

The Trackers

A short story by

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Chapter One

Just inside the edge of the forest in a small clearing the city Council discussed the important matters of the day. Kneeling quietly behind a giant oak, Beau and Erin could only make out what they were saying when someone yelled to make a point. They loved spying on the Council, but rarely heard or understood most of what they were discussing. That wasn't their intention. Just the fact that they could be so close without being discovered was exiting enough.

Beau and Erin considered themselves the best trackers in the area. Erin lived with her parents, Kate and Nelson Hunt and Beau with his father, Mason Wright, in the small village of Sarn Reach. They were indeed very good trackers for their age, both being seventeen now. They could tell the Council was about to break up, so they quietly snuck back to the main trail and then back to Miss Elly's Publik House for a sarsaparilla. Tired from tracking and shooting the fat pea hen for Mason's kettle, then spying on the Council meeting, they relaxed and sipped their drink in satisfied silence.

A short time later, a stranger rode into the village and ask the smith where he might get a cold tankard. Durik directed him to the Publik House, which was owned by Miss Elly. The Council depended on Durik to handle any situations of criminal or suspicious nature. Durik didn't mind, since there was only one wagon and a four horses in the village, so he was not very busy smithing.

The stranger entered the Publik House and ordered a tankard. When Miss Elly brought him his drink, he threw a silver on the table and he said he was looking for someone. He gave a description of the man, but not a name. The description fit Beau's father Mason, but Elly didn't let on she knew anyone like that. The stranger finished his drink, quietly got up and left.

Beau looked at Erin and whispered,

“That sure sounded like he's looking for Pa.”

“Sure does. Maybe we should follow him and see where he is going,” answered Erin.

When she was sure the stranger had left the village, Elly headed straight over to Mason's cottage. She gave him all the details. He asked her what the stranger looked like and she described him. He thought for a moment, shook his head and said he didn't know the man and he must be looking for someone else. When she got back, Beau and Erin were gone. When she asked her manager about them, she said they left right after the stranger, in the direction of the main road. She headed right back to Mason's cottage.

“I'm certain they heard his description of the one he was looking for. You know them, they can't resist a chance to track someone,” Miss Elly reported.

“You're right. And she saw them go out right after he left?” asked Mason.

“Yes. Not five minutes ago. They were headed towards the road to Ryker.”

“Ok. I'll grab some things and go after them. Not a word about this, please Miss Elly.”

“Certainly. Hope you catch up to them before they get in trouble.”

Mason grabbed his pack, threw in some food and water, and his revolver. He had an idea who the stranger was and wasn't taking any chances as he headed towards Ryker.

One of rear shoes on the stranger's horse had a small inside nick and it was easy to follow him. After about two miles he left the main road and headed into the forest. They tracked him another mile or so and came upon his camp just before dark. While they were quietly watching him, two more men entered the camp and started talking to the stranger. Beau was just about to signal Erin to get closer, when a hand came down on his shoulder. He spun his head around to see Mason put his finger to his lips to signal for quiet. Erin was startled enough to make a small sound and one of the men in camp hushed the others and stood up. He stared right at the trio and listened. After a moment he shook his head and said it must have been an animal of some kind. He threw another log on the fire and they resumed talking.

Mason signaled for Beau and Erin to back out quietly. When they had gone far enough, he scolded them for following the man.

"You know nothing about this man. And now there are three of them. You could have been discovered and hurt."

"Sorry Pa, we couldn't resist. The description of the one he wanted sounded just like you. Do you know him?"

"No, but I'll follow them for a short while, just to see where they are really going. You and Erin go back home and wait for me."

Disappointed, they both agreed.

"Be careful, Pa. They look mean. They might be smugglers or robbers."

"I will. Don't wait up for me, it could take a while."

As Beau and Erin headed back, Mason returned to the camp and watched. This is a good spot, he thought. Those kids really are good trackers. After about an hour, the men broke camp and headed towards Ryker. Mason was right behind them.

Early the next morning, Erin was knocking on the cottage door. Beau answered, looking sleepy and mumbled something she couldn't make out.

"Were you up all night?" she asked.

"Just about. Pa never came back."

"Oh dear. I think we should tell someone."

"Yea, lets tell Durik what happened and see what he thinks."

They headed for the blacksmith shop. Even though it was early, Durik already had a fire going in he hearth.

"My, you two are getting an early start. Where you heading?" he asked.

"No where...yet. We need to talk. Do you have a minute?" replied Beau.

Durik poured two more cups of coffee and sat down. Beau, with help from Erin, explained everything that happened yesterday.

"He is not back yet. How long do you think we should wait?" asked Beau.

"Well, they may not have broken camp till this morning. And, probably headed to Ryker and Mason would follow them there."

"If so, he may not get back till tonight," Erin said.

"That's true. I think, to be sure, I'd wait until tomorrow morning. If he isn't back by then, go see the Council," replied Durik.

Erin and Beau went back to the house. They discussed it some more and decided that seeing the Council wouldn't help. They needed to do something now. They packed supplies and headed out again to pick up the trail to the camp. Erin didn't tell her parents because she knew they would not want her to go. But Beau was her best friend and together they were the best trackers around. She had to help him. They left a note for Mason, in case he got back before them and headed for the road to Ryker.

When they got back to the the abandon camp, they followed two sets of tracks, the group of men and Mason's. After only a couple miles they could see sign of a struggle and Mason's tracks disappeared. Mason must have been discovered and was taken prisoner.

"Your Pa said he didn't know the man, what would they want with him?" asked Erin.

Beau thought for a moment and answered,

"I think he did know the rider, but for some reason did not want anyone to know."

"So, do we follow on to Ryker?" she asked.

"Absolutely. Let's go."

Following the confused tracks, they were several hours to Ryker. They didn't know this big city at all and the strange people wondering the streets made them nervous.

"We should find the Sheriff and see if he will help." said Beau.

"Ok, lets ask here at this shop," Erin said, turning into what looked like a craft shop.

They asked the shop owner and she gave them directions to the Sheriff's office. They followed a street that ran close to the dock area of town and Beau saw several rough looking characters lingering about. He was glad when they arrived at the station. They explained things to the Sheriff and gave him a description of all the men. He said he would ask around. He said if the men were smugglers they should check the waterfront area, but told them to be careful and only talk shop owners, not strangers in the street. Beau agreed.

The rest of the day was spent talking to a dozen shop and tavern owners. None had seen any men matching the description. As they got closer to the main wharf, they met up with several young kids that seemed friendly.

"Seems like you two are lost," said one.

"We are searching for my Pa," said Beau.

"Well, we are the dockrats on this wharf. If he is around here, we can find him."

"He was traveling with three others that we believe are smugglers. We think they are holding him prisoner," Erin stated.

"Hmm...smugglers, you say. That's a very dangerous lot, for sure," said another.

"We would appreciate any help you can give us. We are from Sarn Reach and do not know Ryker at all," Beau explained.

"Follow us. We will talk to our leader and see if we can set up a search."

The dockrats lead Beau and Erin to a small shack on a dead end street. They entered and were introduced to a much older boy. They explained the details to him and he immediately sent out three runners.

"I'm Safer, the leader of the dockrats here in Ryker. What makes you think these men are smugglers?"

"We were told by someone who knew my Pa that he got mixed up with smugglers. He evidently had something they wanted, but he doesn't have it anymore."

"If the men were smugglers, they probably used one of the three main sewer entrances. We'll check them out. You from Sarn, you say?" the leader asked.

"Yes. We followed their trail from a camp just outside of the village straight to here. Then we lost it. The Sheriff told us to check around this area," Beau said.

"You tracked them from Sarn all the way to here? That's not an easy thing."

"We are very good trackers," Erin grinned

"Well, it will take some time to check out those entrances. How about a drink? Are you hungry?" asked Safer.

"We brought some food and water with us. A place to rest a bit would be nice," answered Beau.

"Jerand, take them up to the nearest safe house," Safer said. "You can rest and eat there. We will come for you when we learn something."

Beau noticed that the leader did not say "if" we learn something, but "when". This made him feel better. Jerand led them up the street to what looked like an abandon warehouse. Inside was a walled off area with a stout metal door and lock. Inside were several comfortable looking chairs and a table. Beau and Erin ate and rested. Erin slept for a while, but Beau was too worried to sleep.

Several hours later, Safer entered with the three dockrats he had sent out.

"We've found someone at one of the entrances. We can take you there now," he said.

"Any sign of the others?" asked Beau.

"No, and no sign of a struggle either. Come on, it may not even be one of them."

It took only about ten minutes to get to the the sewer entrance. It was just inside the city limits, closest to Sarn. Beau took one look at the dead man and broke down crying. It was Mason.

"Looks like they killed him somewhere else and dumped him here," one of the runners said.

Safer cuffed him and said,

"A little respect, Baller. He's just lost his Pa."

Erin came and hugged Beau, whispering something to him. After a few minutes he got up and thanked the leader for his help. He said he would go see the Sheriff to make arrangements to return his Pa to Sarn. Erin offered to pay the dockrats what little money they had, but Safer refused.

"I believe the three that did this were smugglers. Your Pa probably had something they wanted and he wouldn't, or couldn't give it. With the description you gave us, we may be able to find them if they are still in Ryker, but they may be long gone by now." he explained.

"Thanks again you for your help," said Erin.

"We have no love for smugglers and don't mind helping. If we find anything, we know where Sarn is," Safer said, shaking their hands.

The Sheriff was very helpful. He arranged for a wagon and two men to help them take Mason home. Erin gave him the money they had and said they could bring back more if it wasn't enough. He assured her it was just the right amount.

"Everyone has been very helpful," Erin said as they rode in the back of the wagon with Mason.

"They sure have. I am going to find these men, you know," Beau said.

"And I think the dockrats will help you, too," Erin smiled.

“As soon as we take care of Pa, I'm going to get some sword training and go back to Ryker. Someone must have seen them or know who they are,” he said.

“I'm sure I can explain things to my parents. They won't like it, but they will understand.”

“Understand what? Surely you're not thinking of coming with me!” Beau exclaimed.

“Of course I am. We're a team. It's what we do.”

“Erin, this could be very dangerous. Especially if I do find them.”

“Exactly. You will need me to go fetch the Sheriff while you watch them.”

He smiled at her and said,

“Well, we'll just see what your parents say.”

Chapter Two

When Erin returned home, her parents were worried sick. They had talked to Durik and he told them about the conversation he had with her and Beau.

“You were out all night!” her Pa said loudly.

“It was necessary. Beau needed me to help track his Pa,” she said.

She explained the whole story to them. They felt terrible, as Mason was a good friend. They asked her to tell Beau that everyone in the village would help with the ceremony and burial. She assured them she would and then explained what their plans were. As she expected, they tried to talk her out of going.

“We will be just fine,” she replied. “We have help from the dockrats and the Sheriff both. I really don't think we will find them, but Beau feels he must try.”

“We understand, Erin, we are just worried.” her Ma said.

“The dockrat leader said they would be watching for them, too, but he thinks they are long gone.” she added.

The whole village turned out for the ceremony. The Council told Beau that all expenses would be covered and not to worry. He explained to them that he would be setting out to find the men responsible. He asked everyone there if they knew anything about Mason's past; where they came from and what he did for a living before coming to Sarn. One of the Council members remembered a friend Mason had when he first arrived. His name was Creighton and he lived alone on the outskirts of the village.

Beau went alone to visit the man. He indeed knew Mason many years ago, before they came to Sarn. He told Beau that Mason was a driver for a shipping company in a town about thirty miles to the north. Evidently, Mason had been attacked by bandits on a run and most everything was stolen. The company owner held him responsible for not taking enough guards. Mason could not pay for the stolen goods and had to leave town in secret. He brought Beau to Sarn Reach about five years ago. The man didn't know many more details.

“Do you know where I can find a Sword Master?” Beau asked the man.

“Well, I hear there are several in Walder's Point.”

“Isn't that north of here?”

“Yes, about two days travel on foot.”

Beau thanked the man for his help and headed home.

When he returned to the village he went straight to Erin's house.

“Well, hello, Beau. Did you learn anything from that old friend of Mason's?” Nelson asked.

“Yes, I did. And I now need to go to a town called Walder's Point to find a sword master. I will most likely be gone many months.”

“Do you want us to keep watch on your place for you?” asked Kate.

“That would be great. Maybe Erin can go over every so often and check on things.” he smiled.

On his way to Durik's place he met Erin. He told her all he had learned from Mason's friend. He explained about getting some sword training in Walder's Point and then going to look for the men in Ryker, if they were still there.

“After I get my sword training I'll be back. We will discuss going to Ryker then.”

"I'll be here waiting. Maybe I'll try to get some rapier training while you're gone," Erin said.

He headed to see Durik. He needed more advice on what he should bring and Durik would surely know once he told him what he had learned.

"Well, young man. I think you will need both courage and perseverance. And, a good sword as well. Smugglers are a bad lot and there may be many of them working for a company down there." said Durik.

"Do you know where I can purchase a good sword? And, where I can get the training to use it?"

Durik walked over and removed something from a cabinet in the smithy. He brought it over and handed it to Beau.

"This was mine when I worked in the guard of my hometown years ago. I have not used it since and will not be likely to again. It's yours."

Beau unwrapped the bundle and found a beautiful sword with a jeweled hilt in a dark silver scabbard. He pulled it out and immediately saw small runes on the blade.

"Those look like Elven runes. This must be a very expensive sword."

"The one that gave it to me said it was Elven made and indeed very strong, but with no magical powers."

"Oh, Durik. I can't accept something so valuable."

"Mason was a good friend to me. I cannot accompany you on your quest to find those responsible for his death. This is the least I can do. Please accept it."

"I will cherish it and learn how to use it well, I promise."

"I'm sure you will."

Beau spent the next couple days packing and fixing up the house to sit empty. He had no idea how long it would take to find a master in Walder's Point and get his training. He could be gone for months. On the morning before he left he said his goodbyes to Durik and Elly. He went to Erin's house and said goodbye to Kate and Nelson. He hugged Erin and told her he would be back as soon as he could. She told him to be careful, learn well and she would look after his house. She did not talk about her finding someone to give her rapier lessons. He headed north.

The first day was easy, but the second day it started raining. The clouds opened right after breakfast and it started pouring. He finally had to take shelter in a copse of bergensberry bushes. It was not totally dry, but better than being out in the open. He stayed in his shelter the rest of the day and all night. He slept as much as he could and was awake before dawn. The rain had slowed to a fine drizzle, enough so he could build a fire. After breakfast he headed out again. He was in dense forest and it was slow going. He had seen no one at all the last three days.

