



Alia Waking

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*Alia
Williams*

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藏书章

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Keentens, a sisterhood of warrior women, but after a punishment
caring for captives, Alia begins to question everything that once
was certain in her life.

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Alia Waking

*For Cerridwyn and Magdalene,
with all my love*



*And for Colin,
who has taught me so much about
faith and courage*

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One

*A*lia ran swiftly and silently. As she reached a shaggy needle tree, the sound of grunts and cracking twigs came from beyond her. Then, near one of the forest's many thorn bushes, Alia saw a face and a brown tunic. She crouched, hiding herself behind the tree's draping branches.

Alia peered around bunches of long green needles. The face and the tunic were gone. She could see nothing but the silent forest: thick trunks; spindly trunks; dead, hollowed-out trunks. The wind brought her no scent of the other children she knew were close by. Instead, she smelled wood smoke, last night's chill, and something else she had no name for—a spicy scent that the trees seemed to wear when the days grew shorter and colder. But now was no time to close her eyes and smell the fall's breath. No skirmish, not even a mock skirmish such as this, was won by closing one's eyes.

Alia hunkered down on her heels and held herself very steady, waiting. As she listened to the silence, she wondered if a keenten, a warrior woman, might be watching from somewhere among the trees. The warrior women often watched the children's fights and mock battles to see which girls were the strongest, the fastest, the bravest. Then, when these girls reached thirteen springs, the keentens would invite them to join the keenten sisterhood. Unlike boys, who all trained and served for a time as warriors, only girls chosen by the keentens had the honor of learning the war arts and fighting for the village. Alia wanted nothing more than an invitation into the keenten sisterhood, but in the last moons, she had had little time to show the warrior women her worth. Her elder sister had married the past spring, leaving behind all the indoor chores for her. This day was a gift. There wouldn't be many more before the next spring, her thirteenth.

A slight crunching sounded behind her, and she tensed and turned. At the sight of her close friend, Kay, Alia relaxed. She reached out and pulled the tall, leggy girl down beside her.

"It's not good for us," whispered Kay with a grimace. "The Beechians have caught three of our people."

Alia nodded and glanced out into the trees. No real Beechians were hiding out there; this was

just how the children named their sides in the mock skirmishes. Alia was a Trantian—one of her own people this time, thankfully. Even if pretending to be a Beechian was simply a game, it still made her feel tarnished.

The Beechians were a foolish, stubborn, savage people. Five falls past, they had driven out almost all their divins—the leaders of their villages—as well as the divins' apprentices. Alia had heard stories of the divins and their families fleeing Beech with little more than packs of hastily grabbed clothes or food. They now lived in exile in Trant or in the mountain province. Even the masters, powerful divins who were selected to advise the Magus, couldn't enter Beech safely. The Beechian masters had to live with the Magus in the capital city.

Since the first autumn of the exile, many men and women from throughout the Magus's provinces, including Alia's two elder brothers, had died while trying to make the Beechians take back their divins and their masters. But the Beechians did not seem to miss their divins' high magic and wisdom, and so the fighting dragged on and on.

Alia shook away thoughts of Beechians and the real war being fought to the north. A keenten must keep her eyes on the battle before her. At least for now, the children's skirmish needed all

her attention. "Who's—" Alia stopped, hearing a crackle of branches. She could feel Kay stiffen beside her.

She and Kay looked out into the forest. Not far from their tree walked Alia's two younger brothers. The boys were circling trees and peering into brush piles, as if searching for someone. Alia bit down hard on her lip to keep from cursing. Her brothers hadn't been in the skirmish earlier because Mam had sent them to dig up arrow-roots. Before the boys had come to the forest, they might have stopped at the farmhouse. If they had stopped at the farmhouse, they might have seen Mam. And if they had seen Mam, they would have a message for Alia, and Alia already knew what that message would be: Get your backside home.

