

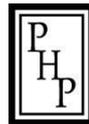
The  
Winter Boy



Sally Wiener Grotta

# *The Winter Boy*

by  
Sally Wiener Grotta



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Daniel

# Chapter 1



The Valley of the Alleshi stretches wide and green, surrounded by gentle mountains that cut the coldest of winds from the north and the wildest of hurricanes from the south. In the spring, summer and fall, the eight passes to The Valley flow constantly with pilgrims, traders, petitioners and emissaries — and, of course, Allemen, the leaders of the land, trained by the Alleshi. But in winter, heavy snow fills the high mountain passes. Only during those deep white months is The Valley isolated and inaccessible. It is a precious quiet season for the Alleshi.

As one such season approached, Rishana had just returned home from a strengthening class at the Communal Hall when she saw Dara through her mudroom window.

Dara was tall and lean, with flesh deeply etched by life. Her black hair was streaked with wide swathes of white. With precise, practiced grace, she walked up to the back door, raised her hand to knock, then noticed Rishana standing inside. So she opened the door and walked in.

“Dara, you’re early!” Why was her mentor here, now, before she could bathe and prepare herself for their daily meeting?

“I’m not staying long.” Dara followed Rishana into the spacious sun-filled kitchen and sat at the square oak table.

Obviously, Dara had something on her mind that she felt couldn’t wait.

“Yes?” Rishana asked, as she sat down across from Dara. Her exercise suit was sweat-stained and itched. She raked the wet strands of her auburn hair that were escaping the tie-back ribbon, pushing them behind her ears. Then, realizing what she was doing, she draped her hands onto her lap, forcing her body to be still and receptive.

“It’s time for you to choose your First Boy,” Dara said with deliberate calm, her dark, age-yellowed eyes fixed on Rishana’s. “I saw a worthy candidate this morning, the son of one of my Allemen. The boy could prove... interesting for you.”

“My First Season isn’t supposed to be until the spring,” Rishana protested. “I’m not ready.”

“Of course you are, or I wouldn’t suggest it.”

“What if I’m not, Dara? A boy’s entire future depends on what I do,

how well I'm prepared."

"You know you won't be alone. I'll guide you through your First Season."

"I don't understand." Rishana paused, trying to sort her thoughts. "Everyone has drilled into me how tightly structured my training schedule must be to fit everything I need to know into three years. Why would you now want to cut it short by four months... and so suddenly?" She studied her mentor, trying to read Dara's face and body the way she'd been taught. "Is there something special about this boy?"

"No, not at all, Rishana," Dara reassured her. "We're simply very pleased with how quickly you've learned. Waiting until the spring won't prepare you any better, but it would delay teaching you the finer points of being an Allesha, which you'll learn only by working with a boy in Season. Trust me; the timing is right."

The younger woman nodded, not so much in agreement as acceptance. Of course, she trusted Dara. Faith in the wisdom and power of the Alleshi was the foundation of her life, of their entire society.

"I don't have your experience or knowledge, Dara; I wouldn't know how to select a boy. Can't I simply accept this candidate, if you think he's the right one for me?"

Dara arched her back against the offensive suggestion. "*Absolutely not!* This is a decision only you can make. However, I can help you analyze what type of boy to choose for your First, which will define the kind of Allesha you wish to become."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me explain by telling you about this candidate." Dara focused on something only she could see in the empty air between them. "Unlike most Allemen sons, he's a rough one — arrogant, and a bit of a troublemaker. Still, he is bright and alert." Dara's voice was as disciplined as ever, enunciating each word clearly, forcefully. However, she paused between phrases more than usual, carefully considering each word before she said it. "He'll constantly try to provoke and test you, attempting to control rather than learn from you. But if you can reach him, as I believe you can, his strength of will, intelligence and good heart could be of great value for our people."

"Sounds like a strong candidate." Rishana wondered why her mentor seemed to be holding herself in tight check. Perhaps Dara was being careful not to unduly influence her in this important decision.

"Yes, but only a few Alleshi are willing or capable of taking on such a difficult boy. I was appointed your mentor because we believe you have within you that ability, and because problem boys have been my

specialty. But you're under no obligation to follow in my ways. Should you select another kind of boy for your First, I will still work through the Season with you. It is your choice."

"How do I decide, Dara?"

"By meeting him, then evaluating your reaction. Does his coarse manner irritate you, or can you find humor and challenge in it? What do you see beyond the face he presents? Is it something intriguing that you'd enjoy unearthing, though the process would be difficult?"

"Look into your heart," Dara continued. "Do you want to give a piece of it to this troublesome boy? Remember, once you are an Allesha to a boy, he becomes part of you, and that will change you. You must be honest about yourself — who you are, and what you want, both for the moment and for the course of your life. To choose a boy such as this one means that your first Alleshine Season — and Seasons to come — will be filled with conflict and stress. You will have to learn to be fierce, while instilling gentleness. It will wear you out before your time. There's no harder work, but also none more important."

"What if I choose another kind of boy for my First?" Rishana asked.

"Most boys aren't like this one. They're confused, mischievous, but willing to bend and eager to learn. Seasons with them start joyously and proceed toward harmony."

"Not much of a choice, is it?" Even as she said it, Rishana wondered why the words somehow didn't ring true. "Who wouldn't choose a life of joy and harmony over one of conflict and stress?"

"I for one, and possibly you." Dara sighed, a wistful smile softening her face. "Once you've moved past the conflict, once you've harnessed a problem boy's energy with discipline, the Alleman you create can become one of our most powerful and effective. Easy-to-train boys are fine for those times when you want to relax, but I couldn't have given all my Seasons and years to languid pleasure. I devoted my life to fire and stone, and with each of my problem boys, I became stronger, more alive." Dara's smile broadened, deepening the wrinkles around her mouth, and yet, for that brief moment, making her seem young once more. "And I couldn't be prouder of the Allemen they have become."

"I see. You've given me a lot to consider, Dara."

"I'll leave now, so you can meditate on your decision. After your bath, prepare a simple lunch, one that won't distract you from your thoughts. Then sit under one of your apple trees, among the fallen leaves. I'll be back in the late afternoon. Soon after, the Southwest Battai will come with the boy. Meeting him places no obligation on you, but will help you think things through."

Rishana was already deep in thought, weighing what Dara had said, and trying to decipher what hadn't been said, when Dara left as quietly as she could. On her way out, the older woman made sure that the outer front door of the house was closed, as a sign that Rishana wasn't accepting visitors.

## Chapter 2



“*Evanya!*” Karinne greeted her friend warmly at her kitchen door. The two women always used the names of their youth when they were alone together, names from so long ago that no one else in The Valley remembered them.

One look at Evanya’s shadowed face, and Karinne knew something momentous had happened. Silently, they secured the house and sequestered themselves inside the locked inner room, safe from any eavesdroppers. They spoke in hushed staccato tones, compressing every sound deep in their throats, though they knew no one could hear them.

“The boy has arrived,” Evanya said.

Karinne’s breath caught in her lungs. “So soon? We weren’t expecting him until the spring.”

“Mistral and Shria had no choice if we didn’t want to chance losing him.” Evanya shivered, though the room was warm. “He’s determined to marry his girl; he had actually gone to their village council to announce their betrothal. If Mistral hadn’t managed to get the girl’s mother to block him...”

“But no woman speaks at the Birani council.”

“She’s a widow with no man to speak for her. So the council had to listen and honor her decision.”

“Which was—”

“*An Alleman for my daughter or no man.*”

“I’m impressed. We should keep an eye on the mother, and see if she has the makings of an Allesha.” Karinne struggled to rearrange her small, round body, trying to find a comfortable position. The inner room wasn’t meant for women whose bones were no longer flexible, regardless of how well-padded they had become. “Perhaps it could be a good thing that he’s arrived, that the waiting is over.”

“Still, I’m concerned about the timing. I thought we’d have longer to train her. Four months could have made such a difference.” Evanya paused. “There’s so much she doesn’t know, doesn’t yet understand. And she’s so young.” She sighed deeply.

## Chapter 3



In the nearly three years that she had been training in The Valley, Rishana had learned much about what it was to be an Allesha. She had studied how to control with the turn of a hand, to seduce with a glance, to disarm with a smile. Lessons with various Alleshine teachers had focused her eye to read the subtle signs in another's behavior, gestures and voice. Other Alleshi taught her self-defense and ways to avoid the need to defend.

She'd spent untold hours absorbed in The Valley's extensive library. Guided by Savah, Jared's Allesha, she had researched history, trade, treaties, and the cultures of the diverse peoples within and beyond the Peace borders, seeking hints about the long-ago hidden time before the Great Chaos.

Combining her new skills, observations and growing knowledge, she had practiced a range of responses to many different scenarios, altering her approach, posture and tone to achieve the most beneficial outcome.

All this time, Rishana's every waking moment had been consumed by the study and practice of the many disciplines required to become a successful Allesha. But now that Dara had set Rishana's mind in a new direction, she realized that her tight focus had distracted her from considering wider, more personal ramifications.

They had been training her to face this moment since she had come to The Valley with her Petition. Her teachers had been chosen carefully to set the path of her life. Their aim was now as clear as that of an arrow knocked into a bow by a master archer. Why hadn't anyone said anything to her, not even Savah?

Problem boys, problem life. Certainly, the challenges of such a future could be fascinating. But how dare they twist her training without asking her what it was she wanted — until now, at this late hour, when they felt confident of her answer. Confident, because they had already formed her into the Allesha they wanted her to be.

*How like the Alleshi!*

And now she was one of them.

“No!” she yelled into the empty house, startling herself with the sound, but feeling a certain satisfaction in the solid autonomy of her own voice. “Arrogant, manipulative, overbearing... I won’t be like her!”

She shook her head to clear it.

“Jinet, pull yourself together,” she demanded of herself, using her name from her life before The Valley. “Remember who you are and why you came here.”

It had been five years ago this spring, but often it felt like yesterday. Jared’s mutilated body carried home to her after that long winter wait. Bathing her husband for the last time and finding under the dried blood and encrusted dirt the gruesome geometric patterns carved into his flesh.

Mwertik Zalog runes.

Pushing the memory deep inside where she kept it locked away, Rishana straightened her back and closed her eyes. Then she took five deep, long breaths, releasing herself into each exhale. When she opened her eyes, she probed inward and found the knot of her anger. No, it would not be easily dislodged, but she didn’t have to lose herself to it.

Rishana stomped into her bedroom, tore off her sweaty exercise clothes, and began the daily ritual of studying herself in the mirror.

The body she saw in her reflection was not the one of her youth. That had been the first difficulty for her when Savah had explained the importance of the wall-size mirror in every Allesha’s bedroom. But her teachers had insisted she persevere; eventually, she had learned to evaluate her own body, wielding that knowledge in the way she carried herself.

All Alleshine skills began with this understanding of the physical self, a tool to be utilized, a power to be harnessed. But she had naïvely believed that the Alleshi would never use their skills on one another, on her. Now she felt like a fool. Yet, still she obeyed, by standing in front of the mirror, honoring the teachings of those who had not honored her.

All in all, it was an attractive womanly figure that Rishana saw in the mirror, one that had given life to two children and had reached the ripeness of maturity. Rishana’s forty-three years had taken their toll, and her body had lost the taut, unstretched silkiness of her youth. The long, shapely legs might widen toward the curvy hips a bit more than she would like, but they were elegant and could be used to good effect. Her arms, too, had that same graceful length that made the motions and gestures she practiced in the mirror appealing. Though her breasts had become weighty rather than round, and her waist would never again be the hourglass indent it had once been, her body was tightening nicely, thanks to Michale’s exercises. She was pleased that her shoulder-length auburn hair now

shone with the highlights of her youth, thanks to the new henna rinse Hester had given her. And her skin was responding well to the lemon juice and olive oil treatments, helping to repair the years of sunburn and hard work. Not that anything would ever erase those freckles.

Rishana continued to stare into the mirror. If you can see a person's heart and destiny in her eyes, what did hers reveal about the Allesha she wanted to be? Had the Alleshi changed her so fully that she no longer had any choices that truly came from within her? Or was the woman who stared back at her still the freeborn, independent individual she had always considered herself to be?

Retreating into her steaming bath, Rishana gave herself fully to the sensual pleasure of it, and used it to clear her mind. As she dressed and prepared a lunch of fruit, cheese and bread, she turned her mind back to the question of her First Boy, and to the Alleshi. Later, she sat among the fallen leaves under the largest of her house-tall apple trees, nibbled at the meal, and considered her choices.

While her mind tugged her toward rebellion, she had shaped her day according to Dara's instructions — bath, meditation, lunch under the tree — and she recognized no contradiction in such behavior. Obedience to the Alleshi was deeply ingrained in her, as it was among all people and villages within the Peace borders. Starting in early childhood, all were taught to not give in to anger, but to follow whatever path the Alleshi decreed, until free will, unfettered by destructive emotions, could be restored.

A child of the Peace, she obeyed.

The resentment Rishana felt about being manipulated to choose a hard life, one devoted to problem boys, remained strong, but less emotional. She examined that anger, as she had studied her body in the mirror. And there, at the core of her being, where her ire had formed, she found her answers. She was calm and sure by the time Dara returned.

## Chapter 4



Dara sat beside Rishana under the apple tree between Rishana's house and barn. A gentle breeze stirred the brown leaves on the ground, tossing them to the cloudless sky. Neither spoke. Nor did they look at each other. Instead, both leaned against the tree's rough, solid trunk, staring in different directions. Rishana took her time forming the words she wanted to say. They had to be simple, but effective.