As he came to a clearing just after noon, he saw wood smoke just over a rise to the northeast. He figured it was someone's cabin and decided to go around it. He had just gotten north of it and ran into a man with a mule on the trail. He was heading directly towards the cabin.

"Afternoon, traveler," the man said.

"Hello. That you place?" asked Beau, pointing to the smoke.

"Sure is. My wife is waiting for me there. I've been to Walder's Point for supplies. You heading there?"

"Yes, I am, Can you tell me how far it is yet?"

"Just a couple more miles."

"Oh, closer than I thought."

"My name is Jeb," said the man, holding out his hand.

Beau shook it and said,

"Beau Wright. Glad to meet you, sir."

"Have time for some supper? Wife's makin bear stew and always makes plenty."

"That sounds so much better than more trail rations. Thank you kindly."

They headed towards the cabin and when they arrived Jeb introduced Beau to his wife, Carla. She told Beau to come in, rest and have some supper. After setting a mug of dark ale in front of them, she continued fixing supper.

"Nice of you to invite a stranger in your place," said Beau.

"We enjoy the company, Don't get many visitors these days," Jeb replied.

"Well you are off the main road a bit"

"You from Sarn Reach?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm on a quest to Walder's Point. From there I will head back to Ryker."

"That's a fair piece of walking. What sort of quest would this be, if you don't mind my askin."

Beau explained all about Mason and the company he worked for and what happened to him. He also told them about Erin and that she would go with him to Ryker.

When he finished his story, Carla said,

"Sounds like you might be in for some trouble, dealing with a company that's running a smuggling operation."

"Hope you know how to use that sword in your pack, Beau." Jeb added.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not very good with it. I hope to find a master in Walder's and get some training."

"That so? I think we can help you there," said Jeb, glancing at Carla.

"We happen to have a friend there that used to be in the King's Guard. He might take you as a student. He's the best swordsman in the land, I think," Carla grinned.

"That would be wonderful. Can you tell me his name?"

"He is Master Chaun and we'll write you a recommend to give him. I figure that just losing your Pa entitles you to some help," Jeb stated.

Beau continued with his story about his quest and of the plans to start their own tracking business someday. They seemed very interested in his story and were so easy to talk to, he thought. Then, he asked if they had any children. They both looked down and got quiet.

"We had a son, about your age he was, killed in an accident bout a year ago now," said Jeb.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Having just lost Pa, I know how much it hurts."

"Still does. We miss Ryan very much," Carla added.

"What I do is concentrate on my quest. Try not to think too much about Pa. I miss him too, but I know he would want me to get on...live my life."

"We are trying to do just that. When I saw you on the trail, I knew you were someone that could be trusted. I was right, eh Carla?"

"It's true. We have a feeling about you."

"That's a very nice thing to say, ma'am. I feel very comfortable with you two," Beau

answered.

“Well, it's getting late. No time to start out for Walder's now. How about a nice warm bed and start first thing in the morning,” Jeb offered.

“And for now, supper is ready,” Carla added.

“My lucky day, for sure, meeting up with you,” Beau said, grinning.

After supper they talked till well after dark. Carla led Beau to a small room in the back of the cabin.

“Was our son's room. He was about your size, too. If you see any clothing here that you need on your quest, help yourself.”

“Thank you ma'am. That's very kind of you.”

“Call me Carla, please.”

“Ok, thank you, Carla.”

Beau slept very sound that night. He woke just after sunrise to the smell of biscuits. He went to the privy out back, washed up and appeared in the kitchen. Both Jeb and Carla had a huge breakfast set with ham and sausage, eggs, gravy and biscuits. A huge pot of coffee was brewing on the wood stove. Beau felt right at home here and enjoyed the breakfast. He admired the cabin they had here. It was just right for two people, close to the forest and just off the road to Walder's.

Jeb said it was only about twenty minutes to Walder's. Carla gave him the recommend for Master Chaun and directions to his cottage. They also asked him to stop back by on his way back home. He assured them he would look forward to it. He gave them both a hug and headed out to the trail north.

He couldn't believe his luck, finding Jeb and Carla. He was sure they would be his friends for a long time and couldn't wait to have Erin meet them. The trail north was easy and he met no one. He wanted to look around a bit before he went to the master's house, so he walked all the streets close to the square. He saw a tavern called the Wayward Lad and went in just before noon. The place was very clean with lots of patrons.

“Lunch or just a drink?” asked a serving girl.

“Just an ale, please,” he answered. “Had a big breakfast.”

“This way, sir.”

She lead him to a booth near the back wall beside a large fireplace. She went off and returned quickly with a tankard.

Beau looked around at those already eating. Most were business owners and a few were what he thought might lumbermen or hired hands. The man behind the bar, probably the owner, eyed his bundle and headed over.

“New in town, sir?”

“Yes, just arrived from Sarn Reach. Looking for Master Chaun.”

“Thought you might be, with that sword there not on your back,” he answered.

“I hope to get some training. Do you know if he is taking students?”

“Never sure about him. Sometimes he goes months with none. Know where his cottage is?”

“Yes, I have directions.”

He paid for his tankard and headed to the master's cottage. The town was much bigger than Ryker and he had to ask directions again before he finally came in sight of the cottage. It was on a small gravel road leading out of town and sat back off the main road so far you might miss it if you weren't looking. He walked up to the cottage and was about to knock on the door.

"Good afternoon, may I help you?" asked a older woman from behind him.

He turned around and said he was seeking Master Chaun. She bid him to follow her and walked around to the back of the cottage to a small garden. Sitting on a bench was a small, compact man that looked way older than his Pa. The woman said something he didn't understand and left.

"Have a seat," said the man, pointing to a bench.

"Thank you, sir. Master Chaun?" asked Beau.

"I am. And you are?"

"My name is Beau Wright, from Sarn Reach. I was recommended to you by friends."

"Friends?"

Beau reached into his pack for the recommend and gave it to the master. As he read it, his face grew a bit softer and a smile almost touched his lips. He handed it back to Beau.

"Good friends to have. Were you a friend of their son?" asked the master.

"No. I didn't know him."

"Well, if you're looking for training for that sword, normally I take no students at this time of year, but for Jeb and Carla, I will make an exception. They have good instincts about people. When can you start?"

"I thought tomorrow would be good. I have to find a room first."

"Tomorrow is fine. And you will stay here. All part of the training. Do you know my fee?"

"No, sir, I don't."

"Do you have any money at all?"

"I have about 30 silvers. The rest I will get once I find work. Can I pay you weekly as I make it?"

"Not necessary. I normally let my students work around here to pay the fee and since my fee is 60 silvers, you only have to make up half."

"How long is the training?"

"Until you are trained," said the master, smiling.

"That sounds like a good time to be finished then," Beau replied, also smiling.

Chapter Three

The weeks that followed were very hard for Beau. He was not used to such strenuous work, both mind and body. The master not only taught skills with the sword, but also mental exercises for the spirit. He learned meditation and self defense. The master was impressed with his tracking skills and improved on it by teaching him how to read others intentions by their movements and facial expressions.

Beau explained all about his quest one day while in the garden on rest break. The master was not pleased by his plans for revenge. He told him that harboring this need for revenge will eventually cloud his judgment when it mattered most.

“Is the finding of these men more important than your well being?” asked the master.

“How can I have well being when they are still free to kill again?”

“Ah...a question for a question. A sign of justification for your actions, perhaps?”

“I don't feel I need justification for bringing these men to justice.”

“Bringing them to justice requires you to bring them to the Sheriff of Ryker. Are you sure that can happen?”

“No, probably not. If they won't turn themselves in, I must kill them.”

“Then you harm your well being. Killing is necessary in war. Planning to kill outside of war is never necessary and can cause you harm.”

“Even in self defense?”

“If it is truly self defense. If you goad these men into fighting and then kill them, is that self defense?”

“No, but it may be necessary.”

“You talk in circles. You cannot justify something that is not right, no matter how you try. Think on this a while. See if you can satisfy your sense of justice in another way, while maintaining your well being. We will talk of this later.”

Beau enjoyed his talks with Master Chaun. They made him look at things differently than he had ever done before. He worked around the cottage and property with different chores that paid for the rest of his training. He often wondered how he would know when he was finished, but trusted the master to tell him.

His sword work was far improved from when he started. And, after his fourth month of training, the master said he could teach him no more. All he needed now was to practice what he already knew. This would make him faster. The master asked him one evening if he had thought more about his revenge of the men.

“I have thought about it, yes. I believe you are right. Finding another way to bring them to justice without killing them would be better.”

“I am glad. You have indeed grown.”

“And, I think I may have a way to do it. I have friends among the dockrats of Ryker. They are very knowledgeable of the town and will help me find a solution.”

“One that involves the Sheriff?”

“Yes.”

“Then, with that, I must tell you your training here is over. You have changed much since you first came to me. So it is with many of my students. I help them increase their strength, of

arm and spirit, that they already have.”

“It must be a rewarding life, indeed,” Beau said quietly.

“Yes. Rewarding, but I also learn from my students. I grow a little with each one.”

“I will always honor you, master.”

“And, I you, Beau. And, give my best to Jeb and Carla.”

Erin found someone in Ryker to teach her the rapier. He was not a master, but everyone in town agreed he was the best. She would save her silvers from odd jobs in Sarn and convinced him to take payment of 2 silvers for each lesson. She was able to go every week and decided that ten weeks was all she could do. One afternoon she was returning from lessons when Durik hailed her to his smithy.

“How are the lessons going, Erin?”

“Good. This is my fifth lesson and my instructor says I am doing very well.”

“How long will you continue?” asked Durik,

“I’m not sure. At least until I hear from Beau again.”

“And I also heard you turn eighteen tomorrow.”

“Yes, finally of age. Seems like only yesterday Beau and I were tracking in the woods after someone or another.”

“Well then, I have a present for you,” he said as he reached for a bundle wrapped in wool on a shelf.

When she opened it, she found a beautiful rapier with silver polished blade and a jeweled hilt. Tears came to her eyes. She marveled at how good it felt in her hand and was just the right length and weight.

“Oh, Durik. What a beautiful gift. How can I accept something this valuable? And, how did you know my length?”

“I’ve had the materials for years. Never had a use for them. And, remember back a few weeks ago when I ask you to help me measure some iron pieces?”

“Yes...for a new gate or something.”

“I measured you reach then,” he nodded.

“Oh, my. You’re a sneaky one.”

She wrapped the rapier back up and hugged him fiercely.

“I don’t know how to thank you, Durik.”

“Getting very good is all the thanks I require,” he smiled.

“You can be sure of it,” she replied.

When she got home, she showed the rapier to her parents. Her Ma was surprised at such a fine gift. More, she thought, than Erin should have accepted. Her Pa said he knew about it all along. He said the jewel in the hilt was from an old sword that Durik used back in his guard days. He said he was keeping it for a special occasion.

“Wow. He must think I am special, then.”

“I believe he does at that, Erin. And so do we,” her Ma answered.

“I hope you won’t start carrying it until your training is finished, though,” he Pa said.

“Always the practical one, eh Pa.”

“Well, I would hate to have you draw the attention of a ruffian in Ryker and not be able to defend yourself properly.”

"I agree. I will not put it on until I've not only finished my training, but practiced even longer, increasing my speed. I will carry it in my pack to lessons."

"Good. I feel much better now," her Pa said.

"So, when do you think Beau will return?" her Ma asked.

"I'm not sure. Its been over three months now. I can't imagine his training will last much longer. He was already handy with a sword when he left."

"And you will go with him to Ryker?"

"Yes, that's the plan. I will be his backup and only fight if needed."

"That's my girl," her Pa said, proudly.

As Beau traveled south from Walder's Point, he decided to stop and see Jeb and Carla. It had been over four months since he had first met them and he was very grateful for their recommend to Master Chaun. He felt different than when he started. He had more confidence now. He came to the place where he first met Jeb on the trail and saw the smoke from their chimney. He felt like he was visiting old friends again as he headed to the cabin. Carla was in the front yard tending the garden as he came up.

"Hello, in the garden!"

Carla looked up and smiled when she saw him.

"Why, Beau! It's nice to see you again. And so soon."

"Been over four months, Carla. Jeb around?"

"Yes. He's taken the mule down to fetch water. Should be back directly. Hungry?"

"Always, for your cookin!"

She set down the hoe and he followed her in the cabin. She proceeded to fix him a bowl of stew with fresh baked biscuits. He dug in. She just sat a tankard of ale in front of him, when Jeb came in.

"Beau! What a surprise. Finish your training with the master already?"

"Sure did. And, he taught me a lot more than sword fighting, that's for sure."

"He always does. Taught our Ryan plenty. Would have taught him a lot more, if not for the accident," said Jeb.

"I can't thank you enough for the recommend. I don't think he would have taken me on without it."

"It was our pleasure, Beau," Jeb replied.

"Bring in the water, Jeb, and have some lunch with Beau," Carla said.

"Master Chaun sends his best," he told them.

"He is a dear man," Carla said, smiling.

Beau spent the rest of the afternoon and into the evening catching them up on all that happened to him. He explained how when he was here last, his plans were to track and kill the men responsible for his Pa's death. And now, after the time with the master he would not kill the men, but bring them to the Sheriff. They were pleased about this change.

"Master Chaun has always been able to see a more peaceful way to accomplish something that would normally take violence." Carla explained.

"And, he makes you feel good about yourself while doing it." added Jeb.

"I am so glad I found you and you directed me to him."

"Well, I think Chaun would say we found you and just gave you some directions, that's all," said Jeb.

"He's right. You don't find good fortune...it finds you," smiled Beau.

"Yep, he's been with Chaun a while, that's for sure," Carla noted.

After the meal, Beau helped with the cleanup and they moved to the main room. Jeb laid in a fire to ward off the cool evening and Carla brought tankards in for everyone. Jeb thought for a while and finally said,

"I have a decision to make now and I would like your opinion about it."

"We'd be happy to give it, Beau," Carla answered.

"You remember the story I told you about my Pa and how Erin and I wanted to track down the men that did it? Well...now..."

"Now, you're not sure it's such a good idea, right," Jeb said.

"Yes. I know there will be danger in finding these men and I would feel terrible if anything happened to her."

"But, you did say you would come back?" asked Carla.

"Yes. But I've had a long time now to think about it."

"How do you know she still wants to go? And, as you say, she's of age now and doesn't need her parents permission," Jeb responded.