As the boys walked past the needle tree, Alia held as still as she was able. She was sure they would see her; the stockier, younger one, Temmethy, seemed to look right at her. But as he did, the wiry elder boy, Athon, whispered something in his ear. Temmethy punched Athon's arm, and they started to scuffle. Though the boys' silly arguments usually annoyed Alia, she began to grin. The boys wouldn't look for her again until one of them won the fight. And their fights could last for days.

A cry cut through the forest, and Alia turned

her face toward where she thought she had heard it. She expected to see a waving arm—the sign for the Trantians to attack—but she saw nothing. She waited, then glanced at Kay.

"There," said Kay suddenly, pointing to a different spot, not where Alia had been searching. "Our sign."

Kay sprang up and ran from the tree. As Alia pushed through the needle tree's shaggy branches, she saw that ten or fifteen other children were leaping or dashing or squirming from where they had been hiding. They all ran toward a spot where the ground was level and clear of brush. Alia raced toward the other children, her feet quick and sure.

Ahead of her, Kay stopped as a boy, the Smith's son, blocked her path. The boy had a barrel-sized chest and meaty fists. One moon past, Kay had challenged him to a fight, and though he was no younger than Kay, Kay had knocked him cold. From the hard, determined line of the boy's mouth, Alia expected that he was seeking revenge this day.

Kay struck out at the boy in a series of moves so deft and agile she could have been dancing rather than fighting. Alia watched, respect thrilling through her. Though the girls had been friends their whole lives, Kay's strong, graceful fighting always amazed her.

But not everyone had paused to watch Kay fight. A girl from the Beechian group, Tana, ran forward, grabbed Alia's wrist, and twisted. The pain caused Alia to turn, her arm caught behind her back. Tana pulled up on the wrist, and Alia bent, gritting her teeth.

Tana pulled up harder on Alia's wrist and hissed, "Go down on your knees and yield." Alia bent lower, her head hanging down. She felt ridiculous and stupid. If she had been attentive, Tana would never have been able to touch her. But she swallowed down her embarrassment; it could do her no good now.

Alia bent her knees a bit, as if she were going to kneel and yield. Ever so slightly, Tana's grip loosened. A secret triumph sparked through Alia as she hooked at Tana's legs with one foot.

Tana cried out with surprise and stumbled backward, then sat hard on the ground. Alia straightened and turned in one swift movement, but before she could reach for Tana, something smacked her chest. A thick wetness splattered up onto her face. Laughing and whooping with victory, Tana scrambled up and ran off. Alia looked down and saw the remains of a rotten allam fruit splashed across her woolen dress, chunks tangled in her long black hair. Then another allam soared by her ear. Alia ducked and heard laughter and outraged yells, as well as the thudding of more allams.

Kay rushed over to Alia and grabbed her hand. They started to run.

"No orchards are near this side of the forest. Where could they have found the allams?" Alia asked. As one allam flew by her ear, she saw that it had come from somewhere above, as if thrown from a tree.

Kay said, "One of the Speare boys chose this site for the skirmish. The cheat probably brought the allams before we even began."

Alia and Kay slowed as they left the fight behind them. The Trantians were yelling, the Beechians were laughing; neither group came to look for them. The girls crouched behind some brush. Alia scanned the trees above her.

In a dead tree sat one of Farmer Speare's many sons. The long-limbed boy grabbed several allams from a basket balanced on the two branches beside him. He threw the fruit quick and hard, laughing all the while.

Alia nudged Kay and pointed out the boy. She studied the tree but could see no way to climb it without him spotting her. The basket seemed nearly empty, so she and Kay could wait until the allams were gone before trying to capture the boy, but while they waited, he would keep hitting their companions. Her gaze dropped to the mossy ground beneath the tree. There, by the tree's trunk, she saw another basket piled high with fruit.

Alia pointed to the full basket. "Let's take it," she said to Kay. Kay gave a soft, satisfied laugh.

The girls stepped out from the shelter of the brush. They scooted through an arch made of tangled saplings, then paused and grinned at each other. The boy was too pleased with himself to notice the girls creeping toward him.

They slipped toward the dead tree. Then Kay squeezed Alia's arm as the Speare boy tossed down the empty basket and started to climb down the tree. The girls dashed for the full basket. The Speare boy looked down at them and opened his large mouth.

