

Tower Goldwah

J A Bard

PART I

Chapter 1

The Draft

Standing beside the kitchen table Connie watched as her mother went through the contents of her backpack, checking off everything the letter listed to bring and nothing more. The dim light overhead showed deep lines of weariness and dark circles around her mother's eyes. Connie suspected the lack of sleep was not just due to her leaving but also in part with Kel's departure. By snippets of conversations she overheard among the men folk, her brother married someone outside of the Brethren's control and would not return.

Her spirit guardians told her wasn't coming back, but they had said that when he left on his draft day, and he came back. However, Connie wasn't surprised her brother left. He never got along with their father. When he returned from the draft their arguments became louder.

Why he or anyone returned from the draft to live with the Brethren was something Connie didn't understand. She often thought that if the draft had been in effect during her mother's youth she wouldn't have returned and married father. Her father and his friends followed the Traditional Ways, or that's what the Brethren referred to it as. Females had no rights under Brethren rules but under the Realm they had.

Her mother gestured she was finished and Connie repacked her bag. Her eyes darted over to her mother and back to her packing. Her mother wore her usual expressionless face, making it difficult to know where she was, though Connie suspected it never was here.

The Realm required all children at the age of sixteen to register for the Draft. It meant even girls would leave home for two years and if they did return to their childhood home, they would be old enough in the eyes of the Realm to have a say in their future. It was a mixed opportunity for Connie. On completion of her duty she would return to rescue her mother... and sister. She would have to bring something back that was powerful. Mentally she sighed. Childish stories of finding rings of power, horses of wonder and crowns of gold were clouding her mind, she thought. She would find something, perhaps a job to support her mother.

But will she want to leave the compound? Bau, one of her spirit guides asked.

I think she has her own business here. You need to concentrate on your business, Sulu said.

Things change in two years, Gen added.

"Give me a hug and hurry to the bus. I don't want you to be late," her mother said, causing her to focus on the present.

Awkwardly she gave her mother a hug and then quickly stepped back embarrassed at the feelings it evoked, and confused by the images that flashed in her mind's eye.

Maybe you'll find someone that can explain to you about these visions of yours, Sulu said.

"That's something I would think you should explain," Connie thought impatiently. Sometimes, her spirit guides spoke in a language she couldn't understand. They would say something like, when you get older you'll understand. Just like her mother.

Connie hefted the light pack onto her back and followed her mother to the front gate of the compound. The morning sun's light had not reached over the compound's wall, leaving the houses in shadows. Once out the gate she ran the five blocks to the bus stop eager to get away.

Over thirty children she recognized from her school were already waiting. None wore new clothes as the letter stated. They would all be clothed at their assignments on arrival. A few of them had a weeping parent near them. The children looked embarrassed at the attention; though, Connie knew they were scared and glad their parents or parent was there to say goodbye.

Connie thought the draft came at a good time in her life. Her father had arranged her to be married to Londol's son, Jhef. She hated the boy and his meanness. Since their engagement, when he could, he would shove her onto the ground or into a wall. If he wanted to scare her, he did. Her reports to her mother of his treatment brought a tired comment from her that if he was bothersome then she should avoid him. In the Brethren Compound avoiding him was easy. Her spirit guardians, once she told them what she wanted from them, kept her apprised of his whereabouts. At school, he was punished when he was caught bullying her, so the bullying had quieted down, but his threatening presence had her always aware of where he was.

Connie looked around hoping Jhef was not in this group. Jhef bragged his uncle was going to get him in the Tailshire Draft House where the odds of being posted in a castle were higher. While many of her classmates saw posting in a castle romantic, Connie saw living within castle walls just an extension of living among the Brethren. Mentally, she envisioned being stationed somewhere where when she looked out she could see far without any walls or buildings getting in the way. Such places existed because she saw them on the computer.

He isn't here, Cali Can said. And if he was, in front of all these people, you can just tell him to go away.

He's such a nasty boy he'll probably be sent to a labor camp, Sulu said.

The other spirit guides agreed.

Connie found a space on the grassy slope where parents let their children gather without them hovering over them. The children shared stories they had heard about the draft from relatives. Connie felt some of the stories were outlandish. Dark haired Lili who was in some of her classes at school, recounted a story of her mother's friend who never returned. Her waving arms and facial expressions added to the tale with everyone within hearing spellbound.

"The girl was kidnapped by the dark ones in Morwea Woods," Lili whispered. Some of the children looked frightened, some ghoulishly enthralled, and others not believing a word of it.

Connie glanced at the parents who may have overheard the story. None seemed alarmed. Did that mean it didn't happen or that it was not so bad to be kidnapped by the people of Morwea Woods? Connie wished she had access to the school computer. There she could look up Morwea Woods.

It's time.

"I see the bus!" someone shouted.

Chatter abruptly stopped, and then resumed in excited pitches. Connie jumped up. Clutching her pack to her chest she ran down the slope, angling away from the elbowing crowd. At the curb, Connie heard someone announce the bus rounded the corner.

It happened quickly; the door to the bus stopped right in front of her and opened; then kids behind her pushed her into the bus. Out of nervousness she sat in the first seat available, and near the window, barely looking at who was already seated on the aisle seat next to hers. Children from another stop were scattered about the seats. Flushed with excitement, her eyes rose to watch familiar schoolmates climb into the bus. When the last climbed aboard the

chaperone began calling names. From the mirror above the driver's seat Connie studied the children behind her. Her eyes fell on a sullen looking Jhef in the back whose expression turned into a scowl when her name was called.

She sat further down in her seat, but she was not able to escape Jhef's reflection in the rear-view mirror that stretched across the front window. When the bus began its journey Jhef rose from his seat and began a swaying progress up the bus studying each passenger. Connie could feel her face heat up with embarrassment from what she imaged would be his badgering of the girl next to her to give up her seat. She felt his presence but didn't look up.

Don't take him seriously. He can't do anything to you. Show some spine and sit up! Calie Can, one of her spirit guides ordered. Calie Can always wanted her to be bolder than she felt. Maybe that was a good thing. She inched back up and while holding her breath, pushed her shoulders back against the seat.

"Hey, you," Jhef's said in a low and menacing tone. "Get out of my seat, or else." He reached out as if to pinch her. Connie knew how his pinches hurt.

"Says you," the girl next to her answered in a loud disdainful voice. "You dare touch me and I'll touch you so hard you'll be seeing stars for a long time to come," she said so all could hear. "Go back to your own seat, dirt bag" she finished.

Jhef grabbed the balance bar while shifting his position as the bus took a turn and the weight of his pack pulled him to the side. His cheeks reddened and his eyes slited as he tried to look mean while off balance.

"You're sitting next to my betrothed, and no one sits next to her but me... unless I say so," he said grandly. "So, get up, girl!"

The bus picked up speed, and Jhef bounced into the pole, bruising his lip and chin. That further eroded whatever effect he was attempting to have on her seat partner, because Connie heard her giggle and others around them made further rude remarks to Jhef.

He swung around the pole and fell off balance, sitting on the boy across the aisle.

"Get off me, Jhef," the boy muttered. He pushed Jhef back on his feet causing him to bang his chest into the bar.

He was going to have plenty of bruises and not just to his body if he didn't go back to his seat, Connie was thinking.

"Go back to your own seat, dirt bag" another told him.

"Crawl back to your corner, dirt bag" another said.

Calling someone dirt bag was the common insult among her age group which wouldn't get them in trouble. They were too excited to want to break any rules their parents set for them.

"Jhef! Go back to your seat now or I will personally have you assigned to gallows watch for two years," the chaperone threatened over the young voices.

Jhef had missed the second adult on the bus. His assumption that the bus driver, ensconced in his protective bubble and not privy to the passengers' business left him to his own devices, giving him a sense of false security that he could bully someone out of a seat. Jhef moved back to his seat, after giving Connie a threatening glower which she caught in the mirror. He would have said something but the other children rose, yelling at him to stop causing trouble. Connie hadn't realized he gained such a bad reputation at school. She breathed a sigh of relief when he was back in his own seat.

"He's going to have a fat lip by noon," her seatmate said.

Connie grinned back at the friendly girl.

“His pack is too heavy so he must have more than what the letter said to bring,” the girl chatted. “He’s going to get the worst ever posting for not following directions. They’ll put him somewhere far from the city, where he has a lot of orders to follow, starting very early in the morning,” she continued happily.

“Just as long as we don’t end up in the same place,” Connie retorted.

“If he tells them you’re engaged you *may* be posted where he ends up. My brother and his girlfriend did.” And then she giggled again. “Only by the time they were finished with their duty, they hated each other.”

“Well, I already despise him.”

“I’m Marian.” Marian held out her hand to Connie who looked at it surprised.

You can touch her. She can’t feel who you are, Gem said. Her guides had cautioned her since she was a child that touching some people would allow them to see who she was. At the time, she didn’t know what that meant, but she noticed her mother didn’t touch anyone in public, so she followed the practice.

“You shake it. Like this.” Marian demonstrated.

“I’m Connie,” she returned, mimicking Marian’s hand shake.

“In some of the cities they say hello and shake hands, in some, if the man or woman is bold, instead of shaking the other person’s hand, the man will kiss the woman’s hand on the back like this.” She demonstrated on her own hand. “That can be so romantic if you like the person. In some cities, there’s no touching at all. Everyone bows slightly forward from the waist, standing up or sitting down.” Marian gave her another smile.

“Do you go to a lot of places? What bus stop did they pick you up at?” Connie asked excited at being next to someone that knew so much.

“Edenhill. Your fiancé tried to get on a bus that left for Tailshire from Edenhill but that was reservation only.”

“He thinks Tailshire posting will get him into a castle.”

“Some parents register their kids at a draft house in wealthy neighborhoods days from theirs because they think it will give them a good posting through the lottery,” Marian shared. “It doesn’t really matter where you register, you know? I have five brothers that went through the draft and they all registered in different places and the lottery placed them in a castle. Figure that. My parents work for the Milan Trading Company, so we travel and spend a lot of time in castles. No big deal. Have you traveled much?”

“No. My father doesn’t believe womenfolk should leave the compound. He won’t even let my mother shop for groceries outside the walls. If I didn’t have to go to public school I wouldn’t know what was outside that prison.”

Marian’s eyes darkened for a moment, then she smiled. “Do you want to hear of some of the places I’ve seen?”

Of course we do! Her guides chorused.

“Yes. Tell me all.” Connie felt her heart beat faster at the offer of a worldly person sharing her life with someone like her.

For the duration of the ride Marian recounted stories of lands and people Connie knew a little about from her readings in the library, but were brought to life from a first-hand recounting and the gossip that went with it.

After two breaks for everyone to stretch their legs and use restroom facilities the bus arrived at its destination by noon. Connie and Marian were the first to exit the bus. Each was handed a number and pointed to go in opposite directions. By the numbers, odds went left and

evens went right, and here they parted company too quickly to say more than an excited breathless goodbye.

Connie followed the brick path through a garden. The biggest flowers she had ever seen in real life — and there were so many of them! — crowded their neighbors for space under the sun. Intermingled with the large flowers were long furry sticks, some arching higher than the fence wall. Her eyes fastened on something that blinked at her through fur. Astonished, she nearly tripped when the ground beneath her changed in texture, bringing her eyes back to what was before her. The brick path turned into large flat stones, evenly spaced with tufts of green between them. The stones had symbols chiseled in each of them — Heart, Well Being, Study. The rest were unknown to her. A small open aired building was at the end. Turning her head slightly she could see a small kitten basking in the sun on top of a rock. Taking a deep breath, she was momentarily distracted with the fragrance the sun-heated flowers gave off. The clearing of a throat reminded her she was here for serious business. A young attendant was waiting at the bottom of the steps. He gestured her to hurry.

No sightseeing, Sulu commented.

Connie's hesitation was slight as she could hear her fellow bus riders close behind her pausing as they too were delighted in the garden. She took the steps two at a time onto the porch, eager to experience the world, mentally signaling that she was open to whatever came her way.

An old white haired figure was bent over a ledger, running a finger down the rows of names and making a notation. This ledger was by far larger than her fathers. Next to the figure was a young woman whose uniform was foreign to Connie...but any uniform not of Warner's County Sheriff was. She was at a computer typing in information the elder read to her.

The elder looked up at her and smiled. "Good afternoon to you. Welcome. You are the first draftee for the day. That means you'll be lucky and get your wish. Are you nervous?"

Connie nodded.

"That's healthy. Let me see your right hand," the old voice briskly directed.

Connie presented her hand. The elder turned it this way and that, looking carefully for something, and then gestured for the other. Once inspected she wrote something down and then ordered, "Stick out your tongue."

Surprised, Connie complied without hesitation.

"Hold this and then give it back to me. Okay. Go out that way and around the pond to the blue building. Your posting number is one. May your service to the Realm be rewarding."

"Thank you, Elder," Connie said. She shifted the pack on her back, and hurried down the path the elder indicated. More flowers and a large pond with waterfowl were on her left. A croak and plop had her stopping for a moment. Water flowed from the top of a rock formation dropping down to different levels, and each level had something going on. Though she wanted to study it more closely, she didn't think loitering around to satisfy her curiosity was allowed.

The blue building was around the corner and the double glassed doors were wide open. Attendants were waiting near the doors waving her to move forward. Inside was a raised table with twelve busy adults sitting at computers. It felt like another group had passed through recently.

"Take this packet and sit over to the left. Your lunch will be brought to you. The buses to take you to your posting will arrive after lunch."

A cart with food and beverages was wheeled to her table. She was given a glass of water, soup, a sandwich, and directions on how to get to the toilet facilities. Connie quickly tucked her information packet in a pocket of her pack and concentrated on her lunch. Others joined her at

the table, and muted voices began to fill the room as those on her bus and others began to arrive and sat to eat. Connie hurried through her lunch not wanting to run into Jhef. Finished, her tray was removed. Connie hefted her pack onto her shoulder and made her way to the toilet. While she washed her hands a young girl dressed in nice clothes caught her eye in the mirror and then glanced back at her hands she was washing. Why would she wear nice clothes? She was breathtakingly beautiful. For a moment, Connie's heart stopped. Tilting her head a little she tried to understand why she thought that.

"Hi, I'm Rachel," the girl introduced as they left the facilities together.

"I'm Connie."

"I see you've drawn number one. That's at Castle Omwell."

"How do you know that?"

"It's posted on the wall. Didn't you see?"

"No."

"Come. I'll show you."

On the wall under different postings were numbers and above it where the number would post the holder. Connie had Castle Omwell.

"You'll find life a bit...hum." Rachel's lips curled up into a funny smile.

"What?"

"Well, the upper class has this attitude of being so much better than you. They teach you manners which you need to remember or you'll be punished. Not beaten or anything like that. If that happens there will be the devil to pay. But they'll embarrass you and that is the worst. You have to know the pecking order — that is who is more important than another, and it's not always who you think it is. It's who really has the power. Then you can't say anything bad about anyone, and you have to say nice things about some of the most horrid people, but...it's so much fun. You'll get to hear all the latest gossip of the Realm first, and know why or who is getting done in." She laughed at Connie's expression. "Not killed, just snubbed. Castle Omwell is the Queen's summer residence. They have the Royal Summer Festival there. Royalty from all over the world visits."

Connie looked at her number with mixed feelings. This was not what she had in mind as seeing the world and definitely not what she considered lucky. "Where's yours?" she remembered to ask.

"The Tower of Glenhollow. Guard duty. Nothing happens out there. It's on the other side of the Realm and isolated. It's on the Wall of Morwea near the marsh."

"What does a guard do?"

"It's the army. I would image you have to learn to fight, learn about the wall, sleep in the wilderness, ride or drive, and other things. My own family won't recognize me when I return."

"I wouldn't mind training as a guard. To learn to fight and not have to worry about someone beating me up. I wouldn't mind learning that at all."

Don't plan on using it to give Jhef a fat lip. You'll lose out on other opportunities, Calie Can warned.

Thoughts are actions, Bau reminded her.

Rachel looked at her surprised but let the comment go. "Well, I would rather be in a castle. I can easily image dressing in fine clothes, with layers of rich cloth, and eating foods that the royalty dine on daily." She gave a dramatic sigh. "You are truly lucky." And then she laughed heartily at her dramatics.

"What if I don't have any fine clothes? I have only what they asked that I bring."

“Your mentor is to provide you with everything. You’ll look fine dressed up and powder on your face. Why, when you return, your family won’t recognize you. If you want to, you’ll be able to catch yourself a fine man to start a family and if not, you should be able to start your own business or work for someone. Working in the castle will give you all sorts of opportunities.”

Connie then realized why Rachel looked so different...not at all like a girl but almost a woman. Her face was painted. *Her* father would not permit such practice in his house. It was going to be a wasted two years for her.

“Why are you looking so unhappy? You have a fine posting,” Rachel reassured her concerned.

“I don’t want to paint my face or wear clothing I’m afraid I’ll tear if I move wrong. I would rather be sent far away to some tower where I can go out and see things and if I get dirty not worry about upsetting someone.”

Rachel laughed. “Well, this is really a joke. You have what I would like and I have what you would like.”

The two regarded each other for a long moment.

Trade places, Bau said.

It’s the adventure you want, Gem said.

You can learn to defend yourself from Jhef-types, Sulu said.

It’s a good choice, Calie Can said.

“Are you thinking what I am?” Rachel whispered.

“Trading places?” Connie whispered back.

Rachel nodded.

“Can we do it?”

“I read everything there is on the draft and don’t recall anything mentioned about swapping postings, and there’s nothing in these papers with my name. How about yours?”

Connie looked through the two sheets. “No. It doesn’t say anything about who these belong to, they’re just instructions.” She looked around her and then at Rachel. “Shall we?”

Quickly papers were exchanged. The two looked around again to see if anyone noticed.

“Oh, great. Here comes Jhef,” Connie muttered. She dared not look around like she wanted to hide.

Tell him to go away, Calie Can said.

He’s liable to go wild if you start a conversation with him, Sulu warned. *See the way he’s walking. Stiff legged. He’s upset and ready to do something violent.*

“There you are,” he informed her arrogantly, roughly pushing two boys aside.

“Hey, watch it, you oaf,” one of the boys said.

Jhef paid them no attention as he stopped inches from Connie. “Where are they sending you?”

“Go away, Jhef!” she told him fiercely, stepping back defensively.