"I think you should just ask her if she still wants to go. Let her make the decision, not you," said Carla.

Beau thought about it for a minute while Jeb and Carla sat quietly. Finally, he said,

"You are right. I'm going to Ryker to try to find these men. If she wants to go, I should be glad for her help. She is a very good tracker, you know."

"Of course, dear," smiled Carla.

After a good night's sleep and a hearty breakfast, Beau thanked and hugged Jeb and Carla and bid them goodbye.

"When your business is finished in Ryker, you bring Erin here for a visit, ok?" asked Carla.

"Yes, I will. She will be happy to meet you both, I'm sure."

"Be careful in Ryker. Remember your training," added Jeb.

"I will. Goodbye my friends," said Beau.

Chapter Four

Erin just finished up a practice session in a small training yard her Pa had made for her. She had trained everyday since she quit her lessons in Ryker. She would go through all the steps, counting each one as she went. This would help with her cadence and she would get faster the more she did it. Just after she cleaned her rapier, she gathered her things and headed in the house. When she came around the corner she ran smack into Beau. She dropped everything and hugged him saying,

“Beau! You're back! Are you all finished with your lessons?”

“Yes. And it looks like you've been doing some of your own.” he said as he reached down and took up the rapier.

“I sure have. I took lessons for 10 weeks in Ryker and have practiced everyday since I finished.”

“What a beautiful rapier. Did you get it in Ryker?”

“No, it was a birthday present from Durik.”

“Oh, that's right. You turned eighteen. How does it feel to be of age now?”

“Not much different, I guess. Except I can make my own decisions now.”

“I remember when I turned eighteen. We were still tracking people in the forest, remember?”

“I do. It seems like so long ago. Come in and say hi to Ma and Pa.”

Beau ate supper with them and afterwards he told all about his training and meeting his new friends. Erin then gave him all the details of her training. She and Beau moved to the front porch swing and continued talking quietly.

“I met the dockrats a couple times while I was in Ryker. They said to tell you hello.”

“Great. I will be looking for their help when I get there.”

“How soon do you plan to go?”

“In a couple days. I want to check on the house and see Miss Elly and Durik.”

“We've taken good care of the place, Beau.”

“And I thank you for that. It was one less worry off my mind.”

Beau felt as they were making small talk, avoiding the main issue, so he came right out and asked,

“Have you given more thought about going with me to Ryker?”

“I have. And now that I'm of age, it is my decision. If you think I would be of help, I will gladly go with you,” she said, a bit smugly.

“From the little bit I saw of how you handle that rapier, you would be a help, indeed.”

“Why, thank you, sir. Care for a light match in the morning? It's a great practice yard.”

“I'd be delighted. See you before breakfast then.”

When Beau walked into the Publik House early the next morning, Miss Elly greeted him with a hug.

“Well, Beau. It's so good to see you again. When did you get back?”

“Just last evening. Went straight to Erin's and talked until late.”

“Did you get the training you were after?”

“Yes, from a very good master swordsman.”

“Wonderful. Care for some breakfast?”

“Just coffee and a sweet roll. Erin and I have a match this morning.”

“Ah, that should be a good match. She is quite good, I hear.”

“I saw. Just as I got there, she was finishing a practice round. I'd better not give her any openings, even with the lighter rapier.”

“Just so,” she smiled.

On the way to Erin's, he stopped to say hello to Durik. They both embraced and he told Durik all about Master Chaun.

“That's one beautiful rapier you made for Erin. You can tell she loves it.”

“Well, she really needed a good one, and it was her “of age” birthday.”

“I'd better get over there. We have a light match this morning.”

“Oh...that'd be something to see, both newly trained and all.”

“And, both equipped by the same Master Smith.”

“Good luck. You may need it,” Durik smiled.

“Thanks, Durik. I'll see you again before we head to Ryker.”

Beau went home and picked up his sword. Master Chaun said it was a sword of very good quality. Perfectly balanced. He was lucky to have Durik as a friend. And, so was Erin. He headed to Erin's and found her already in the practice yard. Both Kate and Nelson were there too. Before they even got started Elly and Durik showed up.

“Since we have no bandas, it will be light touch only. And, I can see that Elly has her medical bag, just in case,” Beau smiled.

“I'm ready when you are,” said Erin.

They touched blades and started testing each others reach and quickness. Back and forth they went. Beau was definitely impressed with Erin's speed. And she was amazed how effortlessly he matched her every thrust. She knew he could stroke the rapier right out of her hand, but he didn't. She was eager to learn more from him. After about ten minutes, he halted and pointed his sword down. She did the same. Everyone applauded.

“I am definitely impressed, Erin. Was the one who trained you a master?”

“No, there are none in Ryker. But, he is supposed to be the best around.”

“That I can believe. I'd love to meet him.”

“And, I would love to meet Master Chaun. And your friends.”

“Lets plan to do that as soon as our business in Ryker is finished.”

“It's a date,” she smiled and gave him a one armed hug.

The spent the day planning and packing for their trip. The both wished they had some silvers for dockrats, but they both spent all their money on training. Beau said they would promise payment after they worked for a while. They talked to Miss Elly about places to stay in Ryker and asked Durik if he knew a smith there. He didn't, but he said to ask the Sheriff about part time guard work. Sometimes the city watch needed temporary guards for special occasions. And, the dockrats may even be able to find them work guarding warehouses containing expensive goods.

They said their goodbyes the next morning. Kate even gave him a hug and whispered in his ear to watch out for Erin. He smiled and nodded. When Nelson hugged Erin goodbye, he handed her small purse of coins, just for emergencies, he said. They waved at Durik on the way out of the village. They caught the road to Ryker and settled into the comfortable walk they were so used to many months ago.

During the walk, Beau told Erin all about his master convincing him not to kill the men, but trapping them for the Sheriff. She was pleased, as the thought of killing someone scared her, even if they deserved it. She knew by the way Beau talked that he had been changed by the master. She was pleased about that, but still had no doubts that he could handle himself well, if needed. And, in the areas of Ryker they needed to go, it may well be necessary.

"I have an idea," Erin said.

"Ok...about what?"

"Let's pay a visit to my old instructor before we find the dockrats. You can explain everything that happened with your Pa and he may be able to help us find them. He's lived in Ryker all his life."

"Good idea. We will definitely need all the help we can get."

"And, the dockrats may have found some worthwhile clues since we were there last. And, if they have, they will be more willing to help us without payment." she said.

Beau smiled at her and said,

"I sure am glad you agreed to come along. You will be a big help in figuring out how to go about this. I seem to be focused on the actual capture and punishment and not the details."

"I'm glad too. Of course, if they've taken a ship somewhere, we may never find them. Crew mates tend to look out for one another." Erin said, beaming.

"Where did you learn all this stuff?"

"From Durik. He is a wealth of information, being in the guard all those years."

"Yes, he is. And a very good friend, too."

That afternoon they met a family traveling north on the road.

"Heading to Sarn?" asked Beau.

"No, Walder's Point. Ryker is too wild for us these days. Too many brigands for our taste. Best be careful, they watch this road."

"Thanks for the information. Good luck to you," Erin said.

"Brigands. That's all we need," Beau commented.

"Maybe we should see the Sheriff first, instead of my instructor."

"I think we'll be safe enough in town. But we can stop in to see him right after."

"Did you find out from Miss Elly about places to stay?"

"Yea, she mentioned a couple taverns, but had no idea if they were expensive."

"So, do you think these men still work for a local company?"

"Hard to tell. If they are making good money at smuggling, they would be in no hurry to go somewhere else."

They arrived in Ryker and headed to Erin's instructor's house. She introduced Beau to him as Connell, and they had a nice visit. He asked Erin if she has been practicing and she said,

"Yes, every day."

"And, it shows. She is very fast," said Beau.

"Great! I knew you were a natural. Now, how about some tea?" asked Connell.

Beau explained everything that had happened in the last half year and what they were here to do. The instructor seemed interested and said,

"Smuggling, and the people involved in it, have been a problem for many months now. And, it's getting worse. I'm not sure why the guard cannot contain it. There are several shipping companies in town. The biggest, and by all accounts the most corrupt, is Belcher Trading and Supply. They have several large warehouses in the wharf area. The Sheriff will

know all about them. He may even know some names of those who run them.”

“We plan to stop by and see him before we go looking for the dockrats.”

“Erin says you've met some of the dockrats before. She was reluctant to tell me much during her training, as she thought that was your place, Beau, but if they consider you a friend, you are lucky indeed.”

“Yes, they actually found my Pa when he was killed.”

Erin could see the sad look in Beau's eyes, but just for a moment. He must have come to peace with things during his training. She felt good about that and would have to ask him one day what that process was.

“Well, be careful in dealing with these men at Belcher. They are very dangerous. The Sheriff should shut the whole place down, but he has no proof of any wrong doing. Their business look perfectly legal on paper.”

“Means they are very smart. We hope the dockrats can come up with a plan to find and trap the ones we want,” Beau said.

“If anyone can, it would be them. Sorry I couldn't help you more. I have two students at present and I must attend to them. It was a pleasure meeting you Beau. And wonderful to see you again, Erin.”

She hugged him and said,

“You too. Thank you Connell, for everything you've done for me.”

“My pleasure. I wish all my students were so well disciplined.”

They were on their way to the Sheriff's station when they heard a commotion outside a tavern. Being only a couple blocks from the dock area, it was common to have brawls. But, what they witnessed shocked them. There were about five large men beating on a small man and a young boy. They both looked at each other and knew they could not help, there were too many of them. The city watch finally came and broke up the fight. They ordered the five men on their way and carried off the other two, hopefully to a doctor.

“They should have arrested those men, don't you think?” asked Erin.

“I would think so. Lets ask the Sheriff about it.”

The Sheriff was not in his office, so they decided to have some supper while they waited. They asked one of the watchmen for a place to eat and he directed them to a tavern on the next street. They asked him to tell the Sheriff they need to talk to him as soon as possible. They walked into the tavern and sat in a booth in the back, near the bar. They ordered a meal and a tankard.

“I wonder if they have rooms available here,” Erin said.

“You know, we don't have very much money,” said Beau.

“Oh, that reminds me. Pa gave me something as we left.”

She pulled out the pouch and opened it. Her eyes got very big and she smiled at Beau. We don't have to worry about money. She put the bag in her lap and counted, to avoid any prying eyes.

“Over 30 silvers,” she said quietly, with tears coming to her eyes.

“Wow. That's all I had to give my master to start my training.”

“I'm sure we won't need it all. We'll give him back what we don't use.”

“Good idea. What a good father Nelson is.”

“Yes, just like Mason was.”

The serving girl came with their food and they just started eating, when the Sheriff walked up to the booth.

“Well, look who it is. I was sure I remembered you from my watchman's description. How have you two been?”

“Both of us have been in training. I was in Walder's Point with Master Chaun and Erin took hers from a local swordsman named Connell,” Beau answered.

“Ah, I've heard of Chaun. He is very selective about who he trains. You were very lucky there. And, of course, I know Connell. Probably the finest rapier man in the area.”

“We were both very lucky, not only to find them, but that they both let us work out the fee.”

“It's unusual for Chaun to take a student this time of year.”

Beau was starting to realize just how much Jeb and Carla's recommend meant. He would have to do something extra special for them in return. Maybe Erin could come up with an idea.

“Yes, I had heard that,” said Beau, not wanting to explain further.

“So, you came to see me,” the Sheriff said.

“Yes. Two things. First we were wondering if you could supply us with some names of the owners of Belcher Trading. Connell told us they were the largest company in Ryker.”

“That's true. And I do have some names. Are you planning to seek employment there?”

“No. We are trying to find the men that killed my Pa. We think they might work there. Or, maybe at another shipping company here,” Beau explained.

“Ah, I see. Well, I will give you the list, but I don't see how that will help.”

“We plan to ask the dockrats to help us track down these men,” Erin said.

“Great idea, but do you think they will agree?”

“We think they will. We plan to offer payment for their services, but I don't think they will take it,” Beau answered.

“Then you must be in very good stead with them,” said the Sheriff.

“The second thing. On our way here from your office, we saw a row in front of a tavern where at least five men were beating a small man and a boy. Obviously, the odds were very wrong. And, when the watch came, they let the men go and took the other two for treatment...at least I hope they did. I wonder why the watch didn't arrest the men,” Erin explained.

The Sheriff looked very uncomfortable and his face hardened.

“Look, you are not from here. You have no idea of the relationship between the citizens and businesses in Ryker. Sometimes it's just not possible to do the “proper” thing.”

“I would think at the very least the men should have been held for questioning. Even if you couldn't arrest them. The message being sent here is that it's ok for them to do this sort of thing,” Beau said.

“I know that's what it looks like. But the city watch is just not equipped to handle these kind of men. My budget does not allow me to hire expert swordsmen.”

“Couldn't you get help from the King's Guard? Or even the dockrats?” asked Erin.

“Not that easy. In order to press charges against these men, I need victims willing to testify and that will not happen. Everyone is afraid of them. And, for very good reason as you just witnessed.”

“Couldn't you hire more watch?” Beau asked.

“No money in the budget for that either. I can't pay the current watch as much as I should.”

Beau and Erin looked at each other. Something passed between them that the Sheriff

noticed. He smiled and said,

“Maybe you two know some hire swords that would be willing to help.”

“Could be. When we've finished our business with the dockrats, we will spend some time thinking about this and talk to you again,” Beau said.

“I'll look forward to it. Enjoy your supper.” he said, as he stood and left the tavern.

“Tell me you're not thinking what I think you're thinking,” said Erin.

“Well, we both have all this training and I think we need a place to put it to good use.”

“But, Beau, how could just the two of us make a difference?”

“ At the risk of boasting, I believe the two of us, compared to the competency of the watch, could make a big difference.”

“You may be right. I certainly would never boast about my skills, though,” she grinned.

“As soon as we see the dockrats, how about we talk to the Sheriff about some part time watch work?”

“Fine with me. I've no where else to go.”

Chapter Five

When they finished their meal, they decided to find a room. There were several taverns on this street and most had rooms for rent. And, it was close to the Sheriff's station. After a brief search, they found a place called the "Stag and Horn" that was clean and affordable. They told the owner that they were traveling companions, and would only be in town for a few days. This way, if things worked out with the Sheriff, they could find a more permanent place later. After a good nights sleep and a good breakfast, they headed out to find the dockrats.

