killing four enforcers. According to the paper,

they tried to arrest her peacefully, but she turned it into a fight that led to her death.

"What a load of crap."

I looked down at the paper, and saw my picture on another page. I tapped it with my finger and asked, "What's this say?"

She glanced down at it and said, "We have to go." She pulled a wad of money out of her pocket, set a few bills on the table, and said, "It's an article about how you are a wanted dwarf. It talks about your escape, and though a reward hasn't been set yet, they are expecting to announce a cash amount soon for your capture."

"I hope it's a good amount. I'd hate to be sold cheap."

As we walked back, bringing Nytoi a carry out bag of food, I asked a question that had been bothering me since earlier that morning. "So, what's that thunder rod you keep stuffed in the back of your pants? Is it some sort of magic wand?"

Michelle was caught up in her own thoughts. She didn't look at me. The elf hardly broke her mental stride as she said, "Don't mention that when other people are around."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not supposed to have a hand cannon. They are illegal unless you have a license for one, and I don't. Elves aren't even allowed to apply for a license."

Hand cannon? Now that sounded interesting. I kicked a pebble. As I watched it bounce down the road, I asked, "What's a hand cannon? Is it like a magic wand?"

She shook her head. "No. There's nothing magical about it. Like the name implies, it's simply a cannon that fits in your hand. It works like a cannon, with black powder and lead, but there's not a fuse, and it can shoot six times before I have to reload it."

No fuse? Six shots before reloading? With each word from her mouth, my interest grew. I caught up to the pebble again, kicked it, and asked, "How's it work without a fuse, and how's it shoot six times? I think you're pulling my beard, elf."

Michelle chuckled and turned toward the clearing where Nytoi waited. She moved nearer to me and said, "Did you get a good look at it?"

I nodded.

She continued. "Did you see the set of cylinders behind the pipey-thing?"

I nodded again.

"The cylinders hold the charges, black powder stuffed into a case with a ball of lead packed on top. When I want to shoot, I cock the hammer at the back of the cannon then pull the trigger. The hammer slams down on the back of the case that holds the powder, causing it to explode and send the lead ball through the barrel at whatever I aim at. Once the cartridge has fired, I can cock the hammer back and the cylinder rotates around to the next charge. Then all I got to do is aim and I'm ready to fire again. After six times, I reload the charges then it's ready." She grinned. "Pretty cool, huh?"

I nodded. That was damned cool. I rubbed my beard and cocked an eye at her. "I want to get a look at it."

She glanced around the clearing to where Nytoi stood with the horses, then back at me. "I can't show you here. Maybe when we're down the road a bit. I'll talk to Nytoi and if we can find a spot far enough from prying ears, maybe you can even try it for yourself."

The elf knew how to motivate me to plop my bottom back on that pony.

Ten minutes later, we turned a bend in the road and the little combination store and restaurant disappeared behind the trees. The hand cannon had been weighing on my mind like an anvil. I asked, "Can I see it now?"

Michelle rode in front of me with Nytoi leading the way. She gave me a crooked grin and said, "Not yet."

Fifteen minutes later, we came to a wooden bridge. Creek water gurgled fifteen feet beneath it.

Nytoi and Michelle exchanged a few words, then turned their horses to the right and followed an undergrowth lined trail running parallel with the stream. Coal turned to follow as Michelle said, "We're getting off the main road. It's safer this way, and it won't add much time to our travels. Plus, we're coming up on the border of the Enclave. It's walled in and enforcers guard the entry gates. We've got another way in and out that they don't know about."

Walls, enforcers, and mysterious ways around them both sounded interesting, but my mind remained set on the hand cannon. Once a dwarf gets an idea in his head, there's no getting it out. I nodded, held out my hand, and asked, "Can I see it now?"

Michelle's crooked grin returned. It reminded me of my childhood, how Ma would look at me when I asked a stupid question. The look said, 'I'm trying to be patient, but whatever it is you want, it isn't gonna happen.'

"You are one hard-headed dude, and no, you can't see it. Not yet. I'll let you know the moment you can. Okay, Gustov?" she said.