"I was angry with you," Rishana said quietly.

"I know," Dara responded, just as calmly.

"You and the others have worked hard to form me as you needed me to be."

"Yes."

"Your chisel chipped at the stone of my being until you whittled me down to my essential self, as if I were a problem boy."

Dara turned toward her charge. "I knew you would understand."

But Rishana's sight remained focused outward and elsewhere. "Yes, I understand. But, I wonder, have you ever been wrong? What if, under that stone, you found a softness, a nature that required a gentler touch?"

"Under the stone is always a softness, Rishana. It is in such softness that true strength is revealed."

"So now I must choose. Do I wish to work with boys on whom I would use a similar chisel? Or do I want to use water on clay?"

"Yes."

"A boy to be chiseled is harder work," Rishana continued in the same cool appraising tone. "But the result is a stone-core strength, a man of unusual power."

"A man not unlike the woman you are."

Rishana was surprised to hear it, but still didn't turn toward Dara. Instead, she allowed her eyes to glaze over, hearing the meaning under the rhythm of their words, finding the truth that had been there all along.

Dara leaned back against the tree.

"The other kind of boy would shape under my hands with little resistance," Rishana continued, "and with a great deal of joy and pleasure. Yet you have known that I would choose stress and conflict."

“Because it is what will give you the greater joy and pleasure in the end.”

“No, because you knew the kind of woman you had shaped.”

“The kind of woman you’ve always been.”

“You assume much.”

“Yes.”

“And now, I am the same as you.”

“Yes.”

“How will I know that I’m making the right choices for my boys?”

“You will know or you will come to those of us who know. It is in your blood, as well as in your training.”

“So I will take this boy whom you have chosen.”

“Only if you wish it. Your will has always been your own to command.”

“A free will shaped by you.”

“No. One unearthed by us, Rishana. It is your essential self that will be doing the choosing. We only helped you understand the shape of that self.”

“Yet, before I make my choice, you already know what it will be.”

“Yes.”

“Because you know me even more intimately than I have known myself.”

“Because I recognized you as my successor before anyone else. And I had been waiting long for you.”

“Perhaps too long, Dara. Perhaps you have seen in me what you needed and wanted to see.”

“No. I saw in you what you needed and wanted to be.”

“I understand, but a part of me is still angry with you.”

“Yes.”

“What am I to do with that anger?”

“Accept it and use it. Without it, you would not have the free will we cherish and need. It is the inner conflict that will prepare you for the many conflicts ahead.”

“So it is already decided.”

“Yes.”

“And it is my decision.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.” Rishana looked up at the blue sky framed by the Sentinel Mountains. A solitary small white cloud drifted in the wind. It was a sharp, clean day, with summer a long-ago memory; winter wouldn’t be held at bay much longer.

## Chapter 5



Ryl cautiously pushed open the heavy oak door and peered outside. One of the serving girls was scurrying through the kitchen garden back toward the inn. Returning from an illicit rendezvous with a caravan lover, Ryl supposed. No need to fear her snitching on them. She'd have too much explaining of her own to do.

"It's clear. Let's go," he whispered to Sim, who hovered in the hallway.

Sim moved as though he never had to be wary of anything. Larger than Ryl in height and girth, with broad muscular shoulders, and much blacker than Ryl's swarthy coloring, Sim was, at nineteen, a year older. However, Ryl assumed the lead, running toward the trees surrounding the garden. It was the longer way around, but they'd be less likely to be seen and stopped.

Behind him, Sim stomped noisily and tripped over some roots. Didn't he know how to run in a wood? But Sim was okay. Not like most of the other Petitioners he'd met so far.

At first, Ryl hadn't known what to make of him. When Sim's family had joined the trade caravan that Ryl and his folks had traveled with for the last leg of their journey to The Valley, Sim had quickly become everyone's pal. Everyone but Ryl, that is.

No one ever had anything disparaging to say about Sim, which made Ryl look bad by comparison. Of course, Ryl's parents were used to having to explain away their son's behavior. But to Ryl's ears, Shria's sighs and Mistral's corrections had seemed more frequent after Sim had shown up.

Ryl had tried to egg Sim on, but nothing would rile him. Too damned easygoing, Ryl had decided. Regardless of how well-aimed the insult or well-contrived the difficulty that Ryl had cast at the other lad, it was like throwing feathers at a brook. No effect whatever.

Then one evening after supper, when everyone was relaxing around their campfires, soothing aching feet and backs, repairing gear and clothes, sharing stories, Ryl had wandered off. He preferred being alone to feeling so alone in the middle of everything.

Sim had followed, noisy as always. No way that boy could ever sneak up on anyone. As Ryl turned a corner around a wagon piled high with trunks of goods, he quickly pivoted. Sim almost ran into him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Ryl demanded.

Sim shrugged. “We should talk, Ryl.”

“What do we have to talk about?”

“I don’t know. But we should get to know each other, don’t you think? We’re both going to be Allemen from the same Season if we’re lucky.”

Ryl figured his chances of being Blessed were as good as those of a fish learning to fly.

“You think I want to know you, huh? Okay. I heard your pa bragging what a good fighter you are.” Ryl crouched with his fists in front of his face. “Show me what you’re made of.”

Sim shook his head. “I don’t want to fight you, Ryl. I just want to talk.”

“Talk with your fists. Maybe I’ll hear you better.”

“But Ryl, you don’t have anything to prove to me. I’m sure I’m not as good as you.”

“You’ve a lot to prove to me, though.”

Ryl jabbed at Sim’s stomach, but Sim blocked it. Then Ryl aimed for the chest with his right, and while Sim parried with his forearm, Ryl came in with a left undercut that connected solidly with Sim’s face, felling him like a tree. Sim pushed himself up into a sitting position and wiped the blood gushing from his nostrils.

Ryl waited, knowing the yelling would start any moment.

Instead, Sim grinned at Ryl and asked, “How’d you do that?”

“You left yourself wide open.”

“Could you show me?”

Ryl held out a hand to Sim to help him off the ground.

Soon after, they strolled back to the campfire, both bleeding and bruised, and laughing so hard that everyone turned toward the disheveled pair.

Mistral leapt up. “Skies! Ryl, what have you done now?”

Before Ryl could say anything or stalk away, Sim stepped between them. “Sir, I asked Ryl to help me improve my fighting skills. It’s one of my weak points. He’s really very good, you know.” Then he turned to Ryl and winked. “Tomorrow night, I want you to show me that sneak attack again. Okay?”

Mistral sat down without another word. The boys’ mothers bathed their wounds.

From then on, Ryl and Sim became close companions. Ryl didn't even blame Sim when he overheard Mistral say to Sim's father, "You've got a good boy there. He'll be a solid Alleman."

"If he's Blessed," Sim's father countered.

"Oh, he'll be Blessed. The Alleshi never let ones like him get away."

Ryl understood that it wasn't Sim's fault that Mistral liked him better than his own son. After all, Pa probably knew as well as Ryl what a fruitless journey this would be. Whatever powers the Alleshi possessed, Ryl was convinced that they'd be able to see right through him. Once that happened, no Allesha would be willing to select him. Ryl had long ago realized that not even Mistral would have picked him, if he'd had a choice in the matter.

Things got easier when they finally arrived at the Southwest Inn above The Valley, and the boys were housed in the Petitioners Wing, far from their parents' private rooms. What Mistral couldn't see, he couldn't complain about.

Not that the inn was that great. Ryl had to endure the Battai's endless questions during the interminable official interviews. But it didn't end there. The old busybody found Ryl wherever he was: in a corner by himself, wandering a garden, or even at supper with his parents.

Then there was the Healer examination — much more extensive and invasive than anything he had ever known. She probed and listened to his body so intimately that Ryl wondered once again at the propriety of a woman being a Healer. Among his people, only men took such roles. However, he tried to be charitable; she was so old and shriveled it was probably the only chance she had to touch a man.

The announcements began almost as soon as Ryl had settled into the Petitioners' wing. Arn, Jack and Mannockin were the first to be Blessed. Hanton, Yan, Daylor, and Staf were next. It didn't help when Sim reminded Ryl that those seven had arrived earlier and so had a head start. Each boy chosen represented one less Allesha available for the coming Season.

Ryl found himself eying the others, weighing his worth against each one. With little more than one hundred Alleshi planning to share the Winter Season, and scores of petitioning boys in each of the eight inns ringing The Valley, Ryl struggled to find reason to hope, to believe that any Allesha might actually want him.

What would happen if he were turned away, as most Petitioners were? Would Lilla go against her mother? Would he dare ask? Ryl couldn't bear the idea of putting Lilla through a council shunning. But

what if it were the only way they could be together?

Hanging around the inn quickly got on Ryl's nerves. That's when he came up with the idea of stealing away to the tradegrounds. Anything would be better than sitting around doing nothing, listening to the other boys gossiping about the wondrous Alleshi and their damned Allemen, being cornered once more by the Battai, or running into Mistral.

Ryl had no problem convincing Sim to join him; all he had to do was mention Emmy. The daughter of Schul, the leader of their caravan, Emmy was a tease who had set her sights on Sim, but didn't give him any satisfaction. Then again, Sim hadn't pressed for it.

"She's not like that," Sim had insisted. "She's a nice girl who dreams of marrying an Allemen."

"She's not so nice, Sim. All you have to do is ask; you'll see."

Sim had refused to discuss it any further. But Ryl had noticed that Sim couldn't keep his eyes off Emmy during the entire trip, and he jumped at the chance of seeing her one more time.

Ryl and Sim cut through the woods, hoping to avoid people until they could lose themselves in the crowds at the tradegrounds. Not that they were doing anything expressly forbidden. No one had told them they had to stay put; just that they couldn't go below into The Valley unescorted. Besides, what harm could it do to spend some time among the caravans?

The day was balmy, with bright sunlight streaking through the trees. It was almost spring-like, except that newly fallen leaves crunched underfoot and the only green in the woods were old-growth pine and spruce. Sounds from the tradegrounds permeated the forest, an almost subliminal buzz which coalesced into a thumping, like faraway drums. The closer they got, the more clearly Ryl could discern competing strains of music and a cacophony of voices shouting out their wares.

As Ryl and Sim approached the edge of the woods, so many paths wove through the increasingly sparse trees, they no longer bothered trekking off trail. Sim spotted a young man in brown trousers and a black wool cloak walking on a parallel path. "Look, Ryl, an Autumn Boy."

"How can you tell?"

"From the way he carries himself. Don't you see it?"

"Looks no different from any of the other guys we've seen."

"No, Ryl, I'm sure."

Ryl was irritated at the fuss Sim was making, but mostly at the idea that it was over a boy who had received what he probably would never have — the mysteries and magic of an Alleshine Season.

"Hey, you!" Ryl called out as he cut through the trees to the other

path. Catching up to the young man, Ryl grabbed his elbow and spun him around. "Didn't you hear me calling you!?"

About the same age as any of the Petitioners, the fellow was really pretty average, not very tall or broad, with muddy brown hair and a washed-out complexion. But something about him made Ryl feel small and clumsy.

"I didn't realize you were calling me," he said in a quiet, dignified voice. "How may I help you?"

"Well, my friend and I were having a disagreement, and I was wondering if you could help us resolve it."

"Yes, of course."

"He thinks you're an Autumn Boy. I said you're probably caravan trash. Which is it?"

"*Ryl!*" Sim had finally caught up, brushing dry leaves from his clothes; he'd stumbled yet again in his rush to stop Ryl. Composing himself, Sim said in that conciliatory tone that Ryl hated, "Please excuse us, sir. My friend meant no harm." Then he pulled on Ryl's arm. "Come on, let's go."

The Autumn Boy started to walk away.

Shrugging Sim off him, Ryl hissed, "Don't you apologize for me!" He stormed after the Autumn Boy, and shoving against his shoulder, demanded, "I still want to know what you think you are."

The young man looked Ryl up and down, studying him. "I don't believe you want to do this, but you can't figure out how to get out of it without being embarrassed. Let me help you. Yes, your friend is correct, I am just finishing my Season as a Blessed Boy. But you are also correct, I am Vetram, son of Vexam, the caravan leader. Now, I'm headed to the Southwest Battai's with a message from the Alleshi. I believe you were planning to enjoy yourselves at the tradegrounds. Let us continue on our way with no further unpleasantness."

"What is the problem here?"

Ryl hadn't heard the woman approach and nearly jumped at the sound of her commanding voice. One look at her and he knew he was in trouble. A tall, buxom old woman, with unruly grey hair that still had remnants of red, she needed no insignia or robe to declare who and what she was.

"No problem, Allesha," Vetram said. "My companions and I were simply having a... spirited discussion."

Her eyes glided over Ryl and Sim until Ryl felt there was nothing about them she didn't absorb and understand. "Tell me your names."

Sim bowed his head and turned his hands upward at waist level, in

the appropriate traditional greeting accorded Alleshi. “I am honored, Allesha. I am Sim of the Emet.”

The Allesha grazed his hands with hers, in perfunctory response to the ritual. “Welcome to our Valley, Sim of the Emet,” she said, though she was looking at Ryl. “And you?”

“I’m Ryl of the Birani.” Under the pressure of her unflinching gaze, Ryl belatedly bowed and opened his hands. “And I am honored, Allesha.”

Filling his hands fully with hers, she responded “Welcome to our Valley, Ryl of the Birani.” But she didn’t move her hands away, staring almost transfixed into his eyes, reading his face. “Mistral’s son,” she added.

“Yes, Allesha.”

