

Part I

A Malignant Specter

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Prologue

For centuries a malignant form of jealousy existed within all the royal households by members of a royal bloodline not in line of succession. It started with a few that formed a secret club called Besardo, whose members grew as families expanded. It was their aim to spread malicious lies or hurtful truths to harass the vulnerable in a royal household. It was considered naïve to not acknowledge that there were always going to be bullies and mean-spirited people, especially in a royal household. For those that felt helpless to be the subject of lies and hurtful things, they were told it was part of life, and they had to learn to handle it. For the more mindful parents, they taught their children self-protection. However not all children took the lessons of the metaphysical aura of protection seriously or thought to pass it on to their own children.

There comes the time when jealousy escalates to too many deadly fights between those that had been friends, accidents where foolishness was to blame, and blatant assassinations of close relations that a truth about responsibility for a ruling monarch must be met face on.

Queen Tess of the Raven Moores beloved consort, Prince Roi was assassinated while saving the life of their eldest son Prince Aniste. The Queen immediately sensed his death and intuited the culprit, an unacknowledged royal bastard. This was a new leader that established his or her claim to lead the Besardo club and was not afraid to boast of being a malevolent threat to her family and her. She issued a mandate of condemnation immediately via all levels and means of communication, throughout her realm outlawing the Besardo group with the order of immediate eradication of its members. She understood a war had been declared by this unacknowledged royal welp born outside of a royal household and who had inherited supernatural powers from the bloodline. At another time she would isolate which Moore male was responsible for not protecting the mystical bloodline his seed carried.

Queen Tess, a powerful sorcerous over the physical lands and realms of the unseen under her protection, was prepared for the consequences and had warned her immediate family to take precautions by choosing their friends and companions wisely. However, being raised as a royal didn't mean everyone took such warnings seriously, since the Besardo was an old established club and some of their best friends belonged to the club. It took the closure of the clubs they frequented and the disappearance of well-known club members that they became less vocal about their association with the club and its members.

Queen Tess had foreseen that most of her six children and their spouses would not be vigilant where they should have been. Princess Lizabeth, first child of Queen Tess and Royal Consort Prince Roi, wasn't worried about personal threats, and her first husband Oraf died two days after their marriage in what was described as a foolish accident. He rode drunk on a boar hunt and fell off his horse, breaking his neck. How accidental was that, the Queen thought in retrospect?

Princess Lizabeth bore their child Prince Ottir and four years later married Aurek, Oraf's cousin and close friend. From their union came sweet Prince Alan.

Prince Aniste, saved by his father, the royal consort and chancellor Roi's second child of Queen Tess, stepped into his father's role to become her chancellor. Like his father he was wise and well-schooled from youth to eventually take the chancellor's seat. It wasn't expected or foreseen by the Queen mother to have taken place so soon.

Princess Kyla, the third child of the Queen and Prince Roi, was born with the mark of a ruler and destined to be a great mystic as her mother the queen. She became engaged to Demitris from the House of Guan, shapechangers. He disappeared days before their official wedding. What had the Queen and Princess Kyla foreseen to have Demitris disappear behind a cloak of concealment on all levels of awareness?

Prince Nagrid, the fourth child not wanting to wait for anything unpleasant to happen to him, left the lands of the Moores to live in an undisclosed place and ceased all communications with family, dropping a veil of secrecy around himself.

Princess Belloma, fifth child of the Queen and Prince Roi, married Jone from the House of Guan living well out of the lands of the Moores and out of the reach of the Besardo, for the House of Guan were shapechangers and could smell a Besardo for what

they were. One could suspect that was why Demitris disappeared after impregnating his fiancé, Princess Kyla.

Princess Rose, the last of Queen Tess's children, was a rebellious child from the start. Queen Tess attributed it to her second consort's nature, Prince Jario. If Rose were accepted in the Besardo club, Queen Tess suspected she would have joined the outlawed club. But by her nature she followed no one's rules and expectations. As Rose's beauty was praised her mercurial moods were the thorns to her character. She married Egan, the youngest son of a wine steward from the Rhine country. To his family he was a foolish and exasperating child that drank too much. Their first child, a son died in childbirth due to Rose's refusal to believe she was about to give birth. Likewise, their second child, Jennifer, came as a surprise and was born in a vehicle on their way to a party. Jennifer's care was given over to a nanny. When Jennifer was a year old, her care was turned over to her aunt, Princess Kyla due to her parents' lack of interest. By then Princess Kyla had already been living a concealed life in a secure compound with her child Constance, under the name of Connie, and her two nephews.