I frowned and stuck my lower lip out. I would have folded my arms to show her how frustrated I really was, but if I did that, I would lose control of Coal's reins, and I wasn't about to let that happen. Instead, I huffed and kicked my heels into the pony's sides, intending to pass Michelle up, but Coal was having none of it. With a snort, he whipped his head to the side and snapped his teeth at me. As an added measure, he gave a quick buck that forced me to dig my knees into his side and grab the saddle horn for dear life. Needless to say, I didn't plan on screwing with Coal again, no matter how mad I got.

I had expected that going through the forest would present all sorts of trouble for folks on horseback, but once we got past a hundred yards or so of underbrush, the trees spread far apart. The pine straw muffled the clop of the horses' hooves. The creek flowed by on our right. It made a lulling gurgle as it flowed over stones and through narrow walls of dirt and leaves. After the first hour, I had to fight to stay awake. My thoughts drifted, durned near like I was in a dream. I mainly contemplated that hand cannon. Thought a lot about that hand cannon. I also thought of things that were obvious to us all, but hadn't been discussed yet. The red elf for starters. I also wondered where we were going and what we would do once we got there. What was the Enclave like? I'd heard bits and pieces, but nothing that would allow me to form a solid picture.

The Enclave was just one of the many things I pondered as I bounced up and down on Coal's back. I guess they didn't talk about the red elf because of the forest lady. They seemed to like her a lot. I did too, though I only knew her for a short time. I imagine they didn't want to talk about that just yet, but I needed them to. I needed to know what was going on, and I needed to know now.

I figured I would start with the less obvious question. I asked, "Where we going, elf?"

She turned sideways on her horse and looked back at me. She said, "First off, quit calling me 'elf.' It sounds stupid and makes you sound stupid. Besides, it might piss an elf off and I'm sure you wouldn't want to offend any elves. What with you being so politically correct and all."

I detected a note of sarcasm in her voice, but I let it go. I repeated the question less offensively, though with a heaping helping of my own sarcasm. "Okay, *Michelle*. Where we going?"

She rolled her eyes and took a deep breath before she replied, "We are going to the Enclave. We plan to meet with the local resistance and then my grandfather. I want to find out if he's had any visions about you, maybe find out what we're supposed to do from here. As far as the Enclave itself goes, it's my home. It's also sort of a pleasure resort for the Federation, the only place where liquor and tobacco can be sold and used within the Federation. It's made of several cities where elves serve the Fed's wealthier class of citizens. We smile, serve drinks and cigars, but underneath those smiles, we seethe inside. That's where we're going, a place where the elves have prostituted themselves. It's not a sexual prostitution, but other than that, there's little difference. I call it the golden handcuffs. We make money from the sales, and the Feds make money from the taxes. The money's too good for us to rise up and tell them to go to Oblivion, so we all grit our teeth and bear it. It beats starting a war we can't win, or starving to death."

The more she talked, the more I wanted to forget about going to the elves. I wanted to return to

the Iron Mountains, back to my people. They wouldn't know squat about me as far as prophecy went. We don't like magic and we ain't got any use for a seer, but it would be nice to find out about my kin. Maybe even see if I had some kinfolk living, though they wouldn't know me from Bophus, the first dwarf. I'd be something like their great-great-great-great grandfather, or uncle. Can't imagine most kinfolk would know much about something like that, but maybe there were records. It didn't matter at the moment. My elven comrades were right. The elves would do me more good at the moment than the dwarves, but I'd get to my kinfolk as soon as I could.

Since I wasn't going to argue about going to the elves, I figured I would broach a subject that the elves had avoided. "What about the red elf? Should I be worried about him?"

Michelle didn't hesitate in her reply. "Yes. You should definitely be worried about the red elf. Only, it isn't an elf. It's a salamander, a fire elemental—about as dangerous as you can get short of a dragon. Nytoi and I had no idea the Feds were using elementals. All elementals were supposed to be banished. The *Feds* were the ones who ordered the banishment."

I frowned. "What about the Lady of the Forest? Wasn't she an elemental?"