“Shut your mouth, girl. When we’re married, I’ll lock you in the cellar with no food. See how you like that,” he said, stepping again into her space to try and grab her paper.

Rachel’s eyebrows rose while her mouth dropped. Now she knew why Connie wanted to learn to fight.

Too bad punching him in the mouth would get you both in trouble, Bau said.

Call one of the guards, Gem said.

Marian arrived just then. Connie was back peddling and Jhef had his eyes on the paper she was holding.

“Leave her alone before I call the guard,” Marian said loudly.

Two uniformed adults heard it and turned to see what was transpiring. Connie thought they wouldn't do anything because they were just kids who couldn't possibly hurt each other.

Jhef looked at the two girls that were staring hard at him. One of the uniforms started to walk toward them. Jhef, looked back at Connie, tempted to try one more time to grab the paper.

“Hey there! Are you making trouble?” the officer demanded.

“I'll remember this, witch,” Jhef promised before leaving. “You'll live in the cellar.”

Marian shook her head as he disappeared into the crowd. “He is frightening, Connie. I kept him in sight since we got here just to be sure he wasn't going to end up anywhere near you. Have no fear, he's so far inland that only a lost tourist would visit as an off-beat vacation spot.”

“Thanks for checking, Marian,” Connie said.

“No problem. He drew Closhire County. The train is the only real transportation that passes through. It's farming country with one long road and a lot of open land.” She nodded to Rachel. “Hi. My name's Marian.”

“I'm Rachel. I can see now why you want tower guard training, Connie,” Rachel said. “Maybe you'll be good enough to become a soldier in the Royal Regiment.”

Connie snorted at the idea, and then asked. “Women are in the Royal Regiment?”

“Tower? I thought you drew Castle Omwell like me,” Marian said.

Connie and Rachel's eyes grew large and both quickly looked around them least the remark be overheard.

Marian giggled. “There's nothing wrong with exchanging. My older brother traded to get sent to the Queen's Winery in the mountains. He thought he would get to taste the wine. Instead he ended up being a footman for the parties and they were very strict about any of the footman tasting the fermented grapes and especially about getting drunk.”

A gong sounded. They turned to the stage where four officials were standing.

“Attention, attention, attention,” a voice intoned.

One of the officials stepped forward. “By the color of this paper,” he held up a sheet attached to the packet, “you will board a bus marked with that color. Present your papers, destination, and name to the attendant before stepping aboard. Good journey in your adventure, and may you all profit from your experiences.”

The hall filled with noise from hurried good byes and shouts of directions.

“Come this way,” Marian shouted over the din. They could see Jhef was looking their way with ill intentions.

He means to follow you, but he won't get far, Gem said.

Too many people in the way, Sulu said.

Outside the building away from the outflow of youth the three exchanged heartfelt hugs.

“Write us,” Marian said to Connie. “Every posting encourages their draftees to write so that they don't feel alone. You know the name of the castle,” Connie nodded, “just look under trainees. Marian, Merchant's Daughter and,” she looked at Rachel.

“Rachel from Goodhew.”

“Connie from Hollbo,” Connie said.

“I want to hear you beating up everyone that talks mean to you,” Rachel said.

“Then she's always going to have to worry about someone that thinks they're better. When you're new, it's best not stand out unless the others are really dullards. This is your chance to see what's beyond your family and meet all sorts of people.” Marian grinned. “Who knows, you may decide not to return home to marry that bully.”

“Hollbo will not be my home, and for sure I’m not going to marry *him*,” Connie said.
“And I’ll write. You two don’t forget to write *me*.”

“I will. You sure this exchange is okay?”

“I’m sure,” Connie told her firmly.

For sure! Bau, Sulu, Gem and Calie Can chorused. Connie grinned. They were going on an adventure.

Chapter 2

The Tower

The bus weaved through poor towns, within view of grand estates, and along a stretch of land that looked dry and abandoned for a long time. Jewel, the attendant on the bus, made sure the right people got off at each stop, everyone ate on time, and at the periodic rest stops, used the facilities and were back on the bus in a timely manner. She informed her passengers about the lands they were driving through, and what place it played in the Realm, both politically and financially. She also explained why they were being transported on a bus rather than an air cart. It was for their education to see the lands outside of where they grew up.

On the fifth day of her journey Connie was sore from sitting but not unhappy with the trip. There were four of them left. Argu was going to work on a horse farm, and she had never seen a horse up close before. Warrant was going to work at the Castle Amanet where medicinal herbs were harvested for the Royal Family. He was a bookworm that had never dug in anything that was not a book. Frail Havo was going to Nordbold Tower, one day by air cart from Glenhollow Tower, to train as a guard like Connie.

Away from her father's influence she felt no restrictions to talk to the boys and laugh out loud about how little they knew of what was beyond their own towns. When they marveled at how in five days the weather could change so much, Jewel explained that they were getting into the higher elevations. It was supposed to be gradual so that anyone not accustomed to the elevation and change of air would not become ill. None of them knew what that meant.

Jewel shared with the four of them her own experience in the draft. She gave them pointers and suggestions in how to cope for the first year of getting the worse jobs until a new draftee arrived. She explained how to act when in doubt, who to see if someone wronged them, and how the chain of command worked in all businesses and military structures of the Realm.

Connie had slept through Havo's disembarking. She was the last to be dropped off. It was early in the morning where the sun was high enough to reveal land that went on forever with a scattering of brush for shelter. It was Lear Desert the map said. Stories of great wealth in hidden cities beneath the desert sands were told in children's stories. Adults heard the stories of people found dead in the desert in search of the cities, with either a drawn map clutched in their boney hand or small sacks of jewels found in their rags.

Connie's eyes drooped closed and she dreamed of walking in a desert city. It was full of life and noise. She didn't know who she was, but when she walked through the street shops the vendors and patrons shouted greetings and jokes to her. She felt good and proud as...

Connie blinked tired eyes open at an unfamiliar sound. Glancing out the window she noted they were driving by farmland with tall grass planted in neat rows.

The short buzz sounded again. The bus driver glanced at Jewel who was napping. "Wake up, Jewel. Your phone's ringing."

From a slumped position Jewel sat up straighter. Her phone buzzed again. She tapped the phone on her belt and touched something in her ear. A soft-spoken conversation ensued for a short time then she tapped her phone and leaned over to speak with the driver.

"Gil, change of destination. Our draftee is being picked up by Goldwah Tower." She looked at Connie. "We have a change for your posting, Connie. Tower Goldwah has requested your number and permission was granted."

"Think she's replacing that troublesome lad?" Gil asked as he slowed the bus to make a turn onto another highway.

“Probably. If a draftee is not working out well where he or she is posted,” she explained to Connie, “then a reassignment to a post more compatible with the draftee’s need is made. There are many who believe that the draft is the best way to turn a troublesome child into a productive citizen of the Realm, but there are some that there isn’t any resource available but prison for them. The draft system tries to lessen that number. I’ve seen more successes in turning around potential losers into productive members of the realm than failures.”

“That’s true enough,” Gil said. “It worked for me. Without the draft, I wouldn’t have known anything beyond my city first hand and the way I was heading I was heading for trouble, especially with the lot I was hanging with. I found that I love to travel and through my work program hitched up with a transportation service.” He grinned at Connie in his mirror. “Take advantage of every learning experience you’re offered. The Realm pays for it all and you’ll never get a better deal.”

“Captain Sahem will be your leader at Goldwah. You’ll like him.” Jewel then proceeded to tell Connie stories about the captain when he was younger and in officer’s training at the Academy of the Royal Regimental Corps. Connie wondered if he would mind knowing someone knew so much about him.

The road they were on went through hilly country where there was white stuff on everything. Gil had to turn the heater on for a while. Then they were winding down a hill and back up a less steep one when at the top she got a glimpse of the Wall of Morwea. It wound to the left and right and out of sight, far away into a mist. As they approached their destination Connie was astounded as the wall became massive, filling up her view.

“Quite impressive, no?” Jewel asked.

Connie nodded her head. She had witnessed the building of a wall around the Brethren’s compound and that had been a grand undertaking, considering how high they wanted it. That wall was nowhere near the greatness of this one. Trying to imagine the construction of it, she realized the enormity of it was beyond her experience as some of the stones were twice her size. What could have lifted those stones?

Stepping out of the bus, Jewel had her walk around for a few moments, explaining that after traveling for so long, she was going to feel like she was still moving even when she was sitting. Connie could feel her breathing was constricted which Jewel explained had to do with the elevation. It was a lot colder than what she was used to and she didn’t have a coat with her.

“Let’s go inside so your teeth aren’t chattering so much,” Jewel said. “I didn’t want you to fall flat on your face in front of your new CO, that’s what they call commanding officers.”

Up this close both the building and the wall were so high that when Connie tipped her head back to see the top of either, she nearly fell backward. Jewel laughed and caught her elbow to steady her.

Inside the building, after a blink, Connie’s eyes adjusted to the darkened interior. It was chilly but not as cold as outside. She could feel there were a lot of stories to be told here but it would not be something she was interested in trying her hand at. Jewel walked her to the end of a long hall, into an office and within that room was a closed door with Captain Sahem’s name on it. Jewel tapped on it twice.

“Come,” a deep voice commanded.

Jewel opened the door and waved Connie in first. A uniformed officer was standing before an opened window, looking out on a yard where people were milling about then rushing another group, yelling and grunting from all the contact. The officer chuckled and turned to his visitors.

“Captain Sahem, this is your new recruit, Draftee Connie. Connie this is Captain Sahem.”
He’s fair enough. At least he’s a veteran that’s done more than march about a parade ground, Calie Can said. Connie had to look down at her shoes to hide the smile of Calie Can’s image standing next to Captain Sahem inspecting him as if he were an insect on a leaf, deciding if it were a friendly or an unfriendly.

Captain Sahem accepted the papers from Jewel, laying them on his desk. He walked around Connie and stopped in front of her.

“Look at me, please.”

Connie took a deep breath and gave a quick eye to eye contact, which didn’t last long, as her eyes dropped in embarrassment. It was astonishing how fast her ingrained lessons of females don’t have eye-to-eye contact with males came back to her. She needed to remember in school she didn’t have this problem with her male teachers.

“Draftee Connie, please sit. Thank you, Jewel for your delivery. Have a safe trip home.”

“Good years for you both,” Jewel said and left.

Connie rested her backpack beside her and carefully sat in the chair. Her hands were clasped before her with her feet firmly planted on the floor and legs together. She waited, while mentally saying affirmations that one of her teachers said would assist her to overcome her moments of shyness.

Shyness! Bau said in disgust. *Ingrained servitude.*

You’re better than that. This is your chance to get over it. Put it behind you, Calie Can agreed.

Captain Sahem leaned against his desk and studied her in silence. He looked for poise and to see what she would do with the silence, understanding why her face was red at his asking her to look at him directly. His intent was to begin desensitizing her of her culture’s taboos, and teach her the military rules of behavior, and the safety they would provide her, instilling with it self confidence. When he thought she endured his stare long enough he sat behind his desk to begin the verbal interview. The moment she had stepped aboard the bus, all the information the Realm had on her was passed onto her destination. He wondered how she would react if she knew that she would have ended at his tower no matter what destination she had picked.

“Draftee Connie, what do you hope to gain from training here?”

“I know schoolwork and housework so anything else will be a gain.”

“Tell me about your home life, starting with the beginning of your day,” he said.

Connie was surprised and for a moment lifted her eyes to see his, then lowered them and started her story, picking a school day since she felt that was more interesting than weekends where her days started earlier and lasted longer. When she finished, her eyes met his briefly and then she looked back down at her hands.

You’re doing better, Gem encouraged.

“Let me tell you what to expect here,” the captain said.

He’s just a teacher, Sulu encouraged her.

Connie’s head lifted and her anticipation and excitement showed on her face. In public school she was taught to look at her teachers whatever gender they were, when a lesson that did not require writing was given. It was a sign of respect.

The captain was pleased to see that she was not totally dominated by culture rules and had a spark of intelligence behind the dark eyes.

“Eleven hours of your time will be studying. Seven hours is time in barracks, and eight for sleep. Men and women barrack or quarter in separate sides of the building and there is no

visiting. Women on the left and men to the right. In the center is the social and eating hall and is open at all times and that is where both men and women mix. You'll bunk with Kendra and Kiku, third level. There are twelve guards per shift, which makes up a squad. Your squad leader is Sergeant Major Bessie of Wolf Pack. A platoon, that's loosely thirty-six people, serves each of the towers. Our job is to patrol our assigned part of the wall, and that implies soldiers that are ready for anything anytime. Your training will cover physical as well as classroom lessons. There's a map in the social hall that you'll need to memorize. SgtMaj Bessie will go over that with you as well as the rules of this compound." He paused when he heard the rumbling of his stomach, followed by Connie's.

"I give day passes into town and sometimes weekends. Eight hours is given for sleep, and that is a requirement unless special circumstances deem it less. Tired soldiers make unnecessary mistakes. One of the methods for lessening the mistakes is repetition, drills, memorization both in mind and muscle.

"All squad leaders are professional soldiers that have chosen military life for a profession. If there is any misconduct on their part, you are to bring it to my office and report it to me. You are not powerless. Understood?"

"Yes..." she paused from not knowing what to address him as, "Yes, Captain Sahem."

He looked at her thoughtfully, watching her face shift with whatever was passing through her mind.

"Any information about tower business is not gossip material," he continued. "You don't share any guard duty business with just anyone, including your own squad unless your SgtMaj says it's okay or myself. The only official place for sharing information is the shift turnover report at the completion of your shift. At the start of your shift, it is your duty to read the shift turnover of the two previous shifts. At the completion of the reading, you will ask the person you are relieving questions to further assist you in knowing what has passed, and release him or her when you are satisfied you have a good idea of the status.

"Any question or reply to me will be ended with captain, sir, or Captain Sahem. Understood?"

"Yes, Captain Sahem," she replied promptly. It wasn't much different from her father's house.

"Other officers and NCOs," he paused and frowned, wondering if he was giving too much information. "NCOs are noncommissioned officers that have risen from the ranks of draftee. They're usually squad leaders, and officers and NCOs should be addressed with their rank designation when on duty. Sergeant Major Bessie is leader of Wolf Pack Squad, Master Sergeant Elroy is leader of Horse Squad, and Master Sergeant Mac is leader of Raven Squad.

"Not all Sergeants are squad leaders. Uniforms have a rank designation for non-officers here," he tapped his arm, "and officers on the collar." He touched his collar. "Lieutenant Hellene is my second in command and on vacation or she would be going over this with you." He smiled and gave Connie the impression he didn't mind doing something she normally did. "At each tower there is a captain, lieutenant and three squad leaders, always sergeants, troops — that's military personnel, and supply staff. We have a dozen civilians working here. We share a mutual respect as well a courtesy to everyone that works here, the civilians in the village, and any that we meet, provided they aren't breaking the law. When you wear a uniform, you are a representative of the Realm, most notably of the Queen.

“You’re a draftee until you put on your uniform. Then, you’re PR until promoted.” He waited for a few moments, noting she was relaxed with the information he was rattling off. He guessed that she had a good memory for details.

“If anyone asks or orders you to do something that you think unwise or unsafe, or you just have some kind of an issue with, for the first month, you can object to doing it, but you’ll be called before your higher ups to state why. It starts with your squad leader reviewing your issue and is taken before the others if the disagreement continues. If none of them agree with you and you want to stand by your decision, it will come before me.

“After a month, you should have an idea of how things are run here and what and when to object to something. We are military and when an order is given by a *trained* field officer, that would be the NCOs or higher, to disobey or linger before carrying it out, is a serious offense. It is expected and required of you to follow orders immediately or as soon as you safely can.

“Your squad leader will get your kit squared away. I see you have a good pack there; quick release for emergencies and side pockets for water and trail food. Until your part of the troop, you’ll be using your pack. Packs wear out quickly since we take them everywhere. See that you remember that. We never know when we’ll be called for muster so a fully readied pack is necessary. That being said let’s get something to eat.” He paused for her to respond.

“Yes, Captain Sahem.”

Connie swung her pack on her back and trailed the captain. On the short walk to the hall Connie studied the pictures on the wall of soldiers with the occasional soldier looking cocky with his or her chest of medals shining under the light. They reminded her of school pictures and the awards some of the children received. Her picture would have also been on the school library wall for her achievement awards if her father had not objected.

When the captain pushed the door open laughter and voices from men and women was heard. He held the door for her. That was something new and it embarrassed her that an older male was doing it. Feeling awkward she entered the room not knowing what to expect but already off balance. It surprised her, and caused her to stop to adjust. The energy in the room was not typical of what she picked up at school, excited and restless, but rather a relaxed playfulness.

Her gaze quickly took in a group where most of the laughter was coming from. She couldn’t differentiate the genders in some cases. Reminding herself that this was a new world where the Brethren rules did not operate did not quiet her pounding heart. Nervously, she studied the walls where three flags were spread out, a horse, a Wolf, and a bird. The captain seemed to understand and waited a few seconds then continued into the room. Connie followed.

As they passed by occupied tables, the occupants greeted the captain who nodded and smiled. Her own eyes slid by the people. Long ago she learned how to take in enough information at a quick glance to gage her safety. There was no danger here.

At the food counter that reminded her of the cafeteria at school, Captain Sahem reached up to a bell and gave it two twists. It clanged loudly.

“Cook! You have two hungry soldiers up front,” the captain called.

“All right, all right,” a voice answered irritably. An older woman came bustling out of the kitchen area to the counter. She held a cutting knife and an apple with its skin partially peeled.

“Well, this must be an honor,” the elder mocked. “Let me go bring out the silverware. It’s been a long time since you’ve taken time to bring yourself for mid-meal, Captain. What’s the occasion?” She laid the apple and knife on the counter, careful so as not to break the circular chain of apple skin. Connie’s mouth watered at remembering the treat the vendors would sell once a week at the street fair that her trip home from school took her through.

"I'm hungry," the captain said.

"Eh? More like your aide is occupied elsewhere. What'll it be? And don't pick something Lt. Hellene is going to berate me for as not good for you," she said.

"I want everything she doesn't let me eat. We're both on a vacation," he said. "No need to tell her, she'll expect it."

Surprisingly enough, the cook gave him exactly what he asked for, then turned to Connie.

"Well, you're new," the cook stated the obvious of Connie. "What squad?" When she didn't respond quick enough she added. "Are you mute?"