With a nod, almost as though she were agreeing with something in her own mind, she pulled away. “You may proceed, but I suggest you avoid any further ‘spirited discussions.’”

Ryl and Sim said, “Thank you, Allesha,” almost in unison and took off for the tradegrounds as quickly as they could in a mannerly way.

Before they were out of earshot, Ryl heard the Allesha say to Vetram, “Tell Tedrac that his Allesha needs to see him again. Have him come to my home this afternoon.”

Ryl’s heart skipped a beat when he heard. *Tedrac! Skies! That was Tedrac’s Allesha!* Tedrac, his pa’s Triat. His mind raced, replaying the last few moments. Was there anything he could do to salvage the situation? All he could come up with was a jumble of memories with no future. Nothing left except the shouting. Why did everything always have to go so wrong for him? *To hell with them all*, he thought as he ran as fast as his legs would take him — faster, he hoped, than thought or broken dreams or Mistral’s disappointment in him.

“Ryl, slow down!” Sim called after him. “You want me to break my neck on these rocks?”

But Ryl didn’t stop until he looked up and realized he was in the middle of the tradegrounds. The first thing to hit him were the colors. More shades and hues than he had ever imagined. And the smells. Of strange and familiar foods, animals, incense, spices and people. A swarm of people bargaining, singing, dancing, arguing, laughing. Scattered throughout, individuals here and there silently scanned the crowds.

Sim caught up with Ryl, but was too out of breath to speak. Even when he was no longer gasping for air, he continued to stare with his mouth open, speechless.

Trade caravans were nothing new to either of them, to anyone living within the Peace borders. Whatever else went wrong with Ryl’s

life, the thrill he felt when one would arrive at his village had never diminished. It wasn't simply the amazing variety of goods, but also the travelers and the exotic stories they told. The biannual caravan arrivals at the Birani village were always filled with adventure and wonder.

But here, on the edge of The Valley of the Alleshi, was the Caravan Convergence. All year, except in deepest winter, caravans came to The Valley, bringing trade goods, tributes, duty gifts, messages and information from all corners of the world. So many that, although there were four tradegrounds in the foothills ringing The Valley, each with room for three or four caravans, none could stay longer than nine days. The frenetic pace of activity and excitement escalated even more during the three interim periods, when the newly formed Allemen from the previous Season, and Petitioners for the next, plus their families, filled the eight inns, tradegrounds and Valley pathways.

With such an abundance of choices before him, Ryl couldn't decide where to look or what to do. But Sim had no doubts, and for the first time since they had met, Sim took the lead, heading right for Schul's booths.

"*Sim!*" Emmy ran toward them through the crowds. "I thought I'd never see you again." Her grey eyes sparkled at the sight of Sim, whose grin was so wide that it almost split his black face in two.

"Hi, Emmy," Sim sputtered, happily abashed and unsure.

Neither seemed to be aware that Ryl was standing right there, next to them. "Hi, Emmy," Ryl said quietly.

"Oh... Hi, Ryl." Emmy's cheeks reddened when she glanced at him, though he doubted it was anything other than embarrassment. Not that it mattered. Compared to Lilla, no girl could hold his attention for more than a few moments of idle curiosity. Certainly not a caravan girl.

Still, Ryl had to admit her sudden blush was appealing. Emmy's long dark hair was threaded with bright, multi-colored ribbons, framing her small light-brown face. Somehow, the effect made her look fragile, though he had seen her successfully wrangle a stubborn mule with no help. Her dancing skirts and soft rainbow-colored blouse seemed to flow with all the colors of the Convergence, revealing curves that had been hidden under the shapeless rough-weave brown pants, quilted jacket and leather hiking boots she had worn during the trip.

Ryl stared, realizing Emmy wasn't as flat-chested as he had thought. Her breasts would be a good handful, if Sim ever got near them.

Sim and Emmy didn't notice when Ryl slipped away into the crowd. Nothing lonelier than being with people who are so involved in each other that you barely exist. It was a lesson Ryl had learned young. Looking back, he saw Emmy taking Sim by the hand and leading him

away — hopefully, to someplace private. That poor fellow needed some relief.

Suddenly, a boy much smaller and younger than Ryl ran into him, almost knocking him down. The kid mumbled an apology that was heavy with a strange accent, then quickly disappeared into the crowds. Ryl understood how the kid felt; so much to see and do that he wanted to run about, too. Instead, he moved slowly, deliberately, as though this were an unknown forest, with strange creatures that required careful observation before he could begin the hunt.

Tendrils of smoke from an awning-covered booth wafted toward Ryl, laden with delicious aromas he couldn't name. Not really hungry, certainly not with the abundance of food at the Battai's, he was still drawn toward the grill that was sizzling with the fat of juicy oversized sausages. Next to it was a wood stove covered with fried breads and a bubbling pot of soup so thick he could probably eat it with a fork.

"Succulents and sausages!" the vendor called. "Come taste the best. Succulents and sausages!" Bent with age and missing several of her yellowed teeth, her small dark eyes danced like a young girl's. Her shapeless dress hung on her shriveled frame, but the fabric was as colorful as Emmy's. The old woman was smiling broadly, as if the world were hers to command and enjoy.

Ryl worked his way through the throng toward the booth. His mouth watering, he said, "I'll take a sausage."

"Certainly, young man." Damned if she didn't seem to sparkle at the sight of Ryl. Was the old hag flirting with him? "You've never tasted better," she said as she speared a large link and wrapped it in a flat of fried bread.

When Ryl bit into it, an explosion of hot spices and herbs filled his mouth, nearly burning the roof of his mouth, but it was so rich with flavors that he took another bite before fully swallowing the first.

"Go slow, young man. Enjoy what you have before you grab more."

His mouth was too full to respond, so he merely nodded and reached into his pocket for his purse.

"That's one and five," she said, holding out her hand for payment.

But Ryl's money was gone. Nearly choking on the food, he frantically searched his other pockets, though he always kept his purse in the one place. Skies! The boy who'd bumped into him! Pa had warned Ryl about pickpockets, but he hadn't really thought it could happen to him, that a stranger could reach into his clothes and take something without him feeling it.

The old woman's small eyes no longer twinkled, narrowing even more. She leaned further over the booth counter, shaking her open palm in his face. "One and five," she repeated, a hard edge to her voice that left no doubt that she was not one to be taken advantage of, not her, no sir, she had ways of dealing with people who tried to cheat her.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. My money...."

"*Ryl!*" Aidan's high-pitched voice cut through the crowd, and the slightly built boy was suddenly at his side. His improbably pale skin looked even more sallow in the bright autumn sun, especially against his close-cut black hair and dark slanted eyes.

Among the Petitioners Ryl had met at the Battai's, Aidan was particularly annoying, with his whining voice, fake friendliness and pompous book-learned smarts that had little to do with real life. Besides, Aidan was a gutless wimp. Ryl had even seen him weeping in a corner of the inn last night. Ryl couldn't imagine Aidan in an Alleshine inner room; he probably didn't even know what to do with a woman.

Ryl's instinct was to ignore Aidan, but at the moment he had other worries. "Give me some money," he demanded.

Aidan looked at the half-eaten sausage in Ryl's hand and at the woman with her outstretched hand, and *tsk-tsked* in a disapproving manner that he must have copied from an old granddad. "You shouldn't take what you can't pay for."

"Don't be a prig, Aidan. Give me one and five. I'll pay you back when we get to the Battai's."

Aidan shrugged, took some coins from his purse and, rather than give them to Ryl, put them into the vendor's hand.

"Thank you, young sir," she said to Aidan. "And would you like to try my succulents and sausages?"

"No thank you, ma'am," Aidan replied with a slight bow that made her sparkle once more.

Damn! Now Ryl was beholden to the wimp. No longer really enjoying the sausage, he quickly chomped on the rest of it, wiped his hands on his trousers, then turned away.

"Hey, Ryl." Aidan caught up with him. "The Battai's looking for you."

"And you took it on yourself to find me. How helpful of you."

"Ryl, do you want to hear what the Battai wants or not?"

"I know what he wants. He's got more questions for me."

"No. He has an interview set up for you. In The Valley. With an Allesha."

"What?" Could it be that he still had a chance?

“You’re to meet an Allesha in her home this afternoon, if you’re not too late already.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry. It isn’t that bad. I had my interview this morning. She was nice. We had an interesting conversation.”

“Conversation? Don’t you know anything Aidan? An Allesha isn’t for conversation. But I guess you can’t be expected to know much about that.”

Aidan looked at Ryl in a strange way, almost as though the wimp pitied *him*. “You’re wasting time, Ryl. If you miss this meeting, you probably won’t get another.”

Not wanting to follow any advice Aidan could give him, but anxious not to botch this one opportunity, Ryl rushed off to the Battai’s without a backward glance. As soon as he reached a clear path, he broke out into a full run, not stopping until he was at the door to the Battai’s study on the first floor of the inn.

## Chapter 6



In the late afternoon, the Southwest Battai brought the boy Ryl to the house of the new Allesha. They walked side by side, a study in contrasts: the lithe young man with the easy stride of a woodsman, and the short, plump man with a thin fringe of once-black hair, who had never been graceful, even as a child.

But it was the Battai who exuded comfort and confidence, while Ryl hid his nervousness with bluster. This particular path from the Southwest Inn down to The Valley was the Battai's personal domain, the defining geography of his position, his reason and right. Only seven other men — the Battai of the other inns overlooking The Valley — could claim similar privilege, authority and responsibility among the Alleshi.

Though most of the trees were bare, stands of evergreens alternately obscured and revealed The Valley below. About three hundred houses dotted the land, connected by gently winding paths and neatly landscaped green space, a meandering stream, a few tributary creeks and a small lake. Each Alleshine home was large enough for two people, set apart on its own patch of land with a barn, workshop or shed in the back. All were approached through a gate set in a wood fence or stone wall.

One, two or three-storied. Made of timber, stone or stucco. Rectangular and compact, or spread out in wings. Some even had curved walls. The Battai knew from experience that the variety of the houses reflected the wide range of personalities and backgrounds among the Blessed Sisters. It was the Battai's responsibility to try to understand each Allesha, and bring suitable Petitioners to her attention.

How many years had it been, the Battai tried to remember, since he had last taken a candidate for First Boy? Certainly, at least ten. So long that he had almost forgotten the raw excitement of preparing for such a meeting.

New Alleshi shouldn't be so rare. Then fewer boys would be turned away, as he had once been. He hated to fail a boy, to bring the news that a petition had been refused. No length of time could make the task easier, weighted as it was with his own boyhood disappointment.

The memory was as vivid as if it were yesterday. His parents had

saved for most of his young life and had borrowed the balance to pay for the trip to The Valley and his petition. Yet, a gale on the sea had delayed them, and they had arrived at The Valley too late. All the Alleshi who would work that Season had already chosen their boys.

It was a matter of numbers, more than anything, for few boys who came to the inn weren't worthy. Just the act of making the trip to The Valley showed their desire to learn. But there were less than three hundred Alleshi in all, each choosing her Season, either to Bless a boy or to remain alone. Some worked only one Season in three, or less. And others were permanently retired from the cycle of Seasons. It was inevitable that most boys would be disappointed.

The Battai often wondered what had happened to the other unBlessed boys he had met as a Petitioner some forty years ago, when he had been turned away from The Valley. He'd heard that, in some villages, they never attained full manhood rights, while in others, it made little or no difference. So diverse were the many villages united under the Alleshi that even a Battai had difficulty keeping their various traditions clear.

In his maritime village, not becoming an Alleman meant he could never be a captain-owner of a seafaring fleet, though his uncle had chosen him as heir. Instead, a distant cousin had inherited the fleet, and the wealth and power it imparted. Too proud to bend his head to his cousin or any other, he hadn't gone to sea. But the seamen had so little regard for the beached that no landlocked position had been denied him. He had become a merchant-trader, the most successful in his village, which helped him get the attention and win the respect of both Allemen and Alleshi. Eventually, through hard work and concerted diplomacy, he had fulfilled his dream of returning to The Valley of the Alleshi, if only to live always outside, never fully accepted, but honored, needed and powerful.

The Battai knew that Ryl's life would be different if his petition were rejected by the Alleshi. The boy's people — the Birani — had been fierce warriors before joining the Alleshine Peace, not so long ago. Some of their leaders still doubted the value of Alleshine training. So Ryl would probably experience little or no stigma should he not be Blessed. Yet, the Battai's instincts, hewn over years of service to the Alleshi, told him that this boy would not be going home with his parents, that he would be accepted by the new Allesha.

Was he jealous of the boy and what he would have that had been denied the Battai as a youth? That was a demon that he had wrestled with and conquered years before. But, yes, the disappointment still lingered, a hard kernel in his heart that he kept walled away, so it seldom surfaced and wouldn't affect his work. He reminded himself that he could never have

become Battai, if he had been Blessed by an Allesha. That was one position refused to Allemen. And, while some women from his village would have considered it less than appealing to marry a landlubber, his wife appreciated the wealth and comfort the Battai could afford his family.

Yes, he had to admit to himself, with a satisfied sigh, life did have a way of balancing out.



The Battai studied the new Allesha as she poured blackberry cider for all of them — except the boy, whom the Battai served. Sitting beside her was the boy's father's Allesha, who was said to be the young one's mentor. He knew what to expect from the old one. As stern as she was, he had dealt with her for many years, so he no longer feared her — well, maybe only a little.