It took Michelle a moment to reply, and her lip quivered a bit when she did. "Yes. Malvalhone was an earth elemental. They let her stay because of her heart oak. To leave it would...kill her. Killing her would have enraged the elves, so they trimmed her forest down to nothing and let her stay. It was a prison for her, though."

"Well, won't they be mad now?" I asked.

She nodded. "They should be, but over the centuries, the elves have visited her less and less. She's outside the Enclave and we weren't allowed to leave the Enclave without filling out a dozen forms and requisitioning a Federal escort. I saw her more than any other elf only because I know how to sneak past the wall. Anyway, she isn't on their minds like she once was. Time and the burden of day-to-day existence in the Federation have worn the bonds down they once shared with her. I hope they will be fighting mad, but to be honest, I really don't know."

I scratched my beard with a handful of reins, too afraid of losing control of Coal to let them go, and said, "Well, I hope they're mad, fighting mad, because I got some payback I want to give this Federation for what it done to the forest lady."

The elf looked sad as she replied, "Me too, Gustov. Me too."

An hour later, I saw a glimpse of stone through the trees. Michelle smiled and kned her horse to a faster pace. Nytoi did the same. I took a deep breath, thinking about how sore my bottom already was. I leaned forward and said to Coal, "I ain't gonna knee you because I don't want you bucking me off your back, but you need to speed up so we can catch up with your friends."

The pony smacked his lips and chewed on his bit. I think he even slowed down. It's ironic that the reason I liked him in the first place was because of his orneriness, but it was also the reason I hated him right then.

It took me ten minutes to catch up to where the others waited against a wall of stone. The stone was manufactured, gray, and as rough as sandpaper, like somebody had taken a piece of the city and dumped it in the forest. It rose from the dead leaves of the forest floor to a height of twenty feet and ran north to south as far as I could see. Underbrush grew against it, hiding the base. To our left, the stream cut a path beneath the wall. Water pooled up and gurgled against a wide meshed screen half plugged up with leaves and pine straw.

Nytoi dismounted and walked to the underbrush that grew against the wall near the stream's bank. He pulled the brush aside and looked at the wall's base, then pushed the underbrush back. The elf walked along the wall for a short distance and pulled the underbrush away again. After a good look, he pushed it back and said something to Michelle, then returned to his horse.

I leaned back in my saddle and asked Michelle, "What's he looking for?"

She answered me quick, hurrying the explanation. "Wards. They're set in place to hide the magic attached to this section of the wall. He wanted to make sure they still worked before we go through the barrier."

As soon as she'd answered me, the elf turned to Nytoi and grinned like a kid asking for a cookie. "Let me do it."

He nodded. I couldn't see his mouth for the respirator, but by the look in his eyes, I'd have to say he was smiling.

Michelle pulled her wand from a pocket in her jacket, pointed it at the wall, and spoke words I couldn't understand. Unlike Nytoi, who spoke the magic naturally, fluently, Michelle carefully pronounced each syllable. As she spoke, the end of her wand glowed with a white light, and I gasped. The wall between the two glyphs faded a little more with each of her words. Tree trunks on the other side of the wall became visible, as though the stone was a fog that I could see through. She spoke her words over and over again and with each speaking, the wall became more transparent until it disappeared all together.

Dwarves and magic don't mix, and I don't mind saying that seeing that wall vanish sent a cold chill down my spine. I gawked, but I didn't say anything to the elves. If they said using magic was how we had to pass through the wall, then that was how we did it. I never figured I would rely on an elf for anything, but I trusted Michelle. I had mixed feelings about Nytoi, but Michelle had always done me right.

Nytoi rode through the vanished section of wall first. I waited for Michelle to go next, but she motioned me on with a wave of her hand and said, "It's customary for the spell caster to go last, so hurry up. I don't want to be in the middle of the wall when it reappears. That would mess my day up in a big way."

I hesitated. It hadn't occurred to me that the wall could come back while I was in it. I got an image of Coal's head protruding from one side of the wall while his hindquarters stuck out from the other. It wasn't pretty. Still, I had to go. I had to trust Michelle.

Leaning forward in the saddle, I patted Coal's jaw and whispered, "Coal, do this one thing for me. If you never do nothing else, do this one thing and hurry yourself through that wall."