Connie swallowed in surprise. "No." Since Cook was wearing all white with food stains splattered here and there, she was unsure how to address her.

"Cook, you're taking up valuable chow time," the captain broke in. "This is draftee Connie. She's with Wolf Pack. Draftee Connie, this is Cook. Now, slop up her a midday meal with a bit of everything. She needs to get used to your cooking." He glanced at Connie. "Eat slowly. Take a bite of everything. Besides deciding what is palatable in the future, you have to let your stomach get used to the food."

"Hey," Cook objected. "You can march for days on one of my meals."

"I'm glad we haven't had to prove that, Cook."

"You're lucky I have the patience to cook that bland stuff you're supposed to eat."

"Well, you got me there." He pointed to the apple skin. "I can't wait until you fry those and dip them in cinnamon or caramel."

Connie's eyes lit up as she silently agreed.

"You keep throwing out all those compliments and you may get first pick of the first batch."

"I thought I already did as the Captain of this post."

"That's right. I nearly forgot about that," she said, laughing as she scooped up food and dropped it onto two plates.

The table Captain Sahem led her had a wall hanging with the image of a black Wolf against a green background. For a moment the image changed to a red background with the black Wolf's head turning to look at her. She blinked.

Remember the Wolf, a voice whispered.

"Wolf Pack, make some space," he ordered. "This is your new member, Draftee Connie. Draftee Connie, this soldier on the edge is Private Hassel, next to him is Private Birk, that's Private 1st Class Turi, on the other side in the corner is Lance Corporal Jov, Corporal Ancell, Lance Corporal Amoke, and Corporal Kendra." As each name was called a hand was raised and a smile quickly followed.

"Nice to share a meal, Captain. I see you have your old favorites," Lance Corporal Jov said.

"Yes, Lance Corporal Jov. I get breaks now and then from the boring stuff."

The relaxed atmosphere continued with jokes and stories, from their first month experiences. Her face reddened when realizing they were telling the stories for her benefit. Connie focused on what was on her tray, but the jovial atmosphere had her looking up often when a joke was made. By the time the captain left she felt comfortable with the group.

"So, Connie, where are you from?" Kendra asked.

Connie swallowed something blue and white that she did not recognize, and worried it would get caught in her throat. Clearing her throat, she mumbled her place of birth.

"Speak up. We're not going to kill you," one of the males said.

“Moron,” one of his companions said to him, adding an elbow into his side.

Connie could see his neighbor jabbed him in the ribs. This playfulness she could handle.

“Wait until after a week of running the trail,” one of the others said. “Then you’ll think Master Sergeant is trying to kill you.”

“So, where are you from?” Kendra persisted.

“Commonwealth of Hollbo.” Connie spoke more clearly. She forced herself to lift her eyes to meet that of the woman. She was surprised to note she was not that much older than she was.

A shadow appeared over their table. “Corporal Kendra. Sergeant Major Bessie wants you to present the newbie to Ward for dress.”

“Thanks, Private Lio. Shouldn’t you be sleeping?”

He gave a grunt and headed to the beverage dispenser.

“He had to get a new uniform fitted,” Lance Corporal Jov said. “He was repelling over the wall and got his pants caught on something. Ripped them right off him. He was lucky it was night so no one could see his skinny white legs, but it sure is cold that time of the morning.”

The others laughed, adding comments about bodies that Connie wasn’t familiar with. They were speaking another language.

“Come on, Draftee Connie. Grab your pack and we’ll go. Without a uniform you’re just a newbie or a draftee. Once you get a uniform, you’ll be a PR with a badge of the tower and a scarf of our troop. Turi, can you dump our trays?”

“No, problem, Kendra. Come on, Jov. Maybe with your new promotion you can wangle us another desert before we get back on duty.”

As Connie followed Kendra she overheard Jov snort in disbelief.

“The rank of lance corporal doesn’t earn anything except extra duty, like babysitting your sorry self.”

“So, what’s in Hollbo that makes you so shy?” Kendra asked as they stepped into the hall.

“Shy?” Connie laughed at that.

“Well, then, are you nervous?”

Connie glanced at Kendra who she was now alongside. It took her a good five strides to think about it. “I don’t think so. In my father’s house, males and females don’t sit together, and females don’t speak in mixed company.”

“Ah.” For a few moments Kendra was quiet with only their footsteps echoing in the hall. Kendra pulled open a door and gestured for Connie to proceed her downstairs. She waited for Connie to look the stairwell over. It was well lit so her hesitation had Kendra curious, but she thought to wait before poking her nose into private fears. “Are you a member of the Brethren?”

“Women are not members of anything. Only males can be Brethren,” she quoted. *Given the choice, I wouldn’t join under any condition.* Something told her she shouldn’t be making such a decision until she really knew why her mother chose to belong. Stubbornly she refused to listen to the caution.

“I see. Well, this is the military. It’s okay to eat with the men, *your* fellow soldiers,” she stressed in a light tone. “Though, not all the guys here are legally men. Just what do you do if you meet a man?” She suddenly realized that maybe SgtMaj Bessie would be having a problem.

“Well, if I *were* a woman, I would not be allowed to be in his presence. But since I’m still a girl I don’t know.”

“Would it be a horrible thing if you put aside those beliefs for the time you’re here? I mean, what’s going to happen if you just treated everyone by rank and you can speak with anyone? Let me take that back. There are some people here that you don’t want to speak to.”

Connie was going to ask who but they arrived at the Ward. There was a large sign above the door that announced it was the Commissary.

“Corporal Kendra. It’s about time. What did you do, stop and chat?” An older woman with a tape measure draped over her neck impatiently gestured to Connie. “Well, come on. I don’t have all day.”

A tall woman, sitting comfortably in a chair near a rack of uniforms stood up. The arm of her uniform had stripes that she recalled Captain Sahem had indicated as someone that was a NCO. “Corporal Kendra, see that her pack is taken to her bunk. She’ll be bunking with you and Lance Corporal Kiku. Then return to your post. I would image your relief is expecting you to bring her a snack.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major.”

“Grab some of those apple cinnamon sticks before you go or else there won’t be any left when you get off duty.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major.” Kendra grabbed Connie’s bag and quickly left.

“Cook better save us some,” grumbled the seamstress.

“Normally speaking, Drafee Connie, you carry your pack wherever you go due to the nature of our duty, guarding the tower and wall. We never know when an attack will come and having your survival kit with you saves time. Time in an emergency is important. However, since you’ll have plenty to carry to your bunk, I’ll spare you additional burdens. Well, Em, she’s all yours.”

“Looks about a size twelve all right. We’ve got plenty of clothes for her right off the rack but there’s always something that isn’t quite right. Step onto the pedestal there with your arms about four inches from your body...that’s the way.”

The light came on when her both her feet rested on the pedestal, and the automated form measurer, AFM, registered her measurements.

“We call Sgt. Em Auntie Em because she worries over the condition of everyone’s kit. Any problems you have with your equipment Sgt. Em will take care of. I’m Sergeant Major Bessie. I’m your pack leader and everything else that is important in your life for the first six months of your training, and for the rest of your two years.”

While her uniform was being altered by Sgt. Em, Bessie walked Connie down the rows of other type of clothing, pulling out things and dropping them in what she referred to as a duffel bag. Bessie explained what six months of training with her was to accomplish. It sounded exhausting but Connie felt excited. For the first time in her life she began to see herself beyond the life her father had planned for her.

Once everything was packed in the duffel bag, SgtMaj Bessie showed her how to carry the bag. SgtMaj Bessie led the way to her new sleeping area. She hoped it wasn’t far with the weight of her new belongings slung over her shoulder. SgtMaj Bessie walked into the room without pausing to knock.

The energy in the room was confusing, but nothing that Connie felt threatening. Taking a quick glance around the room, she could see that up to four people could sleep here. Two of the beds were neatly made up. Her pack was sitting on a bed closest to the wall. Folded sheets, blankets, and a pillow were also on the bed. She was shown where and how to store her clothing and then how to make up her bed.

“Corporal Kendra is highest ranking in this room and she will be responsible for seeing that you’re dressed properly and that you learn the rules. Kiku is also responsible for seeing that you are turned out properly. We support each other. We’re Wolf Pack. When you start your studies, you will see what our code of conduct is. If anyone doesn’t follow it, then notify me. If one person falls below good conduct, it affects the whole pack. It’s like a rotten apple in a barrel, trying to get the others as rotten. Do you understand?”

“Yes SgtMaj. Bessie.”

“Do you think reporting on anyone that doesn’t follow the corps good conduct guidelines is bad?”

“It depends upon why I’m reporting it...” she paused as she realized her mother’s lessons may not have a place here. “I will obey the rules...”

SgtMaj Bessie held up her hands to stop her. “We’ll talk about it after you’ve had time to think about it. Now, let’s get to your pack. I’ll show you the essential things that go in it and then you can add what you want. Just keep in mind the weight.”

Before leaving, SgtMaj set up an account for her on the room’s computer, showed her how to send letters to anyone around the Realm, and gave her a class assignment. The program that SgtMaj Bessie pulled up was filled in with her name so when she signed on it came right up with her daily lessons. The first lesson was information about the tower, its purpose, what was required of her as a PR, and the rules of hierarchy. It had hand signals, light signals, and more than what she thought she could remember in a day. On another page were the rules of conduct and it was required reading as well as she needed to sign it. She was determined by the end of the week what she needed to memorize she would and what she needed to understand in the rules of conduct, she would. Before she forgot, she quickly sent off two messages to her friends. Letting them know that she was at a different address and that her trip was great and she would write more about it later.

It was four hours later that her two roommates showed up, Kendra and another woman. Both came in chatting and laughing.

“Hi, Connie. How’re your lessons going?” Kendra asked, she tossed her pack on a cot.

“Good, Corporal Kendra. There’s a lot to remember though.”

“Always. Hi, I’m Kiku, Connie, your other roommate. Lance Corporal Kiku when we’re on duty.” Kiku opened her locker and dropped her pack in a corner. Everything in her locker was neatly folded and everything had a place. Connie was hoping she could get hers that neat.

“Hello, Lance Corporal Kiku. You’re from the Ankor lands.” Connie’s eyes opened wide and her thoughts went to all sorts of questions she had on Ankor. She had always wanted to meet one of the inhabitants from the white lands of the northern realm. Her introduction to their culture was through a school project.

“Well, my ancestors are. But I’m from the capitol Arhat in Lai Province. It’s known as the Queen’s Winter Quarters. QWQ for short.”

“Is that where the waterfall of Guang Lo is located?” she asked, becoming more excited. “I’ve seen pictures of it in the winter time — a frozen sheet of ice.”

Kiku gave a short laugh. “To tell you the truth, in my sixteen years of living there, I’ve only *heard* about it freezing over like that.”

“We have twenty minutes before dinner so I’m going to clean up. I see you’re in brown kaki, that’s what we dress in when not on duty,” Kendra said. “We’ll go over your uniform before we leave for dinner and give you pointers on mess courtesies.”

“That’s how to eat, how to con Cook into giving you the largest serving of desert, how to get seconds without the whole place crying foul, and a lot of other handy tips. A happy troop thrives on good food,” Kiku said.

Connie walked uncomfortably in her new clothing. It was not just because they were stiff with newness, but also because she had never worn clothing that boys and men wore. Sitting in front of a computer was different than walking in them. Kendra had explained the pants were more practical weather wise as well as due to bugs. Exposed skin encouraged bug bites. She also pointed out that running in long skirts was dangerous.

Kiku joked about any exposed skin around the boys and men due to over active hormones would be a problem, but Connie didn’t wholly understand why that warranted so much laughing from the two. Catching the two women roll their eyes over her head, Connie promised herself she would add that to her list of research.

On this her guides were quiet, but they usually were on matters she wasn’t frightened about. But then again, what could they possibly tell her about sex and such. She had once asked and they all remained quiet, with a snicker from Bau.

Chapter 3

A Full Plate

The next morning bright and early Connie was shaken awake. It seemed she had just fallen asleep. The unfamiliar noises and sounds kept her from sleeping deeply.

“This is what you’ll be wearing,” Kiku said as she and Kendra laid out her morning clothing including underwear.

“This is how you layer yourself.” Kiku dressed quickly. Her bare legs were shocking for Connie to see.

“Put the long pants over your shorts if you find it too revealing,” Kendra told her.

“We’re expected to wear so little?” Connie asked worried.

“When it gets hot, wearing long pants when running is not comfortable. But mornings in winter is really cold. Workouts don’t get cancelled when the weather is too hot or too cold, or if it’s raining or snowing.”

“These are running shoes,” Kiku said as she tied Connie’s shoes.

“Shoes just for running?” Connie asked surprised.

The two women chuckled.

“I remember when I asked the same myself. I was more into the dress shoes young women wore as they prepared to be a rich princess. Imagine my horror at having to get dirty.”

“You have changed,” Kendra agreed with Kiku.

“Alright. You’re presentable. Let’s get,” Kendra said.

Eight people were already standing at ready with their backpacks resting at their feet when Kendra, Kiku, and Connie arrived. It was so cold white puffs of air were coming from everyone’s lips as they exhaled. Lance Corporal Amoke rolled a cart onto the area and stopped before each person, handing them a water bottle and a rock.

Kiku and Kendra exchanged grins at Connie’s puzzled expression at the rocks. Connie followed the example of her neighbors, and stored the rock in her near empty backpack. Kendra whispered she would tell her what it all was for later. The water bottle was slid into a side pouch.

SgtMaj Bessie walked into the area with a tall long legged golden dog walking beside her.

“Wolf Pack ready for inspection, SgtMaj Bessie,” Corporal Ancell reported.

“Thank you, Corporal Ancell. Listen up Wolf Pack. We have a new member, PR Connie,” SgtMaj Bessie said. Bessie walked to Connie and looked her up and down to make sure her roommates had guided her correctly in dressing. That usually gave her a clue if the roommate match up was okay, though sometimes it was a month before some differences became intolerable.

“PR Connie. This is Chavi. If you lose us on the run, Chavi will bring you back to barracks safe and sound. Are you afraid of dogs?”

“No, SgtMaj Bessie,” she answered promptly.

“All right Wolf Pack, get your toes on the line and brace up.” Bessie began her inspection. Soldiers readjusted their equipment or tugged on clothing as she gave pointers.

“Soldier, where did you get those shoes?”

“My regulation shoes are wet, SgtMaj.”

“Tomorrow you’ll have the right pair on —wet or not.” She was aware why his shoes were wet and she was not pleased that hazing and mean pranks were back. The culprits would be rooted out and the hazing stopped, she thought with determination.

“Yes, SgtMaj.”

“I want to say this for everyone. No one is to damage official equipment and that includes each other’s kits. You do so and you’ll be up for disciplinary action. You want to pull pranks on each other, make sure it doesn’t interfere with your duties, and dressing properly is a duty.”

She took another walk down her line staring at each one in the eye. Connie felt the power behind her stare and struggled to keep her eyes even.

“Spread out, arms right, arms left, arms in front and behind you. This is to clear space around you, PR Connie. You’re responsible for not interfering with anyone in front of you or to the sides. We’ll start with 50 jumps. PR Connie, do as many as you can. At this altitude, you’ll not be able to keep up until you’re acclimated. Begin count Corporal Ancell — with one!”

Connie did her best to follow and nearly collapsed before she broke any serious sweat. She didn’t think she could tire so quickly. Stubbornly she kept up even if she was off count. A five-minute break came with Connie bent over panting. The break ended too soon.

“Form up. Corporal Kendra, you have the honors today as leader of the pack. To the trail, Wolf Pack!”

Eleven people ran for the opened gates that showed the beginnings of a forest on the other side of the road. They had not gotten out of sight of the tower when Connie found a distance between her and her troop to be more than what she knew she could catch up even if she were to run flat out. SgtMaj Bessie stayed behind to check on her.

“Don’t run it,” she said. “You’re too winded. I don’t want you in the infirmary on your second day. Stay to the left on the lower trail. It goes around the pond and across a river. Will you be okay alone?” She wanted to be sure she was not going to traumatize the city draftee on her first time out.

“Yes...SgtMaj...Bessie,” she gasped.

“See you back at the tower. When you get back, shower and dress in your brown kakis. Report to the tower for duty, 12th level.”

“Yes, SgtMaj. Bessie.”

SgtMaj. Bessie then sped off to catch up with the others.

Connie had never had a pet before nor had she ever gotten this close to one. She and Chavi stared at each other for a few moments then Chavi started off down the trail at a loose lope, stopping abruptly to sniff at something. By the time Connie was even with her, Chavi was off again. As Connie walked she studied Chavi. There were plenty of pauses to sniff along the way which kept them near each other.

Connie’s eyes wandered over the path and what was around them. Bugs hovered over plants and grass. Connie wrinkled her nose, remembering her mother’s minders to not let the bugs in the house. Sounds from the wildlife began to be noticed. Chirping, chittering, peeps, and other noises she could not describe or identify, filled her ears. Breathing in deep she picked up scents she remembered from her mother’s garden and plenty of new scents. Movement was all around her, from plants swaying in the breezes, birds flitting from tree to tree, and a variety of creatures that scurried away from the trail as she walked. This was life, she thought, feeling a swelling of happiness in her heart that nearly had her bursting out in giggles.

A dislodged rock in the path brought her attention back to where she was walking. It was a well used path and wide enough for two people to walk abreast. Her new shoes were stiff and loud as they plopped down, even to her ears. Spotting a familiar herb her mother grew for her meals, she leaned down to pinch a leaf, sniffing deeply the minty aroma and feeling the essence

of the leaf as she rolled it between her fingers. It wasn't as hearty as her mother's mint bush, but the wild herbs here probably didn't receive as much care.

Connie looked up to see where Chavi was. The golden dog had her nose buried in some brush growing between the rocks off the trail and up the slope. She snorted and stepped back then thrust her face back into the plants. Curious, Connie climbed over the rocks to see what had her attention.

"What's this?" she asked softly as tiny fur balls mewed plaintively.

This is something new but think before you get involved, Bau said.

Chavi looked at her and her jaws quivered. Connie looked around for its mother and spotted a cloud of flies hovering over a spot on the other side of the path in tall brush. Reluctantly she moved forward to see what she didn't want to see. As she drew closer she put an arm over her face to not gag. Chavi was alongside of her. As they approached, small animals eating something turned to glare at them and then resumed their snatching at bits of flesh. Chavi growled low in her throat and lowered herself nearly to the ground.