As the Battai nibbled at the fresh fruit and pungent cheese that wasn't really to his taste (though he dared not show anything but relish for the young Allesha's offering), he looked closer, trying not to stare. She was tall and lean with soft curves. Her breasts were generous without being large, and her hips just wide enough for comfort. She was in her early or middle forties. Younger than The Valley's other Alleshi by at least eight or ten years. He saw signs of her people, the Attani, in her long limbs, thick auburn hair and graceful manner. The way the wind whipped those open lands sculpted the populace. Their strength came from bending, like laurel trees, but never breaking — and never moving from where they planted their feet. On important matters, she'd prove to be stubborn, an immovable force.

The new Allesha smiled at the Battai, and it seemed to light up her whole being, emerging from deep inside her. "Why have you asked for this audience, Battai?" she asked, using the ancient ritual question.

With a nod, the Battai put his plate on the table and crossed his small pudgy hands comfortably on the ledge the round bulge of his stomach formed with his chest. "I bring this boy and his Petition to your attention. I would be honored if you would consider it."

"Tell me of him."

"He's rash, to be sure, but bright and quick. Though much pressure was brought to bear on him by his parents and the girl he says he loves, I do believe he is here for himself, with free will and the desire to learn. I'm told that he's an adept hunter with keen tracking skills that equal the best, but he seems to have little knowledge of or respect for farming or the other gentler skills. In war games, he is said to have won most honors, and has

been trained to the fullest ability of his village's warriors — though, he has not yet been bloodied. He should be an apt pupil in the arts of defense.”

“Hey, old man. Don't talk about me like I'm not here.”

The Battai turned to the boy, with no attempt to disguise his fury. “*Silence!* Don't shame me or yourself again with your insolence.”

The boy glared, first at the Battai, then the old woman and, finally, at the new Allesha. But the Battai noticed how the younger one held the boy's gaze and seemed to transform his anger into burning embarrassment, so that the words of contempt he would have spoken were caught in his throat.

The young Allesha turned to the Battai. “Please continue.”

“As you can see, he lacks discipline. He's a difficult boy.”

“Is he fully matured, physically?”

“Yes, and certified as hale and whole by both his village's Healer and mine.”

“But, Battai, you haven't yet told me why I should consider taking this boy.”

“This boy holds great promise, for himself and his people, the Birani, but only if he is brought to full manhood. However, he won't reach true maturity without help, help that he has refused from his parents and all others. In my opinion, only an Allesha will be able to reach him, and among the Alleshi, only a handful, such as his own father's Allesha, who has summoned us here.” The Battai nodded respectfully to the older woman, but she ignored him, as was proper. This was the younger one's interview to conduct and control.

The Battai continued, “I am told that you are trained to be such an Allesha. If that is so, here is a fitting First Boy for you.”

“I assume he has had a full share of adolescent flirtations.”

The boy huffed a bit, crossing his arms tightly across his chest, but held his tongue.

“Yes,” the Battai said. “I understand that he was a rutting annoyance for a while, though he never forced himself, being popular among the girls of his region. But he has been settled now for well over a year, having chosen one girl, who apparently also wants him. Their betrothal feast is set for next summer, if, and only if, he becomes an Alleman.”

The Allesha stared openly at the boy. Turning back to the Battai, she asked, “What have you told him about what it is to be a First Boy?”

The Battai was unprepared for the question. Did this new one mean to challenge how he handled his duties? Reflexively, he touched his gold badge of office pinned over his left breast. “I've explained the triple blessing you could offer. I've told him that to be Blessed by an Allesha is

the finest thing that can happen to a young man. Even the son of the poorest, least respected family in the land, should he be an Alleman, can aspire to be a leader, honored by all, with his pick of the best women, most fertile land, fleetest ship, or whatever it is that's prestigious among his people.

"To be a First Boy," the Battai continued, "is to have an even deeper bond with his Allesha, one that will enrich his life and hers. First Boys are rare and valued above all other men.

"And to be a Winter Boy is to share the one Season in which the Allesha can devote all her time to him, with none of the daily distractions that descend on us during our spring and autumn Seasons, when The Valley is open to the world. Thus, a Winter Boy is the most rewarded and enriched by his Allesha."

"Does he understand the responsibilities of an Alleshine agreement? Does he have the maturity to honor it for the rest of my life?" the young Allesha asked the Battai.

"Yes, everything has been arranged. Please, Allesha, be assured, I have seen to every detail."

The young Allesha studied the boy while the Battai spoke. A boy of the Birani, a son of one of Dara's own? Could it be that Dara had actually brought Mistral's son to her? Why hadn't she said as much?

Attractive and fully grown, the boy could be mistaken for a man. And, yes, there was something of Mistral's dark wildness in him. His deep-set eyes met hers without flinching. Other than the crooked nose that looked as though it had been broken more than once, his swarthy face was made of straight lines, from his high cheekbones to his fine-chiseled jaw. No more than average height, he had the type of lean body that would look tall if he didn't slouch in that chair. His lower legs shook nervously, apparently unconsciously, readying themselves to dart. Underneath his bluster, she saw that he was eager to be accepted, willing to be responsible, praying to whatever or whomever he held sacred that she would Bless him.

Yes, she decided, and it was her free will that had brought her to it. But why would Dara bring Mistral's son to her with no warning? The young Allesha rose from her seat to signal the end of the interview.

"Battai, thank you. You have discharged your duties admirably. I will give you my answer tomorrow."

The Battai bowed first to the new Allesha and then, with deeper solemnity, to the older one. The boy mimicked the man's gesture, but with less grace, his movement made awkward by a muddle of fear, anger, resentment and hope.

## Chapter 7



“Well?” Karinne asked.

“It is done,” Evanya said. “Rishana will Bless the boy.”

“Good. And Rishana?”

“I’ve done my best, but there is still so much she hasn’t been taught.”

“Anything you can’t control, Evanya?”

“Of course. You know Rishana. Has anyone ever really controlled her?”

“No, but she is a reasonable woman. Logical and capable. Strong and good hearted. No amount of training could give us all that she is. We’ll have to trust in her native abilities as we continue her training. We agreed from the beginning that she’d be a good match for the boy.”

“Yes, but...”

“But what, Evanya?”

“Karinne, you won’t believe what she suggested: a hunt on their first day. Just when we need to be close to her, guiding her through the delicate initial engagements.”

“A hunt? She is full of surprises, isn’t she?”

“You sound proud of her.”

“Yes,” said Karinne. “Yes, I am. What a wonderfully inventive idea. A hunt, indeed. Have you ever heard of an Allesha doing such a thing? And on her first day with her First Boy.”

“But it’s dangerous.”

“Rishana’s a skilled hunter. She knows our mountains and its herds as well as any.”

“Not the hunt itself, Karinne. Them going away... on her first day. What if something happens? How could we control any problems that might arise? Perhaps a more experienced Allesha might experiment...”

“Don’t you see, Evanya, how brilliant a plan it is? Keep a boy like this at home, and he’ll always think of his Allesha as nothing but a woman like other women. Take him into the woods, which he considers his domain.... Think about it. You say he’s a master tracker; well, Rishana is certainly anyone’s equal in archery or riflery. For a boy from a village in

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which women aren't even considered fit for the hunt, it will shake him as no conventional first lesson could. Yes, Evanya, we chose wisely when we decided on Rishana."

"I still wish we'd had more time."

## Chapter 8



Rishana busied herself throughout the day and into the evening, cleaning her house thoroughly, sweeping out anything from her rooms — and her mind — that wouldn't suit the boy.

Tonight, her First Season would begin.

It was still early when she finished, with hours left to fill. She felt too restless to read, write in her journal, or meditate. Besides, what she really wanted more than anything was to talk once more with Savah, Jared's Allesha.

The years had shrunk her world, taking away, one by one, those whom she could depend upon to love and protect her, whatever happened. First, all four of her grandparents in quick succession, though Grandmamma lasted longest, followed some years later by her father and soon after, her mother. But those had been natural deaths, after good long lives. Then Jared, ripped from her too soon, with such sudden, senseless violence.

The one mainstay left from her previous life was Savah — and her children, Eli and Svana. But Eli and Svana were grown and off on their own. They were still an integral part of her being, as much as the breath in her lungs which sustained her but could not be contained. However, she had long ago recognized that it was right and proper, if bittersweet, that her children were forging lives that she could share only peripherally.

Savah was the one person remaining of those she had always depended upon for help, support, sustaining love.

Now, somehow, Rishana had become the elder, a guide and guardian to the young. Not simply as a mother, or even as a village leader, but as an Allesha to a strange, troubled boy.

Time had passed so quickly; she didn't remember getting older — certainly not wiser, like Savah or Grandmamma. Who was she to guide anyone?

Was it really so long ago when she had joined with Jared as his young bride, then known as Jinet? Her heart still brimmed with memories of their first flush of love. The joy of standing by Jared's side, when their union was affirmed at the village council fire, had been marred only by

her trembling fear. For she knew that the marriage would not be sanctified until she made the requisite nuptial visit to honor the Allesha who had molded her Alleman husband. But when she had met Jared's Allesha, she had discovered a sweet grandmotherly woman whose presence exuded confidence and comfort. What's more, she had even been given the privilege of learning Jared's private name for his Allesha — Savah.

The bond between the two women had been forged with friendship, trust and love. Since Jared's murder, it had grown even deeper, through shared sorrow, need, and closer proximity. When the young widow had chosen to join the Alleshi, Savah had encouraged and sponsored her, becoming her closest advisor and supporter. At her initiation, it was Savah who had given Jinet her Alleshine name — Rishana.

How unsettling that Jinet/Rishana hadn't planned her day more efficiently so she could have spent time with Savah. Just a few minutes of comfort, reassurance and Savah's intriguing questions would have helped. Instead, the young Allesha felt so terribly alone, on the threshold of an unknowable future, without Savah's sure hand at the small of her back.

Earlier that morning, Savah had stopped on her way to the library, to organize the small collection of books that she had selected and sent over for the boy's room. But Rishana had been in the middle of a planning discussion with Dara, and Savah had come and gone before Rishana could shake herself free.

Now it was too late. Savah was certainly already on her way to the Battai's to prepare for the Signing.

Rishana sat in the front window seat and looked outside. The half-moon was beginning to rise over the mountains, casting long shadows into the dark night, beckoning to her. She decided that a brisk walk in the cool evening air was just what she needed.

The walk quickly became an all-out run, as Rishana threw her pent-up energy and nervousness into pushing her legs and arms faster, harder. What a relief it was to abandon herself to pure physical release. It made her feel younger and stronger, reminding her what it was like to be in control of her own body and life.

She swerved a few times to avoid various Alleshi, Allemen and others walking on the paths. However, they were so busy with their own Season transition concerns, they barely gave her a backward glance. That is, except one woman.

Rishana didn't notice Kiv cutting through some shrubs from another path until the older Allesha was standing only a few paces ahead, directly in her way. Rishana had to stop abruptly in her tracks to avoid colliding with Kiv.

Tall and angular, with sharp features softened by her ready smile, Kiv greeted the young Allesha in a friendly, lighthearted tone. “Hello, Rishana, where are you headed?”

Rishana quickly composed herself, not wanting to show how unsettled she was by Kiv’s sudden appearance. “I’m just getting some exercise.”

“May I walk with you?”

Rishana’s answer, “Of course,” had as much to do with curiosity as courtesy. She had never spent much time with Kiv, certainly not alone. But she’d noticed how well liked Kiv was among their sisters, many of whom sought her out for her companionship and lively mind. In Council, Rishana had been impressed with Kiv’s intelligence, but also noted the brittleness of her objections and counter arguments, especially with anything Dara had to say. Dara secretly called her The Knife, but did that have more to do with Dara than with Kiv?

Rishana initially reined in her usual quick pace in deference, but found that Kiv walked with greater energy than she had expected. Looking more closely, the young woman realized that Kiv wasn’t as old as she had thought. Perhaps only ten or twelve years her senior. Then why was she already retired from the giving of Seasons?

As they walked, Kiv’s small dark eyes slowly swept the landscape, noting all nearby activity, human or otherwise. Rishana had the impression that Kiv didn’t want them to be overheard.

“Are you ready for tonight?” Kiv asked.

“As ready as I can be.”

“Your First Boy is the son of Dara’s Mistral, isn’t he?” Kiv asked.

“Yes.”

“They are a wild people. If he ever gets to be too much for you—”

Cutting Kiv short, Rishana reminded her, “Mistral *is* an Alleman.”

“Yes, and your husband’s Triat. I know. But Dara never really gained full control of him. His son will be even more difficult, especially for a new Allesha.”

Was Kiv testing her, or did she not realize how easily her words could be taken as an insult? “Kiv, I don’t wish to be disrespectful, but I would rather not discuss my Winter Boy.”

“Please, Rishana, don’t misunderstand me. I have full faith in your ability to shape this boy into a strong, capable Alleman. I just hope you’ll remember that I’m here if you ever want to talk. It wasn’t so long ago for me that I can’t remember how confusing a First Season can be.”

If she scrubbed her perceptions clean of Dara’s disapproval of the woman, what would Rishana really see when she looked at Kiv? A

brilliant mind, certainly, but also someone who cared deeply about the Peace and might be offering her hand in friendship.

“These are difficult times to become an Allesha,” Kiv said.

“I would say they are difficult times for everyone.”

“How true.” Kiv nodded in agreement. “With the Mwertik hammering at everything we value, and our Council buckling under.”

Rishana felt her stomach twist at the mention of the Mwertik, not really wanting to talk about them, wishing she could stop thinking about them.

“Tell me, Rishana, it’s been only a few years since the Mwertik murdered Jared. Does the memory of it still keep you awake at night with questions of why it happened, and how it is that our beautiful Peace has failed so completely?”