"No!" he cried and started to slide down the tree, heedless of the branches that cracked and broke in his careless hands.

Kay leapt forward, and Alia was at her heels. Then to Alia's surprise, a small, swift girl, Imorelle, jumped the brush on the tree's other side and sped toward the basket. Alia couldn't remember whether Imorelle was fighting with them or against them. She sprinted as fast as she could, determined not to let either Imorelle or the Speare boy outpace her.

Kay reached the basket first and grabbed one of its handles. Alia arrived just behind her and grabbed the basket's second handle. The boy jumped and landed beside Alia, and Imorelle pulled up hard, almost knocking into him. Both

were half a moment too late. Alia and Kay gave victorious throaty yells.

"We've won!" Alia cried out. "We claim your weapons, and the Trantians win."

Imorelle looked as if she'd have liked to yank the basket from Kay and Alia's hands. "If we'd spied out our enemy's plans before attacking, as I suggested, we'd have won sooner." She wrinkled her nose. "And we wouldn't stink of rotten allam."

The Beechians snickered. Alia and the other Trantians glowered at Imorelle. Kay leaned close to her. "Would you really say such things before an enemy?" she whispered in angry exasperation. "You make us all look dull-witted."

"My apologies," muttered Imorelle, sounding mostly, but not thoroughly, repentant. "I was only speaking the truth."

Kay rolled her eyes. Alia shook her head. Every word Imorelle said and every step she took and every fight she fought were for *her* advantage, *her* triumph, *her* glory, even if they might hurt those standing with her. Kay sometimes tried to help Imorelle act with more honor, because she was a great fighter and could be a great keenten. Alia didn't want Kay to fail, but, great fighter or no, Imorelle always rubbed her wrong. But if the keentens chose Alia, and Imorelle, too, she would never disappoint them by showing such feelings.

"Stop whispering, unless you're talking about giving in," said the Speare boy. "Because you didn't win."

The Smith's brawny son hurried over. "We were trouncing you," he said, pointing to Kay. "Before you captured our allams."

"We've taken your weapons," said Kay. She crossed her arms and looked at both boys' dirty faces. "Anyone who wants to challenge me for them can."

Both the Speare boy and the Smith's son glared at her, but despite their hard stares, neither said a word. One corner of Kay's mouth curved upward into a half-smile. Alia's grin stretched from one side of her face to the other.

"We've won!" shouted Kay, and the other Trantians, and even Imorelle, howled their approval.

As the yelling started to dwindle, a voice came from a clump of trees. "I don't know that 'win' is the right word."

The yelling instantly stopped. Alia turned and saw a tall, slender woman step from behind the thick branches. As the keenten walked out of the trees' shadows, she seemed like a warrior woman walking out of the Old Tales—Creanna, or Kris, or Jaline, ancient keentens who had fought heroically side by side with warriors to protect Trantian villages long ago, before the forming of the

Divin Hierarchy and the Magi's rule over all the provinces.

As the keenten, Jen, walked closer, she became more real, but no less glorious. Her face was proud and smooth, and she moved with the lithe grace of a cat. Around her waist was a green sash, symbolizing her oath to marry no man while she ran with the sisterhood. Alia touched the waist of her own wool dress, longing for such a sash.

The keenten stopped in front of Kay. She gestured at the Trantians and said with a sly smile, "I don't think you and your companions won, Kay. Look at them. They're covered in rotten allam."

Alia's cheeks grew hot, and she saw that Kay's cheeks, too, were darkening.

A moment drifted by before Kay spoke. Then the girl held her head high and admitted, "They did surprise us."

The Smith's son and the Speare boy nudged each other and smirked.

"But you did well despite the surprise, Kay," said Jen. Then she inclined her head slightly toward Alia and said, "As did you."

The sound of these words made hope rise in Alia—the wild rushing hope that the keentens would finally want her. Last moon, when the keentens had taken her and Kay and Imorelle and Tana with them to the healers' trade meeting at the Blessed Groves, the same hope had filled her.