"Ugh," Connie muttered as she backed up. Turning, she returned to the small furred creatures in the sheltered brush and rocks. "I wonder why whatever killed her didn't go after them."

Hunters of another kind scared them away, Calie Can said.

Connie squatted near them, looking down at the five fur balls wondering what she should do. In school a teacher spoke of the law of the wild but Connie couldn't just leave the little ones to die if that was their sole parent. She stared, frowning at them, trying to figure a way to care for something she didn't know what they were and it was only her first day at the tower. Asking for favors may not be well received.

You'll never know unless you ask, Sulu said.

Trouble, Gem said.

But nothing we can't handle, Calie Can said.

"What are you doing?" a voice demanded behind her. It sounded so much like Jhef that it startled her. Connie turned quickly and Chavi turned also, pressing against her leg, growling loudly. The young man was not wearing a uniform, but Connie remembered she had seen him the previous day in the mess hall in uniform.

"Just looking to..."

"Lagging behind are ya?" His lips curled in contempt. "You can get hurt out here alone. Lost even." Then he heard the hungry mewing. "What do you have back there? Get out of the way, girl."

Frightened, she pressed against the boulder, unable to move out of his way. He grabbed her from the side the dog was not on and pushed her off the boulder into Chavi, moving them both out of the way. With the heavy rock in her pack she easily fell off balance. Flat on her back and helpless like a turtle. Connie squinted up at the stranger. Before he knocked her down she saw the dark dirty colors around him like Jhef had. Now the sun was behind him, making it difficult to see what his intentions were.

He's just like Jhef. You have him pegged right, Bau said.

"Arg. Damn chadie kits."

Connie blinked and she could now see him as a boy not much older than her that thought he could bully her. The rock in her back hurt enough that she realized she had to move.

Loosen the straps and get up! Don't let him get away with this! Calie Can urged her.

Connie pressed the two release connectors and the pack straps fell to the side. She scrambled to her feet and just stood there, not knowing what she could do. Her method of protecting herself in the past was avoiding confrontations. Chances were if he wanted to beat her up he could.

His eyes wandered the area as if looking for someone or something. The buzzing of the flies caught his attention. "Now can that be their mama?" He walked over to investigate and snickered. "Could be." He walked back to Connie pushing her out of his way. She stumbled over her pack.

"Another lost litter isn't any big deal. Get your pack back on and start running, girl. You don't want to lose your troop or you'll be out here in the dark- alone." He leaned close to her face. "Scary things happen after dark. A city girl like you should know that people disappear in the woods after dark, sometimes in the daytime too." His expression changed quickly to meanness. "Now scam!"

Chavi's growls turned into snarls but the boy didn't take them seriously.

"What are you going to do to them?" she asked.

"I'll pick them up by the tail, one by one and fling them over towards the swarm. End the little beasts suffering. It'll be my good deed for the day."

"No you won't," she said shocked. "They're babies!"

"And who's going to stop me, newbie," he jeered, stepping closer to her with a threatening gesture to grab her arm. "That mutt? He doesn't bite unless ordered, and there's no one here to give that order." He missed her arm when he was distracted by Chavi's move toward him.

Connie moved out of his reach and closer to the mewling babies. Chavi moved between her and the boy. Chavi snapped at his hand when it came close to her. Regardless of what he said about not fearing the dog, he stepped back.

"Stop!"

The voice from behind them had the two jumping. Chavi stuck close to Connie, growling.

"What are you doing here? Are you following me?" The boy's attempt at sounding tough was not with the same bluster which gave Connie a clue he was caught doing something he shouldn't be doing. What puzzled her was why he thought the dog wouldn't hurt him. Chavi looked and felt like she would with certainty bite him if he made another threatening move.

"Your off post without a pass," the uniformed stranger said.

While both stared the other down Connie sat by the kits that were crying piteously.

"Don't touch them," her rescuer told her in a soft voice.

The other laughed without mirth. "You're going to eat your words, Hadid. That stupid newbie already touched them."

"Get back to barracks, Private Trey. I'll be checking on your time back," he told him tersely.

"You can't order me back. This is my free time," he sneered.

"Your free time is restricted to the barracks. You have no pass off base. Any more insubordinations and you'll be so low in rank you'll be taking orders from PR Connie. Chavi, from now on, you can bite him if you think he deserves it."

The order to Chavi had Trey looking worriedly at Chavi who advanced menacingly two steps toward him, snarling and looking like he was about to bite him.

He backed up and glared at Hadid. "That dog bites me and I'll kill it."

“That dog bites you and you’ll be in the docket under investigation to see why you didn’t heed her warning growl and she resorted to a bite.” Hadid’s tone sounded like he didn’t take Trey’s threat seriously. Connie felt Trey meant it. She looked at Chevi worriedly.

Trey turned and left but not in any hurry. Hadid lifted his pocket communicator and spoke to someone then turned to Connie.

“He meant that about killing the dog,” Connie told him softly.

“He’s always making threats and doesn’t follow through. So far, he’s all bluff. I’m Sgt Hadid of Raven Squad,” he said.

“I’m PR Connie of Wolf Pack, Sgt Hadid of Raven Squad.” Her lips curled into a smile, not knowing why.

Hadid squatted next to her and studied the nesting then glanced at the swarm of flies. “It looks like we’ve got another poacher kill leaving the kits to die. And right at our front door,” he finished grimly. “The captain is going to take this personally.”

“Poachers? But, don’t they take the body or sell what they capture?”

“Not chadies. Poachers, chadies, ringwolds, hyachts, and wolves compete for the same thing. Poachers thin out the population of their competitors during birthing season when they’re most vulnerable. They kill off the parents and leave the little ones as bait to the other animals of prey.”

“We can’t let them die,” Connie said.

Hadid blinked at her surprised. “No, of course not. Do you know what’s involved in caring for them?”

“No.” She studied the young man, as he considered the small mewlings, his brow wrinkled in thought. She liked his calm demeanor, though he was wrong about Trey. He meant to do harm to the dog.

“Well,” he glanced at Chavi who was sitting patiently on the trail. “We need to transport them back to barracks. The captain may have you taking care of them until the conservationists pick them up.”

Connie was watching his expressions and guessed it was a lot more complicated than what he was saying.

“I can handle it,” she told him assuredly.

“You wait here and I’ll get something to carry them in. You can’t be carrying them in your pack,” he told her as he handed hers to her. “They’re too fragile for that and you don’t want them to get too used to your scent. Chavi, guard the PR and the kits,” he ordered the dog. “Oh, and here.” He handed her a stick he pulled out of a slit along his pant leg. “Here’s the on/off switch. Just point it at whoever is attacking you. It sends a shock into them. Careful you don’t shoot yourself or Chavi, and don’t let them steal it from you. It numbs for ten seconds, the amount of time it would normally take you to run away or tie up your attacker.”

“What if it’s something big?” she asked.

“When you point it at the attacker it takes a reading and knows how much of a charge to send.” With that said, he was gone.

Connie glanced at Chavi. “I can handle it,” she assured the dog. “I’ll go on the computer and from the wildlife library I’ll get the information I need.”

When do you plan on sleeping? Sulu asked, but the tone was light and teasing.

The expression on the dog’s face was not one of confidence.

“I don’t think I did all that well on my first day out,” she reflected aloud.

You did good! You stood up to a bully, Gem said.

*You don't have to knock someone down or chase them away to call it a victory, Bau said.
One step at a time, Gem said.*

Next time you may have to bloody your nose, Calie Cam said.

"I sure hope not. That not only hurts, it's messy," she said. She sat comfortably with her back against the rock, letting the sun warm her face. Occasionally she would glance over at the nesting's occupants. While she sat still she was entertained with various wildlife visitors that were either ignoring her or didn't know of her presence. Squirrels, small creatures she had read about, scampered around making their noises, while different colored birds landed for a few moments before hopping or flying away. Chavi laid very still with only her eyes moving to watch things Connie could see and things she couldn't. When Chavi stared at something that Connie couldn't detect, she would become very still and try to figure out just what it was that Chavi found so interesting. Only once did she growl and it was a short one. Connie sniffed the air trying to pick up something that may have set Chavi's protective streak up. There was nothing she could pinpoint and her guides made no comment.

Wake up, Calie Can said.

He's returning, Bau said.

Connie's eyes blinked open to darkness and it was very cold. Startled she glanced around her. A light shinning on the path was coming toward her. Chavi was leaning against her, keeping them both warm. Her tail thumbed at the figure that stood before them.

"Sorry it took so long. We had to contact the Conservationists and let them know another chadie's been killed. Then they insisted on sending someone to remove the kits from here, but they had no one available after keeping me waiting for hours. Your troop is on duty so they couldn't come out and join you. I see you're not afraid of the dark. That's good." Hadid had a light on his cap that lit up the area they were in.

Tiny voices set up a loud chorus for a meal.

"I brought some nursing milk." Hadid leaned down and laid a covered box beside her. "We'll put them in here. The Ward had one in the supply room and it took us a while to find it. Someone's been moving stuff around." He laughed at this. "I'll tell you, Auntie Em was cursing up a storm that someone was messing with her stores. There's going to be repercussions, I'll tell you. That woman is more territorial than a mother bear of her cubs." While he chatted, he was setting up the box. Pushing buttons and a timer then adjusting some other knobs on the outside of the box. "This rescue box comes with a heartbeat, warmth, nipples for them to nurse off of when they're hungry, and it purrs to them. It will fit the entire nesting. We need to limit our contact with the kits as much as we can. Lift the nesting at these two sides where it's the strongest."

The kits voices were loud as she lifted them. The water she had been giving them held them for a while but by their cries it wasn't enough. Before shutting the lid over them Connie and Hadid watched as they all weakly crawled to the teats, smelling something better than water.

"When we get back, you need to report to the Watch. Since you didn't do any guard duty today SgtMaj Bessie reassigned you to Horse Squad. You'll be working in the tower. Private Abasi will teach you about Watch duty, so keep sharp. Don't let him push you around. If you feel uncomfortable with anything he says or does, speak up. Do you think you can do that?" Considering the type of person Abasi was, he was curious why their CO assigned her to be with him in a trainee position.

“He?” her voice squeaked.

This isn't the compound. You have to grow up, Sulu reminded her.

We've taken care of you so far haven't we? There's nothing you can't handle, Calie Can said.

Hadid gestured for her to pick up the other end of the box, which was heavy with the clutch of kits. “There are cameras and sound recording in the watch towers and all along the wall, in the corridors, and in the rooms. You're always watched for security reasons.”

Connie could see the tower lights as they neared the barracks. Her thoughts were primarily on working with Private Abasi. She glanced at Hadid, suddenly realizing that he was male, and she was alone with him.

One of her most recent teachers had repeated many times to her students that if you repeat something to yourself often enough, you will believe it. She then had her students that were soon to be drafted, to create a mantra or affirmation that would carry them through their draft. Her's was: I trust my inner guides to lead me through lessons I need to grow into the person I can be.

Her teacher had coaxed that affirmation out of her and still she wasn't sure if it was her teacher's or her creation or maybe it was Gem's contribution, since she liked to give out words of encouragement.

Hadid helped her carry the box up to the tower and place it in a corner. By Private Abasi's expression he wasn't happy about the company. Hadid introduced her to Private Abasi and for a few moments stared hard at Abasi, as if imparting a silent message. Whatever influence Hadid had when he was present left when he did.

“All right, you need to change into your uniform,” Private Abasi, told her briskly. “The chadie kits are sleeping now and won't be needing you to worry them.” He made to go near the box but Chavi's lips curled up in a silent snarl. Abasi quickly backed away.

“Report back here when you're ready. Don't take all night either.” Abasi was looking at Chavi when he said that.

Connie's photographic memory helped her find her way to her quarters. She was relieved that her bunk mates weren't in the room. They would probably have something to say about her causing trouble so soon. Quickly, she changed her uniform and ran back to the Watch Tower. Panting, she ran up the stairs to the tower room and waited to catch her breath before tapping twice as she had seen Sgt. Hadid do.

“That was quick, PR. Very good. Step in. I'm not going to bite.” He laughed mockingly, giving Connie an uncomfortable feeling. He jerked his head to the upper level. “Know anything about working the tower? Of course not,” his mocking tone continued. “Even if you read about it, doing it is not the same. Come on, step up. You can't see anything from down there.”

While he continued talking nonsense she looked around. The room was circular with windows surrounding it. It was pitch dark outside of the glass yet bright in the room. It made her nervous not being able to see out and anyone outside could see her.

“We've got visitors. See those glasses, hand them to me.” Abasi snapped his fingers impatiently.

Curious at how he knew they had visitors, Connie unhooked the glasses and stepped up to hand them to him. His fingers grabbed hers as the glasses were passed. He wagged his brows at her and then turned to the window, humming to himself.

It was a long ten minutes as Abasi studied something southward. Finally, he backed from the window, and handed the glasses back to Connie.

“Go ahead and take a look.”

Holding the glasses to her eyes, she looked out to a different world. Everything changed into something unfamiliar. She tried to sort out what she was seeing when something bright came at her and burst against the window in flashes of light, so fast she didn't have time to duck.

“Down!”

Abasi pulled her off balance and she landed on her back, banging her head on the floor. She no longer had a rock in her pack, but the contents were hard enough to aggravate the bruise she had from her earlier fall. For a brief moment she saw stars and as an after thought realized something boomed outside the window. The second loud bang followed by bright lights made her realize it was like fire crackers they used in celebrations in Hollbo. A third shot quickly followed, rattling the room. Chavi growled, and the mewlings blended in with the sirens that went off.

“Hot crap!” Abasi said as he reflexively covered his head with one hand and grabbed at Connie with the other.

Frightened Connie pushed Abasi's grabbing hand from her. “Stay away from me,” she told him, scooting out of his reach. It humiliated her that her voice quivered.

“I'm protecting you,” he informed her with a smirk, but pulled away. “Hey, I'm being nice. No need to act like you're being insulted.”

Keep out of his reach. He's not a nice person, Sulu said.

Footsteps pounding up the stairs alerted them that someone was coming up.

“Clear the stairs, Sergeant Major coming up!” a voice boomed up the stairwell.

Abasi looked nervous. “You don't know what happened, newbie, so don't say anything otherwise or we'll make your life miserable.”

“Says you,” she boldly challenged, but not so loudly. She knew once she let the bullying start, it would be difficult to stop. She had to make her stand now since she didn't do a very good job with the chadie kits.

That's the way to go, Calie Can said.

“What's going on?” demanded SgtMaj Bessie. She heard Abasi's threat that easily echoed down the stairwell, and knew MstSgt Elroy who was close on her heels heard it too. This was making it easy to guess who was behind the pranks that had stopped briefly when Laif was placed in isolation.

“Who authorized shooting off fireworks?” MstSgt Elroy demanded.

Abasi stood stiffly at attention and Connie did the same.

“Private Abasi! A question was asked and you're the ranking member here, so fill us in.”

“I was told it had been cleared, MstSgt Elroy — SgtMaj Bessie,” he said nervously.

“Who cleared it and who set it up?” SgtMaj Bessie demanded.

“I don't know sergeants. I just got the word and...” he gulped when the two were glaring at him with all the power they could put behind it.

By then the mewlings became too noisy to ignore. Both sergeants glanced at the box.

“You had all that noise going on around the kits?” MstSgt Elroy asked. “Consider yourself on report. Starting tomorrow you’re on dump duty for a month. You’re to only leave your bunk for your troop muster and dump assignment. Dismissed.”

“I was following orders, Sergeant!”

“Whose?” MstSgt Elroy demanded. “Unless it was the Captain, I’m the only one that you should have cleared that with.”

“Who set it up?” SgtMaj Bessie demanded.

“I don’t know. Really. I just got a message...” as soon as he started the sentence he realized what he was admitting, that the small Underground Club that lived for hazing and playing pranks on anyone, with the prank and intended victim drawn from a hat, was back in business. No one knew who the leader was or the members. It was secret so that no one could rat on the other.

“Where was the note left?”

“It was sent to my email.”

“Thank you, Private. SP, take him to the captain’s office.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major,” a voice echoed in the stairwell.

They could hear two sets of boots clunking down the stairs. SgtMaj Bessie turned to Connie.

“PR Connie, are you okay?”

“Yes, SgtMaj Bessie.”

“What happened?”

Connie took a deep breath and let it out. Still she felt overwhelmed. “Private Abasi was looking out the window and gave me the glasses to look out while he went to the phone to call someone. He yelled ‘down’ and then...” Her face burned with embarrassment. “I heard a lot of noise and then it was over.”

“I need to get someone to cover the tower,” MstSgt Elroy said.

“I’ll cover the rest of the 2nd watch with PR Connie,” SgtMaj Bessie informed him.

“Offer accepted, SgtMaj. Our password is woodsmen.” Elroy turned and left the tower.

“So, did he teach you anything about guard duty?”

“I didn’t understand what he was talking about.”

“Did you tell him you didn’t understand?”

“No, SgtMaj Bessie.”

“Let’s do it right then. First of all, no lights. Second, you get a verbal shift turnover and then read the last three shifts if you didn’t get a briefing. Third, check in with the guards along the wall because by then, the shifts have been turned over and you want to be sure everyone is in place.” Bessie picked up the discarded glasses and shut the room light off with the only light on near the computer. She put in an ear bud used for communication and began speaking. She confirmed the name of the person at each post along the wall and took whatever information they had to report. She then showed Connie how to use the binoculars and what to look for, then instructed her on the equipment in the crow’s nest. In the center of the circular room was a bucket that rose to the ceiling. The guard could either stand or sit, but the primary duty in the crow’s nest was to use the binoculars that could see in the dark, and watch for any activity above or below the nest. Someone was to be in it at all times. Her next lesson was identifying what she was seeing and reading the location. Bessie standing in the lower portion was pointing her binoculars in a direction that Connie had to match and then report what she was seeing. It was exciting and exhausting. For one hour she scanned, monitored by SgtMaj Bessie who then

switched positions. Connie checked in with the guard posts along the wall and then with her set of binoculars tried to match what Sgt Major was seeing from the crow's nest. After an hour they switched places again.

"Did anyone touch any of these buttons while you were here?" SgtMaj Bessie asked.

"He was fiddling with something. But I didn't look."