Things in the wharf area had not changed at all since they were last there. The same smells and same people tending to their own business, heads down, walking fast. They found the street with the safe house at the end, but decided it would be better to wait and be found. Sure enough, within several minutes, they were approached by a couple very young kids who asked their business. They didn't recognize these kids and said they needed to see Safer.

"How do you know that name?" one asked.

"Now I recognize you. Baller, isn't it? You're a lot taller than I remember." Erin exclaimed.

"Yes, I'm Baller. And you are the one that lost your Pa a few months back, right?" he said to Beau.

"I am. So, can we see Safer?"

"Of course, follow us," he said and motioned to his partner as they headed down the street.

They entered the door of the small shack and Baller whispered something to a guard standing there. He ran back up the street.

"Safer don't stay here anymore. We have to go get him. Won't be long. Want something to drink?"

"Thanks, no. We just had breakfast," Erin said.

Beau and Erin sat down and she immediately saw another kid come in that she recognized. She nudged Beau and nodded to him.

"Jerand. Good to see you again," Beau said.

The kid named Jerand stopped and stared at them a moment, then said,

"Ah, yes. Now I recognize you two. Safer will be here in a minute."

Within a few minutes, Safer came through the door, shadowed by two new kids. He walked up to Beau and Erin and shook their hands and said,

"Good to see you again. How are you both?"

"Fine. Been pretty busy the last few months, but wondered if you ever found out anything about those men I was after," said Beau.

"Baller, some drinks. Jerand, you should join us. Well, we didn't find them or we would have come for you, but we think we might be able to locate them. A month or so after you left, Jerand here found a man that knew about your Pa's body. Told him he heard two men talking about it one night after too many drinks."

"That's right, he were boasting about how several men gave him a silver for dumping the body," put in Jerand.

"Jerand came to me and we paid him another visit. He was very cooperative after a little encouragement and described these men in detail. Said he thought one of them worked at Belcher's."

"I knew it!" exclaimed Beau.

"Knew what?" asked Safer.

"I had a feeling these men were mixed up with that trading company," he answered.

Erin gave Safer all the details about Mason and his problems with a shipping company. Beau added to that what they found out from Connell and the Sheriff about Belcher's. Safer thought a minute and said,

"Sounds like those men may work there, doesn't it? How about we nab one of them. See if we can't shake out some information."

"Yea, if we find one, he can lead us to the others. With a little encouragement, of course," grinned Jerand.

"This is great news, Safer. And this time we insist on paying for your services," Erin said.

"Let's not call them services. And, we always welcome donations to the well being of the poor homeless kids we help," he replied,

"And, how much would a customary donation for this well needed and generous work of yours be?" asked Erin.

"Well we just took on three new kids. They don't help us much yet and eat all the time. I'd say three silvers would go a long way until they can pull their own weight," smiled Safer.

Erin pulled out her pouch and counted out ten silvers. She handed them to Safer.

"This should help those three, with a little extra for Jerand and Baller here," Erin said.

Safer stood and bowed to Erin.

"Why, that's very generous, my lady," he said.

"My pleasure, kind sir," Erin grinned.

Safer took them to another place just a few blocks from the safe house. He told them he would assign Jerand to be their personal escort and anything they needed he would take care of. They would start by watching the back entrance of Belcher's for one of these men.

"Where are you staying?" asked Safer.

"The Stag and Horn," Erin replied.

"Nice place, but a little pricey," said Safer.

"A silver each per night, including meals," Beau replied.

"Let me see if I can persuade the owner to give you a better deal."

"Thanks. We may be staying on here a little after we settle with these men."

"Oh? Thinking of joining the dockrats, eh?" asked Safer.

Beau told him all about the row they witnessed this morning. And, what the Sheriff had to say about it. He laughed and said,

"Typical. The city watch here is only for show. Not a one of them handy with a weapon and they don't get paid well. The Sheriff's a good man, but he is pretty well restricted from getting good help by the Council's budget."

"Exactly what we thought," said Erin.

"I think we may talk to the Sheriff about some part time guard work," Beau added.

"How come he doesn't ask you for help?" Erin asked Safer.

"Well, now, that wouldn't be proper. We could definitely help some, but when word got out that the Sheriff was using street kids to help enforce the law..."

"Yes, I see. And, the citizens would immediately side with the shipping companies."

"Which would cause even more grief for the Sheriff," Safer responded.

Safer bid Erin and Beau goodbye for now and whispered a few instructions to Jerand. Several more kids came in and they all headed to one of the warehouses on the nearest

dock. Jerand explained that it belonged to Belcher's and if they watched the south entrance they would see some of the owners.

"They use this place for temporary storage. Probably to stash stolen goods while they fence it," Jerand explained.

They positioned themselves on a short wall, just above the walkway to the south entrance. Jerand said as soon as he saw one that fit the description they would take him. While they waited, Erin told Jerand she was glad he was assigned to help them. She trusted him and hoped the silver would help. He explained that he doesn't get the silver directly, but all her money would go into a pot to be used to pay for all the dockrats expenses.

"I have everything I need supplied to me by Safer. I don't ask where the money comes from."

"I guess that's a fair way to do it, right Beau?"

"Sounds fair to me. We will make sure that whenever we get any extra silvers, we contribute to the pot," Beau grinned.

"It not only helps me, but all the kids."

"How many are there, total, do you know?" asked Erin.

"It varies, but usually at least thirty."

"Oh dear, I had no idea there were so many," Erin said.

"Well, some only stay a short while, then get placed. Others, like me, could stay for several years. I'm a team leader now, after only a little over a year."

"Congratulations," Erin smiled at Jerand.

"Thanks," he replied.

"Some day, when we have time, you will have to tell me all that you do for the dockrats," she said.

"I can't tell you everything, but I'll tell you what I can," he grinned.

After about an hour a group of men came out of the door and started up the walk.

"That's one of them. The one with the red neck band. I remember it from the description," Jerand whispered.

"Shall we follow him?" asked Beau.

"Yes. You two stay just behind us."

Jerand and his team followed the men. The one with the red band bid the rest goodbye and headed to a tavern on the first street. Jerand gave one kid some orders and off he went.

"Let's not confront him in the tavern. Too messy. We'll draw him out the back of the place and you can be waiting there," explained Jerand.

Erin and Beau headed around back while one of the kids went inside. They were only in place a few minutes, when the man walked out. He was alone and looking around. Beau stepped in front of him and said,

"I understand you had some dealings with a man named Mason Wright a while back."

"Maybe. Who's askin?" the man snarled, his hand going to his sword.

"Mason's son," Beau sneered.

The man drew his sword and took an overhead swing at Beau, which he blocked easily. After several blows were exchanged, the man stepped back, evidently realizing Beau was better.

"I was just following orders," he said, nervously, still pointing his sword.

"Whose orders would those be?" asked Beau.

"That would be suicide. I can't tell you that."

"Might be suicide if you don't."

The man whistled loudly, and another man came out of the back of the tavern, his sword drawn and stepped up beside the red band man.

"Maybe not, eh?" the first man sneered.

Erin came over to stand beside Beau, her rapier drawn.

"Probably still is," she said, smiling.

"What are you going to do with that sticker, swat flies?" asked the first man.

They both jumped and pressed Beau and Erin. They held their own for a several minutes, when Erin lunged in close, laid the rapier low against her man's sword and with the flick of her wrist, it went flying. She had her "sticker" at his throat and he went to his knees. Beau put a clean cut on the other man's sword shoulder and he screamed in pain and dropped his weapon.

"Now, maybe you can answer my question. Whose orders?" Beau said.

"Clinton. He's the supply manager at Belcher's."

"Why would he want my Pa dead?"

"An old debt Mason didn't pay. Our orders were to get what he owed or bring him to Clinton."

"Now I recognize you. You were the one that came to Sarn looking for him, right?" pressing his sword down on the man's injured shoulder.

"Yes, but I didn't kill him. It were Clinton. I swear," wincing in pain.

"Will you be willing to tell that to the Sheriff?" Beau asked him.

"No need, Beau. I've heard it all," the Sheriff said as he came around the corner.

"Glad you could join us, Sheriff," Erin said.

"Not that you needed any help, I see."

He ordered his watchmen to take the two men and lock them up. Erin looked around and Jerand and his kids were nowhere to be found.

"How did you know?" Beau asked the Sheriff.

"Some young kid came in and said you needed help. Told me to hurry."

"Ah, those kids are very helpful," Beau smiled.

"If you can get it," the Sheriff said.

He reached down and picked up the second man's sword. He turned to Erin and said,

"This belonged to your man. He must have dropped it. I'll have to keep it."

"Fine with me. I've no use for them," she grinned.

"Will you get this man Clinton?" Beau asked the Sheriff.

"Sure will. My guard will pick him up today. You want a crack at him?"

Beau glanced at Erin and said,

"No. You've someone who can testify to what he did. He should hang, right?"

"Absolutely. And I've no doubt we will get all three involved. They will all go to jail for a long time as accomplices."

"Then no need for revenge. Justice is served," Beau said grimly.

"Sheriff, maybe we could come by tomorrow and talk to you about some part time guard work. Looks like we may be staying a while," Erin said.

"I'd be more than happy to discuss that with you both," he smiled.

Erin and Beau headed back to the Stag and ordered drinks.

"Our first mix up," Erin said

“Yes. And you did great. I don't know how you did that with a lighter rapier. That sword looked old, which usually means it's heavy.”

“A trick Connell taught me. He knew I'd probably be up against swords a lot more than rapiers. And, it doesn't work well with an experienced swordsman.”

“Will you teach it to me?”

“Sure. Looks like we may see more of this in the coming weeks,” she said.

“Yea. I wonder if Safer can really get us another place.”

“I'd bet on it. He seems extremely resourceful.”

“Well, now what. We have the rest of the day. Wanna take a walk around, get the lay of the city before supper?” asked Beau.

“Yes, but first I have a question.”

“Shoot.”

“The Beau that I knew a half year ago would have killed that man, or taken a “crack” at Clinton. Why didn't you?”

“Well, my instructor taught me a lot more than how to fight. He taught me about revenge and how it's not good for your well being. He was an amazing master, Erin. I hope you get to meet him someday.”

“Lets make a promise. We will go north as soon as we may. I want to meet Jeb and Carla too.”

“Done and done. Shall we go see what Ryker is all about?”

They walked all around town, noting the street names, alleys, establishments and then headed to the docks. They were especially interested in the warehouses.

“It sure would be helpful if each warehouse had the company name on the side,” Erin observed.

“You're right. We must ask the Sheriff about that.”

They noticed that all the ships in the dock area seemed to be owned by the same company, Gorson Maritime. Erin wondered if that was a front for one of the shipping companies. They both could see that there would be a lot to learn about this industry. Maybe the Sheriff could recommend someone that knew all the businesses in town and how they interacted with each other.

It was near dark when they finally got back to the Stag. They had a quiet drink together and talked about home. Beau wondered if his house was ok. Erin thought she should get a message to her folks letting them know things were ok and she would be here a while. They both agreed things were working out very well for them and they were happy with their new life.

Chapter Six

The next morning they met in the common room early. The owner brought them their breakfast and asked Beau,

“Do you know yet how long you will be staying?”

“Not sure, but I think only one more day. By the way, what are you called?” he answered.

“I’m Ty Akers, I took over the Stag from my Father about ten years ago. You may call me Ty.”

“And, please call us Beau and Erin.”

“Well, nothing against your tavern, Ty, it’s a very nice place and well situated, but we have a friend who can get us a suitable place for less. And, we have to watch our silvers.” Erin added.

“Oh, I see. Well I just had two rooms open up that are half of what you are paying now, if you really want to stay here,” he grinned.

“Why, that’s very kind of you sir. What do you think, Beau?”

“That sounds perfect. Should we move our things now?”

“Not to worry, it will be taken care of. And the new rooms include a hot bath everyday, too.”

“You sure know how to take care of your customers, Ty,” Erin said sweetly.

“Thank you, both.”

They headed to the Sheriff’s station. It was only two blocks away and they were surprised to find that he was out. Erin asked the watchman on duty if there was any way to get a message to Sarn. He told her one of the shipping companies had a letter delivery service and where it was located. They went there and she penned a letter from them both. She told her parents to let Miss Elly and Durik know they were well. The man in the office said a delivery was going north tomorrow and her letter would be delivered.

When they returned, the Sheriff was back. He asked them into his office and closed the door.

“Before we get started, can you please give us your name? We can’t keep calling your the Sheriff.” Erin asked.

“Certainly. I’m Grant Davis. Grant or Sheriff Davis will be just fine. And you are Beau Wright and Erin...”

“Hunt,” she replied.

He took out some forms and started writing.

“And, are you both interested in helping me on the Watch?”

“Yes, we are. Not sure if it would be part time or full time though.”

“Well, I really don’t have part time watchmen. So it would be full time. You will have either one day off a week or four days together, once a month, You are staying at the Stag. Is it satisfactory?”

“Most satisfactory,” Erin said.

“The owner, Ty Akers is a good man. Watchmen that stay there receive free breakfasts, too,” Grant said.

“Yes, he is very accommodating,” Beau added.

“I assume you both want to be on the same watch shift.”

“Yes, to start, anyway,” Beau answered.

“Ok, now, about pay. My budget is set by the Ryker Council and it’s not very big. Based on what I’ve seen of you, I can say you are very competent with weapons. So, that means I can

start you out as Sergeants. Normally the pay is 8 silvers a week, with room and board. Since you have your own place, how about 12 silvers a week?"

"That is more than fair. Thank you, Grant," Erin said.

"Ok, I have no need for Sergeants on the night shift, so you will start working days. Do you mind an early morning start time? Say, six am?"

"We like that better than later," Beau said.

"Our first official question. Last night we walked around town getting the lay of the streets and dock area. We noticed there are a lot of warehouses and wondered who owned them all. Does anybody know?"

"Yes, one of the Councilman has a manifest that shows the owners of them all."

"I wonder, since there are no street signs down there, if we could put signs on all the buildings showing their company name?" asked Erin.

"We may have trouble convincing the owners to do that. Who would pay and why are they needed?"

"Do you ever have warehouse fires?"

"Yes, more than you would think."

"Well, the cost could be split between the Council and the company. They are required for the firemen to find the correct building in case of a fire," Erin explained.

"Hmm...I think the Council might accept that. Why do you really want them named?" asked Grant.

"Well, if the dockrats are correct, most of the buildings are holding illegal goods awaiting fencing. The signs would show who has the most illegal goods. And, if you explain it to the Council, a fire inspection could be required a couple times a year," Beau said.

"And, of course, the city watch would have to accompany the firemen, just to make sure nothing gets misplaced," Erin added, grinning.