Queen Tess had foreseen Princess Kyla and her granddaughter's future and therefore arranged for the safety of Princess Kyla and her daughter, Princess Constance at the age of five to leave the Castle for a safe compound with a trusted guardian. In Princess Kyla's care was given Ottir age six and Alan, age two. Elizabeth and her second husband Aurek were assassinated in the forest outside the Raven Moore castle. Ottir and Alan became frightened of the forest for what it represented and needed for the sake of their mental states, to move to a place in a city without their royal lineage known.

By the age of five Costance's training in the mystical and magical side of the life around her was progressing enough that Queen Tess and Princess Kyla felt she would be safe enough to continue secretly training her outside of Raven Castle in dream time. By then a compound in a small city was established, that the members lived as a cloister of like-minded people, isolating their females from society at large. Within this group of males, they called each other brethren, were loyalists to Queen Tess and her family, mixed with civilians unknowingly acting as a distraction to what the group's origin was for.

At this stage of her life, a curtain was created on Constance's developing conscious mind to conceal her previous childhood, though her education was continued via dream time and her mother's careful teachings.

Chapter 1

The Draft

In the predawn, fourteen-year-old Connie stood in the dim light of the kitchen patiently waiting for mother to finish her inspection. The kitchen was mother's sacred space where herb bundles were assembled and tinctures were mixed, meals prepared, and important lessons imparted to her. No one uninvited could step into this sacred area, not even Jennifer dared to bother mother when she was busy in her space whether at her desk or at the counter cooking something. Mother put a spell over this space that kept it sacred. Jennifer, a malicious unmindful child, found the kitchen a space she was not interested in entering, nor did the malevolent child wonder about it, since kitchen work was a lowly household job. That was from the type of spell mother protected her space in. Those unworthy of the healing energy from mother's work were not harmed with thoughts that would cause them worry, such as why did they find mother's kitchen a place unwelcome to them.

Connie could feel the spell yet there was nothing that prevented her from entering that sacred space for her lessons. This was where mother taught her things the public school didn't, nor what ordinary people knew about. Would she miss these personal lessons and the safe familiarity of mother and this space?

With mixed feelings, she studied mother who was sorting through her backpack that lay on the kitchen table, making sure the contents had everything the letter from the Department of Draft listed to bring and nothing more. Bottled water that could be refilled, a dozen small snacks of nuts and dried fruit from mother's stores, a change of clothes that was an old salwar, underwear, leggings and personal toiletries. There was no dupatta, by her own omission. Mother said nothing about her leaving it out. For her, it served no purpose but to make her stand out among the other children, as if her salwar and leggings weren't enough.

While the town spent the previous three days and nights celebrating and honoring deceased relatives and friends, the males inside the closed compound—down

to the youngest who could read—dressed in their finest salwar and matching turbans to proudly recite their patriarchal lineage. Connie listened as they claimed descent from prominent names, though she knew they were not related to them. The year before, after hearing the same claims, she had looked up the names on the school computer. The pictures beside those names did not resemble the men at all, and when she touched the images, she sensed no familial connection. When she told Mother what she had found, Mother only smiled and said it was like admiring a hero, or perhaps someone they wished to emulate.

A fat chance that, she had told mother haughtily.

Why would you want to demean a person who wanted to aspire to be associated with a noble person? Mother asked.

Another teaching moment for her. In that moment she was reminded of the books on famous people she enjoyed reading in the school library. It was humbling because the women of long ago that ruled empires or were heroes in their endeavors were inspiring to her.

So, this year, instead of her unkind judgement, she said a blessing to them that they reach a benevolent outcome in their quest to be the best they could be. Had she become that generous and wise in a year? Was she being presumptuous to see herself as wise? No, her spirit guides had said. Everyone was here to learn, and their lessons were not the same as hers. *Be content that you were learning more about yourself*, they had said encouragingly.

That comment made her glare at Jennifer, the brat, and she doubted this place would teach her much—except how to care for Jennifer whenever Mother was busy. This was not the life she wanted. Now, because of the mandatory four-year draft, she had four years to discover what she did want, away from Mother's reminders and daily lessons.

You have us, her four spirit guides reminded her.

Of course. How could I forget that she thought amused. She often received advice and warnings from her guides, but she didn't always heed their advice, but it did give her comfort that she would have access to their communication, even if she didn't always follow their advice.