"Look next time. This is the military. You must be cognizant at all times of the people around you. You need to know what your partner is doing and you need to know why. Our lives depend on you and your teammates to be aware. I'll make available to you some watch reports written up in the past that are considered first rate to study."

For the last few hours of their watch Connie's thoughts were on protocol and repetition, how to read scans, what to look for on the monitors, and how to check in with the spotters on the wall. She also now understood what she was seeing in the night vision goggles. At the end of her watch SgtMaj Bessie helped Connie carry the rescue box to the mess hall where Cook was waiting with the right mix of formula for the chadie kits.

"Now mind that you watch the food level. These little ones will be emptying them faster than I can make a batch up of their special milk formula if those Conservation agents don't show up soon. They grow fast."

Connie had the distinct feeling that Cook was purring to the kits as she patted the box gently. "I'll take good care of them, Cook." She lifted the box with SgtMaj Bessie lifting the other end and they both headed out into the hall. Cook had packed a small sack of food for Connie since she had missed a meal.

SgtMaj Bessie didn't have to knock on the door to Connie's quarters. Apparently, her roommates were anxiously waiting for her with the door opened.

"SgtMaj Bessie, you could have called one of us. We would have helped carry the chadie kits," Kiku said.

"I was presuming you two would be sleeping, considering it's late," SgtMaj said.

The two made room for Chavi who had every intention to continue her guard position of the kits.

"I'll leave you in your bunkmate's hands," SgtMaj told Connie. "Good night."

As soon as the door closed behind SgtMaj Bessie the two girls quickly sat on Connie's bed, looking at her expectantly.

"So, tell us how you rescued the kits," Kendra said her, not wanting to wait any longer.

"I didn't rescue them. Chavi did." Chavi looked at her with an expression Connie couldn't read.

"Chavi?" Kiku looked at the dog.

"That's something she would do," Kendra said. "She rescued a Wolf cub."

Both women rolled their eyes at that memory.

"I remember."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Connie asked. Which guide warned her about the Wolf?

None of us, Bau said for the others.

"We had a battle royal with the Conservationists because we wanted to keep it as our mascot. We lost the argument but every now and then we see a lone Wolf watching us from the trails. SgtMaj Bessie doesn't want us to think it's our cub but..." Kendra shared a knowing glance with Kiku, not finishing the sentence.

"So, what happened with you and Sgt Hadid of the Ravens? We heard you two got into it with dirt bag Trey," Kiku said.

“He was threatening to toss the kits to the wild animals,” Connie reported upset once more.

“He said that!” Kendra hissed angrily.

“So, he threatened the kits. You aren’t starting at the beginning,” Kiku said. “Start at the part where we left you.”

Connie gave an inward sigh. She rushed through the story because she was tired. Both girls let her get away with only telling that story and not what all the recent noise was about because her yawns became too many to ignore.

Chapter 4

Rangers of Lewah

It was too early for Connie, but she was used to going to bed tired and getting up still tired. The kits mewling woke her. Quickly she showered and dressed for morning muster, then hurried to the mess to get milk for the kits.

Cook was waiting for her. Instead of filling the container Connie had, she handed Connie a new one.

“I’ll wash it out and make sure it’s ready for the next refill. How are they doing?”

“They’re hungry.” She suddenly grinned. “I’m surprised anyone can sleep through the racket they’re making.”

The door swung open and SgtMaj Bessie walked in. She looked pleased at seeing Connie.

“Good morning PR Connie — Cook. PR Connie, bring the chadie box and your roommates to the Central Room,” SgtMaj Bessie said.

“Yes, SgtMaj,” Connie said.

Returning to her room she found the other two up and getting dressed. “SgtMaj Bessie wants us to report to the Central Room with the chadie box.”

“Did she say why?” Kendra asked.

“No.”

“Sounds like no running this morning,” Kiku said.

“Yes, but that also means we may be getting dumping duty since those other two are now off it.”

“Abasi is doing that,” Connie said.

“Ah,” Kendra said rolling her eyes over to Kiku.

“So, what happened in the tower that he was sent to dump duty?” Kiku asked.

Connie looked uncomfortable, not wanting to talk about something she didn’t understand fully.

“Another time,” Kendra said. “We have to get going. If it’s something good, we don’t want to overshadow it with being late.”

Kiku picked up one side of the box with Kendra at the other end. It gave Connie an opportunity to rest her hand on top of the box while the three unhurriedly made it to the Central Hall.

Bessie was typing something on one of the computers when the three entered.

“All right Wolf cubs come on over here. Kendra and Kiku you’re to go over tower duty for Connie. Then the three of you will work the tower today. Keep the kits in sight.”

“SgtMaj, does this mean no running?”

“Does that disappoint you, Kiku?”

“No, SgtMaj, running is my favorite sport. I just want to know if we would have to work in exercise time.”

“You’re very lucky I have a soft side this early in the morning and will let you get away with that whopping story. You can eat before you start or after, but no eating while training. Get to it,” Bessie ordered.

“Yes, SgtMaj,” the three chorused

“Why does she not mind you lying?” Connie asked as Kendra led them to one of the computers in a corner.

“Because everyone knows Kiku hates running,” Kendra said.

“When I first got here and SgtMaj asked us what we hated the most, those were the first jobs we got for the next six months.”

“I’ll remember that,” Connie said seriously.

“It doesn’t matter if you tell her or not. She’ll find your weak spot and gleefully exploit that knowledge. Pretty soon, you end up liking it better than whatever else she can think up.” Kendra looked over at Kiku. Both women were smiling as if it were not something that concerned them.

“How can you not be bothered by that?” Connie asked.

“Because there’s always something worst that could happen and once you get what you feared or hated the most out of the way, or become familiar with handling it, the rest is not so bad.”

“So, we start with basics,” Kendra said, returning their attention to their lesson.

“We’ll study an hour, get something to eat and do another hour. By then we’ll be ready for duty,” Kiku said, looking at Connie as if she understood enough to have something to add.

“Come,” the captain responded from the tap on his door.

“Captain, you had your evening meal yet?” Bessie stuck her head in his office. Stepping in at his beckon she held up a bakery bag from Eliza’s Shop.

“Yes, thank you Sergeant Major, but if that’s pastry from Eliza’s Shop, I have room,” Captain Sahem said.

“The pastry is compliments from Cook. She went into town for some supplies and loaded up on sweet things from Eliza’s Shop.”

“I’ll stop by and give her my thanks. I okayed your change for Kendra and Kiku to work the tower with Connie for the next four days. Was there a reason you moved assignments around?”

“I wanted Connie to see what a team looks like working the tower. It means we’re short on the wall but the weather visibility will be good until the end of the week, and day time doesn’t usually have poachers attacking the wall. With luck, we should get away with it. She’s a fast learner for someone that’s led a sheltered life.”

“Not that sheltered if she went to public school in a city.”

“In a week, I’ll have a profile on her so we can seriously work on her weaknesses.”

“She’s turned this place upside down and she doesn’t even know it,” the captain said.

“I think she’s picking up on that, but with all the adjusting she has to do, no telling how this all is affecting her. She’s friendly enough but I can feel she’s not all that trusting.”

“Did you find out whose idea it was to haze her?” he asked. Carefully, he pulled out his pastry, not wanting to break it until he took his first bite.

“Who else but those three dead beats, and they admitted to it as if it were nothing. They’ve been here a year and they’re not picking up anything or they’re refusing to. What are we going to do with them?”

Thoughtfully he chewed his pastry. “The last few months they’ve stepped up their antics. At the rate they’re going, they’ll be finishing off their draft in prison and with added time. We’ll let the electronic security monitor them for now, but keep an eye out for anything that doesn’t look or feel right.”

“Are you getting that feeling again?”

“It never left.”

“When is Lt. Hellene getting back?”

“Why?”

“If someone is planning an attack, this would be a good time, while we’re short-handed.”

“I’m thinking it’s not yet because it’s not just around our area. The surprise raids on poacher camps these last two months coincide with our misfits acting out behavior.”

“Last night I had to recalibrate the communications and unscramble signals. Someone’s tampered with the system. I don’t know how much of security has been compromised. I was thinking we should have a drill. Test equipment and people.”

The captain nodded. “I think it’s time we go to a new plan so we’re not predictable. I’ll change the hours of the shifts and get Sgt. Em to look over the security system. That reminds me, what about Laif’s move to his new residence?”

“I think it finally dawned on him that he’s in trouble. His new squad is tougher and more determined to make something good of their second chance. Do you remember Mka? Well, he reupped and is working on becoming a WO. He’s married now and has a young boy.”

“Mka? I had serious doubts about him.”

“Falling in love changes people.”

“Yes, it does. But it doesn’t guarantee a positive one nor of permanence.”

“I hope you’re wrong with Mka, Captain.”

“Me too, because him and Laif in the same place is scary. What’s taking so long in getting a deeper background on Laif’s family?”

“I made the same remark to the clerk in the hall of records yesterday, but didn’t get much more information than the request is still being processed.”

“Suspicious, that, no?”

“It is, Captain. Taking your encouragement to find out all I can through whatever means, I sent a dispatch via a ranger that was passing through.”

The captain smiled. “That will cause an eyebrow lift with uncle.”

“Hopefully, I didn’t set any alarms off that will bring the Queen’s Regiment to our door. I best be getting to the hall and check up on my newbie.”

He leaned back in his chair thinking. Of course it would set alarms off with the commander of the Queen’s Regiment, his uncle — Bessie’s great uncle. He smiled in anticipation how he would respond.

When Bessie entered the social hall, Birk and Hassel were holding everyone’s attention with one of their tricks. PR Connie was watching with rapt attention. Her eyes were squinting and Bessie wondered if her eyes would need attending. She made a mental note to take her for a physical at the end of the week when she would have time.

“So, you think you have them fooled?” Bessie asked the two cousins when the performance was finished.

“Sergeant Major,” the group greeted.

“Greetings, Wolf Pack. Turi, can you explain what they did?”

“No, Sergeant Major. It looked like magic to me,” he returned with a wide grin. Someone new might think that he really believed it, but he had taught the trick to the two cousins.

“Likely story, Turi. Any of you?”

Connie hesitated. She remembered in school sometimes the person with the answers was not welcomed.

“PR Connie. How do you think Privates Birk and Hassel pulled this off?”

“Sergeant Major, to give away the secret would take away the fun the others will have figuring it out,” she said.

“You’re right. Does this mean you know?”

“I believe so.”

“Okay. I’ll be your partner. Let’s see if you can replicate it.” SgtMajor Bessie took Birk’s part and Connie Hassel’s part. It wasn’t done as smoothly but most of the on lookers still could not figure out how they were fooled.

“Well, PR Connie, it’s time to feed the kits. The rest of you lot, get to your studies.”

Connie hurried back to a room the cook set aside for the kits to be in when Connie was busy. No one could enter without the cook noticing and she was protective of her territory as a mother bear of her cave, to say nothing of Chavi’s presence.

Connie gently cooed to the kits, holding her hand above them to give them some warmth from her. It must have worked because her hand became warm and the kits curled into tiny fur balls and went to sleep, full from feeding.

“Singing a clutch of chadie kits to sleep marks them for life,” a soft voice informed her. Connie’s head jerked up and Chavi’s tail wagged slowly.

As the woman entered the room Connie could feel something different about her.

She is different, Bau said. Be careful what you say to her. She’ll know if you’re lying, Sulu said.

“Marks them how?” Connie asked.

“Chadie kits are impressed with what they hear the first days of life. You’re singing in a language not their own.”

“Why would that be bad?”

“They’ll be looking for that song when they’re distressed.” Then the woman smiled. “I’ll have to see if I can make a good impersonation of that child’s lullaby, including sounding off key.”

“It’s just sound.”

“And rhythm, and tone. I’m Ranger Morra. Times are changing if a city girl takes to rescuing chadie kits.” The woman’s eyes were a slate gray that became luminous when she smiled.

Captain Sahem entered the small room with another woman. She had a close resemblance to Ranger Morra.

“Have you the kits, Morra?”

“I was waiting for your arrival, Captain Leah.”

Connie had braced to a salute when Captain Sahem entered and relaxed when he returned it. Her eyes moved back to study Captain Leah. She not only resembled Morra, but had the same clothing and feel. It was as if there was something more to these women and it had Connie curious because it was not something that could be seen.

They’re rangers, Calie Can said with pride. Real ones.

Since she had never met a ranger, real or otherwise, she had nothing to compare like Calie Can.

“It’s time for you to turn over the responsibility of the chadie kits to the Rangers of Leweh. They will raise them until it’s time to release them into the wilds.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Pass the container to Ranger Morra and in your heart let them go,” Captain Leah softly directed.

Connie wondered what she meant by that. The container was too heavy for her to lift alone. Looking down at the container she felt a sigh escape her at the thought of the little ones leaving her care. She hadn’t realized they had come to mean so much to her.

“Nature created a bond between you and the kits to insure they would survive. Now you must let go, and allow me to take over their care,” Ranger Morra said.

Connie could feel sluggishness in her thought processes, and everything slowed down. Her total focus was on the kits, feeling their breath and hunger.

“Do you believe that I will care for them as precious beings?” Morra asked.

Dragging her eyes from the box of kits to Ranger Morra, Connie struggled to focus on the Ranger’s face. For a moment, she thought she was looking at something else. With an effort, Connie nodded her head.

A cold nose nudged her hand. Connie blinked a few times and then cleared her throat. It was a feeble attempt to become more alert. “Yes,” she mumbled, “Ranger Morra.” A sudden pang at the memory of how she found their mother came to her in a vivid image.

“It will not happen to them if we can help it,” Captain Leah assured her.

Connie nodded. “Thank you. I *am* sure you will protect them.” The lethargy left her.

Ranger Morra nodded and lifted the container effortlessly. There were others dressed in the same uniform waiting outside the door. They all left quietly.

“How do you feel?” her captain asked.

“I feel okay, Captain. Knowing I only had to care for them a short time helped. Captain, how can they lift the container so easily?”

Chavi gave a noisy yawn and trotted out the door.

“Practice. Did you know that if you had not given them the chadie kits you would have had to go with them until the kits were adults?”

“I read that, but I don’t believe it.” Yet, in her heart, she wanted to go with them and follow Ranger Morra.

It’s better you stay here, Sulu said.

You still have things to learn, Bau said.

You need to learn to defend your physical self first, Calie Can said.

“Most people that have bonded with the chadies can’t part with them. It’s like giving up one’s baby to a stranger. Go get some sleep. Wolf Pack has muster later tonight.”

“Yes, Captain.” Connie saluted him and ran upstairs to her quarters feeling elated that the kits had a good home and she didn’t have to continue getting up early to feed them.

At eleven Connie was standing before her sergeant major alongside of her team with her toes on an imaginary line that the sergeant major saw clearly.

SgtMaj Bessie walked between the lines, inspecting each soldier.

“Alright Wolf Pack. Everyone looks dressed for business. Listen up for assignments.” Crisply she read off the duty list and who they were paired with. “PR Connie, you’ll be with me

running messages between the watch towers. All right Wolf Pack, you know the drill, if any of you feel anything is off, call it in.”

The sergeant major paced down the line, looking at each one of them. “Trust your gut, and your senses. We haven’t worked the late shift for quite a while so stay sharp. Sometimes a smell, a sound, a shadow gives us an unconscious message that may take a long time to make sense of, but the turning in your gut or a nagging suspicion is there. That’s all that’s needed. Report it and wait for support. Never investigate something suspicious alone. You all got that?”

“Yes, SgtMajor!” the squad shouted.

“Get to your posts!”

Connie trotted beside Bessie whose long strides were difficult to keep up with.

“What’s on the other side of the wall that we’re keeping out, Sergeant Major?” Connie asked.

“The wall is to protect the Realm’s citizens from themselves.” SgtMajor Bessie waved at an air cart that was preparing for flight. “Corporal! Can’t you see the down for repair sticker on the door? Go get another cart.” Bessie glared at him as he drove back to where they were heading, a large building adjoining the training field.

Bessie turned to Connie. “I want to make sure you learn how to ride an air cart without falling off or landing in a tree.”

“Me, fly an air cart?”

“Does this mean you’ve never ridden one?” she looked at her surprised.

“I rode one in back of the playground but not very fast or high.” And if her father had known of her operating one, he would have surely punished her. Calie Can had goaded her to learn.

Bessie led into the building that was a storage for all sorts of equipment and stalls for horses, which only the horse squad practiced riding. Connie wasn’t that interested in riding a horse.

The other guards along the gate had already taken off to relieve their fellow guards from Raven Squad. It was Horse Squad that would relieve them in the early morning hours, giving them eight hours on the wall.

Bessie selected a four-seated shinny flyer that looked too clean for being used recently. She started the engine and checked the controls before engaging the see-through plating that encapsulated them.

“We’ll be riding higher than the wall so put your safety harness on.” SgtMaj Bessie demonstrated how to put it on. “If you should get thrown it has locators.” She touched two places the locators were. “And in the back and chest here, a canopy will open if you’re high enough to make sure you land safely. The harness will keep you in the air cart for as long as it’s safe. Once it senses the air cart is unsafe, it will either eject you, shooting you up and out, or it will release and you can safely exit the craft.”

Bessie handed Connie a pair of night goggles. After securing hers she checked to see that Connie’s was on correctly.

“I’ve never seen anyone wear one of these harnesses,” Connie said.

“Civies aren’t the brightest in preventive practices. Since there aren’t any laws on flying safely only those that care about themselves have them. The Queen does care about her soldiers and ordered them to be installed and used on all military vehicles. That means, you wear one. Are you ready?”

Connie nodded and they were instantly out of the building and up in the air moving perpendicular until eye level with the tower. Connie was grateful for both the harness and firmness of her seat.

“That’s the signal we’re looking for. It’s telling us that changing of the guard has taken place. The pass codes change at irregular times. Do you know when we changed it last?”

“Today at dinner, SgtMaj.”

“We aim to be secretive about it, not letting anyone but our squad know what it’ll be. As each squad switches, verbal updates are given and the logs from the two or in your case three previous shifts are read. Nothing that moves goes unreported.”

Connie nodded. She had read the three reports with Kiku and Kendra and repeated what she understood to be important to follow up with during their watch.

They flew along the wall, getting a signal from each guard in position. There were eight scattered along the one hour travel to the point that another tower would cover. The watch guards moved along their appointed area, scanning and testing the energy wall that prevented anyone passing over or under the barrier to the nation on the other side of the wall.