The pony snorted and smacked his lips, then trotted through the opening. It was anything but rushed, but he got me through it. I guess I would have been surprised if he had done exactly as I asked. Like me, the pony was cantankerous and wanted to prove it every chance he got.

Michelle's horse trotted through the opening and stopped on the other side. We waited a couple of minutes before the wall faded back into place, then turned our horses and continued following the stream to the east.

The sun was dipping down into the trees before Nytoi called a halt for the night. I was awfully glad to get down off that pony. My legs had grown numb and my back ached something fierce. It took me darn near an hour to loosen up enough to feel comfortable. I hoped that in the days ahead I would get used to riding the little beast, but I had my doubts.

We set up camp in a little clearing surrounded by hard woods. The creek meandered through the forest just to the north, and a thin, white strip of sand made a beach against its rippling waters. Cattails grew up on each side of the beach and dragonflies fluttered from one cattail to another.

Michelle picketed the horses in a nearby spot of grass while Nytoi worked on the fire.

I strode up to Michelle, put my fists on my hips, and said, "Well?"

She looked at me with a playful grin. "Well, what?"

The elf knew darned good and well what I was 'welling' about.

"Don't act like you don't know. I want to see the hand cannon." I growled.

She reached around to the small of her back and brought it forth. The barrel gleamed silver in the fading sun. The shiny pipe merged with a larger cylinder in the center of the cannon, a thick piece of metal with holes bored through it around the outer circumference. The metal handle was sandwiched in polished wood, its grain striated like brown granite. A round symbol was burned into the wood on each side, webbed with elvish script. The trigger guard was clear of etching, but looped around the handle in fanciful S shape. I held my hand out for it, but Michelle wasn't ready to release it to me yet.

"This is an MSC-45, also called a Mog 45. It was first designed ten years ago by a dwarf named

Mog Stonecutter, hence the title. It'll make an entry wound the size of a copper piece, and an exit wound as big as a pie plate. It kicks like a mule, and its roar sounds like the bellowing of a god. I call her Princess. It's sort of a personal joke. So, you got any idea how this works?"

I nodded and said, "Some."

She placed her thumb on a lever by the trigger and cocked the hammer back. It made a couple of ratcheting clicks. She slid her thumb away, then flicked her wrist. The cylinder swung down, revealing six chambers plugged with brass discs. She pulled one of the plugs out to show me a brass-capped cylinder with a coned plug of lead on the other end. I took it from her and looked it over as she said, "That's the charge. It's a brass case packed with black powder and capped with a slug of lead."

She took the charge back and slid it back into its chamber. "With the cylinder in place, you pull the hammer back, point the cannon at anything that annoys you, and then pull the trigger. Whatever was bugging you bugs you no longer. I think of the hand cannon as an equalizer. The littlest girl can beat the biggest orc if she carries one of these in her lunchbox." Michelle laughed then pulled the trigger. The hammer slammed down with a click.

Oh, yeah. I liked that cannon. I wanted that cannon, or one like it, but I still had one question.

"Does the fancy writing say Princess?"

Michelle frowned. "What do you mean? On the cannon?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I see all the writing on it. I figure it's the cannon's name. My da's axe had runes on it that made its name. Figured the cannon was the same."

She grinned and swung the cylinder back into place. "No. The etching's only decorative. Did you have a name for your axe before coming here?"

I frowned and said, "No. I was working on it, but I hadn't earned a name for it yet."

She started to say something and stopped. Michelle looked over my shoulder at Nytoi, held the hand cannon up, and said, "Is it okay if Gustov fires Princess a couple of rounds?"

He took careful stock of the forest then nodded. Michelle asked, "Do you want to shoot it?"

What a question to ask. I would have shaved three inches off my beard to shoot that cannon at that moment. I nodded with more enthusiasm than I wished to show.

She chuckled, handed me the cannon, and pointed to a nearby mound of grass and dirt. "Let's make this easy for your first shot. Aim at that mound of dirt, pull the hammer back, and when you're ready, just pull the trigger."