The low light showed lines of weariness in mother's face. Connie suspected it was from the lack of sleep due to the previous night when after the men and boys finally stumbled to their beds, mother and she had a shared meditation. It was peaceful with bright stars twinkling overhead and air crisp and clean from city traffic. It seemed it was only for a few hours but lessons and exercises she had been taught by mother for as long as she could remember were stored somewhere in her subconscious. To be accessed when needed, was the caution mother gave her. Until then, it was on occasion when she was in a dreamy state that she had the odd feeling of being in a library before her life in the compound, surrounded by books, and entertained by story tellers. And then the door was shut. It wasn't time for her to remember the past, mother repeated. She had to focus on the present and learn what she could.

While mother looked tired, she felt refreshed from her meditation and eager for the day to begin where she had a new life ahead of her.

The Royal House of Eameet, presently governed by Queen Elsa and King Blaz, continued the traditional census of all families in their commonwealth for the social management of the population and disbursement of collected taxes for needed civilian welfare agencies. The commonwealth guaranteed the education of all children to the age of eighteen. A draft was established at the time of the first collection of information on all citizens of the realm, and at the age of fourteen children would continue their education at the expense of the commonwealth to be trained in a trade to support themselves and provide a view of life outside of their neighborhoods. At the time it was considered an enlightened monarchy that instituted many socially advanced laws and the rulers following that era continued the established practices to keep tract of troubled citizens.

Connie was excited at the opportunity for her to leave the brethren's compound and away from a life with too many social restrictions. On completion of her service to the commonwealth, she would return to rescue mother. She frowned for a moment. She would have to bring something back that was powerful enough to free mother from this life. Mentally she sighed. Childish stories of finding rings of power, wands of magic, horses of wonder, and bags of golden crowns were clouding her mind.

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

I think she still will have her own business here, Gem said.

You need to concentrate on your future, Bau emphasized.

Things change in four years, Callie Can added.

Would mother leave if she gave her the opportunity? What could she possibly acquire in four years to release her mother from the confines of the brethren's compound? Was there still a danger from someone who wished to do her harm outside the compound? She didn't know what it was exactly, just a vague feeling that harm would come to mother. Older brother, Ottir who entered the draft a year earlier, was raised in the boys' quarters out of mother's influence.

Was that it? He had the same view of mother as the brethren had to women? Would he come back after four years with a different view? She mentally shook her head. Ottir had no emotional connection that she could see to mother's house once he moved to the boys' residence at seven years old. He had occasionally visited at father's insistence, but she had a distinct feeling he hated Jennifer and her spiteful fits of jealousy of his freedoms to come and go as he wished. However, Connie knew he had obligations boys in the compound had in the upkeep of the public buildings and other facilities that allowed them to be solvent enough to pay for their status as a cloistered establishment in the middle of the city. Provided rules governing all residents of the commonwealth were available to the residents of the compound, they were free to have their compound in the city. Of course, by appearances it was so but to Connie, it was stifling to have so many rules of behavior the brethren added to females that resided in the compound.

In private, mother taught her to observe the people living in the compound and to see behind the masks they wore in public. She felt in Ottir he acted as if he was disdainful for all females due to peer pressure displayed by the adult male teachers in the boy's barracks. As for younger Alan, he wasn't the same. She feared his tender heart would be badgered to disconnect from mother.

When she left the compound six days a week for public schooling as the commonwealth required of all children, she practiced observing the children and the adult teachers to see what the differences were between those outside the compound and those inside. The school's student population reflected the multicultures of the

commonwealth's people so there were many differences to observe and similarities that made friendships possible. After school she walked slowly back to the compound mingling with other school children and visiting friendly shopkeepers that enjoyed telling stories. One particular shop, run by a husband and wife, loved sharing snacks from their store while telling stories to entertain the children who waited for a bus to take them home. Their one child was serving his four years on the seas. Not a particular place Connie entertained for her time in service, but they shared funny stories of their child's misadventures. She adored the couple for the care they showed to all the children, especially towards her, who dressed differently and absorbed their stories like it was a precious liquid, as a refuge from the desert.

As she got older, her perspectives of the people around her changed with more color to their personalities, such as that of Ottir and Alan and noticed they were not the same as they were in the compound. Maybe there was hope for them. Jennifer was another problem. She was disruptive in public school and the brethren's council decided to school her in the compound following the requirements the commonwealth's department of education required. Thankfully, Jennifer's disagreeable temperament meant they didn't demand that she also attend classes in the compound.

In her final meditation with mother, mother explained that this was her journey to learn about the world and herself and understand that there were no mistakes, just lessons to know more about herself. Remember the rule of three, she impressed. Connie had nodded, as it was often repeated to her. Whatever energy she put out, it would return to her threefold.