"Yes, I think you two will be a valuable addition to the department. We can discuss this with the Council when I introduce you."

"Is that normal?" asked Beau.

"Yes, it's part of the hiring process. All watchmen have to do it."

There were no uniforms issued, but Grant gave them each a watch pin and a whistle. It was decided they would meet with the Council that afternoon and start their regular shift in the morning. They were assigned to another Sergeant to spend the first few days with to learn the daily routine and rounds required. They would not have any other watchmen assigned to them for a couple months, until they learned all the procedures. There were only two other Sergeants, one on day shift and the other on nights.

Grant took them to the Council chambers and introduced them. They had a few questions about their background and training and what they knew about the dockrats. It was obvious to the Councilmen that they had sufficient experience to start as Sergeants. Grant then asked them about Beau and Erin's idea of names for the warehouses. They discussed it briefly and agreed it was a good idea. One of the Councilmen thought it would be very beneficial to have watchmen walking through these warehouses on a regular basis.

The Council thanked Beau and Erin and dismissed them. After they left the chambers, Grant said,

"Well, that was unusual. The Council almost never thanks new watchmen."

"Probably because of our warehouse idea, you think?" asked Erin.

"Could be. Or maybe your influence with the dockrats. One of the Councilmen seemed

impressed with that.”

“I just hope we can justify their confidence,” Erin said.

“I think that will not be a problem. See you in the morning. I usually get in later in the morning, since I'm there late,” Grant said and headed to the station and Beau and Erin went to the Stag.

As they were eating supper Beau asked Erin,

“Do you think we should have a code set up with Ty that lets us know if our rooms are being watched?”

“Good idea. Lets do that now.”

Beau caught Ty's attention and called him over.

“Excellent pork loin, Ty.”

“Thanks, Beau. How are things this evening?”

“We just wanted you to know we hired on as Sergeants of the watch today.”

“Great. I wondered what you would be doing now that you're staying in Ryker. Did you know that watchmen get free breakfasts here?”

“Yes. Grant told us that, but we will be working the early shift, so probably won't be eating breakfast much,” Erin said.

“Some of the watchmen that start early come back by for a late breakfast. I'll make sure coffee and rolls are out before six am for you.”

“That is most kind, Ty. Another thing. We were thinking that there may be times when dealing with smugglers, our rooms may be watched. Is there some way, if you or your staff notice it, could we set up a code so we don't walk into a trap?”

“Certainly. I have a towel hanging at the end of the bar that is always white. If it is ever a blue towel, someone is watching for you or another guest. Come see me before you go to your room,” he said, pointing to the towel.

“I think we made a wise choice in the Stag, Ty,” Beau added.

“And, the fact that two Sergeants, very handy with swords, are staying here, will definitely cut down on rows and such. A perfect partnership.” smiled Ty.

After strong coffee and a sweet roll, they headed to their first day at work. They met with the Sergeant and he said,

“Welcome. I'm Lane. And, you are Beau and Erin?”

“Yes. Glad to meet you,” Beau said.

Lane looked at Erin's rapier and said,

“Grant tells me you know how to use that.”

“Yes, I took lessons from Connell here in Ryker.”

“No doubt about it then. He is very good. But, I fear you may be tested early on. Some of the characters we will be meeting up with on our rounds will sneer at the idea of you wearing a watch pin. They may want to test you,” Lane said.

“I suspected as much. Not to worry. As long as I'm not alone, I should be fine.”

“We are never alone. Always in pairs or groups of four or six is the rule.”

“Just what do we look for in these places?” asked Beau.

“Well, normally we are watching for a smuggler or keeping an eye on the businesses in the area. You will quickly get to know which areas have all the problems.”

“Will we go to these areas every day?” asked Erin.

“Yes, probably several times a day. I understand you know some dockrats.”

"We do. They may come in handy some day, too," Beau acknowledged.

"No doubt. Maybe you can introduce me to the leader."

"Sure will. Not sure when though. We never find him, he finds us."

"Of course."

The three Sergeants headed out on their rounds. It seemed very quiet this day and Erin wondered how long before the first problem occurred. Beau seemed tense as he listened to Lane explain procedures and duties. Everything seemed like just using common sense to Erin and she asked Lane what was the hardest part of the job and he said,

"For me, it's knowing when to call for backup. I will point out to you the businesses that we have agreements with that will get help if we need it. They are mostly in the dock area, but a couple others are the Stag and Horn and Willies Place."

"Really? We are staying at the Stag and have talked to Ty. He told us about the towel at the end of the bar," Erin said.

"Oh? Ty is a great friend of our department. You're lucky you can afford to stay there. I think he also is friends with the dockrats leader."

"We thought as much. He gave us a great rate on our rooms," Beau replied.

"Another friend of ours is Mead Wilson. He owns three different taverns in and around the docks. His cousin is a Councilman. Mead can be a life saver when you're over matched. He has bouncers that just love to help us," Lane grinned.

"Did Grant tell you about the smugglers we caught?"

"Yes, they were the ones that killed your Pa. Good work on that one. The one called Clinton will be hanged and the others got prison sentences up in Walder's Point," explained Lane.

"I hope we don't have to deal too much with the likes of them," Erin said.

"They are probably the worst, I'm sure. But a lot of smugglers know what happens if they are caught and will always put up a fight."

"Good to know," Beau said, glancing at Erin.

Lane took them on almost every street in town and introduced them to a lot of business owners. Erin knew it would take a while to get to know them all. By the end of shift, they were both ready for a meal and their beds. They bid goodbye to Lane and headed to the Stag. They had their supper and both slept well that night.

Things went pretty much the same way for the next couple weeks. The only trouble they had were drunks and a few thieves to deal with. Lane said he had showed them about all there was and had explained all the procedures. He told Grant that they were ready to be on their own. Grant assigned them a section of town that included the western part of the dock area. He made sure that they knew to be on the lookout for new ships in port and to let him know so they could be checked out.

Their second day of watch on their own, they met several kids that said Safer wanted to see them. The kids led them to a totally different part of town where a safe house was situated on a street with several other large merchant houses. It was one of the nicest parts of Ryker and Lane said everyone that lived here was wealthy. Pickpockets were the biggest problem here and the dockrats were not happy about it. They didn't take an active part in catching pickpockets, but they let it be known on the street that it would not be tolerated.

"Welcome," said Safer, as Beau and Erin entered the safe house.

"Hi Safer. How are things?" Beau responded.

"Well, not so good. It seems we are having a problem with pickpockets. We've tried warning them, but they know we have no teeth. We need to take a couple of them down."

"And, that's where we come in, right?" Erin asked.

"I'm hoping, yes. I think just a few arrests by you, from the information we supply will send the appropriate message. And, they have to know who supplied you the information." Safer answered.

"I don't see a problem there. Have you identified a ring leader?" asked Beau.

"There doesn't seem to be one. They all are freelance. Which makes it tougher to contain."

"Yes, I can see that. So, you just give us the names and we pay them a visit, eh?" asked Erin.

"Kind of. But, I think we have to be more thorough. We've been watching several of the more active ones and have a pattern of their habits. We give you that and you stake out their next target area and nab them."

"It will be our pleasure, Safer," replied Beau.

"Good. I'll turn you over to Jerand here. He has all the information you'll need."

"Thanks Safer. Oh, by the way, are these guys armed?"

"Nothing that shows. Probably carrying a knife though. And I'm guessing they are very good with it. Be careful."

Jerand spent the next couple hours explaining the routes of two different pickers, as he called them. He also supplied a detailed description of each one and their normal get away routes.

"You will have to actually see the picker when he strikes in order for the charge to stick. And, we can't be witnesses for you. That would blow our cover," Jerand explained.

"We understand," Erin said.

"Good luck, then."

"Thanks for all your work, Jerand. Maybe you should consider joining us on the Watch," Erin grinned.

"Not me. I have all the work I need here," smiled Jerand.

"Just one more thing," Beau said. "Is there a way we can quickly get a hold of Safer if we should need to?"

"Not really. He is constantly on the move. Never stays in one place more than one or two days. The best thing to do if you need him is to find one of us. I'll ask him if you can be included in the location list, just in case. If you don't hear from me in a day or so, he didn't agree to it," Jerand said.

"Our thanks. See you later," Erin replied.

Chapter Seven

When their shift was over, they headed back to the station. They explained everything to Grant and he seemed pleased.

“The Council has been getting complaints from some very influential people in that area and I've been instructed to do something about it. I've been trying to come up with a plan. This sounds perfect.”

“I think we should stake things out alone. We can have several watchmen close by, but they can't be seen,” said Beau.

“Agreed. You pick the men you need and start in the morning. I'd love to report some good results to the Council,” Grant said.

Beau talked to Sgt. Lane before they left. He said he would have a detail ready first thing in the morning. They headed to the Stag for supper and an early night.

Right after breakfast, they briefed Lane on the target for the day and the area he would be working. They set out for the target area. Lane and his detail of three watchmen surrounded the area in strategic locations.

“We should split up. You take one side of the street, just ahead of me and I'll take the other. Signal me when you have our man and I'll move in closer. Watch him closely and when he strikes his target, you blow your whistle. I'll follow the first man that starts running,” Beau explained.

“Ok, then on the next street, we will switch positions,” Erin added.

“Good.”

They started down the street closest to the large expensive homes. There were lots of people heading to or returning from the market in the square. Erin closely watched every man for her target, checking back to see that Beau was still there. She spotted a man stopped at a small business looking at merchandise in the window. She stopped and waited for him to turn around. He finally did and it was not their man. She continued on to the end of the street. She motioned to Beau and headed to the next street closer to the docks.

She had gone only a short way when she spotted their man. He had a large bundle under one arm and was walking slowly. She could see he was casing each person that passed him. All of a sudden, as a couple walked past him, he bumped the older man and dropped his bundle, spilling its contents. As the older man was apologizing and helping him pick up the contents, Erin saw her man lift his wallet. She blew her whistle and started walking towards the trio. The target saw her coming and started running.

As he crossed the street, Beau also blew his whistle and was right on his heels. The man darted down an alley, only to meet two watchmen with swords drawn. As he turned around to go back, Beau rounded the corner, followed closely by Erin.

“Down on the ground. Now!” yelled Beau.

The man pulled a knife and started looking for a way out of the alley. There was only one door. He tried it, but it was locked.

“There is no way out. Drop the knife. You are surrounded.” Erin said as she drew her rapier.

The man was desperate. He ran directly at Erin, not wanting to deal with Beau's sword. He probably thought Erin would be easier to get by. She waited until he was a step past her and she whirled and swung. Her rapier slashed the back of the man's leg that hamstrung him. He went down in a heap, screaming and grabbing his lower calf. Beau put his foot down hard on

the hand holding the knife and reached down and took it. Just then Lane came down the alley and joined them. The other two watchmen put straps on the man's arms. They lifted him up and Beau said,

"Looks like the dockrats were right. We found him exactly where they said."

He reached inside the man's coat and took out a wallet. He handed it to Erin to give back to the old couple. She went off to find them.

"Lock him up," he said to the two watchmen.

"That was too easy," Erin said when she returned.

"The guy was fast. Glad he turned down this alley. I don't think I could have caught him if he would have got to the docks," Beau responded.

"He was fast. And, he now knows how we nabbed him, too."

"Good job you two. That was a nice move Erin. Where did you learn it?" asked Lane.

"Just came to me. I knew I had to stop him and I really didn't want to kill him. I wasn't sure where you were."

"I told you she was fast," Beau said, grinning broadly.

"Now I see why you wanted her as your partner."

Erin blushed at the compliments and said,

"Beau would have done the same thing if the guy went to his side."

"Something similar maybe, but probably with more critical results. I can't think that fast."

"So, do we have another target area to go to?" Lane asked.

"Yes. It's about three blocks south of here. Farther away from the docks," answered Beau.

The trio headed to the next target area. They gave Lane the description of the man again and said he should be the lead this time.

"And, Erin will back me, right?"

"Sure. But lets get a drink first. I'm parched," Erin responded, smiling.

They stopped at a tavern on the next street and all had a sarsaparilla. No alcohol on duty was the rule for watchmen. When they got to the target area, they decided to split up and walk the street. They would all stay in sight of each other, though. Lane saw two other watchmen and stopped to give them some instructions. They both nodded and left the area. He resumed his watch and so did Erin and Beau. They slowly made their way to the very end of the street and all met up.

"No sign. Maybe he isn't out today," Lane said.

"This is supposed to be his day. Lets make our way back down to the end and then cross over to the next street," Beau said.

As they were rounding the corner at the end of the street, Erin spotted their man. He was talking to another man in front of a small smithy. She motioned to the others and they all got behind cover. The man handed something to the smith and started heading to the next street. They all followed. He was about half way down the street, when he made his move on a woman coming out of a business. He grabbed her two bags and headed back down the street towards the smithy. He crossed the street just before he got to Beau and Erin. Lane took chase and the man disappeared through a side door of the smithy. Lane waited just outside the door until Beau and Erin arrived.

"He went in there," Lane said, winded.

"So, how do we do this?" Erin asked.

They both looked at Lane, since he had more experience.

"I'll cover this door in case he retreats. Erin, go around the north side and Beau, you take the other. Don't enter the smith alone. If he comes out running, try to stop him and call out," he explained.

They all split up. Beau walked past the main entrance slowly, his sword drawn. He got to the back of the smith and met Erin coming from the other side.

"Do we go in together?" she asked.

"Did you pass a door?" Beau asked.

"No."

"I only passed the main entrance, so there is only one other way out and Lane has that door. Lets go to the front and call."

They moved to the main entrance and Erin move to one side while Beau stayed on the other. He called in to the smithy.

"We know you're in there. Come out with the two bags," Beau yelled.

No response. Just then, the smith came out with a hammer in his hand. He saw that they were watchmen, laid the hammer down and came to Beau.

"He's in there. He's got one of the swords from my workbench. He told me you were thieves and were trying to kill him."

"Glad you got out unharmed. He's been wanted a long time and dangerous," Erin said.

"Could you go to the other exit and tell the Sergeant to stay there, in case the guy bolts. We're going in," Beau said to the smith.

"Be careful, he looks very scared." the smith said as he headed to the other exit.

"How do you want to do this?" Erin asked.

"I will go right to flank him. You stay near the entrance on the left side. If he bolts out the other exit, follow him and help Lane."

"Right."