“Failed isn’t the word I’d use.”

“No? We’ve become tame lambs grazing comfortably on the bounty we’ve accumulated around us, twitching nervously when the wolves strike, but doing nothing about it. Is it any wonder that the Mwertik’s attacks reach deeper inside our borders with every passing year? Perhaps it’s time to reshape our methods, to recognize that we must do something more than talk and trade when faced with enemies who understand nothing but violence.”

Rishana shook her head, not so much in disagreement, but because she wasn’t sure how to respond.

Kiv patted her arm. “All I ask is that you think about it.”

As they parted, Rishana accepted Kiv’s embrace, but the older Allesha’s touch chilled rather than warmed her. Was it because “The Knife” was naturally cold, as Dara claimed, or because her cuts were so incisive?

## Chapter 9



After leaving Kiv, Rishana continued her run, but it did little to dispel the disquiet she now felt. It wasn't just Kiv's comments, nor the mention of the Mwertik and Jared, that upset her. But she couldn't put her finger on exactly what the problem was.

As she approached her house, Rishana discerned a large, rotund figure of a man stopping at her gate. He looked at her closed front door, started to turn away, but then pulled something out of his pocket, wrote on it, and placed it under her gatepost message lantern.

She hurried to reach him before he could leave. "Tedrac?" she called out. "Is that you?"

"Hello, Jin—" he stopped in mid word. "Hello, Allesha. I was passing by and thought I might... But you must be busy. Don't let me disturb you. It was good to see you again." He turned to go.

"Wait, Tedrac. Please, won't you come in and visit with me for a while? It's been so long since I've seen you." She hesitated only slightly before adding, "Tedrac, please, I need to speak with you."

Bowing his head, he held his hands open in ritual greeting. "I am honored you will see me without prior arrangements, Allesha."

Tedrac, of all people, bowing his head to her!

Rishana acknowledged the gesture, and filled his hands with hers. "Tedrac, I welcome you to my home, which will always be open to you."

"No, not always, Allesha," he answered as he followed her inside.

She didn't argue the point, understanding that he wasn't so much disagreeing with her, as helping her move from the habits of their long-time relationship to the new forms. After all, she was no longer the wife of his Triat, but an Allesha on the threshold of her First Season, when her door would be closed to all outsiders.

In the kitchen, she gestured toward the table. "Please sit, Tedrac. I have blackberry cider and cheese. Or would you prefer tea and cookies?"

He eased his girth into the small bentwood chair. "Your cookies? Definitely. But please don't go to any bother."

"No bother," she said as she turned up the gas fire under her kettle. Once, many years ago, Tedrac had been walking-stick thin, but he enjoyed

cookies and other sweets too much. No, that wasn't the whole of it.

She remembered meeting Tedrac just before her wedding. He and Mistral had come to stand behind Jared as he declared himself to her at the village council fire. Only when she felt the watchful eyes of his Triats as she responded with her vow did she fully understand that in marrying Jared, she was also accepting the other two men into her life — so close are the ties within an Allemen Triad.

How different those three were from one another. Tedrac had always been the quiet one, preferring to bury himself in books rather than expend any physical energy, slowing down and retreating even more after Lorel died giving birth to their only child, a stillborn son. Mistral was the exact opposite, filled with a restlessness that would not be contained, though his step was nearly silent, and his words few. Jared had been the balance between them, the one who was comfortable within himself, wherever he was and with anyone he met.

Yes, Tedrac had been an important part of her marriage and her life. And, now, here he was: Tedrac, the renowned scholar who seldom left his library and rarely traveled from his village, which was at least a month's trek from The Valley. Why had he sought her out, tonight of all nights?

She reached for a green-enameled tin canister from a top shelf. "If I remember correctly, you have a fondness for mint tea."

"I'm honored that you remember."

Turning from the counter, she met his gaze. "Please, Tedrac, don't do that. We've known each other too long to fall into ritual. Is it so very different from the old days, sitting here in my kitchen?"

"In one word, yes. You are now an Allesha."

"Yes, I know, and Jared is no longer here beside us, connecting us." She sat in the other chair, across the kitchen table from him. "But must everything between us be erased and forgotten, now that I am an Allesha? Did the Mwertik destroy that, too?"

"Of course not. If anything, Jared's death made Mistral's and my connection to you stronger than ever, because Jared is no longer there between us."

"Did you know that Mistral's son is to be my First Boy?"

Tedrac leaned back into his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. "I heard that you would listen to his petition."

"But when I agreed to hear it, I didn't know who he was."

"Would it have made a difference if you had known?"

It was the same thing she had been asking herself since the meeting. One of many questions, none of which she had been able to answer to her full satisfaction. "Mistral's Allesha thought it might. She claims that's

why she didn't tell me... because she wanted me to judge the boy for himself."

"And you're discomforted by it." It was a statement, not a question. "You know you don't have to accept him as your First Boy. It is your choice."

"Is it, Tedrac? Is it really?"

"In the final analysis, yes. But no decision, at least none this important, can be made in a vacuum. Still, I do ask you to consider carefully. What you do today will change things for you, for your entire life."

She had seen Tedrac like this before, the consummate scholar and strategist, analyzing situations. If he followed his usual manner, he would soon be offering different viewpoints, working his way into the core of an issue, not directly but in spirals of ideas, knowledge, answers and new questions. Did he already know where he was headed tonight? Was this why he had come? "You sound like Eli."

"Oh?" Tedrac uncrossed his arms, which somehow changed his focus from portioning to gathering information. "I didn't know your son was here."

"No, not now. That was when I first came to The Valley."

"So he wasn't talking about Mistral's son?"

"No, of course not. Neither of us could have known back then that the boy would be my first Petitioner. Eli was warning me about other things, about how being an Allesha would change things for me."

"I see." He nodded his satisfaction and leaned back once more.

"Tedrac, why are you here? Was there something you wanted?"

"To pay my respects, Allesha."

"Please, Tedrac. Am I no more than a title to you?"

"Of course, you are. But you are also more than my Triat's wife, and far beyond the young woman I once knew as Jinet. What name could I use to encompass all that you have become?"

"Please call me Rishana. It is the name the Alleshi have given me."

"Then I am doubly honored, to be given your true name."

"Do you really believe that, Tedrac? That it is my true name?"

"Perhaps the question should be: do you believe it?"

"I don't know anymore. Tonight, I will shed even that, becoming a blank slate for a boy I did not truly choose for myself."

"Then don't accept him. Turn him away."

"You would have your Triat's son remain unBlessed?"

"I would prefer to not see my Triat's wife compelled."

"Does one preclude the other?"

“I’m not the one who can say, Rishana.”

“I will not send him away.”

“Then it’s decided already. But you must remember, it is your decision, and no one else’s.”

“Why is that important to you, Tedrac?”

“Because I would not have my Triat’s wife compelled.”

“Is that all? Is there no other reason you’ve come?”

“I wanted to offer my friendship, Rishana. My help, any time you might need it. My support, whenever you want it. Beyond being my Triat’s widow, or an Allesha, or even the Allesha to my other Triat’s boy. For yourself.” Tedrac leaned forward onto the table, his chair squeaking as he shifted his weight to reach toward her. “Rishana, Eli was right. Things are going to change for you, in ways you can’t possibly foresee. If I can assist in any manner, I will.”

She placed one hand over his. “Then I am the one who is honored, Tedrac.”

The kettle whistled, and she got up to prepare the tea, using dried mint leaves and bits of lemon peel, the way he liked it. When she sat down again to serve the cookies and tea, the moment had been broken. But she couldn’t shake a feeling that something more than what had been said had passed between them. And that something important, perhaps vital, had been left unsaid.

## Chapter 10



Everything changed when Ryl heard from the Battai that he was to be Blessed. He could even put up with Mistral's constant instructions as he dressed and prepared himself. However, all that noise and nonsense Pa spouted about what it would be like when they would be Allemen together had begun to grate on his nerves, especially when he realized that Mistral still hadn't accepted the fact that Ryl and Lilla were promised to each other. Not that Mistral could do anything about it. No one would ever separate them again, once Ryl was an Alleman and master of his own life.

Shria was fluttering and smiling as she came into the Petitioner's Wing to walk with them to the Battai's study, "It's near time. Are my two men ready?" She fingered the fringes of Ryl's traditional leather tunic to untangle them, straightened the front where the lacing was pulling a bit, and stood back to admire her handiwork, her dark eyes shining.

"Ma," Ryl began to protest, but refrained. Instead, he spread out his arms and pivoted around once. "Well, what do you think?"

"Oh, Ryl..." Shria choked back tears of pride. "I can't believe this day has come so quickly."

Mistral stepped forward, pulling Shria to his side. Though Mistral wasn't tall, especially when compared to the men they had seen in the inner villages on their way here, Shria was diminutive and fit neatly under his arm.

"Look, Mistral," she said. "What a fine young man we bring to the Alleshi! Wasn't it only yesterday when you carried him to the council for his Naming?" With her free hand, she pulled her son toward her, so she could have an arm around each of them. "We'll miss you terribly, Ryl, but I'm so very proud of you," she said.

She held them both, but when Ryl's hand accidentally brushed against Mistral's, where their arms were wrapped around her back, he quickly stepped away.

"Come on; let's go," Ryl said as he strode down the hallway, not looking back to see his parents following.



The Battai's spacious office had been transformed into something mysterious yet wondrous by the simple act of turning down the gas lights and filling various nooks with candles. Shadows flickered on the wall-lining bookshelves and the green ceiling-to-floor curtains that covered the large windows.

During his three long interviews with the Battai, Ryl had stared out those windows, at the trail leading down to The Valley, convinced that he would never walk that path. The view was blocked now, but in his mind's eye, the path stretched open before him. He couldn't shake the feeling that it had to be a mistake. Yet he knew that the Alleshi didn't make mistakes. Still, why did they want him, when everyone else treated him as though he were nothing but trouble?

The Battai stood as they entered. Somehow, the man seemed taller, as though his ceremonial brown wool jacket with its Alleshine green edging, collar and cuffs gave him added stature. His gold badge of office gleamed on his left breast. Instead of sitting behind his massive oak desk, he gestured to Ryl, Mistral and Shria to sit with him at the large round walnut table, to await the other signers.

The Healer arrived first, having been in the inn since the early afternoon, when she gave the boy his final examination. Old and gaunt, she had more grey than black in her hair. Her ceremonial robe of deep blue, trimmed in the blood-red symbols of her craft, made her appear more substantial than she was.

The five of them had barely been seated at the round table again when they quickly stood for another woman who entered. Her yellow robe marked her as a Storyteller, though Ryl had never seen her before. She had a thick mane of pure white hair, but her dark face was so vibrantly youthful that he couldn't decide if she were older than a granny or younger than his mother.

The Battai then left the room by a side door. When he returned, he announced, "Please greet the Allesha."

Everybody immediately stood in respect.

A short, plump woman in her late seventies or early eighties glided gracefully through the door. She wore the traditional green robe; its hem dragged along the floor. Obviously, the robe was old but well cared for, and from a time when the Allesha was younger and taller.

While she embraced the Healer and the Storyteller, the boy pulled the Battai aside and whispered, "This isn't my Allesha, is it? I'm supposed to get that new one. Right? A younger one."

The Allesha heard the boy's question. "You're correct, boy," she said. "Your Allesha awaits you below in The Valley. I am here only to see

that her Agreement is signed correctly.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know. I thought...” Ryl stumbled over his words, worried that this Allesha could break the Agreement before it could be made.

She nodded. “It’s understandable.”

After the Allesha accepted Ryl’s, Mistral’s and Shria’s ritual greetings, she sat at the table and gestured to Ryl to sit beside her. The others arranged themselves in appropriate order around the circle.

“Tell me, boy, what do you understand about the Agreement you and your parents will be signing here today?” The Allesha spoke directly to him, as though he were the only person in the room.

“Well, I’m promising to become a Defender of the Peace, an Alleman.”

“What does that mean to you?”

“I guess it means that I’ll have to fight anyone who tries to break the Peace. But I’d do that anyway. You don’t have to make me promise.”

“Yes, I am certain you would fight for our Peace. But, sometimes, the most difficult battle is learning when *not* fighting will win it for you.” She touched his hand and smiled. “Shall we read the Agreement together?”

They bent over the wide, round handwriting on the soft vellum while the Storyteller read another copy aloud.

*Blessed is the Boy, son of Mistral, Alleman, Chancellor of the Birani; son of Shria, daughter of the Healer of the Reen; and grandson of the Headman of the Birani. The new Allesha blesses this Boy and welcomes him to her home, the House of the Apple Trees, to share her First Season. And Mistral’s Allesha welcomes this Boy and his Allesha into her care.*

*The Boy acknowledges the new Allesha as head of the household and agrees to be bound to the Allesha’s words and deeds, as she wills, for the four months of their Winter Season.*

*The Boy honors Mistral’s Allesha and agrees to be bound to her words and deeds, as she wills, for the four months of the coming Winter Season.*

*The Boy and his family also agree to provision the two Alleshi, according to their needs and desires, for as long as they live.*

*The Boy vows that, for all the days of his life, he shall be a Defender of the Peace, and accepts all the responsibilities, obligations and allegiances that entails.*

*This Agreement is binding upon the Boy, his parents, his future wife or wives and any children he may have, down to the generations that*

*spring from the Boy. Also, in accordance with the traditions of the Birani, the village of the Birani assume their Chancellor's obligation as their own.*

"What do you think of it?" the Allesha asked the boy when the Storyteller had finished reading.