Connie's attention moved back to Mother who gestured that she was finished, and Connie repacked her bag. Mother wore her usual expressionless face, making it difficult to know where she was, though Connie suspected it wasn't entirely here.

The brethren followed the Traditional Ways, or that's what they referred to life within the compound as. Females were to be under the protective wing of the males, which meant to Connie, females had no rights under their rules but under the commonwealth's authority they had, and that took precedence over a tribal groups' beliefs. Mother explained there was a purpose for their living here and she needed to focus instead on the lessons she was secretly teaching her.

"Give me a hug and we'll hurry to the gates. I want you to leave before the day's guard goes on duty. He may try to hold you up, but I will see that that doesn't happen. Step through the gate and don't look back. Remember every experience is a building block to self-knowledge," she again reminded her.

Awkwardly she gave mother a hug and then quickly stepped back, confused by the images that flashed in her mind's eye. This time it was of a castle with elaborate gardens and animals that could speak to a young girl who laughed at their conversations, fully understanding the creatures she shared the garden with. The vision quickly faded.

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

That's something I think you, as my spirit guides should explain, Connie thought impatiently. Sometimes, her spirit guides spoke in a language she couldn't understand and to top it off would say something like, when you get older, you'll understand. It was the same thing mother would say. Why were her memories of her childhood limited to only her time in the brethren's community? Mother assured her it was only temporary and again stressed she needed to concentrate on being in the present moment.

Connie put her coat on and hefted the light pack onto her back. Her pack straps were pulled over her coat by mother and her long-braided hair was tucked under the pack. Mother draped a dark dupatta over her own head and shoulders and gestured for Connie, to start her walk to the compound gates.

The autumn dawn hadn't quite reached over the compound's walls, which kept the night chill enclosed around morning inhabitants. It was all she could do to not race to the gate to an unknown adventure. She didn't glance back at mother whose figure was a shadow. The gate opened silently, and she slipped out, and it closed the moment she crossed the threshold.

Her stomach was fluttering for fear suddenly Jhef would appear. He was a hated bully who was also scheduled to join the draft this day. She ran five blocks to where she had arranged a secret stop at Domono's Shop where Mother Domono was waiting. Connie hurried to the opened door and was given a hug by Mother Domono and Father Domono, then she hurried into a room that was their son's when he lived with them.

Closing the door quickly she removed her thin coat, salwar, leggings and folded them neatly on the bed, then put on warm long pants, a heavy shirt and a warmer coat that had been their sons. She couldn't wear his larger shoes even if she wore two pairs of his socks. Wearing even one pair of his thicker socks would make wearing her shoes impossible. She decided the pants were long enough to cover her bare ankles. Stepping out of the bedroom, dressed unlike females from the brethren's compound she was handed her pack and given more hugs from her helpers, then she rushed out the door and to the bus stop eager to start a new life, feeling the early cold breeze pushing her along.

We did it! Chorused her spirit guides.

Yes, Connie thought joyfully. By changing clothes, she discarded a visual connection to a stifling and unacceptable way of life.

At the public bus stop where the draftees from the surrounding cities were scheduled to gather, a handful of children she recognized from her school were already waiting, along with others she didn't know, all wrapped in warm coats, some wearing gloves and hats. 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, intuitively, Connie knew they were scared and glad their parents were there to say goodbye. Gazing around the crowd she didn't catch sight of Jhef or Londol, his father.

Smiling to herself, Connie was grateful for the official draft. It came at a good time in her life. The practice with the brethren, girls at thirteen years of age were engaged to an available male on a list a year before they entered the draft. It sounded ridiculous to her. Why would anyone want to come back after four years to an engagement they had no say in? Thankfully, the commonwealth did not allow marriages of the young before their service to the commonwealth was completed.

Father had dutifully arranged her marriage to Londol's son, Jhef. She hated the boy and his meanness. Since their engagement was announced in the compound's square when she turned thirteen, if Jhef found her alone he would shove her onto the ground or into a wall. If he meant to scare her, he did. It never occurred to her to speak to father about these incidents since she saw him as the cause of this problem.

Embarrassed by her feelings of powerlessness, she finally did mention Jhef's attacks during one of her lessons with mother. Mother calmly reminded her that she could prevent that herself.

Mother was right. How many times has she practiced the exercises of surrounding herself with various protective spells? It's just that until Jhef she never felt she had to use such a strong repulsing type of protective spell. She practiced different spells to see which worked best and requested her spirit guardians to keep her apprised of his whereabouts in the compound.

She sighed. So simple. She let fear rule her thoughts. At school, he was punished when he was caught bullying her, so the bullying at school had ceased, but his threatening presence had her always wanting to be aware of where he was.