Her training in the tower with SgtMaj Bessie, Kiku and Kendra, paid off when she was able to translate the fast-moving terrain below them. The focus helped her take her mind off how fast they were flying above the wall. After an hour, they neared the point where Tower Istobel took over the inspection of the wall. There was another air cart waiting for them, resting in the wide walkway of the wall. Bessie cut their speed as they neared, coming to a smooth rest next to the other air cart. On the other side of the air cart was a soldier focused on his duty, scanning the area on the Realm’s side of the wall.

Connie thought by SgtMaj Bessie’s standards, he was a good soldier. He ignored the meet and kept his attention on his area.

“Sergeant Major Bessie, is that you ridding that air cart? And so late at night. It must be getting boring in your tower.” The speaker was wearing a guard’s uniform with the same stripes as SgtMaj Bessie. Sitting inside the cart was a girl who didn’t look older than twelve, yet she also wore a uniform, though not like any Connie had seen so far.

“Sergeant Major Aida of Tower Istobel,” SgtMaj acknowledged. “This is PR Connie, she arrived the other day. I wanted to make sure she learns not to spend much time here with idle gossip from your tower guards.”

Sergeant Aida laughed. “Ensign Neda, this is Sergeant Major Bessie of Wolf Pack and PR Connie. The Ensign is wisely thinking about moving from the Navy to the Queen’s Regiment. I’m taking her on a sightseeing tour. I intend on showing her how much more exciting it is to be on land than water.”

SgtMaj Aida paused before adding. “So, you got rid of that trouble maker, Laif. I was hoping to show Ensign Neda what trouble looked like.”

“Are you a detective too Sergeant Aida?” Sergeant Bessie mocked.

“I wouldn’t want to reach beyond my rating, SgtMajor, but it’s basic logic. You weren’t due for a new draftee until next year and according to shared briefings, Wolf Pack has the day watch until mid spring. I hope the reasons why you’re changing your patrols are passed on to my captain so we can take the same safety measures if it’s necessary.”

Sergeant Major Bessie grinned. “You’ll have Laif on your other side. Britton Tower is his new home. If Captain Ohin can’t get him to see the error of his ways then no one can.”

“He’s going to need more than rough terrain to keep his charges in line. That boy is real trouble. Maybe now the poacher activity will go down with those four separated.”

“I would feel better if all four were in prison,” Bessie admitted.

The ensign suddenly stood and Connie could feel a change of energy from her slight form. Standing up she looked older. Sergeant Aida stepped into her air cart as if that was a signal that the conversation was at an end.

“Nice to meet you both. And you PR Connie, be ever vigilant,” Ensign Neda said.

Though her guides said nothing, Connie could feel their interest in her, though it wasn't the same feeling as with Ranger Morra. The thought of Ranger Morra distracted her for a moment as she wondered what she was doing.

The air cart lifted and flew into the forest.

“Why are they heading into the forest?” Connie asked.

“Looking for trouble. Anything can happen. Three months ago, the first shift from Tower Istobel spotted smoke within the forest. By the time they arrived to look at it closer, it was a full out forest fire. Tower Istobel and a team of fireguards put it out. It fell to our tower to cover their side as well ours while Tower Istobel's troops worked the fire. It was a good exercise that pinpointed weak spots in our coverage. Tonight, we're looking for illegal activity. Something is stirring the air and making some sensitive people twitchy. One of the reasons for changing the shift turnover times is that the best time to attack a point is when it's safe to not be seen. Usually guards are tired at the end of their shifts, looking for their replacements and reluctant to spot trouble, so they don't have to stay on.”

Connie held on tight as the sergeant major made swoops down and up, back and forth around the wall and trees.

“I'm making it difficult for a sniper to get a fix on us. I hope your stomach isn't too unsettled because we'll be flying like this for a while.”

Connie clamped her jaw tight and focused on the scope studying the hot spots of life in the forest. She almost had her queasy stomach forgotten until she opened her mouth to report something and had to gulp a few times.

“We have four sets of people along the wall,” Bessie told her. “Two have camps. One is wandering in the neutral zone along the wall. Call it in.”

Connie called it in and as they circled further out they spotted a van parked in one of the public rest areas. Bessie took pictures and verbally added her observations to their tower controller, and the local forest ranger station. Rather than head back to the wall, Bessie headed further inland, following a cleared swath of ground that in the dark was easier to see in the viewer. Bessie ceased her wild flying as there was not enough room to move around.

“Ranger station Winter Rose to tower night patrol, come in.”

“This is tower night patrol, go ahead,” Bessie answered.

“The number of campers you gave is the number that have registered with us. Two camping vehicles. However, none should be in the restricted areas. Over.”

“Thanks for the read, Winter Rose. Out. See this swath of cleared area, PR Connie? This is a fire road. It's unlawful for civilians to travel it; therefore, it's a restricted area. Usually poachers like to use it because they can get to areas of the forest that are deeper into the woods that a day hiker can't reach. More often than not, we let the forest rangers do their own policing but for the last four months we've had more than the usual unlawful visitors.”

“What do they do with what they kill?”

“Sell the skins or if they capture the young, sell them to circuses or to wealthy families that have their own private zoo.”

“SgtMaj, I have dozens of hot spots moving!” Connie said.

Bessie gave a quick glance at the screen. "Looks like birds. I wonder what's going on over in that part of the woods?"

"This is Winter Rose, calling tower patrol, come in."

"They must be picking up on it too. RYLAC, go ahead Winter Rose," Bessie said.

"See anything else of interest? Over."

"Birds are moving from some of the treetops southward," Bessie said.

"RC. Watch your flutter. Just got a call from one patrol that she and her passenger were shot at over the gulch. Got a squad of eager raccoons surrounding that area now. Safe hunting. Out."

"RYLAC, thanks for the heads up. Out." Sergeant glanced at her attentive pupil that was studying the scope, and dutifully reporting to the tower about the bird movement.

"What is RYLAC and RC?" Connie asked.

"'RYLAC' is 'read you loud and clear' that's to let the ranger station know that danger is out and about. RC is 'ranger caution'. For birds to move at night is unusual. Since poachers know that, it's assumed that the disturbance is a distraction; therefore, the leaders of the rangers have to decide whether to treat it as a distraction or a major event in that area. Anything else?"

"What are raccoons?"

"Ranger newbies, who haven't been on the job more than two years." She steered the air cart to the left slowing down to look at something along the wall. "While we were sidetracked, someone could have been looking for a weak spot along our wall. Remember we said there's an energy buffer around the wall?"

Bessie bounced the air cart against the energy barrier that prevented anyone from crossing over the wall by air cart. "See how strong it is? Not a bit of drop in energy when we came in contact with it."

"Hassel said it would be impossible to breach the wall without an alarm going off."

"Do you believe that?" Bessie asked.

"I believe that anything is possible, and nothing is certain."

"Good philosophy. We tested the barrier along the wall by bumping the energy envelope. Now we'll do a visual inspection."

Bessie swooped to the ground where she brought the air cart to a stop. "Here is where you get your first experience of investigating a check point in the dark. There's a water well for wild animals along this trail." She pulled out of her pocket a device. She strapped it on Connie's wrist. "Smell the water for unusual smells and put your wrist over the water and press this button. Amber means it's contaminated. Green is okay. Dip your finger in the water and drop it on the face, that's why it's cupped. Press the button again and it will test the water. I'll keep you in sight. This means you're okay." She showed her a hand sign. "This means you found something. This means come back. Watch where you place your feet. Besides animal droppings you may fall into an illegal trap. Let's see how much of what you read you can put to actual use."

"Yes, SgtMaj." Connie readjusted her goggles more out of comfort than necessity, and looked around her. Her nose was picking up the rich smells of a forest, the damp trees, brush, and strong pungent scents used to warn other animals off or to attract a mate. Through her goggles, she could see clear outlines of darker shadows with small living creatures creating a brighter spot in her view. As she moved, she realized her footsteps were loud, causing a lot of movement from unseen creatures in the brush around her. The ground dipped down sharply. Carefully, she made her way down the slope, keeping her knees bent and her head moving side to side. The well was off to the side of the path. It didn't take long to take her readings. The

water was safe. Suddenly to her right she saw a movement that was too quick for her to identify. It soundlessly disappeared further into the brush. Her hand went up automatically and signed to her sergeant. She was startled at the speed SgtMaj Bessie was beside her and without any noise.

“Report,” Bessie whispered.

“I saw something move there. It was as big as Chevi.” She didn’t feel any danger from whatever it was and her guardians were silent, though she could feel their alertness.

“Go back to the air cart. Can you fly it?”

“Yes, SgtMaj.” As long as she was not expected to fly like Bessie did, she believed she could handle it.

“If I call you, fly low and slow.”

With her heart pounding, fearful of leaving her sergeant yet worried about being alone if danger was near, Connie jogged back to the air cart, nearly tripping when the ground level changed.

Go slow. There is no danger to you or your troop leader here, Calie Can said.

Regardless, Connie couldn’t help wondering what if the SgtMaj could not call out to her? Remembering the emergency beacon on her coat, she touched it to reassure herself it was there. The signal read it was on.

Stumbling again she reached out to touch the wall for balance. An energy hummed through her fingers and up her arm. Her momentum in falling allowed her to break contact. Panting from fear and physical exertion she laid for only a second before getting up. Readjusting her goggles, she forced herself to move with more caution to the flyer.

Relax. Take a few deep breaths, Gem said.

The sergeant moved into the thick foliage.

“You need to trim this stuff back,” a voice complained, “and train your guards to not make so much noise.”

They both heard an “ouch” and someone falling, a short slide and then quiet.

“She’s a city girl and new; however, she did see you, which means you must be slipping. Why are you out here?”

“A dalin is missing. We’ve heard that the number of poachers have increased on this side of the wall so I’ve come to see if they might have captured him.”

“The only oddity is a van at the turnout along the fire road. The campers we spotted are the number registered with the ranger station.”

“A van? Did you get how many vans registered at the station?”

“Two. This one wasn’t where it should be. But campers don’t always end up where they say they’re going to camp for various reasons. Who’s missing?”

“Yerik.”

Bessie thought about that for a few moments, knowing Yerik worked both sides of the wall. “Yerik is always scouting for poachers. Are you sure he’s not hot on someone’s trail?”

“He was due for a check in a day ago. He doesn’t miss rendezvous.”

“Do you need assistance?”

“Sergeant Aida is helping Ensign Princess Neda search along Soderms Gulch and I was looking along here since there was a break in the link a while back.”

“Think we have another soft spot, aye? I checked and the barrier held up. Aida and the princess were shot at a few minutes ago along the river. By now it’s encircled with the ranger’s finest.” Her lips curled up in a smile.

“I want to inspect that van you spoke of. Do you think you have room for one more?”

“You’re not going to scare her, are you?”

“Of course not. I’ll be on my best behavior.”

Your leader is returning with the one you spotted, Calie Can said. Be careful what you think. This one can pick up on some thoughts.

Connie’s focus was divided between the messages she was getting from the guards along the wall and watching for SgtMaj Bessie. Occasionally noises from the forest would become silent and then resume, but the break in the rhythm didn’t feel alarming.

Connie sat up further in her seat when she caught sight of SgtMaj Bessie’s head crest the slope. Her hand signal relieved Connie of some of her anxiety. She looked about her then returned her attention to her sergeant and the shadow that was beside her. She could feel his energy, immediately recognizing him as a ranger, just like Morra.

“We have a passenger. We’re going back to the van. He’ll be sitting in the back seat.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major.” Connie suspected Bessie was going to accelerate with all possible speed so she gripped the arms of her seat in anticipation.

“I see she’s used to your flying,” the ranger commented.

“Do you want to get there in minutes or hours?”

“No complaints from me,” the ranger laughed.

It took a few minutes to get to the site they saw the van. There was no van and the area was clear of any activity including the normal nocturnal wildlife.

“Looks like they moved the van recently, maybe five minutes ago. Normal wildlife hasn’t returned,” Bessie said.

“Sergeant Major,” Connie called softly.

“We see. Good eye, Connie.” The air cart made a wide arc around the light and dropped down above a small clearing. The ranger jumped out and the air cart lifted back up with so much speed it took Connie’s breath away. Gripping tightly to the sides of her seat she forced air into her lungs.

“There may be someone down there with the intention of shooting at us. I need to get out of range with all speed possible. If you’re going to get sick, wait until we’re safe.” Bessie said without looking.

When Connie thought she could swallow without her stomach bringing it back up she ventured a question to SgtMaj. “Who was that ranger?”

“A Lewah Ranger just like Captain Leah and Lt. Morra. His name’s Sgt. Pen.” She glanced at her newbie. “Don’t repeat any of our business to the others. What happened tonight will only be recorded for the captain’s eyes.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major.” After thinking about it she asked, “What do I tell them if they ask what happened?”

“Tell them it was a SOSO night. That’s ‘same-old-same-old’. Wolf Pack will know not to ask any more questions,” she added. “The others should know better not to be discussing business where it can be overheard. We only talk about it when we’re officially gathered. Do you understand?”

“Yes, SgtMaj. The walls have ears.”

SgtMaj Bessie laughed. “Indeed, they do.”

Chapter 5

Shapeshifter

“Turn out. Wake up call!” Sergeant Major Bessie rapped on their quarter’s door. Since squad duty hours changed at irregular times due to the continued high alert status, SgtMaj had been making her rounds of rapping on doors to get her troops up. Everyone was hoping the problem would clear sometime soon so they could get back to a routine schedule.

Connie had been with Wolf Pack for six months now, and felt comfortable with the people in her squad. They pushed her to overcome some of her shortcomings and always found time to offer suggestions. Through their cajoling and embarrassing teases, she entered into their world of camaraderie and the support system it offered. Her guides said little as her team took over advising her and protecting each other from outside threats.

Connie rolled out of her too comfortable bed and stumbled to her locker to dress in her running clothes. She wore a wide grin as she remembered she had taken her first self-defense test yesterday and had passed. It meant she would be moved to standing guard along the wall. Everyone had patted her on the back and gave her suggestions. They said it could be monotonous if she wasn’t careful. Boring was what one person called it, comparing it to tower work or flying between the posts to make sure everyone was secure, but it was the most important part of guard duty. They gave her suggestions in staying alert, and one most often given was to stay busy...and then they dumped her in a stagnant pond...her initiation. They picked the one she had many times told the others stunk worse than a cesspool. It was her official welcome into the squad.

After her shower which she wanted to spend more time in to wash the foul smell from her nostrils, she found her old uniform had a new badge sewed on it, showing her affiliation with Wolf Pack. In fact, someone had gone through all her uniforms and sewed the patch on. Tears filled her eyes at the honor and trouble someone had gone through for her. She was terrible at sewing.

Proudly she adjusted her new pack her bunkmates had presented her. It had the Wolf Pack badge on it.

Kendra and Kiku were close behind her as they hurried down the hall and stairs to the quad. They were not the first out on the field. The captain and sergeant were dressed and waiting for them. Usually, SgtMaj Bessie came onto the quad after they formed.

“Hey, looks like we’ll be taking it easy,” Hassel joked as he took his place in line.

“Hardly. Captain ran circles around you the last time he joined us, Hassel,” Kendra pointed out.

The captain grinned but said nothing at the teasing.

Connie looked up at the sky. It was late afternoon and the summer heat felt like a heavy blanket. Absent mindedly she touched both her water pouches remembering to take two.

“When you’re ready, Sergeant Major,” the captain said.

“Wolf Pack! Let’s move out,” Sergeant Major ordered.

The group started out the gate of the quad and onto the road that turned into a trail that wound around the lake and back to the tower. Going left would have taken them around the pond that the river would refresh during the rainy seasons. The others liked to finish their run with all possible speed even in the heat, whereas Connie enjoyed the run and took her time. There was no rush, the sergeant major reminded them many times, but everyone wanted to beat her back to the tower, where the first one back earned an extra helping of ice cream on cake.

Connie could hear them up ahead of her. Friendly bantering and grunts were accompanied by SgtMaj's remarks that they were making too much noise. The voices echoed backed, bouncing against the crook in the mountain that the path wound around. Her run was along the river where a new animal path crossed, then up a steep embankment. Idly she searched through her new knowledge on why animals start new paths. Too much thinking, she reminded herself. As she swiped at the stray bugs that formed clouds above the grasses she concentrated on her breathing and moving upward. The next thing she knew she was sliding down a collapsing embankment and over the cliff. Water covered her head as the river flow, strong in the center where she dropped, moved her under the water over rocks. She didn't know how to swim and was lucky the pack turned into a flotation device; however, the rock in her pack slowed her ascent as she clawed her way back up to the surface. She thought of releasing her new pack but then where would she go?

Hold on, I've got you. Don't fight.

Connie forced herself to stop struggling, though panic was robbing her of her strength. Someone pulled her to the river bank where her fingers curled around the grasses growing along the edge. The helpful pressure was gone. Pulling herself out, she rolled to her back, panting as she caught her breath. She pressed the release button so she could roll over and cough out what water she swallowed. Soon she was surrounded by her concerned team.

"Wow! We saw you from the top drop over the side of the cliff. What a rush!" Hassel's claim to fame was jumping off the high tower with a chute just to see if it was possible to land safely. His point was that a spy could jump from the wall and land safely if he were prepared. The quick creation of a good story to cover his unauthorized leap was what saved him from dump duty.

"Got quite a swimming arm," SgtMaj Bessie commented.

"I...don't swim," Connie puffed.

"How did you get here then?" Kendra asked.

"Give her some space," the captain ordered. "She needs to catch her breath. Sergeant Major, why don't you take your squad and finish up the run and I'll stay with PR Connie."

When the others left, Connie watched the captain follow animal prints into the surrounding brush. By the time he came back her breathing was back to normal.

"Ready to finish up the run?" he asked her.

She nodded and pulled her pack back on. Instead of going back up the cliff, the captain took another trail into the woods. They arrived back at the tower before the others. Moving in wet clothing and shoes was not a pleasant experience, her thighs and feet felt rubbed raw, before the heat dried her out.

"Clean up and see me in my office, PR Connie."

"Yes, captain."

Something happened out there that he's worried about, Gem, one of her spirit guides said.

It's not because you can't swim, Bau said.

You heard something, Sulu said.

Be still. We can be heard, Calie Can warned. Connie agreed and her spirit guides became quiet.