"It's awfully one-sided," the boy replied. "I promise to give her anything she wants, forever, and to accept whatever you Alleshi require of me as a Defender of the Peace. All she does is promise to give me a place to live for the next four months."

"This is true," said the Allesha. "Has anybody given you reason to believe it would be anything other than this?"

"Well... yeah... sure." Looking at the gentle old woman, Ryl felt twisted about and uncertain. "I mean, she's supposed to teach me stuff. How to do things, like be a leader, solve disputes, initiate me into the mysteries of... damn it... I don't know what you're trying to get me to say."

"I want you to say what you think, so I can gauge your understanding and commitment to this Agreement. So tell me, how can I judge whether you will honor it?"

"I thought that's what you're supposed to know, how to read and mold the future. Isn't that what Alleshi do?"

"We do many things. Right now, I'm asking you a question."

"Well, I've never broken a promise. Ask my pa. He doesn't like me much, but he'll say that about me."

"Son—"

The Allesha glanced at Mistral and, with a slight shake of her left hand, silenced his protest.

"Why do you honor your promises?" she asked the boy.

"Because..." Ryl hesitated; his sense of honor had always been rooted in deeds, not words. "Promises are oaths on your name. You can't let your name become nothing, mean nothing. It's not manly. It's not right."

"I see. And, if at some time in the future, you are convinced that the promise was forced on you or would lead to inequity, are you still obliged to honor it?"

"I think so. Yeah." Ryl was silent for a moment, then admitted, "I don't know."

"Good," said the Allesha "Not knowing is a good beginning."

"But you're supposed to judge whether I'll keep this Agreement, and I just said I don't know. How can that be good?"

"I'll let you think about that for a while. If, after you have been with

your Allesha for a month or so, you still don't understand, then ask her to bring you to visit me, and we'll talk about this again. Now tell me of the girl you hope will be your wife."

"Lilla." Saying her name made Ryl feel warmer, more alive, even if Mistral winced at the sound of it. Ryl couldn't understand what Mistral had against Lilla.

"Did Lilla share in your decision to come to our Valley?" the Allesha asked.

"Did she ever! Her ma wouldn't have me anywhere near her, unless I came. Unless the Alleshi accepted and Blessed me."

"Did that made you angry?"

"Yeah, it made me angry! Lilla and I love each other, belong together, and that old hag got the idea into her head that no one except an Alleman would have her daughter."

"And Lilla agreed?"

"Yeah, Lilla agreed. Her ma can turn anything around so Lilla will agree. She's a shrewd one, she is. Could even turn Lilla against me."

"So, it's thanks to the mother, whom you call an 'old hag,' that we have the pleasure of your company?"

"Well..."

"Would you be here, if it weren't for her?"

"No..."

"Are you sorry that you have come?"

The boy saw the trap too late. *Damn, this old Allesha isn't as sweet as she looks.* "No, of course not. I'm excited as anyone could be about being Blessed."

"I'm glad to hear it," said the Allesha.

"You believe me, don't you?"

"Shouldn't I?"

"Well, yeah. My word is good. It's just that... oh, I don't know. It seems that you wanted to trip me up or something."

"No, I simply wanted you to speak your thoughts, so I could know the person we are welcoming into our community. I think I now know you a bit better."

"And I'm still to be Blessed?"

"Of course. Your Allesha has already chosen you."

"So you had no say in whether I'd be accepted?"

"None whatever."

"Then why did you put me through all that?" Ryl demanded. "You'll have nothing to do with me. You're not my Allesha. You're not anything to me."

The Allesha's posture and expression remained unchanged, but Ryl felt the room chill with her disapproval. "Hey, wait, are you angry at me now?"

"Shouldn't I be? You've told me I'm nothing to you."

He frantically sought some way back to the way things were before he had screwed up yet again. But what did that matter? What did anything matter, other than getting this Agreement signed and getting down to The Valley? After a moment of silence, the boy turned to the Allesha and said, "I'm sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to insult you."

With a warm smile, the Allesha patted his arm. "I accept your apology." Then she nodded to the Battai, who spread out the three copies of the Agreement and placed ink sponges around the table and an ink bowl in the middle.

The Battai turned to the boy. "Before we begin the Signing, I must ask if you have any more questions for any of us?"

"No," Ryl answered.

"Fine. Let us begin," the Battai said.

Each person around the table rose in turn, took out a personal seal, pressed it on an ink sponge and applied it to the three copies of the Agreement. First the Healer, certifying that both the Allesha and the boy were healthy. Next, the Storyteller, who confirmed that she had studied both the Allesha's and the boy's bloodlines, and that they were free from familial or bond constraints. Then Mistral, giving his village's pledge to the two Alleshi.

But when Shria rose, Ryl was stunned. No woman of the Birani had her own seal, bound as she was by that of her father or of her husband. "Ma?" he blurted out, before he caught himself.

"You forget, son, I am of the Reen. I came to the Birani out of love for your father, but I still carry my past with me, which is as much a part of you and your future as anything that came to you from your father."

"But..." Ryl began to protest.

The Allesha asked, "You do know that each village has its own traditions, don't you?"

"But..."

"The women of the Reen are equals with the men," explained the Storyteller.

"I know."

"So, should they not also sign a contract, as men do?" asked the Allesha.

"Yeah, but my ma never did before."

Shria turned to her son. "No other contract has ever been so

important to me, not since my marriage vows were witnessed.” She moved slowly, deliberately inking her seal each time before firmly pressing it onto the three copies of the Agreement.

The Battai now spoke to the boy again. “It is time for you to sign your Alleshine Agreement.”

Ryl stood, because it seemed the right thing to do.

The Battai asked, “Do you sanction this Agreement and all that it says or implies?”

“Yes.”

The Healer asked, “Do you do this of your own free will, with no force or coercion?”

“Yes.”

The Storyteller asked, “Do you understand that accepting this Agreement may change your life in ways you neither expected nor sought?”

“Yes.”

The Allesha asked, “Do you promise to uphold the Alleshi, to honor us and obey our will, and to be a true and formidable Defender of our Peace, for as long as you live?”

“Yes.”

“*Done!*” exclaimed the Battai, who now reached for the boy’s right hand and pushed it into the bowl of red ink.

“Hey!” Ryl protested.

“Your right hand is the seal of a Blessed Boy,” said the Battai. “Now, press it onto each copy of the Agreement.” The boy obeyed, and when he had sealed the third copy, the Battai clapped the boy on his back, while handing him a damp cloth to wipe his hand. “Well done.”

The Allesha rose and spoke to the boy. “Blessings on you, boy. We accept you into our community and honor you as one of our own.” She pressed her seal onto the Agreements, binding the Alleshi to the boy.

The Battai poured seven glasses of wine from a decanter and raised his. “I propose a toast to the boy and his Allesha.”

“To the boy and his Allesha,” all rejoined.

“To my Allesha,” Ryl added, in awe and wonder, but still not trusting that any of this could truly be happening to him.

## Chapter 11



The forest smelled of the crisp end of autumn. The moon hadn't yet crested over the mountaintops, and the sky that showed through the leafless trees was filled with stars. Along the easy, generations-worn trail that wound down the mountain to The Valley, the boy and the old man walked side by side in silence, lost as they were in their thoughts. The Battai carried a lantern to light the way.

A sad sweetness seeped into the Battai's heart, of hope for the lad mingled with his own sense of time irretrievably lost. It was always such for the Battai, this final duty, taking a boy to his Allesha.

At a clearing near the end of the woods, the boy turned to the Battai, "You usually have so much to say. Why are you quiet now?"

"I was waiting to see if you have any last questions for me."

The Battai purposely slowed his pace to give the boy time to think. They continued walking, listening to the crunch of leaves underfoot.

"What questions should I ask?" The boy stared at the glimpses of The Valley lights through the dark wood, rather than looking directly at the Battai. His tone was uncharacteristically tentative. "I mean, are there any other things I should know that will help me?"

"What kind of help do you mean?"

"What happens when I get there?" The boy jabbed his hand in the direction of The Valley. "She's pretty old. Probably as old as my ma. I've never had a woman that old. Do I treat her like a teacher or a lover or what?"

"Treat her as you would any woman or man, with respect and good will." As the Battai spoke, he unconsciously shook his head, knowing this boy still had much to learn about respect and good will. But he quickly disciplined his actions and tone, reminding himself to keep his voice non-judgmental and his manner impassive. "She will be many things to you. Head of the house. Lover. Teacher. Friend. And what she will be will change often. After all, as I've explained to you, that's what the title Allesha literally means — Every Woman. So it is that an Allesha must be many women, to give what—"

"No!" The boy interrupted. "None of your philosophy, Battai. I need

something I can use, now, tonight. Do I embrace her in greeting or open my hands in the traditional way or wait for her to approach me? What's this nonsense about naming her?"

"I've no doubt your village Storyteller has already taught you about the significance of naming."

"Yeah." The boy shrugged, then in a whining singsong voice that the Battai assumed was supposed to mimic a Storyteller, he recited the lesson. "Relationships define us. Important bonds and pacts change us. And the names we share within the privacy of those relationships represent this, sealing us to the 'other.'"

"So it will be with your Allesha."

"But so many names... how many can you have? One for every relationship? That'd be dozens of names. Maybe more. It's unnatural."

"Nothing is more natural. The Alleshi have simply taken what we already do, what our people have always done, and imbued it with layers of meaning we might not have otherwise recognized." The Battai paused, realizing that the boy wasn't ready to understand the nuances and import of name giving. Instead, he decided to take another tack. "You've already experienced this. What is your Father's name?"

"Mistral. Mistral of the Birani. You know that."

"Yes, but you don't call him Mistral of the Birani, except when you speak of him to strangers. If you were talking to others about a man related to you, you might say, 'my father.' In conversation with him, I've heard you call him 'Pa,' though I'm sure your name for him has changed as you've grown and your relationship has changed. You probably even have a name you use when you're angry with him. But none of your names for your father are those used by his wife or his Allesha."

"Sure, but how do I do it — name her?" The boy shook his head. "Skies! That's not important right now. Tell me about tonight and tomorrow morning. Will there be some initiation or ritual or something? What do I do or say to please her and get me into that inner room?"

"There's no second guessing any Allesha. All I can suggest is what I said before. Eventually, you will learn how to act, because that's one of the important things an Allesha teaches her boy."

Gradually, the forest gave way to cultivated greenery, the winding dirt path became a groomed gravel walkway, and the hills flattened to The Valley — so slowly that the Battai wondered if the boy noticed. Then again, this boy seemed to notice little that didn't directly and immediately affect him.

"But what about tonight, old man, what about the sex?"

"There'll be no sex for you tonight."

The boy stopped abruptly and pulled on the Battai's shoulder to swing him around, so the two of them were face to face. "What do you mean? Why not?"

"You'll have no intimacy until you are intimate."

"Now you're talking nonsense, old man."

"Until you understand how far from nonsense I'm speaking, you'll not learn any of what your Allesha has to give." The Battai started walking again.

"Well, that's what you're supposed to be doing, helping me understand." The boy followed the Battai, catching up to him easily. "Right, old man? That's part of what my pa paid you for. So explain. I want you to be able to tell her I understand, so we don't waste any time getting to that inner room."

"I won't be telling your Allesha anything. It will be up to you. She'll watch you, and, being an Allesha, she'll know when you're ready. Just try to remember this: attempting to control an Allesha will be a losing battle. Play her neither for a fool, nor for a weak opponent. She's shrewder and more powerful than anyone you have ever met." The Battai gestured to the slate-roofed cedar-shingled one-story house in front of them. "This is where I leave you. I wish you well, boy."

No lights shone through the front windows, which surprised the Battai. Wondering what the new Allesha had planned for this boy, he was certain of one thing: it would be an interesting match.

The boy seemed to want to say something, but nothing came out of his mouth. The Battai clapped him lightly on the back, pushing him forward through the gate. Knowing his role was finished, the Battai extinguished his lantern and quickly disappeared into the darkness.

The boy turned once more and, not seeing the Battai, whispered to the shadows, "Goodbye, old man... and thank you."

He walked through the open front outer door of his Allesha's home and called out "Hello?" in a thin, uncertain voice. Then he rapped tentatively on the inner door.

The Battai stood there for some time, watching the house from a distance, knowing he would see nothing, for he could go this far and no farther. Eventually, he made his way home through the cool night air, alone.

## Chapter 12



When there was no answer to his knock, Ryl poked his head inside, and called out tentatively, “Hello?”

No answer. *Could it be she’s hard of hearing?*

He left his coat, pack, satchel, bow and quiver in the vestibule between the inner and outer doors and cautiously stepped into the darkened greeting room. “Hello? Ouch! Damn.” He rubbed his shin where it had jammed into some low-lying piece of furniture. “Anyone here?”

“I’m in the kitchen. Come on in.”

He hated the relief he felt at the sound of her voice, the soft femininity that offered solace from the fears he didn’t want to acknowledge. Behind him was the empty night and others’ expectations of him. His unknowable future lay ahead, behind the black silhouette of a dark door framed by the light of the room beyond.

The kitchen was so brightly lit by gas globes that he had to blink to accustom his eyes after the deep dark of the evening. The Allesha stood at a stone counter with her back to him. Wearing a food-stained wraparound apron over a simple belted green dress, she showed a bit more leg than he was used to seeing in a mature woman. But then, those were legs worthy of showing.

“Please excuse my back,” she said without turning toward him. “If I don’t spoon the jam when it’s at this temperature, the whole thing will be ruined. I hope you like bealberries. The harvest was good this year, so we have quite a bit preserved for the winter. Ah, there, that’s the last of them.”