I swung the cannon up and looked down the barrel. Michelle said, "Watch out—"

I pulled the trigger. The concussion blasted my ears as fire leapt from the end of the barrel. The ground exploded just in front of the mound and the cannon jerked up over my head and nearly left my hands.

Michelle flinched, but finished her sentence. "For the kick."

I stuck a finger in my ear and wiggled it, hoping the ringing would stop. I said, "By Donnan, that was loud."

The elf folded her arms over her chest and asked, "Well, was it all you had hoped for?"

I just smiled and replied, "Can I try it again?"

Michelle pulled a cigarette from her pocket, lit it, and took a pull. She blew smoke into the air, then cocked her head and swung her hand toward the mound in a 'be my guest' gesture.

I smiled, pointed the cannon, and looked down the barrel again.

The writing machine's clicking again. Rapid clicking, like it's hung up. I suppose it's still working, maybe it's doing some catching up or something. Whatever's happening, it's the elf's problem. I'm gonna just tell it my story and not worry about the device no more.

If I do all this talking, and that machine don't listen to it, then I'm punching the elf in her pointy ears.

We'd left in such a hurry from Fred's that none of us had put in any thoughts toward food, and it ain't like me not to give food quite a bit of thought. Luckily, Fred had done some of the thinking

for us because one of Nytoi's saddlebags was loaded down with sausages, oranges, and apples. I guess the strange human had told Jimmy to pack us up before he brought the horses over. I don't think the human boy would have thought of it on his own.

One of Michelle's saddlebags was stuffed with blankets, so that was two I owed Fred. There weren't any pillows, but I couldn't expect him to think of everything, and besides, I was a dwarf so I was use to sleeping hard.

We were all worn out and the elves settled in pretty quickly. I didn't. I was tired. That darned pony had worn me plumb out, but sleep wouldn't come.

Outdoor sleeping isn't the type of sleeping that a tunnel-bred dwarf cares for. A dwarf Stronghold is completely dark when a fellow wants to go to sleep. It's a cavern and there ain't a lot of wind. There ain't no light except what turns yellow with our special vision. It's natural. Out in the open, the moon cast a blue tint on everything, messing up my night vision so that nothing had the right color for sleeping, too much blue. Then there was the wind. It made the trees sway and their limbs creak. It rustled my hair and tickled my beard. When the trees weren't making their racket, the darned animals were scampering around in the underbrush, digging up worms, roots, and such. I saw a bat or two, but they probably bothered me the least. In the dwarven Stronghold, they were a nuisance, a pooping menace, but they were something familiar in a world that had suddenly become all too strange. I didn't figure I would get a lick of sleep, and I didn't.

I was ready to give up on it all together and go sit by the fire when I heard an odd noise. It wasn't an animal foraging for food. The sounds were too even, like someone walking around in the trees, someone who was trying to be careful. I heard a whisper that I could almost have blamed on the wind, almost. I figured there were at least two people out in the woods.

I didn't move, and even pretended a snore or two. I figured they were planning to ambush us, but I had a surprise or two for whoever it was.

A figure stepped out of the woods and into the firelight. He was a big human in a greatcoat and wide brimmed hat. His beard was trimmed short, and his piercing blue eyes sparkled with intelligence. The fire glinted off the hand cannon he held, one hand held forward against a wood sheath on the barrel, the other hand on the handle and trigger. It was a big cannon, at least three times bigger than Michelle's. I imagined it would kick something fierce.

"Don't nobody move," he bellowed.

I jumped up to charge him and he swung his cannon in my direction. My charge and my plan fell short. It wasn't much of a plan to begin with.

Nytoi and Michelle sat up and froze.

A second figure moved into the human's shadow, a scruffy orc dressed in leathers with a knife strapped to his waist.

The human swung the cannon to each of us in turn and said, "Keep your hands where I can see them."

The elves raised their hands into the air. Luckily, they were far enough into the shadows that the human couldn't see Nytoi's gear. I defiantly folded mine over my chest.

The human looked at me and frowned, but didn't push the matter. "I'm Enforcer Rowlings, and I'm here because I got a report that someone was shooting a cannon in this area. Any of you seen anybody with a cannon around here?"

The elves shook their heads. I glared.