When she arrived at his office in dry clothing, she could hear her team entering the quad. Lieutenant Hellene was on the phone and nodded for her to go into the captain's office. She tapped lightly on the captain's office door, though it was open.

“Come in, PR Connie. Leave the door open. Have a seat.”

Puzzled, Connie did as she was instructed.

“Brief me on how you ended up falling off the trial.”

“I was running on the path and the embankment collapsed. I fell off the cliff and into water. If I wasn’t pulled out I may have drowned. I can’t swim.”

“Your SgtMajor will arrange swimming lessons for you, just in case you may find yourself in the river again. Do you know who helped you out?”

“No, Captain. I was pulled out by my collar. He was gone by the time everyone arrived.”

“He.”

“His voice sounded like...”

“*His* voice?”

Connie halted completely, picking up something from the captain that had her realizing that her story was causing some sort of disturbance. Sulu was right. She should not have heard something. Why?

“Don’t scare her like that, Captain Sahem,” the soft voice of Ranger Morra warned.

Connie smiled automatically at the sight of Ranger Morra. Her clothing and boots were splattered with dried mud.

“Ranger Morra. Any of your group I can thank for helping out one of my guards?”

“Ranger Dovev. He was tracking poachers. He was taking a break when he said someone splashed into the river soaking him. He didn’t have time to pass pleasantries as his quarry was moving. I’m here to see that your soldier is okay.” Her eyes turned to Connie and silvered when the light hit them.

Connie wanted to ask her about the kits.

“The kits are doing fine. We found two Chadie mothers that had small litters and were willing to take on the extra kits. Now they’re big and ready to make it on they’re own.”

“Thank you,” was all Connie could think to say. Calie Can’s warning kept her thoughts still.

“Not a problem. We owe you a debt of gratitude for saving the kits. We have a gang of poachers that’s out to eradicate the wildlife around the wall.”

“Why?” Connie asked, and then blushed.

“Because whatever chooses to live around the wall is not your average household pet and could never be made a pet, and some people have a problem with that. Ever have a pet?”

“No, Ranger Morra.”

“Well,” she smiled at Connie, amused for some reason Connie wished she knew, “they’re like everyone else you’ll run across. Some are cranky, some are shy, and some are a real pain to get to leave you alone. Now the wildlife around the wall have a great sense of independence, dislike for being caged, and an uncanny intelligence above your normal pet. Insecure people get frightened about that and can’t tolerate anything that may be smarter than they.” **Which isn’t hard with most of them. Aye?**

Connie blushed and nodded. Her guides stirred but didn’t say anything.

Ranger Morra’s eyes stared hard at her and then glanced at the captain. Whatever silent message passed, it was understood.

“What is happening around you, PR Connie,” she continued, “is unusual. For one, seldom does the average person get a chance to rescue chadie kits. Secondly, seldom can people see a ranger in the wilds unless she or he wants to be seen, and thirdly, seldom do people get pulled

from rivers by Rangers of Lewah and are not frightened. You're like a magnet for strange happenings and some people may think ill of you."

"What the Ranger is trying to explain, PR Connie, is that we have spies that would harm you if they thought you were a threat to them. The chadie kits bonded to you, which makes you a powerful person in some people's eyes. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir. I've read about the odds of that happening. I thought since they're gone, that they would forget me."

"Chadie's see you as a friend to seek if they are in danger. For you and them that could pose a problem. Poachers have someone watching you at all times, hoping to get a shot at a chadie that comes to greet you."

Connie looked stricken at first and then realized that if she had left them to die, that would have been a worse fate. She looked straight at the ranger. "I don't regret saving them."

"Good. You'll need to be trained to protect yourself from being kidnapped, killing, or whatever harm they can think to bring your way."

Connie gulped audibly.

Won't happen! Calie Can said.

Ranger Morra cocked her head as if she heard.

"We'll take care of that Ranger," Captain Sahem reassured her.

Without taking her eyes off Connie she said, "We'll see. Try not to have such an adventurist life until you know woods skills." She smiled and then left.

"Wolf Pack should be finishing up their meal. Go on and join them. Tell SgtMajor I want to see her now, PR."

"Yes, Captain."

Connie hurried to the mess hall, anxious to leave behind the meeting.

She heard me, Calie Can said sounding aggravated.

Some people can see and hear other people's guides. It's nothing to get upset about, Bau said.

You did say yourself you thought we can be heard, Sulu reminded him.

There was a collective sigh which Connie wondered if they would explain just what all that meant. She thought everyone had guides, so what was the big deal?

She found SgtMajor Bessie exchanging jokes with Cook.

"SgtMajor, the captain requests your presence."

"Will do, PR. Eat your grub and then you lot get to your lessons. You'll have tests so make sure you understand what you're reading. Help each other out, but don't turn it into a social hour. We still have guard duty to look forward to."

"Right, SgtMajor." Lance Corporal Kiku looked the group over seriously. Perhaps too seriously some thought. It meant Kiku would make sure they were taking practice tests rather than catching up on personal correspondence.

"All right then. Carry on," Kiku said.

Finished with her meal, Connie eagerly sat before her terminal and began her lessons. Learning how to read weather and the forest signs was Connie's favorite class. Her team had helpful information to give her that the class work didn't cover. Like what it smelled like when some animals urinated weeks ago as opposed to recently. At first Connie thought they were teasing her until she read that when tracking or looking for poachers, it was necessary to know how recent an animal passed that the poacher would be interested in.

A tap on the captain's door had him laying aside his reports. "Come," he ordered. Lieutenant Hellene opened his door to show Sergeants Bessie, Elroy and Mac in. "I ask for one and get three of you?" he asked amazed. "What brings you all to my office?"

"PR Connie. Wolf Pack is talking about the animal tracks around her near the river. The others will know it's a dalin," Sergeant Elroy signed.

"That chatter needs to be silenced. We can't have it being heard by a poacher or one of their agents," the captain signed back.

"You still think we have a leak here? We've gone over this place thousands of times for weaknesses and we've got the three malcontents pretty isolated from passing notes," Mac said.

"Someone is keeping tabs on us. I haven't received information on Liaf and Lieutenant Hellene's search came up with nothing. I've already sent out a request for assistance on this investigation," the captain informed them.

The three nodded and left.

The captain turned his chair to watch a few guards playing football over the dirt field.

"Things don't feel right," Lieutenant Hellene said softly. "And it's not the same as before Connie arrived."

"No, it's not. Something has changed the tone around the wall."

What he wanted to know was who was so interested in spying on his tower guards and why. Turning back to his computer he logged on then went into his encrypted mail from HQ. He wanted to send an inquiry as to what was going on in the rumor mill.

A soft oath crossed his lips as a place he was not expecting information on Liaf alias Teman to come from was there before him. So, Hellene's use of her contacts at the palace did get someone roused.

The secret police had a long record on Teman, son to Lem, a poacher whose family made a living off killing animals and burning forests if necessary to cover their escape. At the bottom of the information was a note for him to expect members from the Queen's Regiment under the guise that they were there for additional training.

Sahem leaned back in his chair and gazed at a small trophy he had won when he was a lieutenant in the Queen's Regiment.

So, help is on the way soon. How did Teman get in the draft under another name? Did he switch or use a fake name? This gives us a wider circle of suspects in a plot we haven't figured out what it's about.

That explains why the sudden influx of poachers. He was intentionally sent to a tower post. It has to be someone in the draft office of the city he reported to.

Quickly he sent a message to Captain Ohin. *Might as well warn him.*

Captain Ohin sent an acknowledgement.

Goldwah Tower was already on high alert but now he had more to go on. He sent a message to his sergeants to expect visitors and to get things spit and shine. He added that all passwords and signs were to be changed immediately.

"If there's a spy here he or she's going to pass it on," a voice from behind him warned. The dust covered traveler pointed to his window where a reflection of his screen could be seen.

“Jeepers, Herder. You nearly gave me a heart attack,” the captain yelled. He rose from his chair and gave a heart felt hug to Field Commander Herder of the Queen’s Regiment. “You sure move fast.”

“We were in the neighborhood. There was a prison break. Out of ten escapees we’ve only three still at large so I took over the hunt. The trail is too cold for trainees to find. They’re from this area so we figured they would be heading in this direction since they know the land.”

The captain sat back in his chair disturbed. “It’s not that Goolog lot, is it?”

Herder sat in the chair near the door. “No, another one that at one time was cleared out. We believe one of the guards looked the other way. Jasper, Colin, and Miles are the escapees.”

“From a poacher’s clan, then?”

“Aye. The lot are cousins to Laif.”

“It’s looking like something along this part of our wall is being planned.”

“You think?” Herder grinned at his old commanding officer. “I’ve read your reports and heard your lieutenant rattled some doors when your inquiries and warnings were not responded to; which also brings us here.”

“You look like you can use a few good hours of sleep after a shower to get rid of the travel dust. Let me get you a place to bunk down. How many with you?”

“Seven here and twenty out in the field. I’d like my seven to be integrated with your teams to get the feel for what’s happening on tower watch. Being officers in training, they sometimes lose sight of the world at grunt level.”

The two men gave a short laugh, remembering the king himself made that comment about officers in training when he noticed his children in the corps were slacking off due to claiming royal privilege.

“Let’s get some bunks setup.”

The two walked to the field where a tired looking group of Queen’s Regiment squatted with their packs beside them. The tower guards pointedly ignored them and continued their game, though it had moved a few levels higher in roughness. As the two COs drew closer they overheard the remarks some of the regiment were making of the players. The two officers glanced at each other, remembering a time in their lives when they were in the same position.

When the QR caught sight of their captain they rose to their feet.

“Sergeant Mac!” Captain Sahem hollered at one of the on lookers

“Yes Captain.” Mac quickly trotted to his captain, saluted smartly and gave a wary look over the dusty officer next to him.

“Get seven bunks setup. These soldiers will be spending some time scattered within our squads.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Lt. Mendes, work with Sergeant Mac,” the commander ordered.

A youth that looked too young to be an officer gave hand signals to the six and they followed Lt. Mendes as he followed Sgt. Mac.

Lt. Neda nodded to Kiku, Kendra and gave a wink at Connie. Her bunk was to be the closest to the door. Her dusty cloak and pack were tossed on it.

“So, you pampered uniforms are here for some experience at grunt duty, huh?” Kendra asked mockingly. “No problem. We’ll make sure you’re in all our duties, right Lance Corporal?”

Kiku rolled her eyes dramatically and threw something at Kendra.

“How are you doing Kiku?” Neda stepped forward and gave her a hug and then Kendra.

“You know her?” Connie asked surprised after Kendra’s remark.

“When we were both newbie’s we got knocked off our air cart by a poacher shot. That was before she was even *Ensign* Neda. She was with her brother Pili and they gave us a lift. We didn’t get to bust the poacher but we did get to empty out his van of what he was collecting.”

Neda smiled at the memory. “They were two very sorry looking individuals by the time we ran them down.” Her smile faded as she added, “We were lucky they were interested in live cargo and not dead.”

Neda used the boot rack to pull off her boots, then bounced on her bunk. “So, what’s been doing with the three of you since I was last here?”

“Don’t you want to take a shower first?”

“I know your shower system well. With the rest of my squad showering, the water pressure is going to be a drip.”

“Who all is here?”

“No one you know. They’re all new to the squad. Field Commander Herder reformed the squads, their leaders and duties. Bother to some to be split up and a relief to others. If you want to rise in the ranks and become a good field officer, you need training in all field duties so you know what your weaknesses are and get over it.”

“That sounds familiar. Wonder where you heard that?”

The three laughed.

“Spoken like a true politician...errr...future commander,” Kendra teased.

“So, what’s been happening around here?” Neda asked.

To Connie’s embarrassment, Kiku and Kendra told Neda everything they knew without holding back, including what they thought of the other members of the tower.

When they finished, Connie sat on her bed with her arms crossed looking stubborn at the inquiring look from Neda.

“Nothing to add?” she asked.

“We’re not supposed to be talking tower business with anyone outside of our squad and certainly not gossip,” she said.

“You’re right. But I’m an officer in the Queen’s Regiment and therefore, above those rules.”

“I’d rather hear it direct from SgtMajor, since she’s the one that gave me the order. She gave it to all of us,” Connie said pointedly to the others. She couldn’t figure out if Lt. Neda was serious or teasing her. It was her tone of voice and the relaxed atmosphere in the room that had her uncertain. The other two didn’t seem to take her refusal to pass on information seriously either.

“Well, maybe later. I’ll take my shower and then get in some pillow time. A real pillow. Such a pampered life you all lead, and which I don’t mind sharing.”

With the extra help, more day passes were issued. Passes were done on a lottery and Connie won the third day along with Kiku, Dekey of Horse Squad, and Hadid of Raven Squad. That was Cook’s day to go into town for supplies and all but Kiku jumped at the chance for a

ride in with Cook. Cook liked to exchange outrageous stories of her early days in the corps with what the others could come up with. Connie was spared her turn by their arrival in town.

“I’ll be having noon lunch at *The Dragoon’s Rest Stop* if any of you want to join me. After lunch, I’ll be headed back to the tower. If you miss me you’ll have to hitch a ride in with someone else.”

“I won’t miss lunch with you, Cook,” Connie told her. “You get the best service and all sorts of extra goodies from the chef.” The others agreed.

Connie had never been into town to just wander around. Her days off were spent learning what she didn’t have time to learn on duty. Being the newbie still showed in her forestry and weapons skills. She had befriended some of tower guards from the other squads who didn’t mind practicing with her. The others had talked about their favorite shops to visit but Connie had spotted a toy shop on one of her delivery visits. She wasn’t interested in buying, just looking at the things she never had a chance to see when a child.

This is a place you need to keep your hands in your pockets, wrapped tightly around your wallet, Sulu said.

There’s no danger here for you, Calie Can told Connie confidently.

Of course not, Connie thought, *I have no money to speak of.*

The shop’s door dinged when she swung it open. Two heads bent over a toy lifted and turned in her direction. Two children, she identified. The man behind the counter was engrossed in fixing something and didn’t look up. Connie went to the furthest side of the store, wanting to start at one end and see all that she could in the two hours she had.

“Can I help you?” a voice near her elbow inquired.

Connie looked down at a child dressed in the same clothing as the man behind the counter.

“I’m just looking.”

The youth nodded. “My name’s M, just M as in the letter. I see you find the automated figures intriguing. Can I demonstrate it for you?”

“I’m Connie. Yes, please.”

For the next half hour Connie and M played with the automated figures. They played at a sports game, three to a team. It was challenging to manipulate three at a time. Then it was time to move on to look over the other toys, with M showing her the delights. Too soon with so much more to look over Connie’s timer notified her she needed to get to the lunch rendezvous.

“I have to go, M. Thank you for showing me the toys. I haven’t even gotten half way to seeing what’s here.”

“If you come on weekends, I’ll be here to show you. I work here when I’m not in school.”

“I don’t know what days I’ll get off but if they’re weekends, I’ll look for you.”

“You know, if you really like any of the toys, you can put some money down. Pay a little each time you can.”

Connie looked surprised, both at his salesmanship and her for being enticed to take him up on it. She pulled out her wallet that she bought at the castle store. Another lesson that Kendra had given her was on handling money. It took a few pay periods to understand that she did not have to spend it all in one day or at all. Kendra put her on a budget so she could learn about money.

“All I have is a 5.”

“How much do you want to put down? If you put the 5 down you’ll only have three more to pay.”

Connie counted in her head what that was. If she was going to have lunch she wouldn’t have enough. “Not this time. I only have enough for lunch.”

“Next time.”

Stepping out of the toyshop she paused to get her bearings.

That was a strange excursion into a different space, Sulu said.

I found it too strange, Bau said. Where are the others?

They’ll be along. Don’t fret, Sulu said.

Connie felt curious that her guides would take trips away from her. Next time she dreamt she would ask about it before she fell asleep.

As she walked quickly she weaved in-and-out of the hawkers and their customers. Tables and booths were setup along the sidewalk. It reminded her of the Friday sidewalk fair and summer weekends in Hollbo where hobby crafts and unwanted goods were bartered or swapped.

Connie stopped where she was and was nearly knocked to the ground by those behind her that were not expecting her to stop so suddenly. With apologies and shaking of hands, which Connie was not partial to, she turned to see if Kiku was still talking to the strange man in one of the booths. Kiku and the man were gone. The booth was closed.

To avoid any more bumping into people she crossed the street where there was less traffic. As the road turned, there was an alleyway that she walked by but halted for a moment when a whimper from the alley caught her attention.

Keep going, Sulu said.

This doesn’t feel right, Bau agreed.

Connie stepped into the alley anyway, concerned something was hurt, then everything went black.

“You don’t leave a newbie on her own!” SgtMaj Bessie shouted.

Hadid looked miserable and was wondering what the newbie had against him that it was he that kept getting stuck with her care. She wasn’t even in his squad.

When the SgtMaj said that she was looking at all of them. Kiku, objected to being included since she didn’t come into town with Cook’s group, which was the wrong thing to say to the three squad leaders.

“You are all on tower watch. Since you lost her, you can take the place of the others that are looking for her,” First Sergeant Mac said. “You’re on duty as of now.”

“Rule number one is we take care of our own. She’s a Goldwah Tower Guard,” MstSgt. Elroy added.

The three sergeants were furious when PR Connie turned up missing. Cook was suspicious that she didn’t turn up for lunch and sent a neighborhood kid to look for her whereabouts while they had lunch. When the last person that saw her reported she was headed to the restaurant an hour ago Cook sent everyone out looking for her and then contacted SgtMaj Bessie. Cook had her feelings and her feelings were saying something bad had happened to PR Connie.

Connie felt nauseous and the black bag over her head probably had something to do with it. She was in a vehicle she knew immediately. It felt like a bus, the way it was swaying. A fast moving bus.

“Slow down, stupid! Do you want someone to spot us?”

“I’ll slow down when we’re out of this area. Kidnapping a tower guard isn’t the same as transporting pelts.”

“Yeah, she doesn’t stink as bad,” the other laughed. “But slow down anyway. We’re in close enough distance for some air cart to spot us. You can drive this crazy when we hit the open highway.”

“That’s one place I don’t want to drive this fast. We get stopped by the Roadway Cops and they find her, no telling how they’re going to act.”

“What are you so jumpy about? We have our contacts.”

“She’s still a kid and she’s not wearing a uniform. That makes us in hot water with transporting a minor without her say so and whatever else they can think of.”