She turned, looked at him quite seriously, then erupted into one of the most dazzling smiles he’d ever felt. “Welcome to my home... I should say *our* home, because that’s what it will be for the next few months.” She wiped her hands on the apron before placing them on his shoulders. They were about the same height so that she looked directly into his eyes. Then she quickly brushed her lips on each of his cheeks.

It was over before he had time to react. In fact, she had him sitting at the square oak table, though he wasn’t sure how he had gotten there. She hadn’t pushed him or anything. It was just those light, almost

weightless kisses, and then he found himself seated across the table from her.

“Are you hungry? I don’t suppose you had your supper.”

“No, ma’am.”

Looking across the table at her, he knew she was only an arm’s reach away — but not *his* arm. His entire being was enshrouded in an itchy wool cocoon. It was a familiar discomfort, enclosing him, rooting him to the chair, as though he weren’t quite in this room but apart from it and her.

“No to which, the hunger or the supper?” she asked.

“No, I haven’t had supper, so I guess I’ll be getting hungry soon, ma’am.”

“Good.” The word propelled her out of her chair. “The day was so filled with preparation, I didn’t find the time to eat, either. I’ll have a meal together for us shortly. Don’t bother to help this time. Just sit there and talk to me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He felt as if he were a watcher at a Storyteller’s tableau, but what he was watching was his own life. For almost as many years as he could remember, he had struggled, lashing out in anger even when he didn’t want to, but had to, to break free of the deadening. Only with Lilla had it been effortless to step into the flow of his life, making it fully and truly his own. With Lilla, and when hunting, and sometimes when he was alone with his mother in her kitchen.

The Allesha set the table with homespun mats and napkins, pewter forks and bone-handled steel knives suitable for a headman’s hunt banquet. He picked up the knife in front of him and felt the finely-honed edge with his thumb. *Superb. No old wife’s knife this.* He bounced it in his hand, appreciative of the heft and balance. When he saw she was watching him, he quickly put the knife back on the table, in the exact same place and position.

She pulled a large covered clay pot from the oven. “It’s roast chicken. Which do you prefer: white meat or dark?”

“If we could use some of those hot bealberries as a sauce, I’ll take white meat. Otherwise, a leg and thigh would be good.”

“White meat it is.” She placed a blue and white pottery plate brimming with carrots, small white potatoes, chicken and hot berry sauce in front of him, and a similarly generous one at her place. In the middle of the table was a rattan basket filled with fresh baked hard-crust bread and a tub of sweet butter. An earthen jug beside the basket held cool spring water.

“Please start eating; don’t let it get cold.” She whipped off the apron, sat down, picked up her knife and fork, then looked at him and put them back down on the table. “Or do your people practice some thanksgiving ritual before meals?”

He shrugged, and heard his voice echo in his own skull. “Some do. I don’t, except when my parents insist. Usually, I just set aside bits of food for the spirits that live beyond our gate. Still, maybe this meal is different because it’s our first together.” Though he’d never tried it, letting a woman think she’d inspired a man to prayer had to be an effective way to impress and seduce.

“Yes, it is a special night, but hollow prayers can turn around and become a curse.”

“Why’d you say that?” *Damn, is she reading my mind?*

“Please let us start this out right, with honesty.” She reached with her right hand to touch the fingertips of his left. “You don’t strike me as one who would bow his head in prayer. I can’t imagine you bowing your head for anything or anyone. You face all that comes to you straight on, looking it in the eye, in confrontation or friendship or both, but always directly. If I’m mistaken, please tell me. Is praying at the table something you would do without being asked, because the words sprang of their own spirit from your inner self?”

“Not usually.” *If she already knew the answer, why did the woman ask the question?* “Skies! You’re right. Mouthing words is useless. It’s only what a person does that counts.”

“Well said and very true. Should you ever be moved to pray, to give thanks, I would be honored to share that with you. For now, shall we put some of our food on this saucer for the spirits, so we may take it outside after our meal?”

“Okay.”

He chose and cut a small tender portion from each food on his plate and put it in the saucer; she followed suit with offerings neither less nor more than his.

But it felt *wrong*, this ordinary dinner, in a kitchen that was nicer than any he’d ever seen, but still just a kitchen. And, yet, sitting across the table, eating a meal she had prepared for him, was an Allesha. *His* Allesha, if he were to believe everything that had transpired.

He took a bite of chicken dunked in the berry sauce. “This food is good. I was hungrier than I thought. Thanks, ma’am.”

“‘Ma’am’ sounds terribly formal, don’t you think? I’m assuming you know that one of the first responsibilities of a Blessed Boy is to name his Allesha.”

“They told me that. But... well, I’m not sure I know how to do that, ma’am.”

“You will.” While she buttered a piece of bread, she asked, “How was your day? I understand you took off for the forest in the early morning.”

He hadn’t slept the night before and had gone wandering before dawn when he couldn’t stand it anymore. All the waiting to hear the Alleshi’s decision. And those damned empty reassurances from everyone, when he knew and they knew that no Allesha worthy of the title would give him a second glance.

But here he was, and he still couldn’t understand how it could have happened. Would she realize her mistake? Could she still send him away? Or was she playing some game? Was he there only to be laughed at when they told him the truth: that he really wasn’t a suitable candidate? *So sorry, but get the hell out of here.*

He shifted in his seat and poked at his food.

“Our mountains are beautiful. I don’t fault you for wanting to lose yourself in them,” she continued. “But today wasn’t your last opportunity to be in our forest. I hope we’ll have many walks together in the woods, even when they’re bare and covered with snow.” She paused to savor a small bite of the chicken. “Actually, I was thinking... how would you like a hunt tomorrow? I was in my coldhouse today, checking our winter provisions, and there’s still space for some meat. Would you join me in a hunt?”

“So that’s why you chose me.” The words erupted before he could swallow them. But once spoken, he allowed them to carry him, crashing clumsily through the cocoon’s barrier into his life. “I knew there had to be a catch. You needed a hunter to supply your table. Guess I’ll be doing that for the rest of my life.”

“Are you trying to be insulting, or are you really that insecure?” She stared at him, as though he were standing naked.

“Skies! I didn’t mean to...”

“No! Don’t apologize yet. Listen first, and learn. Even if I never Blessed a boy, I’ll always have whatever I need, for both comfort and sustenance. So, why do you think you had to sign the Agreement today?” The Allesha’s eyes were full of fire, her body suddenly rigid. “It is a symbol of the bond between us; I am your Allesha and you are my First Boy, my Winter Boy. We are responsible to and for each other, until my spirit leaves my body.”

She closed her eyes and took two deep breaths. In the sudden stillness, he sat rigidly, uncertain what he could say or should do, but

knowing something was necessary.

When she opened her eyes, she asked, “Now, do you have something to say to me?”

“Yeah, I’m... uh... sorry.” He grimaced. “Sometimes, my mouth rushes ahead faster than my mind.”

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand firmly before starting to clear the table. That smile again, it was like sunshine breaking over a rain-soaked field, where only dark clouds had hovered seconds before. He welcomed the warmth of her smile, wanting it to go on forever. But she turned her back too soon, taking their plates to the sink.

“So, did you bring your bow, or do you need to borrow one?”

She put the leftover food in covered earthen dishes and placed them in the large varnished wood icebox, moving about the kitchen so quickly he had difficulty guessing where she would go, what she would do next.

“Yeah, I brought my bow. But don’t you have any rifles?” he asked hopefully.

“Of course we do. However, where’s the adventure or fair play in gunning down wild game? We use rifles for defense or when food is the only purpose of the hunt. But when I want to lose myself in our beautiful mountains, a bow is quieter, more sporting. Don’t you agree?”

“Sure. I just didn’t want you to think I don’t know how to handle a gun. My village has had them for a few generations, ever since we came into the Peace.” He didn’t bother mentioning that only a handful of Birani had their own rifles, and that the only time he’d shot a gun was when he had sneaked away to the woods with his father’s old smoothbore. Skies! He’d never seen Pa so angry.

“Yes, of course. So, we’re agreed. We’ll take our bows.”

She picked up the rest of the cutlery and plates from the table, put them into the sink and quickly wiped down the table and counters. “The Allesha who brought us together wishes to come to our house tonight, to welcome you to The Valley.” She handed him two wooden matches. “Please light the candle in the gatepost lantern to signal her. While you’re out there, please set out our offerings to the spirits.”

When he returned, she showed him to his room, to unpack and settle in, while she continued to clean the kitchen. “If you’re finished before me, you can come and help. But tonight isn’t for chores. We’ll work that out later.”



The yellow-painted bedroom was large, with big multi-paned

windows on the outer wall that must let in lots of sunshine during the day. As the Chancellor's son, Ryl was accustomed to comfort, but no one he knew — not even his grandfather with his headman's privileges — had a room as spacious and richly appointed as this.

The red maple furniture was substantial but simple, with straight, clean lines. Definitely a man's room, though with touches of femininity in the bed's patchwork quilt, the needlework cushions of the armchair, the forest-green linen curtains and the delicately painted bone knobs of the tall chest of drawers. Volumes of various sizes filled a low two-shelf bookcase. Gas lamps were placed on either side of the bed, next to the armchair, on the bureau — more and brighter lights than he'd ever seen in any bedroom. *These people must spend time in their bedrooms*, he thought, *doing things into the night that require lots of illumination*. He hoped that included activities other than reading. On one wall, two doors led to a small closet and a bathroom.

A number of the boys he had met in the Petitioners' Wing had been confounded by the advanced conveniences of the Battai's inn baffling. Not Ryl. His village had been converted from candle and oil to gas when Ryl was a child, so he knew how to use the keys on the pipes to turn gas lamp flames up or down. Similarly, he was already familiar with indoor bathrooms having flushing toilets and knew how to use those facilities, too. After all, his father had been the first in their village to build one, though some of their neighbors had warned against malodorous fumes and dirty water fouling the health of the home.

But the boy's pride and sense of superiority in his father's modern ways dissolved when he saw the spacious bathroom attached to this bedroom. Until then, he hadn't understood the measure of the Alleshi's great wealth. Both the large porcelain bathtub and the sink had two knobs; when he tested them, one produced icy cold water like at home, while the other pulsed with streams of steaming hot, like the shower at the Battai's. So much better than heating the water from the kitchen pump in his mother's iron caldron and then lugging it in that damned wooden bucket. What's more, even the air was warm, with the heat emanating from a tight rectangular coil of pipes under the small window. Even here, two wall shelves were filled with books, and several gas lamps filled all corners with light. They obviously expected him to spend some time in this bathroom, at least long enough to read.

*Peculiar people, these Alleshi*. Though looking about, he had to admit it would be pleasant to just sit in a bathtub like this, with hot water pouring over him. Did every bedroom in The Valley have a bathroom like this? How much more extravagant his Allesha's must be, if this were what

was given a visitor they considered a mere boy.

The fourth door in his bedroom was locked. Did she sleep beyond, or was it the portal to that inner room the Battai had promised he would share with his Allesha? How could he get her to unlock it? When?

*Damn these women with their rituals and ways, talking and taking their time, driving a man crazy with wondering and wanting.*

He was almost finished unpacking when he heard a light knock at the door. "Our mentor is here. Please come greet her," his Allesha said through the closed hallway door.



The two women were seated on the sofa. One of them must have just said something hilarious, because they were shaking with laughter. They stopped abruptly when they saw him.

"Hey, don't stop on my account. I like a good joke as much as any man," he said.

His Allesha turned to him. "It was nothing. Just silliness between two friends that would take too many words to explain, and then it wouldn't be funny anymore."

*Bet they were laughing at me. We'll see who laughs last.*

His pa's Allesha got up to greet him. Ryl opened his hands to her in the traditional greeting given an Allesha, expecting her to fill them with hers, as she always had. Instead she put her two hands on his shoulders, pulling him toward her and brushed her lips on his two cheeks. The same gesture as the younger one's, but how different it felt. Her lips were dry, not soft. Her smell was sweet, rather than fresh and breezy.

"Blessings on you, boy, and welcome to our Valley. May your Season with your Allesha be joyous and fruitful."

"Uh, thanks."

"Come, sit with us." She patted the armchair next to the sofa.

The younger woman lifted a white porcelain kettle from its candle stand. "May I pour you some tea?"

"Okay... thanks," he said.

"It's natural for you to feel a bit strange tonight. Don't let it bother you," the older Allesha said. "We have some things to discuss, which may help you feel more comfortable. It's always easier when you know the boundaries and what's expected. First, however, do you have any questions for me?"

"Yeah, everyone says I have to name her. How do I do that?"

"Ah, the giving of names. Actually, you'll have two names to give,

one for me, as well.” She paused to sip her tea, then continued. “To name a thing or person properly is to seek to understand and, yes, in some part to possess its essence. But the essence of a thing is so changeable, that the naming of it says as much about the namer as it does about the thing being named.”

Her words seemed double-edged, as though she had a secret obvious to everyone but him. “How can an essence — the core of a thing — be changeable? That doesn’t make any sense.”

She held up a small cake. “Name the essence of this.”

“Food.”

“True. But to a baker, it might be flour, sugar and water. A Healer might see it as a dual essence: a pleasant sweetness in moderation, but danger in excess.” She took a bite, leaving half. “Now, it could be seen as proof of someone having been here, taking nurturance, leaving only half satisfied or so sated as to need nothing more.” She put the cake down and wiped her fingers on her linen napkin. All the time, she watched him, as though he were a rabbit about to spring her carefully laid snare.