The orc whispered to Rowlings, but I still heard him. "They're lying. I saw the dwarf shooting with my own eyes."

If there's anything I hate more than an orc, it's an orc snitch. The enforcer pulled on the wooden sheath running along the barrel. It made an ominous double click. The elves jumped at the sound. He pointed the cannon at me and said, "Seems I got a fellow here who saw you shooting a hand cannon. I think one of you is lying and I don't think it's him. Do you have a permit for that gun, dwarf?"

I spat and stood. I could see down the barrel of his cannon. The whole way down, and it wasn't a pretty sight. I growled, "I ain't got no cannon. You gonna take the word of a pig fornicating beast

over mine? If so, you'd best be ready to fight me."

His weapon didn't lower, but the edges of his mouth did. "I don't like the way you talk, mister. You sound like a racist and a fool, and we don't put up with that sort of thing in these parts, and you're damned right I'm gonna take Orix's word over yours. I've known him most of my life."

That settled it, and damn the consequences. I rushed him. Michelle screamed and Nytoi hollered something in elvish.

With my first step, the enforcer's eyes grew as wide as gold coins. He obviously wasn't expecting me to be dumb enough to rush him with that big cannon he held. My eyes grew as wide as Rowlings' on my second step as the cannon was yanked from his grasp with invisible hands. It flew across the air and into Nytoi's waiting grasp. The elf turned the cannon on the enforcer and his friend. Michelle's cannon appeared in her hand as if by magic.

Nytoi held the cannon on the enforcer while speaking out the side of his mouth to Michelle. When he finished, she said, "Both of you, step into the light with your hands in the air."

The enforcer complied, but the orc turned and ran into the black between the trees.

"Damn," Michelle swore. She jumped up and disappeared into the forest after the orc. I began to follow, but Nytoi barked at me in that garbled gibberish I couldn't understand. I turned to him and shrugged with both hands out. He jabbed the cannon toward the enforcer and repeated his bark.

I turned to Rowlings and said, "I don't know what he just said, but I owe you a beating for calling me a liar. I ain't gonna beat you under the circumstances, but I am gonna ask you if you got any more of them cannons on you, or knives, or rocks and such? If you do, you'd better tell me now." He shook his head, but I could tell he was favoring his right side. I squinted at him, studying the man, then said, "Keep your hands in the air. I don't usually call a man a liar on first meeting him, but in your case I'll make an exception. Now, I'm gonna pat you down and I want you to keep your hands in the air. You drop them and I'll drop you. Got it?"

He fumed, but nodded, then frowned. "An elf."

"What'd you say?"

He nodded to Nytoi. "He's an elf."

"Yeah, so?"

"An outside elf, not of the Enclave."

"Don't you be worrying about him none. He ain't any of your concern, enforcer."

I kept a close eye on him as I patted him down. I found another cannon in a small holster on his right hip just as I'd expected. I pulled it free and gave it a good look. It was a baby of a thing, not much longer than my finger, but it had two barrels. I pulled the hammer back and pointed it at him.

"I guess this makes you the liar here, wouldn't you say?"

Yeah, I gloated. I think I deserved to after the way the human treated me. Nytoi stopped my gloating with another order that sounded like fancy babbling to me. I turned to him and he waved to the horses. He wanted me to saddle them up, and quick. I gave the enforcer a threatening glance then picked up Nytoi's saddle and walked to the horses.

Michelle was back by the time the animals were ready. She was winded and frustrated, not a good sign.

Nytoi spoke in elven and she replied in kind. Since I couldn't understand a word of it, I asked, "I don't suppose you got him?"

She shook her head no.

I pointed the little cannon at the human and asked, "What do we do with him?"

The elf walked over to the human, swept his great cloak aside, and jerked a set of manacles off his belt. A metal star gleamed against his breast and after a moment's thought, she yanked that off too then pulled him over to a tree and pushed him to the ground with his back against the trunk. Then the elf grabbed his arm, pulled it behind the tree, and said, "I think you know what to do with your other hand."

He did, and a moment later, his hands were shackled together on one side of the tree; the rest of him remained on the other.