“You worry too much. I’m going to go in the back and make sure she’s still out.”

“Don’t give her any more of that stuff. I don’t want her to stop breathing on us. They want her alive.”

“Well then if she’s coming to, what do you want me to do?”

“Let her be. She’s tied up and bagged. Where is she going to go?”

Two voices laughed at this.

Connie would have tested her restraints but her hands were numb and she could feel numbness creeping up her arms. Her thoughts were fuzzy cutting her off from the usual sense of her environment. Even her feel for her guardians was gone.

She was too drugged to panic. Instead she moved her feet and then head to see how much space she had around her. She had been wedged in wherever she was. All four sides were solid and unyielding. She had been dumped in a luggage box. Between the smell and her headache it was difficult to plan anything. The way she felt she wished she was knocked out.

A sudden bump in the road seemed to catch the bus by surprise because it didn’t bounce. The front end went nose first into a rut while the back end came up and over, crashing on the roof and then rolling. At the speed they were going the bus slid into a bridge post, twisting around it, and then down the embankment. It came to a stop nose first in the river.

Connie was conscious of something pulling at her. Actually, there were many pulling at her. Unable to help she let herself fall back into unconscious. When she came to again, she was looking up at the stars and into luminous eyes.

How do you feel?

“Better. I don’t have a sack over my head,” she whispered. Her throat ached. Was she screaming? Slowly she sat up, using her elbows to push herself into a sitting position. She felt sore everywhere. Carefully she flexed her hands feeling the burn as circulation was restored. It was useless to pat the rest of her body to see if she was real. Her hands couldn’t feel anything. She looked back at the Wolf that was sitting more than an arms length away from her, watching. Occasionally it would lift it’s nose to the air and sniff then return it’s stare at her.

“Were you the one that saved me from drowning?” She didn’t get an answer, but Connie felt it was the same Wolf. “Thank you.”

We travel in packs. It’s time for me to leave you. Your transportation is arriving.

Connie didn't bother to stand when she heard the whoosh of air carts traveling faster than it was safe. SgtMaj Bessie was the first at her side. Connie was dimly aware of her wrists and ankles being wrapped with something, then she was allowed to lie down and sleep as she was moved somewhere else.

Lt. Neda slid down the embankment and waited for the ranger that was looking over the two bodies. While she waited, she looked along the river bank and then looked the other way. They were lucky the river was low at this time of the year. She could hear others arriving to tow the bus out of the river. It would contaminate the water for the farms downstream if it wasn't removed.

"I'm done here," Ranger Captain Leah said. Lt. Neda helped pull her through the window and then, "It's a kidnapping. They had more credits in their pockets than they should for their jobs. They had an address written down but not the name of the person that she was being delivered to."

"What do you think is happening?"

"I can't read her. I asked Ramla and she can't either. Too much is happening around her for it to be coincidence...which I don't believe in. The poacher activity increased before she arrived but it's become personal since she rescued the chadies. Chadies have been rescued by others and they didn't have a sudden increase of personal attacks like this."

"The other rescues were by rangers and rangers are always in the thick of things. So, what do we do now?"

"We use her as bait. Whoever has been creating trouble around here, couldn't have known she was going to be assigned here so there's something else that has set her up as their target."

The two clambered back up the embankment for a better view of what was around them. Two different types of uniformed groups were moving around slowly, collecting anything that had been thrown from the van as it flipped and rolled. The two women turned their attention to a tow truck arrival. Two people. They were guided as to where to park.

Neda watched as one of the tow truck operators jumped out of the truck and before anyone could stop him slid down to the other side of the van. Neda walked over to the top of the embankment and informed him, "There're bodies in there. We're waiting for the Office of Body Retrieval to get here. Go back to your vehicle and wait."

One of the rangers planted his body in front of the new arrival to prevent him from going any further.

"That must be them now," Leah pointed at a caravan of vehicles headed their way on the road. "Sgt. Elid get that guy out of there and arrest him if necessary. Lt. Morra, check out the driver."

"I'll check with OBR and see who they're sending," Lt. Neda said, not taking her eyes off the tow trucker as he tried to peer around the ranger. Their tow truck was too small to pull the bus up, so how did they find out about the crashed bus when it was transmitted over encrypted communications?

"SgtMaj Bessie, we have a situation over here. I know you got the names of the OBR personal that are arriving. Can you give them to me?"

“Lieutenant, your faith in me is justified. Rathford and Manny from the Regiment’s Office. They’re monitoring everything unusual out here.”

“Get your team over there to make sure everyone in that caravan is supposed to be here. The small tow truck’s driver and passenger are suspect.”

“I read you.”

Neda and Lewah let the others secure the scene while they looked for any anomalies. Morra stood on the bridge looking over the area with two other rangers.

“I hope a recorder is with the OBR team and not going to follow up later,” Neda said.

“You have little faith in the Regiment’s OBR team.”

“They’re over worked and too scattered.”

“Isn’t that true with us all. Here comes the OBR officer.”

He was a colonel and those with him were all officers. Purposefully they cleared the area and others from their team took custody of the two tow truckers. Meanwhile a larger tow truck with the regiment’s emblem on its side door let them know that the real tow truck had arrived.

“Shall we let them look into it without our nudging or nudge them now?” Neda asked.

“We wait. Col. Egbert doesn’t take nudges very well especially from a mere captain and lieutenant.”

SgtMaj Bessie joined them. “Col. Egbert has officially taken over this investigation. Before he arrived, information came in that a tow truck was stolen.”

“That means we take our leave and wait for him to finish his report. Have you moved PR Connie?”

Bessie smiled.

“Let’s get to her before he gets his people with her. I want to know what happened,” Captain Leah said. The captain gave a hand sign to Lt. Morra then turned to the two women. “I’ll catch up with you. Let me give some sort of display of displeasure that he’s kicking us out of this investigation.”

Neda and SgtMaj Bessie walked to the gathering of rangers and guards that were not happy at being called off the investigation. Rangers were quiet types but their body language told a lot to someone who could read it. SgtMaj Bessie gave a hand signal to her group to get back into their vehicles.

“Where do we meet?” Lt. Morra signed.

“Forest stronghold 3,” SgtMaj Bessie signed back.

“Wake up, Connie. You’ve slept enough,” a voice said.

Blinking against the light, even subdued, Connie lifted a bandaged wrist to cover her eyes. Lifting the other she found a matching wrap.

“How are you feeling?” Ranger Morra asked.

“A lot better. I’m getting a lot of adventure out of this,” she whispered.

“So are we,” Captain Leah said.

Morra stepped back and Leah sat in the seat next to her bed.

“You want to know what happened,” Connie guessed.

“From the moment you woke up that day. All conversations and nuances and oddities you experienced,” Leah said.

“Relax, almost falling asleep. Listen to my voice. I will start you remapping that day,” Morra said.

“Okay.” She looked up at Morra and smiled.

“So,” Morra said when Connie didn’t close her eyes.

Connie closed her eyes, breathed in and as she exhaled, she felt herself sink into darkness. Behind her closed lids she recounted her day, included her thoughts and observations that she was not consciously aware of.

“Okay, Connie,” Morra said softly, “wake up.”

Connie’s eyes opened promptly, staring into Morra’s luminous orbs. For a few moments they were quiet.

“Did you find my first day off boring?” Connie asked.

“I liked the toy shop, but you shouldn’t go in there alone. They deal in drug trafficking.”

“The child too?”

“That wasn’t a child. That was a troll and you crossed over a threshold. Hasn’t anyone taught you about the dangers of traveling with trolls?”

“Trolls? Oh, no. Trolls look like ugly shrunken men. This was a child,” she insisted.

That was a troll, Callie Can whispered in her ear as if she didn’t want Morra to hear.

Morra grinned at her. “You need a guardian to keep you from bungling into places that should be visited with intent. One of these days you won’t find a way back and guides that don’t know everything, won’t protect you from your naïveté.”

“We’ve got a problem here.” Neda squatted next to Captain Leah. “You said you thought you saw Kiku talking to a person that looked like trouble. Would you be able to identify him if we showed you pictures?”

“I didn’t really see him...or her. Kiku didn’t come into town with us. The woman had similar body movements as her but I couldn’t swear it was her. I would want to see her face for that. And with the person she was talking to, it was more like a bad feeling when seeing him. It happened so fast and the street was busy.”

“Feelings, to a Ranger, are valid reasons to act on,” Lt. Morra said.

“Do you feel well enough to return to the tower?” SgtMaj Bessie asked.

Connie struggled to rise from her bed but Captain Leah gently pushed her back down.

“Give her one more day to recover. We’ll need to also work on a plausible story. Problem with all of this is that too many people have their own business interests involved. We need to find out what is under our perusal and see that Connie is not targeted again.”

“And why she is being targeted.”

“Do you think it’s because of the chadies?” Connie asked.

There was silence for a long moment, enough for Connie to think it was.

“It’s more complicated than that,” Captain Leah said. “But when we unravel it all, we’ll let you know. Lt. Neda is bunking with your group. She can keep an eye on you and Kiku.”

“Why Kiku?”

“She was in town. She helped look for you.”

“She got a ride in with someone else,” Connie objected.

“Yes, but who gave her the ride? Who was she waiting for? A love interest?”

SgtMaj Bessie laughed at that. “It’s always love interests,” she told the others defensively when they looked at her. “It’s the age of secret rendezvous and passed messages.”

“So, it can be something innocent,” Lt. Neda said.

“Yes. You’re talking about teenagers. And Lt. Neda, you’re not out of that phase yourself.”

Neda’s face reddened for a moment. “Well, we do meet now and then and exchange notes...but I sure won’t put anyone in danger for my private romance.”

“People in love have this trust in the person they think they’re in love with and if it’s someone with dark intentions...the inexperienced can easily be manipulated,” Captain Leah said.

“So, who do you think Kiku is infatuated with?” They all looked at Connie when Neda asked the question.

“How would I know?” Connie asked.

“Well you do sit next to her when you’re working on the computer,” SgtMaj Bessie said. “But you’re right, it’s probably going to make you feel real odd if you bunk with her and are asked to spy on her. I’ll check her Email logs.”

“You won’t find her sending Emails,” Connie said. “She’s sensitive about people knowing her business.”

The four exchanged looks and then looked back at Connie.

“She writes letters?”

“Yes. To someone in a castle but I don’t know who.”

“Do you think someone is out to get you?” Lt. Morra asked suddenly.

“It’s not personal,” Connie said.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think it’s me that someone is after. I feel it’s more of a position that I represent.”

Morra smiled at her. “I think you would make a good ranger Connie. When your two years are up, think about transferring over.” She looked over at Captain Leah.

“Recruiting?” was her comment to Morra. Looking back at Connie she frowned at what she saw. “You’re tired. You’re safe here without interruptions. When you wake up, you’ll feel good and ready to take on the world. Sleep now.”

“I’d rather sleep in my own bunk,” Connie answered drowsily. “Hey,” she whispered. “I’m...” When her breathing evened out the women left the room.

“Why did you have to put her to sleep?” Bessie asked.

“If she were awake, what else can she do here but pace and worry? She needs more healing time in quiet. It will give us more time to complete the background checks on her two bunkmates,” Captain Leah said.

SgtMaj Bessie looked at her quizzically.

“If we’re setting her up as bait, we need to eliminate loose ends. Also, Col. Egberg will have someone waiting at the tower for her ready to ask her tireless questions,” Captain Leah said.

Bessie glanced at her watch, “It’s time for me to phone in a report.”

“Best not. Deliver it in person. Chances are the Realm’s Agents are sitting with him,” Neda said.

“When can we expect her,” Bessie asked.

“Early tomorrow morning. Wolf Pack still has the late-night shift?”

“I don’t know if Saham is going to shift the watches again. This kidnapping has him pretty steamed up with the troops. It’s so out of character for the tower guards to leave a newbie alone in town. Captain Saham came down heavy on Lance Corporal Kiku. He’s angry enough to bring her down a rank to make his point,” SgtMaj Bessie said.

“Well then, it’s best I get back to my bunkmates and see how they’re dealing with that,” Neda said.

“You think Kiku is going to be resentful?”

“If she does then Connie will have to deal with it. It’s life in the military,” SgtMaj Bessie said. “We look out for our own and when there’s unfriendlies in the ranks, we deal with them openly.”

Connie arrived back at the tower early in the morning but not too early for the agents to immediately have her ushered into the Captain’s office. The bandages around her wrists and ankles were unwrapped and inspected. The type of injury seemed to mean something to the two men. She was relieved they didn’t ask to see the other bruises on her body from all the bouncing around in the bus. Two hours of questions that were not the same as she remembered the ranger asking her, were just as exhausting. They were looking for something different, but what it was Connie couldn’t get a sense of it. These agents had an entirely different attitude that gave them a heavy feel in her mind that was carried into their body language. Connie was grateful for the extra time she was given to recover.

“You may return to your quarters, PR Connie. Your squad has night duty so you need to catch up on some sleep,” Captain Sahem said. “Close the door behind you, PR.”

Connie’s progress to her dorm was interrupted by well-wishers that she was back safely. When she got to her dorm she hoped she was slipping in quietly, but apparently, everyone was sleeping lightly.

“What the blazes happened to you?” demanded Kiku. “You got us all in trouble, and me most of all.” Kiku stood in front of Connie fuming.

“I didn’t go out to purposely ruin your day off,” Connie said indignantly. “I was just walking to a restaurant.”

Kendra stepped between the two. “Lighten up, Kiku.” She patted Connie on the shoulder. “You are one walking lightning rod.”

Lt. Neda was sitting up in her bed watching the drama. “I think something is happening around the wall, but it had been happening before Connie was recruited. It maybe she is being singled out because she’s the newbie. But, for whatever reason, we have late night shift, so let’s get some rest.”

The clanging of the alarms had Connie rolling out of her bed entangled in her bedding while the other three were in their lockers, grabbing what they needed for an emergency muster.

Neda was waiting by the door impatiently while Connie fumbled with her fastenings.

“Just secure your boots and go!” Kendra told her. “You can button your clothing on the run.”

The quad was not lit up and the two squads didn’t muster where they would make easy targets. They were all equipped with night gear.

“Wolf Pack, secure the ground parameter along the wall. Horse Squad is already on duty on the towers and wall. Raven Flock, you have the air. Move out.” Captain Sahem glanced at Herder whose eyes were studying each guard that arrived as if sizing them up.

Neda glanced at Connie. “You’re with me PR Connie.”

Connie's eyes blinked in surprise. SgtMaj Bessie was already in her air cart watching her squad leave the hanger.

Neda's skills at handling an air cart was something Connie envied. It was not as abrupt and sharp as SgtMaj and she was going much faster than Connie ever remembered flying.

"We're assigned the area around tower 4. That's the furthest so we need speed to get there within the shortest amount of time. Don't fall out."

Connie had her harness on but still held tight to her seat. She forced herself to focus on the blips on her screen and not the speed at which the images were passed. It was ten minutes later that a reading outside of their area of inspection caught Connie's attention.

"Lt. Neda, I have a reading of about sixteen hot spots to the left of the river."

"Call it in, just in case they aren't ours."

"They're scattering." She pressed her throat mic and reported what she saw and the location.

Neda slowed down and began to fly higher and away from the wall. "What I'm doing is getting out of weapons range of what poachers normally carry. Since we weren't informed what type of emergency it is, I'm assuming that I can't trust those on the wall."

"What happens if they need help?"

"We call it in first, then we investigate with care. Wolf Pack has been given the position of the hunter. We're lone scouts, sniffing out trouble." She grinned at her description.

"I'm seeing a yellowish glow. What's that from?" Connie asked.

"Dango!" Neda cursed.

Suddenly the air cart was rising quickly and banking over the wall. That was something Connie thought they couldn't do because of the barrier around wall. She didn't have time to worry about a breach as something hit their flyer and the air cart spun wildly.

"Hang on! Don't jump unless I tell you to!" Neda shouted above the high pitch whining of the air cart.

They hit the side of the hill with a thud and the air cart rolled then slid down a hill, and with one bounce went high into the air and over a cliff. Connie's eyes opened wide as she watched the world around them rotate slowly as they dropped. Their halt was sudden, entangled in branches and vines. The two were silent for a few minutes listening to the loud snapping of green wood and creaking as the branches bent from their weight. Connie hoped it would hold them.

"Are you all right?" Neda asked softly.

"I think I'm going to barf."

"We need to get out of here. Let me check and see if it's okay. We're not on solid ground."

Cautiously, she pushed the door open, pausing to let the shifting air cart move to the change in weight as the door moved. Neda took a cautious look out just as the air cart suddenly shifted position. She lost her grip and fell out the door. Connie made a grab for her wrist, further loosening the air cart in whatever precarious resting place it had landed in.

The air cart dropped, breaking branches with loud snaps and the sound of metal bending. Connie wedged her body against the air cart frame, struggling to hold onto Neda. The sudden stop had something break and stab Connie. Her grip on Neda's forearm loosened.

"It's alright. Let me go," Neda told her. "I'm standing on a branch. Can you get out?"

Connie breathed in slowly and then out. Her side was on fire.

Neda reached in to find Connie. Her hands could feel her coat and something warm and sticky. “Connie, are you alright?”

“I don’t think so,” she answered softly. It hurt to breathe.

“I can’t come in there to get you. You have to move yourself out of there and slowly.”

With Neda’s verbal guidance, Connie crawled out of the damaged air cart, and was lowered down the tree. Connie leaned against Neda as she tried to stand.

“Well, this is a fine mess,” Neda muttered to herself. She glanced at her half-conscious partner. Sniffing the air, she turned a little to catch a stronger scent.

“Do you think you can walk?” Neda asked.

“I’d like a rest, but I don’t think it’s wise here, right?”

“Actually, we’re a lot safer here than if we were on Realm’s side of the wall.”

Neda gave Connie a moment to gather herself. The only reason she wanted to move away from the air cart was it may drop from the tree it crashed in. The ribs she bruised prevented her from lifting Connie.

“Come on, just a few steps and then you can rest.”

Connie placed one foot in front of the other but was not aware how far they went until Neda eased her to the ground. “This is safe enough,” she panted from the pain in her side. “Now we wait for a ride.”

Though she hurt all over, they were both alive. Pulling out a cloth from her pocket, she pressed it against Connie’s bleeding side.

Connie heard her but was in too much pain to give an answer.