“So it is in the naming of people. The names you choose for us should have layers of meaning,” the older Allesha continued. “We will change over the next few months because of our relationship with you. Your perceptions of us will evolve, too. Whatever names you give us should fit us today and next week and next year.”

“That’s stupid. You’ve already got names; I’ll just use those.”

“What names we have, we have received in relationships which have nothing to do with you or why you have come here. Those that you give us will define a whole new role for us — and for you. It will mark the true beginning of your Season with us.”

“What if I can’t find the right names?”

“Then the lessons you want and need the most will remain out of your reach.”

“That’s not fair!” The boy saw the know-all look the older Allesha gave the younger one. How he hated the way people did that, judging him before he even had a chance to prove them wrong. “So, if I don’t come up with names you approve of by some complicated rules I can’t hope to understand, you’ll refuse to teach me.”

His pa’s Allesha shot him a warning glance, so like the looks his father sometimes gave him just before the yelling began — or worse, the silence. *But Fire and Stones! If she already knows what I’m thinking, all this tiptoeing around is pointless.* “No sex, then, is that what you’re saying? So why did I go through all that crap?” He threw his napkin at the table, frustrated by its floating, lofting, soundless fall. Too bad he hadn’t

held onto his teacup. That would have made a satisfying crash.

“Calm down, boy. We will refuse you nothing you need,” the older Allesha said.

“But you just said...”

“To reach a level of intimacy with your Allesha and with me, in which we can be effective, you must give something of yourself. Without names, we are nothing to you, only symbols, two of the many Alleshi. Your naming of us will make us flesh-and-blood women.”

She clasped the young Allesha’s hand. “It’s time for me to go. Thank you for the tea.” Then she turned to the boy. “You will walk me home. I want you to know where to find me.”

The younger woman embraced them both at the door. She said to the boy, “We’ll leave before dawn tomorrow. Please be sure to close the outer door before you go to sleep. Good night.”



Now that the moon had risen, the night was bright. With the instinct of a woodsman to blend in, the boy extinguished the lantern he carried, and the woman followed his example. They walked for a few moments in silence. When she spoke, her voice scythed through the cool, soft air, commanding his full attention.

“You will be coming to my home often,” she said. “Mostly, it will be at prearranged times, although you’ll be welcome in my house any time the outer door is open. But do not wander from this path and do not enter any other building without permission. There are rules to be abided here and never broken.”

*Rules. When weren’t there rules?* “Like what?”

“I’ve already told you the one: Never go into any building other than my home and that of your Allesha. Do not walk off on your own, away from your Allesha’s home, without her permission, and do not deviate from the path you are to take. Do not speak to any other boy in The Valley, until the end of your Season. You may see them about, though almost always with their Alleshi, since you are the only First Boy this winter. Speak only to those Alleshi who address you first. Don’t—”

“Whoa! How do you expect me to keep track of all these rules of yours?”

“Simply use common sense, courtesy and respect for privacy whenever you don’t know the right thing to do, and you should have no problems. Ask your Allesha or me if you’re uncertain how to behave.”

They stopped in front of a two-story wood and stucco house, sur-

rounded by a stone wall. It was taller and took up less land than his Allesha's, with large evergreen bushes close to the building. The one thing the property had in common with the others he had seen in The Valley was the sense of solid construction and the feeling that the house and garden fit each other.

"This is my home. My outer door is closed because I've been away for the evening. Remember, come when you wish, when that door is open, or set a candle in your Allesha's signal lantern, if you want me to come to you. I'm giving this Season to you, as much as your Allesha is. The two of us will work hard to make it a good Season for you. But how good it will be, will be up to you."

"Yeah, I've heard that."

"Someday you will understand it. Goodnight, boy. Go directly home to your Allesha. I'll see you when you return from your hunt." She embraced him with her dry mouth on his cheeks and her long bony hands on his shoulders. Then she turned to enter her home.

*Strange woman*, he thought, as he retraced his steps along the path to his Allesha. *But at least a man can know where he stands with her.*

## Chapter 13



By the time dawn had brushed first light onto The Valley floor, the boy and his Allesha had already hiked up the mountain, far from the paths to the inns and tradegrounds, traveling toward the wilderness above the ungroomed forest between the Northwest and West Inns. They stopped for a cold breakfast at a clearing. As they ate fruit and chicken, he studied her. How different she seemed from the woman who had greeted him the evening before.

Her auburn hair, which shone with the very colors of the dawn, was woven into long plaits that fell over her shoulders. Somehow, it made her seem young, even vulnerable, yet strong and self-sufficient. The way she had sprinted up the trail, sure-footed and long-legged, in her doeskin pants and boots, she seemed the image of a young woodsman, born to the forest. Now, her soft, beautifully tanned jacket fell open as she ate, and he saw the swelling rhythm of her breath in the tight knit of her tan jersey. How round her breasts were. Not bad at all, his luck in getting a new Allesha, rather than an old one.

“What about Mari? It’s a good name, don’t you think?” the boy suggested.

“Why?”

“Well, it’s pretty, like you.”

“But was I pretty yesterday? Will I be tomorrow? What do you think? Does it fit?”

He had no answer that wouldn’t get him in trouble.

“You’ll find it.”

They cleaned the site and continued their trek uphill. The way was neither clear nor rough, but pleasantly wild. Tall bare trees scratched a blue sky, with the promise of a crisp, bright day. Light breezes blew the brown leaves in gentle whirls. They walked without talking, as is the way of hunters, climbing steadily upward. By noon, they saw their first fresh signs of long-tail eladar. A small herd had passed that way very recently, headed west. However, the Allesha set her feet toward the north.

“Hey, you’re going the wrong way,” he corrected her.

“That’s not the herd we want. It’s already been winnowed.”

It wasn't natural, letting a woman lead a hunt, but he wasn't concerned. When she messed up, he'd take over. They'd not go back empty-handed with him doing the tracking.

They saw no more signs of eladar for the rest of the day — at least none fresh enough to merit following. Before the late afternoon sunset, each of them brought down a some partridges for their dinner. Watching her take aim and strike her prey had been quite a sight. Her arrows flew true at first shot, and her bow arm was strong.

"Who taught you to hunt?" he asked as they made camp.

"My father and mother."

"Your father *and* your mother?"

"Yes. You sound surprised."

"Women don't usually hunt. They're not built for it."

"Oh, really?" She stood apart and mimed a huntress stalking her prey. "We're lighter, tend to be more graceful, quieter when we walk." With an almost silent leap, she was by his side again, helping to snap kindling for the fire. "Did you know, in some villages, only women hunt, and men are expected to do the heavier work?"

"If you say so, but it's still not right. Yeah, I like it when Lilla comes with me into the woods. But I do the hunting."

"What does she do?"

"Keeps me company for the trek. Then stays and makes the camp, while I get the game. It's nice to come back to her in a clearing that she's made our own."

The fire built and lit, she popped up again, tousling his hair in a quick, playful swipe. "Well, no one could ever expect me to stay behind when there's fun to be had." She spread some leaves and fronds for cushioning under her blankets. "Nor do I expect anyone living under my roof to stand apart when there are chores to be done." She pointed to an area on the other side of the fire. "That looks like a nice spot for your bedding."

He pounded the dry earth with a log, using more energy than necessary for stamping out ground lumps. *Damn*, he reflected, *she not only expects me to help make camp, but she still isn't sleeping with me.*

"What about Jan. I like that name, don't you?" he asked. "It's solid and strong, like you, and pretty, too. What do you think?"

"I think you're not sure."

By the time their blankets were spread and leather flasks filled from the nearby stream, the fire had collapsed into glowing embers, where she buried their potatoes. When he saw that she intended to dress only her two birds, he plucked and prepared his, in angry silence.



The young Allesha relished the quiet of her beloved wild woods. Every year, usually after the last harvest, she and Jared would take off together like this, leaving the children with family or friends. Making love by night, hunting by day, giving themselves fully to the wilderness surrounding them.

But in the years before his death, his missions had taken him away from her more and more, and they hadn't managed to find the time. She wished she had recognized the last hunt with Jared for what it was, something that would never be repeated, an ending too precious to have been treated like any other outing together.

How different everything was now. She was unable to give herself freely to the forest, because her First Boy needed her to adhere to a role, to be whatever and whomever necessary to help him grow and become an Alleman. When the Mwertik had butchered Jared, they'd killed more than an Alleman. They'd killed the woman she had been with Jared.

The sounds of late autumn on this mountain were more subtle than those heard in summer. A rustling breeze, a night bird's wings slipping through the air, small scampering paws. She gazed at the shimmer of red and gold hovering over the burning logs. When she spoke, it was softly, unwilling to disturb the peace. "On a night like this, the world seems to stand still. Nothing exists outside the light of our fire. I wonder if this is what it was like when the earth was born. Did it spread out from a campfire, stirred by some god playing with the embers?"

The boy seemed just as captivated by the mystery of the night. Staring into the fire, he spoke freely. "Our Storyteller spins a tale of life lost in a great ocean, thrown there in the beginning by Promin, because it wouldn't be still. But even in the deep of the sea, it bubbled with noise, until the ocean threw it out onto land. There, on the sand, it struggled to breathe the dry air, reviving only when the waves washed over it. But the waves withdrew, taking only the fish and coral back, for the beauty of their colors. All others were left, orphaned, to die or grow."

He paused to pull his cooked birds off the spit. Taking the scorching potato that she poked out of the fire with a stick, he gingerly bounced it from hand to hand, until it was cool enough to hold and eat.

She prodded him to continue. "To die or to grow..."

It took him a moment and a few bites of food to find the thread again. "Umm... and so life pushed its way up from the beach toward the forest and mountains. The weaker and the more foolish took root in the

low lands. Only man made it to the summit of the tallest mountain. When he looked down, he knew that Promin had made him the strongest and most intelligent, to hold his place on high, above the rest of creation.”

“But do you think it was Promin’s purpose to give man the struggle so that he might prevail? Or was it an accident that sprang from one god’s irritability?” she asked.

“It’s just a story.” He shrugged. “It’s the fire. It makes men silent or talkative. I don’t usually ramble on with Storytellers’ nonsense.”

“I enjoy such tales,” she said. “Especially how a story changes with each telling, revealing something of the person who shares the tale. Don’t scowl; it’s nothing to guard against. You’ve given me a lovely gift.”

“If that’s so, show me something of yourself. Or are you scared to give me some of the advantage you now say you have over me?”

“I didn’t speak of any advantage.”

“No, but that’s what you meant. I exposed myself to you, and got nothing out of it in return.”

“Here, let me give you something of myself. I care nothing for such *advantages* as you see it. Let’s see...” She paused to think and eat. “Yes, I remember another creation tale you might enjoy.” She tore off the last bit of meat from the bird’s bones, chewed it daintily while she composed herself, wiped her hands on a few leaves and then settled into a comfortable storytelling pose.

“It is said, in the beginning, everything was One, alone and complete. Nothing existed beyond the One. But even the One must obey Nature. The first law of Nature is that nothing may live that doesn’t grow, and growth comes only from sharing. But the One had no one other, so the One began to shrink and die. That was when the One realized that the only way to survive was to break apart into the Many and the Multitude. And the One became the stars and the sun, the moon and the earth, the trees of the forest and the flowers on the plains, the animals of the land and the birds of the sky, Man and Woman. Ever since then, the One in all of us has been trying to find itself in the Others. That is why we are drawn to one another, to share, to unite, to be the One once again.”

“Did you make that up?” he asked.

“No, it was told to me by my mother.”

“It sounds like a woman’s tale.”

“Really? She told me her grandfather had given it to her.”

“I didn’t mean that as an insult. Women’s tales can be good, too.”

“Thank you.”

“Why do I feel that you didn’t take that right?” he asked.

“I suppose because you don’t consider a ‘woman’s tale’ to be the

equal of a man's."

"Did I say that?"

"Don't worry so. We've had a pleasant evening; we've given something to each other that neither had before. Tomorrow, we'll find our eladar. Let's say goodnight and sleep the deep of the forest." She embraced him, with that now familiar two cheek brush of her lips, then wrapped herself up in her blankets before he could think of a retort.

Listening to the fire popping and the breeze rustling through the woods, he looked at the back of her long, curved body across the campsite from his own bedroll. *Steel would be a good name for her*, was his last thought before he gave himself to a dreamless sleep.

#### END OF EXCERPT

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## *Addenda*

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### **ABOUT SALLY WIENER GROTTA**

Sally Wiener Grotta is the consummate storyteller, reflecting her deep humanism and sense of the poignancy of life. As an award-winning journalist, she has authored many hundreds of articles, columns and reviews for scores of glossy magazines, newspapers, journals and online publications, plus numerous non-fiction books. Her fiction includes the novel *Jo Joe* which was published by Pixel Hall Press in 2013 to critical acclaim.

She is currently working on *Sex Witch*, the next Alleshine novel, about the Mwertik, Jinet/Rishana, Dov/Ryl, Lilla and Kiv.

Sally Wiener Grotta is a frequent speaker at conferences, schools and other organizations on storytelling, creativity, photography, and the publishing industry. She welcomes invitations to participate in discussions with book clubs and other reading groups (via Skype, Google Hangout, online chat, phone or occasionally in person). She is sometimes available to do readings. You can also connect with her on Twitter ([@SallyWGrotta](https://twitter.com/SallyWGrotta)), Facebook ([Facebook.com/SallyWienerGrotta](https://www.facebook.com/SallyWienerGrotta)), and her website ([Grotta.net](http://Grotta.net)).

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Sally Wiener Grotta

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