They headed in through the entrance. Beau could see no movement. He circled around the right side and called to the man to show himself. Erin kept quiet and watched the path to the back exit door. Beau started heading to the center of the smith when the man jumped out in front of him, sword slashing. Beau blocked a viscous overhand swing and moved inside it. They parried for a moment and Beau realized man was good. He tried several strikes in quick succession and the man blocked them all. Beau didn't want to kill the man, so he held back just a bit. Erin heard the ringing of steel against steel and headed towards it.

He saw movement in the corner of his eye and Erin called out. This distracted the guy for a split second, just long enough for Beau to slash his sword arm. He dropped the sword and went down with a yell, grabbing the arm. Erin moved in and put her rapier to his neck. He didn't move again. Beau got wrist straps on him and they led the man out the exit where Lane and the smith were waiting.

"Again, with you two. And not a scratch on you," Lane said, grinning.

"Your sword is on the floor," Beau said to the smith.

"Thanks." he said, heading back to the front for his hammer.

"This one has had sword training. He gave me a fight. Thankfully, my partner distracted him."

"Where did you get sword training?" Lane asked the prisoner.

He didn't answer. Beau made a comment about the dockrats and they had to thank them.

"That's two pickpockets in one day," Lane said.

"Maybe the rest will get the message, eh?" Erin grinned.

"Let's hope so," Lane answered.

They took the prisoner back to the station and locked him in a cell next to the first one. Grant came in a short time later and the three updated him on the day's work. They told him to make sure the Council knew where the intelligence came from.

"This is great news. That's two of the worst pickers off the streets."

"What happens to them now, Grant?" Erin asked.

"Well, the first one will get a short jail sentence, but the second one will be sent to the prison in Walder's because he tried to kill a watchman. Probably be gone a good long time," Grand explained.

"He'll probably lose all his skills with a sword in there," Erin smirked.

"If we're lucky," Beau replied.

"Do you have more targets?" asked Grant.

"One more, but the kids said he is new and doesn't have an area yet. We'll just keep an eye out for him on our watches," Beau answered.

"Fine. I'll report these two to the Council. Good work you three," Grant said.

"It was them. I just kind of helped on watch and clean up," Lane smiled.

"Why am I not surprised," Grant said as he walked out.

"I'm starved. Ready for some supper?" asked Erin.

"Sure. Join us, Lane?" Beau asked.

He smiled widely at Erin and said,

"Sure. Maybe I can learn a bit more about you two."

Beau, catching the smile, knew exactly to whom he was referring and it wasn't him. He grinned at Erin and they headed to the Stag.

The next day, Beau and Erin reported to Safer the status of the two thieves. He was pleased and thanked them for their quick work. Beau said the Sheriff would be mentioning to the Council where the information came from. That pleased Safer even more.

"Maybe they will see their way to contribute to your pot, Safer," Erin said.

"Would be most welcome," he replied.

"Thank Jerand for all his help, will you?" Beau asked.

"I will. He is our best team leader."

"And one smart kid, I think," said Erin.

"Also, we never thanked you for all the help we've gotten from Ty Akers," Beau added.

"Him and I go way back. We've helped each other a lot over the years."

"Maybe you should run for the Council."

"Not me. I'm not much for politics. At least that kind, anyhow," Safer grinned.

The next couple months passed without any more serious confrontations for Beau and Erin. Grant said he would soon assign them their own group of six watchmen.

One evening during supper Erin said she it was time she visited her parents. Beau agreed. He was ready for a visit himself.

"We have eight or ten days leave coming. Let's make it a nice long visit," she said.

"Sounds good. Want to go tomorrow?"

"Yes. I've already hinted to Grant that we were thinking about it. So, he won't be surprised."

"I wonder if I should sell my property. I don't really think I will live on it again," Beau said.

"Probably so. Then you could use the money to buy a place here in Ryker."

"I'm not sure about that. I don't think I want to live here permanently. I was thinking of maybe Walder's. I'd like to be closer to Jeb and Carla. Maybe get a cabin south of Walder's."

"What would you do for a living?"

"I don't know. Maybe start a tracking business. I have a good friend that's an excellent tracker. Maybe she would consider a partnership."

"She would seriously consider that," Erin smiled. "I'm not that excited about staying here, either. Grant has been good to us, but we told him at the start we really wanted part time."

"True. I will miss the kids though. We can come for visits every so often," Beau said.

"And after a while we could hire Jerand. He would make an excellent tracker."

"And have Safer upset with us? Not sure that's a good idea."

"Yea, Jerand would probably be bored with that kind of life after this place."

They asked Grant the next morning for some time off to go to Sarn and Walder's Point. He said it would be no problem, since they had the time coming. They then told him about the plan to sell Beau's place and start their own business.

"You're kidding. You've only been here a few months. And you're doing so well."

"Well, we said we really wanted part time, remember?" asked Erin.

"Oh, yea, that's right. How soon will you be leaving?"

"Well, I'll have to sell the property first. That could take a while," Beau answered.

"Good. Meanwhile, I'll be working on some replacements."

"Sorry, Grant. You've treated us fair. And we will miss everyone, especially the kids," Erin said.

"You gotta do what makes you happy. I've always known you were trackers, ever since that first time I met you when you came looking for your Pa."

"Seems like a long time ago, doesn't it?" asked Beau.

"Yea, a lot has happened since then," Erin commented.

"Most for the good, though. Right?" asked Grant.

Erin put her hand on Grant's arm and said quietly,

"Yes, Grant. Most for the good."

It didn't take long to collect their things and settle up with Ty. They told him they would be back in about a week or so. They were soon on the trail north to Sarn.

"We spent all that time learning the dock area and now we're leaving," Beau said.

"Yea and I kind of feel bad for Grant. Do you feel we owe him more?" Erin asked.

"Well, he has been good to us. But, I really need to sell that property. It's a shame to have it sit there empty. And, once I have the money from it, I won't be happy working in Ryker."

"Maybe you should go on and start the business and I will keep working for Grant."

"No. I really want you to be part of the decisions of starting it. Besides, I think Lane has designs on you," he said.

"Lane! I really don't think so. I mean, he is a nice guy and all, but he isn't my type."

"And just what is your type?"

"I'm not sure exactly. I thought maybe my best friend could help me figure that out." Erin said as she glanced at him.

Beau just smiled and kept walking. She really wasn't sure how she felt about Beau, other than he was her best friend. Could she be romantic with him? Could he be with her? She had known him so long as a friend, she wasn't sure she could be his lover. Right now, they had a

wonderful relationship just being close friends. She decided to talk to Miss Elly about it.

They arrived in Sarn early that afternoon. Erin went right to her parents house and Beau stopped to see Durik. Then he went to his cottage. He saw that it was well kept by Erin's parents. The property looked well trimmed and it looked very much like it was ready to sell. He would put the word out tomorrow after he decided what to do with his Pa's belongings. And, the rest of his stuff too. He didn't have much and he could probably store it at either Durik's or Erin's house until he got his next place. He wondered how much money he should ask for the old place. There were about five acres and the house was in good condition. He would talk to Nelson about that. When he was finished he headed to Erin's. Miss Elly and Durik were there as well as several of Erin's friends. It was great to see everyone again and he was looking forward to the rest of their trip.

"So, tell us all about your jobs in Ryker," said Kate.

Beau started by telling about catching the men that killed Mason. Everyone was glad they were brought to justice. And, that Beau didn't have to kill them. Erin then told all about their jobs, the dockrats and all the other people they met. They were only there a short few months, but made good friends.

Then, Beau explained about selling the property and starting a tracking business outside of Walder's. Erin said she would be joining as a partner. And, that they would visit often. And, everyone was welcome to come visit them anytime. Beau said they wanted to buy or build a cabin just outside of Walder's and work out of there.

Over the next couple days, Erin and Beau spent quality time with Kate & Nelson, as well as Durik and Miss Elly. Erin had her talk with Elly about her situation with Beau. And, Beau talked to Nelson about selling the place. He said it may be hard to find anyone that had that kind of money and he would have better luck in Walder's. Beau said he would ask around when he got there.

Soon it was time to leave. Erin was speaking to her parents and Beau waited by the north trail.

"Beau and I were paid 12 silvers a week and didn't have much to spend it on, so we've saved quite a bit. I want to give you back the money you gave me when I left," Erin said as she handed her Ma the same small pouch with 30 silvers in it.

"It was a gift dear, you don't have to pay it back," Nelson said.

"Yes. I want to. I have ways to make more. You don't," she insisted.

She gave them both hugs and said she would be back soon. She joined Beau and they were off.

"I gave Ma and Pa their money back." she said to Beau after they were on the trail.

"Good. It really helped us when we needed it, but they will need it now more than us."

"How long to Jeb and Carla's cabin?" she asked.

"About two days in this weather. Took me almost four the last time I went. There was a storm and I had to wait it out."

They walked in silence the rest of the day. Beau thought how nice it felt to be on a forest road with Erin. It was very comforting. He would be glad to be done with Ryker and on with their tracking business. He had lots of ideas about what he wanted to do and Walder's was just big enough to sustain it, he thought.

Erin was also thinking about how nice the walk was. Soon, it was getting dark and they

stopped at the same place Beau used before to camp. They had dried beef, cheese and brown bread for a meal. The bottle of ale was still cool from inside their pack. They talked late into the night and were on their way at dawn.

They met nobody on the trail all day and finally saw the chimney smoke from Jeb and Carla's cabin early afternoon. When they came into the yard, Beau saw how much the garden had grown. The corn was as tall as he was and he saw beets, peas and pole beans. Erin marveled at how big everything was. He knocked on the door and when Carla answered, she gave him a big hug and called for Jeb. Then she looked at Erin and tears came to her eyes.

"It's Erin! I just knew it from Beau's description," she said hugging her too.

"That you Beau?" Jeb called from stoking the fire. "Supper will be ready shortly."

"I brought Erin, Jeb."

Jeb stood up and he too, started tearing up. He went right Erin and hugged her. Then hugged Beau.

"Sorry for staring, dear, but you look a lot like our son's friend. It brings back memories."

"That's ok. Beau told me all about your son. And, that he stayed in his room."

"Let me take your packs. You sit down and Carla will get you something to drink." Jeb said taking their packs to his son's room.

"I love this cabin. It is much bigger inside than it looks. How long have you been here?" Erin asked.

"Near twenty years now. We love the garden, but it's a little more than we can handle these days," Carla said. "We cut back a lot this year."

"I can't handle the mule and tiller the way I used to," said Jeb.

"I can't believe it has actually been bigger. It's bigger than any garden in Sarn now." Erin commented.

Beau and Erin spent supper and the rest of the evening catching them up on Ryker and their visit back home. Carla was amazed that Erin was actually a watchman. She asked her all about her duties, while Beau and Jeb talked over a tankard by the fire. He told Jeb his idea for a tracking business. He explained that he was going to look for someone to buy his place in Sarn while they were in Walder's. Jeb was curious about it and wanted all the details. He called in Carla to listen. When Beau was done, Jeb looked at Carla and she nodded.

"Beau, I have an idea. You need a cabin near Walder's for your business. This place is starting to be too much for me to handle," Jeb said.

"And, I would like a place in a small town with neighbors again. And, a store closer than the walk to Walder's," added Carla.

"What say we make a trade. Our cabin here for your cottage. We haven't seen it yet, but it sounds perfect for us," said Jeb.

"And, your family and friends in Sarn sound very nice too," Carla smiled.

Beau and Erin looked at each other. Then she looked around the cabin again and smiled. She sat down in front of the fire and said,

"I sure like this fire to cozy up to after a hard day in the garden or on the trail," she said.

"And, it would be close enough to Walder's that clients wouldn't have far to come," added Beau.

"Of course, we could do just a trial switch, you know, to see how we got on. Then if we both agreed, make it permanent. What do you think, Beau?" asked Jeb.

"I think it's a great idea. I was worried about finding a buyer and the cottage is not much bigger than this cabin. And you would have plenty of friends around you," Beau said.

“You will love my Ma and Pa. And, they would love you, too,” Erin exclaimed.

And, so it was settled. Right there in the cabin that night. They would switch right after Beau and Erin finished up in Ryker.

“Durik has a nice hauling wagon that we could use to transfer your things that you want to bring down,” Beau said.

“We don't have that much, but I'm sure Ma would want me to take anything we need from their house,” Erin added.

“I think it's a grand idea,” Erin said, reaching over and squeezing Carla's hand.

“Now I don't have to find a buyer for the place. But, I do have to start setting up contacts in Walder's for our business.”

“And, I think we even have enough money saved to buy a couple horses,” Erin grinned.

“Yes. We'll need them in the coming months, I'm sure,” said Beau.

Beau told them all about the cottage and the property. Erin told Carla about the kitchen and pantry. Both Jeb and Carla said it sounded perfect. The more they talked about it, the more excited they became. But, just before midnight, they all agreed to turn in. Beau wanted to get an early start to Walder's. He said they would finish their business and go directly to Ryker. When they finished up there, they would head to Sarn. They would be a couple days there and bring a wagon to load them up. They would see them in about a week. Carla said they would have everything sorted by then. Everyone was so excited about their new places to live.

Chapter Eight

When they arrived in Walder's Point they went straight to Master Chaun's place. They went down the gravel lane and entered the property. Beau stopped and waited.

"What are we waiting for?" Erin asked.

"You'll see."

Within a couple minutes the same old woman appeared. She bowed to them both and bid them to follow her. She led them to the garden in back where Chaun was waiting. Erin thought it was almost like he knew they were coming.

"Greetings master," Beau said as he bowed.

"And to you Beau."

"This is my friend, Erin."

"Welcome, Erin. I've heard a great deal about you."

"And, I you, sir. Beau was very lucky to find you," she replied.

"Sit, please. Tell me all about your adventures."

Beau explained all about finding the men in Ryker. And how he preserved his well being.

"Congratulations. I knew you would figure that out, Beau."

"But how did you know, sir?" Erin asked.

"Beau has a healthy spirit. It showed most of the time. Only when he was confronted with this personal tragedy did it get blocked. He needed to figure out a way to solve his inner conflict while keeping the integrity of his spirit."

"I was there when he he caught the men. He could have killed one and he only wounded him. The other was going to hang and the Sheriff offered him a crack at him first. He refused, saying justice would be served when he was hanged," Erin explained.

Beau was amazed that Erin saw and remembered all these details. He didn't think anyone knew he was holding back.

"So, the men were brought to justice and you did not compromise your spirit and well being. You are at peace?" asked Chaun.

"I am," Beau answered.