Nytoi stood and handed Michelle the big cannon. She held it a moment, glancing between my little cannon and the big one. Without a word, she took the little cannon from me and handed me the big one. She said, "Just one more thing." She walked over to the human and dug in the pockets of his great cloak. She returned and handed me a dozen paper cylinders capped in brass.

"These are the charges for that scatter cannon you're holding. It's a DB-12. We don't have time for you to try it out, but it works basically the same way. Pull the pump back to load a charge, then pull the hammer back and it's ready to shoot. It doesn't fire a single shot of lead, though. Instead, it blasts out dozens of little pellets. I know it doesn't sound like something that can do a lot of damage, but take my word for it, this cannon is devastating at close range. It's loud too, like thunder in your ear," the elf said.

I nodded, and I'm sure I wore a childlike grin when I did.

Nytoi saddled up while Michelle and I traded weapons. He trotted his horse over and motioned for us to mount up. A minute later, we were on our horses and following the creek again at a gallop. I didn't know Coal could move so fast until that moment, but I'm glad he did. Behind us, I could hear the enforcer yelling, "You can't just leave me here. At least let me have my mini-cannon." He'd be all right. It wouldn't take long for his orc friend to return with lots of help.

We rode away and didn't look back.

Nytoi led us through the forest at a fast pace, or as fast as the night and Coal's short legs would allow. I should have been the one leading, with it being night and all, but some moonlight shone down through the leaves and allowed the elf to see where he was going. I didn't like it, though. The air had an early morning chill filled with dampness. We clopped along for about five miles before Nytoi brought us to a halt.

He waved Michelle over and talked to her in low tones that I could barely hear. I don't know why he bothered whispering. I couldn't understand a word he said anyway. I just sat atop Coal and listened to them talk. Their conversation grew louder and I soon had no problems hearing their gibberish. It kept getting louder and more heated until I figured everyone in the forest could hear their strange words. Michelle sounded upset while Nytoi only sounded resolved.

She grew quiet, head downcast. He reached into the space between their horses and gripped her upper arm. I don't think he meant for her to, but she leaned over, placed her arms around his neck, and squeezed him tight. Even through his breathing gear, I could see he was startled, but that quickly gave way to contentment as he hugged her back.

A moment later, they separated. He turned his horse and rode it back down the trail. The elf spoke something to me as he passed. I figure he was telling me goodbye, maybe he said to take care of Michelle. For all I know, he could have been saying how fine my beard was, but I doubt it.

I watched until he disappeared into the trees then turned to Michelle and asked, "What was that all about?"

She looked to the side and ran the back of her hand over her damp cheek, then she said, "He's gone to draw them off. He'll hide our tracks so nobody can find them, then he'll go off in another direction to draw them away. He said he would meet us at the Enclave."

I scratched my head as I thought a minute, then asked, "Who's 'they?'"

"The enforcers. The salamander," she answered.

"What? You think that enforcer's gonna sick them on us?" I asked.

She shook her head and replied, "Yes. I'm sure he will talk to them, but they'll hunt us because Nytoi used magic when he pulled the enforcer's cannon from him. It's the magic police. They are sensitive to the use of magic, and Nytoi didn't have time to cloak his spell. If that weren't enough, the enforcer saw Nytoi's gear. A free elf hasn't been in the Enclave since the Enlightenment.

They'll want to catch him, to find out what he's doing here."

"Do you think the elf can outspell the salamander?"

Michelle's tongue ran across her lips before she answered. "No. Salamanders are brutal beasts,

clever and heartless. Their magic is born into them, instinctual and powerful. Nytoi's only chance is to draw them off, but not to let them get too close."

In that moment, I found a new respect for the strange elven monk. The pointy-ear was sticking his neck out for me against a foe that he couldn't beat. I would owe him for that, and owe him big. I just hoped that he lived long enough for me to repay him. In the meantime, I would do my best to watch out for Michelle. It's what he would want.

I didn't know what to say, as I don't talk so good when the emotions take me, so I mumbled, "Hope your elf friend turns out okay."

She looked down our back trail to where Nytoi had gone, and said, "Me too, Gustov. Me too."