Erin then asked Chaun where they might buy a couple sturdy horses for their trip back to Ryker. He suggested they go to the main stables at the center of town. They have a small corral out back that is used to sell horses.

"Do you know how to choose quality steeds, or do you need someone to help?" asked Chaun.

"I would feel better if we had someone we could trust. We've never bought a horse before," answered Beau.

Chaun wrote something on a small piece of paper and handed it to them.

"Show this to the Master Horseman at the stables. He will select two sturdy mounts at a fair price for you," Chaun said, handing Beau the paper.

"That's a relief. I was very nervous about buying horses. I have no idea how much they cost," said Beau.

"They should not be more than 30 silvers each," Chaun said.

They thanked Chaun and told him they were moving to a cabin just a couple miles south of town and they would visit him again. He bowed to them both and bid them goodbye. They made their way to the central part of town and found the stables. Beau asked for the

Horseman and were led to him. He handed the paper from Chaun to him. He smiled when he read it and bid them to follow.

He went to the corral out back and selected two horses. He saddled them both and gave them some basic instructions about the cinch, stirrup height and not pulling back too hard on the bit. Erin's horse was a bit smaller than Beau's, but they were both sturdy and well mannered.

"That will be 50 silvers," the master said.

"For both horses and saddles?" Erin asked.

"Master Chaun is well respected around here. We give special rates to his students," he answered.

Beau paid him and they set off to Ryker. They decided to ride straight through without stopping at the cabin or Sarn. On the evening of the second day, they rode into the Sheriff station.

"Sure beats 4 days of walking, doesn't it?" Erin asked.

"Yea, but I'll be sore for days," Beau laughed.

They found the Sheriff and asked if he could join them at the Stag for some conversation. Grant gave them a worried look and asked,

"Is this news I want to hear?"

"Probably not," Beau answered.

Grant told them to head on over and he would be there in a few minutes. When they entered the Stag, Erin called to Ty,

"Two tankards, sir, if you please!"

"Beau...Erin, what a nice surprise. Back from the north and ready for your rooms again?"

When Ty brought their drinks, Beau asked,

"Not exactly, Ty. Grant is on his way here now. We are going to update him on things. Could you get him a tankard and join us?"

Grant sat and Ty set a tankard in front of him. He sat at the table and winked at Erin.

"I'm afraid we have some not so good news. We will be resigning today as watchmen and moving to Walder's Point. We have a cabin just south of town that we will be moving into next week," Beau explained.

"We are sorry to be leaving, as we will miss everyone. But we have an opportunity here that we can't pass up," Erin added.

"Going to be trackers, right?" asked Grant.

"Yes, we will start our own business," Beau said.

"Well, I am happy for you both," Grant said and Ty echoed.

"Is there some formality we need to do with the Council?" Erin asked.

"No, I'll write up the formal document of resignation and file it. Speaking of the Council, they asked me to give you this." Grant said as he laid a fat pouch on the table.

Erin opened it and said,

"Wow! This is a lot of money. We didn't earn all this."

"According to the Council you did."

Grant explained that the Council voted them a bonus for catching the top two thieves in Ryker and the warehouse idea. He explained that since they made it mandatory for fire inspections, along with the information the accompanying watchman gathered, they have been able to prove several smuggling operations. Arrests have been made and the operations

shutdown.

"Your idea for company names on the warehouses started it all. They decided one hundred silvers was appropriate," Grant said.

"Hear, hear!" Ty added.

"This is most generous, but some of this belongs to the dockrats. They were the reason we found the thieves," Erin said.

"I told them that. The dockrats have moved up a notch or two in their estimation. The Council will be sending odd jobs their way in the future, too," said Grant.

"That's good news. They are a great bunch of kids," Erin added, and Beau nodded.

"I have a request for you Grant," Beau said.

"Certainly," he replied.

"Do you know the Sheriff of Walder's Point?"

"Yes, I've met him a couple times while testifying there."

"Do you think you could put in a good word for us, in case he ever needs a tracker?"

"Absolutely. I'll send him a note on tomorrow's mail run," Grant said.

"Tell him we will present ourselves as soon as we are settled. We need to get the word out about our new business," Erin added.

"I think he can help there too. He knows all the business leaders in town," smiled Grant.

Beau and Erin thanked Grant for everything and handed him their watch pins and whistles. He said he had closing paperwork to attend to and bid them both goodbye. Erin gave him a big hug and told him to say goodbye to Lane for them. He said he would.

"Ty, do you have rooms for us for tonight. We will be leaving early tomorrow?"

"I do, and they are on the house!" Ty answered.

The next morning, Ty had a nice breakfast for them. After eating they left him a large tip that more than covered for the room and breakfast. When they got to the dock area, they found a safe house street, got off their horses and sat down to wait. Within ten minutes Jerand appeared. Erin got up, greeted and hugged him. Embarrassed, he said,

"Safer will be here soon."

"As I thought. Always efficient," Beau replied.

"How have you been Jerand?" asked Erin.

"Just fine. Still a team leader, though," he answered.

"Interested in leaving Ryker and a new line of work?" Beau asked.

"Maybe, depends what it is."

They explained about the business they were starting and he looked interested. He said he would think about it some and let them know. Safer appeared and greeted them warmly.

"Not on foot anymore eh? Back and ready for work?" he asked.

"No, just on our way back to Sarn. We've resigned as watchmen," Erin said.

They explained everything to Safer and Erin handed him a pouch.

"This is your share of the bonus we got from the Council. Put it into the pot, ok?"

Safer opened it and said,

"Must be forty silvers here. Are you sure, Erin?"

"Absolutely!" she and Beau said together.

"Well, you two have become somewhat of a hero to our kids. They will certainly appreciate this," Safer said. "Take care of yourselves up there in Walder's. Stop and see us anytime you are in town."

He disappeared down the street and they told Jerand to think about their offer. Erin handed him five silvers and said,

“This is just for you, from us. Buy yourself something nice, ok?”

Jerand blushed a bright red and said he would get those new leather boots he has been wanting. Erin felt good about that. She hugged him again and Beau shook his hand. They got on their horses and headed north.

They were just entering the outskirts of Sarn when a man on horse rode by them in a very big hurry. He didn't even look at them as he thundered back down the trail to Ryker.

“That's odd. I've never seen him before,” Beau said.

“Sure is. Let's see what's up.”

They rode straight to Miss Elly's and went in. She ran to them and hugged them both. Durik was also there and he hugged them too. They asked about the rider and Durik said he was from Walder's Point. He was alerting all the towns and villages around about a pair of escaped convicts on the loose. They broke out of Walder's prison two days ago and were seen heading south. Erin looked at Beau and said,

“Jeb and Carla?”

“No, they surely want to get farther away from Walder's than that. I'm sure they're ok.”

“Can you two come to my house with us? We will update everyone together,” Erin asked.

“Sure, give me five minutes,” said Elly.

Durik, Erin and Beau headed to the house and greeted her parents. They said that Elly was on her way and when everyone was together they would give them all the latest news. They said they saw the rider heading south as they were coming into town. Everyone would have to extra careful now with these men on the loose. Elly knocked and entered and they all gathered around the kitchen table. Kate fixed coffee and Erin started,

“I met Beau's friends Jeb and Carla. They are wonderful people and we had a very nice visit.”

She went on to explain the idea they all came up with about exchanging houses. Everyone thought it was perfect and would be happy to help them get settled in Beau's cottage. Elly and Kate said they would replace the curtains and Durik said he would build a new gate for the front yard.

“We are heading there from here. Can I borrow your wagon to haul their things down?” Beau asked Durik.

“Sure, I'll go with you and help.” he answered.

“It sounds like a perfect solution for you both,” Nelson said. “Does the cabin need anything?”

“Not that I could see. They do have to haul the water in from the creek on their mule. Maybe we could run a pipe to the house, but I don't know how far it is yet,” he answered.

“I can check it out when we get there,” Durik said.

Over the next two days, Beau and Erin went through their belongings deciding what to take to the cabin. Some things they would leave in the cottage for Carla and some things they would take. Durik got the wagon ready and hitched it up the next evening. He drove it while Beau and Erin were on their horses as they headed out the next morning, telling everyone they would be back in a couple days.

“Keep your shotgun handy, Nelson,” Beau instructed.

"I will. Don't worry about us. Elly will stay here nights and we will all three be in the Publik House when it's open," he answered.

"Good plan," he said.

They made good time to the cabin and when they saw the smoke from the trail, Erin was relieved. When they entered the yard, Carla greeted them and she called to Jeb. He came out and they introduced Durik. They asked Jeb and Carla if they had seen anyone. They said they heard a rider go by yesterday, moving very fast. Beau told them about the rider and the escaped convicts. Erin said she was so relieved they were ok, hugging Carla again.

Durik and Jeb headed to their water supply and Beau helped Carla and Erin load the wagon of all the small items. They did not have a lot to move down, leaving most of the furniture in the cabin. Beau told Carla he did the same thing. Most of his Pa's furniture is still in the cottage. It sure made things easier not having to move it all.

Durik and Jeb returned and Beau could see him pacing off the distance.

"About seventy yards is all, Beau. Will be easy to run a two inch pipe to a pump right inside the house. We will wrap it all in burlap and it won't freeze in the winter," Durik reported.

"Not sure why I haven't done it already," Jeb said laughing. "Guess I thought it would be a much bigger job."

"I may have nearly half of the pipe in the shop and the rest we can get at Walder's General, along with the burlap," Durik said.

"And, we will need a lean-to for the horses, with water and feed bins," Beau added.

"Right, before winter sets in," Durik added.

They finished loading the wagon and had supper. Beau and Erin entertained them with all the stories of their time in Ryker as watchmen. And about the dockrats. Everybody enjoyed the stories.

"Think Jerand will show up someday?" asked Durik.

"I hope so. I really like him. He is very smart and would help us a lot in our business," Erin replied.

"Well make sure you tell everyone in Sarn to be on the lookout for him," Durik said.

"I will. He may even come straight here. I explained where it was."

They headed south the next morning. Jeb and Carla in the wagon with Durik, with their mule trailing. On the second day they were on the road just outside of Sarn, when they saw someone walking up the road towards them. As they neared, they saw it was Miss Elly. She ran up to them and said that the escaped convicts were held up in the smith and won't leave. They arrived a few hours ago and are demanding food and supplies.

"Is everyone ok?" asked Erin.

"Yes, Most of us are hold up in my place. All armed," answered Elly.

"They know that Sarn has no watch. Have you seen any riders from Walder's looking for them?" asked Beau?

"No. They just came into town and started watching places. When they saw that the smith forge was cold, they went right in," she explained.

"They probably won't be there long. Just rest a bit and get supplies. We better hurry," Beau said to Erin.

"You all wait right here. Pull the wagon off the road into those trees, Durik," Beau ordered.

Durik started for the trees and Erin and Beau headed for Sarn. It was less than a mile and

when they got there, they made directly for the smith.

“Remember how we did this in Ryker,” Beau asked Erin.

“Yes. I'll head to the side door.”

“You there. In the smith. Come out with no weapons and your hands high,” yelled Beau.

No response. Beau moved closer to the main entrance and repeated the order again. This time a voice from inside called out,

“Who are you?”

“The people that will be taking you back to Walder's,” Beau answered.

“You'll have to come in and get us,” the voice said.

Beau heard someone behind him. He turned and it was Nelson with his shotgun.

“Glad to see you Nelson. Can you go around that side and cover Erin, just in case they both break out that door? Don't hesitate to shoot to kill. These guys are probably desperate,” Beau said, nodding to the side.

“Will do.”

Beau started inside. He knew they were armed, but didn't know what kind of weapons. Hopefully they were swords. He crept slowly through the forge area and into the main door to Durik's kitchen. Luckily he knew the inside of this place very well. He approached a hallway that led to the bedroom and inched his way to where the side door that Erin was watching. He looked at the door just as Erin was coming in. He motioned for her to come to him.

“I don't know what weapons they have. That's Durik's bedroom down this hallway. You stay right here. If one of them shows up with a shotgun, you go back out that door fast. Your Pa is out there watching,” he instructed.

She nodded. Beau crept back through the kitchen and through another room to the door to the bedroom. They were evidently hold up in this bedroom. When he was beside the door, he looked up and nodded to Erin. He banged on the door and said,

“Come on out. You're surrounded. Throw your weapons out this door.”

No shots through the door. They must have swords. He waited. One minute. Two minutes. Finally, he heard glass breaking and Nelson yell,

“Drop those swords or I'll start shooting.”

He motioned for Erin to follow him, kicked the door open and confronted the two men. One was on the bed with an injured leg, but he held a long knife. The other was in the middle of the room with a sword. He charged Beau. Erin entered and immediately disarmed the one with the knife and held her rapier to his throat.

“Move and you're dead,” she growled.

Beau parried with the other man long enough to find his reach and moved inside it. The man went for an overhead swing and Beau buried his sword in the man's chest. He dropped his sword, looked at Beau and said,

“You killed me.”

Beau pulled out his sword and caught the man as he fell. He died a few seconds later. Erin pointed to the other man's long knife and Beau retrieved it. Nelson watched the whole thing from outside the window. He was extremely proud of Erin. And, Beau too. They helped the man outside and Elly attended to his wound. Erin headed back to the wagon and brought them all back.

“We'll lock this one in Durik's tool shed and take him back to Walder's when we go,” Beau said. “The other one we will bury here.”

After that unpleasant task was finished, Erin and Beau introduced Jeb and Carla to

everyone and started unloading the wagon and putting it in the cottage. That evening Carla and Elly fixed supper for everyone at her new place. They took a plate and some water to their prisoner. The man mostly slept as he was weak from loss of blood. He should be no problem on the trip back, Beau thought.

After supper they all loaded the wagon with Beau and Erin's belongings. They didn't have much, so Durik loaded the pipe and burlap he had for the water supply at the cabin. They used the burlap for a bed for the injured man to lie on. Durik hitched up Beau's horse up to the wagon. Beau would drive it while Erin followed and watched the prisoner from her horse.

Beau said to Jeb and Carla,

"I hope you like the cabin."

"It's just perfect," answered Carla.

"You sure handled those men well," said Nelson. "We are so glad you showed up when you did."

"And, I'm glad you tipped me that they had just swords and no shotgun," smiled Beau.

"Did they do much damage inside?" Erin asked Durik.

"No. Nothings broken. And they didn't get far with the supplies, either," he smiled.

"We will deliver the prisoner and head to the cabin. After we get settled in a few weeks, we will come back down for a visit. Enjoy your new neighbors," Beau said to the Sarn residents.

"We will. We are so glad to have them," said Kate.

Everyone said their goodbyes and headed to their beds. Beau and Erin stayed at her house. They were exhausted and slept sound that night.

The next morning early, Beau and Durik loaded the prisoner in the wagon and headed north. Elly's potion was restoring the prisoner's blood and he would be fine. Just in time to be locked up again. They arrived in Walder's and headed to the Sheriff station. He introduced himself to the Sheriff and said he had a present for him. He led him out to the wagon, where Erin was watching the prisoner.

"Well, well. If it isn't Gates. Where is your buddy, Gates?" the Sheriff asked.

"That one kilt him," he replied, pointing to Beau.

"Now there is a story I need to hear. Say, are you the ones that worked for Sheriff Grant in Ryker?"

"Yes. I see you got his note," answered Beau.

The Sheriff called two watchmen to take the prisoner. They he led Beau and Erin to his office. Two Sergeants joined them. Beau told the whole story, starting with the rider they saw leaving Sarn. When he finished, one of the Sergeants said,

"That prisoner you killed. He was very good with a sword. You're lucky he didn't kill you."

"I was lucky, I guess," answered Beau.

"Not really luck. Sheriff Grant said you were a student of Master Chaun," the Sheriff said.

"Really? Wow, he teaches a lot of the King's Guard, did you know that?"

"No, I hadn't heard that," Beau answered.

Erin finished with a few words about their tracking business and the cabin they now live in.

"I know Jeb and Carla," said one of the Sergeants. "Good people."

"They now live in the cottage I shared with my Pa in Sarn. We think they will be happy there." said Beau.

"So, if you have any tracking needs, let us know, ok?" said Erin.

"We sure will. And I'll put out the word around town, too," the Sheriff said.

“What happened to the other prisoner?” asked a Sergeant.

“We buried him in the Sarn cemetery. Hope that was ok,” Beau answered.

“Be just fine. If you will just sign the incident papers to that effect,” the Sheriff said.

“Be glad to. We'll be heading home then. Hope to see you soon, Sheriff, Sergeants.” Erin said.

They arrived at the cabin and unloaded everything. When they were unloading the pipe and burlap, Beau said they needed to get more pipe, burlap and a pump. Then they would lay it and have water to the cabin. They would need to screen the inlet of the pipe and lay it on some rocks in the stream. It should stay fairly clean.

After the cabin was all set up, they went back into town with the wagon and bought their initial supplies. They bought bed clothes, canned goods, fifty pound sacks of sugar, flour, salt, beans and all the other things they would not be able to carry on the back of their horse. They just started back to the cabin and Beau asked,

“Where is a good place to advertise our new business, do you think?”

“How about the General Supply store where we just spent a bunch of money. We can ask the owner to put up a sign,” Erin answered.

They went back into the store and found the owner.

“We are starting a new tracking business. Would you be willing to put up a sign somewhere for us?” asked Erin.

“Sure. You're the student of Master Chaun, right?” the owner asked.

“Yes. How'd you know?”

“A Sergeant of the watch was in here this morning and he mentioned you two.”

“That's good. We brought the one remaining escaped convict to the Sheriff this morning,” Beau said.

“That's what he said. Glad to have you two in our town,” the owner said.

They headed back to the cabin with all their supplies. Beau spent the rest of the day working on the water pipes, while Erin set up housekeeping. She felt very comfortable in the place and thought it was going to work perfectly. Beau came in then with the pump. He dug a hole near the kitchen wall and ran the pipe outside. He connected it to the long run and then mounted the pump. As Erin started supper, he pumped water in a large pot and set it on the wood stove.

“There, all done. It works perfect. No trips down to the creek this winter hauling back a couple gallons at a time,” he said proudly.

She came up and gave him a big hug.

“Quite the handyman, aren't you?”

“Well, at some things. Don't even ask me to bake anything, though,” he laughed.

Chapter Nine

Several days later, right after breakfast, they heard hoof beats coming up to the cabin and someone yelled,

“Hello the cabin!”

Beau opened the door and a man ran to the door and asked,

“A watch Sergeant sent me. We've lost our little boy. He's wandered off from our cottage and we have no idea which way he went. Can you please come?”

“Right away,” Beau said.

Erin grabbed some gear and they both saddled the horses and followed the man. He lived in a small cottage just north of town about a mile. His wife was sobbing loudly, being consoled by another woman. Beau and Erin sat at the table and Erin said,

“Ok. Some details. When did you last see him?”

“About an hour ago. He was playing on the porch and when I went out, he was gone. I called all over for him,” the mother said. Erin could see she was frantic.

“How old is he?” Beau asked.

“He just turned four.”

“And, his name?” Erin asked.

“Ollie,”

“He couldn't have gotten far,” said Beau to Erin.

“We will try to pick up his track. You all stay here,” Beau ordered.

They immediately started looking for sign of which way he went from the porch. Erin started a sweep about ten feet out and Beau started one at about twenty feet. After a couple minutes, Beau said he had two tracks leading into the woods. Beau stood near one and Erin found a set and followed it in a line to Beau. It didn't match. She quickly found another set and this time it led right to Beau.

“This is it,” said Beau.

“It's about the right shoe size,” Erin added.

They followed the tracks through thick trees and bushes. They found what looked like the boy had fallen and got up again.

“I see no other tracks here. He wasn't following an animal or anything. I wonder why he kept falling?” Erin asked.

“There is no blood anywhere, I don't think he's hurt,” Beau responded.

About a hundred yards farther on the tracks turned up a small hill and there were signs of the boy falling again. They looked down the other side of the hill and there was a creek about thirty yards ahead.

“Oh dear. I hope he didn't get into that,” Erin said.

The ground was covered in about a foot of leaves and they lost the tracks. They split apart about ten feet and headed straight for the creek. They didn't pick up the tracks before they came to the edge of the water.

“He didn't get to the creek. Lets start circles out from where we lost his last tracks.” Beau said.

They went back to that spot and each one started walking in a circle pattern about ten feet wide. In about five minutes, Erin yelled,

“Got him!”

Beau ran over and they both looked down at a sleeping four year old. After a quick check,

Erin said he had no injuries. Beau woke him gently and said,

“Hello, Ollie. We are friends of your Ma and Pa. They ask us to bring you home.”

“Ok, I tried to get Polly, but couldn't,” Ollie said, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

Beau picked him up and they headed back. The boy kept asking where Polly was and Erin said they were not sure. About twenty feet from the house, the mother came running out calling Ollie's name. Beau handed Ollie to her and said he was fine. He just had a little nap.

“Where was he?” asked the father.

“Just a few feet from the creek. He was sleeping. Said he was trying to get Polly,” Erin said.

“Oh, damn. That was a pet bird we had. It died and we didn't want to tell him. He must have thought he saw it and went after it.”

“That would explain why he kept falling. He was looking up and kept tripping,” Beau surmised.

The parents quietly talked to Ollie while Beau and Erin readied the horses to head home.

“We can't tell you how thankful we are. The watch Sergeant said you would be better than anyone there and he was right. How much do we owe you?” the father asked.

“Well we don't rightly know. You are our very first clients. How about this one being on the house while we work out a fee schedule,” Beau said.

The parents of the boy thanked them over and over again and finally they headed home. It looked like they would have to come up with a fee schedule, before the next client knocked on the door.

It was only a couple days later, when another knock came on their door. This time it was Ollie's Ma. She said she just wanted to bring them something since they wouldn't let her pay for finding Ollie. She had two big baskets of vegetables from their garden, a large smoked ham, and two chickens in a crate.

“Now you can have fresh eggs every morning,” she said.

“Oh, this is wonderful. We haven't had much time to work in our garden,” Erin replied.

“Well, when you're ready to plant in the spring, please let us know and we will bring over our plow and mule to clear the garden smooth and you'll be ready to plant,” she offered.

“We surely will. Thank you very much. And for all this too,” Erin said looking to the things she brought.

Beau was happy about the chickens and built a nice coup with a feeder box and water pan attached. He said they would get someone from town to feed and water the chickens while out on a tracking job. He added lots of straw for the hens to lay on, too.

They were in town a few days later and met the Sheriff in the feed and grain store.

“Hello there! Getting settled in ok?” he asked.

“Yes. Almost all done with the major chores,” Beau answered.

“I heard about Ollie. That was some nice work. And you didn't even charge them.”

“Well, they were our first clients. And they did bring us lots of food and a couple chickens,” Erin said.

“Word of that has gotten around, you know. You are the talk of the town. I suspect you'll have all the business you need soon,” he added.

"We really love it here and are so glad we came," Beau said, looking at Erin, who nodded.

"Once in a while I have more work than watchmen to do it. Would you be interested in some odd jobs?" the Sheriff asked.

"Definitely if it has to do with tracking. Otherwise, probably only if it was a small job for one or two days." Beau answered.

"Yes, we don't want to be unavailable for any tracking jobs that might come up," Erin added.

"I understand," the Sheriff said. "You take care now."

"Thanks, we will," they both responded.

The nights started getting colder and fall was upon them quickly. Beau and Erin spent many hours hiking the forests and mountains all around Walder's. They were finding and making notes on the trails and natural shelters. If they had to track the area, it was always good to know where these things were, especially in the winter. Blizzards came up quickly in the mountains and knowing where shelters were was critical.

They mapped out the entire area that fall and winter. They only had a couple small jobs as hunting guides during that time. They visited Sarn regularly and Jeb and Carla were doing very well and loved it there. Miss Elly and Durik were talking about marriage in the spring. She had turned over most of the operations of the Publik House to her manager and had lots of time on her hands. She was very interested in making things and selling them for people's garden. They were mostly made of iron, tin and glass and she called them sculptures.

One day, when winter was losing its grip and spring was budding, a stranger rode into Sarn. He went to the Publik House and ask for Beau and Erin. Elly was not sure who he was, but she had instructions to direct anyone from Ryker to their cabin. So, she gave the young man the directions. He thanked her and left. Said his name was Jerand.

He knocked on the cabin door and Erin answered and cried,

"Jerand! What a surprise. Beau, come look who's here."

Beau was out back working on an addition to the cabin. He came into the kitchen and said, "You finally made it. I was beginning to think you'd forgotten your old friends."

"I could never forget you two," he said, beaming.

"How long can you stay?" Erin asked.

"Well, I told Safer I'd be back when I got back. He seemed to understand."

"Yes, He would. The man is very intuitive when it comes to his *kids*," Erin said.

"I have never been to Walder's and would like a tour, if you have time," Jerand said.

"Sure. Are you hungry? Supper will be ready soon," Erin asked.

"He's always hungry," Beau smiled. "Come see what I'm working on."

They went out back while Erin went back to fixing supper. She was so glad he came to visit. Maybe he would stay for a while, too. Even consider working with them.

"It's going to be a spare room for visitors. Erin's parents come a couple times a year, and our friends, Jeb and Carla, do too. They were the ones that owned the place before we switched," Beau said.

Beau told Jerand the whole story and Erin called them to supper. They had a wonderful visit with Jerand catching them up on all the Ryker happenings. He said there were so many new kids that they had to make several new teams. He hardly ever sees Safer anymore.

"Things are just not like the old days," he said.

“So, maybe you're ready for a new adventure?” Erin asked.

“I think so, but not sure where I would live,” he answered.

“Well, that room is almost ready. If you helped we could have it done in less than a week. Then you could just stay there until we found your own place,” Beau said.

“Yea, maybe a room in town. We know lots of people there now, I'm sure we could find something that you'd like,” Erin added.

“Well, after what I'm used to, it wouldn't have be anything fancy,” he grinned.

“Good, it's settled then,” Erin stated.

They gave Jerand a tour of the town and introduced him to the Sheriff and watchmen. They were happy to meet a member of the dockrats and Erin was sure they were hoping he would start a group in Walder's. They showed him all the trails in the forests close by. He seemed to be excited about seeing all the new things. One day, during breakfast, Erin asked,

“Do you have any family, Jerand?”

“No, my Ma and Pa died when I was young. I only had one sister and she married and moved away many years ago. The dockrats have been my family for over three years now.”

“How old are you anyway?” Beau asked.

“Just turned seventeen,” he replied.

“Wow, you look a lot younger,” Erin smiled at him.

“How about I teach you the sword. Just enough to defend yourself. Interested?” asked Beau.

“Yes! I would love that,” he said excitedly.

“Good, then. I have a short sword that would do for learning, then we can get you one that fits you later,” Beau said.

“Ever tried using one?” Erin asked.

“No. Used a knife a little, though.”

“Well, that will help. It will take a while, you know,” Beau explained.

“I've got plenty of time,” he smiled, looking a lot younger than his age,

A few days later they finished the extra room and set up a sleeping palette. It was warm and cozy and Jerand said it was the nicest place he ever had. They took Jerand down to Sarn and introduced him to everyone. They all seemed to take an instant liking to him and he loved all the attention. Erin realized that he never had a family of his own. She was glad he finally had close friends that were not dockrats. They would all become his family now.

Miss Elly told Erin just before they went back home that the date of the wedding had been set. It would be in one week's time and they would go to Walder's Point for a couple days afterwards. Erin promised to be there and then ride back to Walder's with them. Erin told her of a new Hotel right downtown in Walder's where they could stay. And, Beau told them about all the things to see and do in town. The three headed back home the next morning. Erin thought how nice it was to come home. She loved her cabin home and having Beau and Jerand there.

Erin and Beau went to the new hotel that week and purchased two nights lodging in the honeymoon suite as a wedding gift. It cost five silvers, but Durik and Elly were like family to them both. She found herself wondering if she would ever marry. It just didn't seem that important to her. She loved her life with Beau and saw no reason to formalize it. And, she was

pretty sure Beau felt the same way.

Elly and Durik's wedding was wonderful and the entire town of Sarn attended. It was the first wedding that Jerand had ever seen and he was impressed with all the formality. And, of course all the food and drinks. Elly was overwhelmed with their wedding gift and couldn't wait to see the new hotel. Erin, Beau and Jerand headed back to Walder's the next morning, Elly and Durik following in the wagon. They would stop for a bit to see the cabin, then head into town. Durik had a list several items to buy for the smith in Walder's and the wagon to bring them back with. Ever practical was Durik, Elly always said.

About a month later, Jerand found a room over the general store that was comfortable and reasonably priced. He worked part time in the store when he wasn't tracking with Beau and Erin. Of course, they all visited Ryker once in a while and Safer was always glad to see them.

Life was good and they both loved talking about the days when they were young, tracking strangers around Sarn and spying on the Council.