Worried, Connie looked around again, hoping Jhef was not in this group.

He isn't here, Sulu reassured her.

You placed a protection spell around yourself, Callie Can reminded her. *Are you losing faith in your lessons already?*

Her four spirit guides reassured her that she was safe from any physical harm.

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 postings in a castle romantic, Connie saw living within castle walls just an extension of living among the brethren.

His absence reassured her he got his wish and was at the Tailshire Draft House.

Connie found a space on the grassy slope, hunching into the warm coat and enjoying the scent of cedar mixed with lavender that the coat had been stored with. Other children she didn't know joined her on the slope. Their parents respectfully let their children gather without their near presence. Stories were told of what the kids heard about the draft from relatives. Connie felt some of the stories were outlandish. The dark-haired Lili who was in some of her classes at school, recounted a story of her mother's friend who never returned. She was kidnapped by the dark ones in Morwea Woods, she whispered. Some of the kids 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? Her own feeling was that there was some truth to the story. If she were at school, she would have accessed the school's computer in the library to look up Morwea Woods.

Mentally, she envisioned being stationed somewhere so that 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...and in her dreams.

It's time, her guides chorused.

"I see the bus!" someone shouted.

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

It happened quickly; the door to the bus stopped right in front of her and opened; then those behind her pushed her into the bus. Out of nervousness she sat in the first seat available near a window, quickly glancing to confirm it was a girl next to her already sitting in the aisle seat. Children from another stop were scattered about the seats. Flushed with excitement, her eyes rose to watch familiar and unfamiliar teens climb onto 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. Excitement mixed with anxiety was the general feeling. Then her eyes fell on a sullen looking Jhef in the back whose expression turned into a scowl when her name was called.

She quickly slid down in her seat, but she was still able to see Jhef's reflection in the front mirror over the driver's windshield. When the bus began its journey Jhef rose from his seat and began a swaying progress up the bus, studying each passenger with a glare. She could feel the contempt he radiated as he came closer. He was dressed in an embroidered dark blue kurta over tan palazzo pants and his shoes looked new too. He was dressed to impress, she thought. All that was lacking was a turban. His pack was tearing some of the embroidered work on the coat, as she could see in the mirror threads sticking out. The coat wasn't made for a school pack to be slung over the wearer's shoulders.

Who does he aim to impress? Sulu snickered, echoing Connie's thought.

You did protect yourself with a spell. He can't do anything to you. Show some spine and sit up! Callie Can, ordered. Callie Can always wanted her to be bolder than she felt. Maybe that was a good thing. She inched back up and while taking calming breaths she pushed her shoulders back against the seat. However, her heart was beating frantically. It was embarrassing to think that after all she had learned from mother, for some reason beyond the compound's walls she didn't feel what she learned was real.

Connie could feel her face heat up with embarrassment from what she imagined would be his badgering of the girl next to her to give up her seat. She felt his presence near but didn't look up.

"Hey, you," Jhef's said in a low and menacing tone. "Get out of my seat."

"Say you," the girl next to her answered in a loud disdainful voice. "Go back to your own seat."

The voices of the other children rose in jeers at Jhef.

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 slitted, as he tried to regain his balance and dignity. Connie didn't dare look at him directly, but she imagined he looked like a crazy drunk, angry that a girl was indifferent to his malice. She stifled a laugh at her image.

"You're sitting next to my betrothed, and no one sits next to her but me...unless I say so," he said out of breath. His voice lacked the grandiose tone his announcement intended.

Betrothed! There will be no marriage! Connie fiercely thought. Her guides echoed her feelings.

The bus picked up speed, and Jhef lost his footing, bouncing into the pole he gripped for holding himself upright, bruising his lip and chin. That further eroded whatever effect he was attempting to have on her seat partner, because Connie heard her giggle out loud.

He stumbled and flopped on the boy across the aisle, but a push put him back on his feet.

"Get off me, Jhef," the boy muttered.

"Go back to where you were," his seat mate said.

"Shut up, Jhef and go back to your corner," another nearby commented.

"Jhef! Stop making trouble or I will personally have you assigned to gallows watch for four years," the chaperone threatened over the other voices.

Jhef unsteady from the buses movement turned back to his seat, but not without giving Connie a threatening glower which she caught in the mirror. He would have said something more, but a chorus of voices rose, yelling at him to stop causing trouble. Connie had not realized he had gained such a bad reputation at school. She breathed a sigh of relief when he was back in his original seat.

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

Connie smiled at the friendly girl, who wore a wide grin, and giggled with her.

"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 and arguing with the bus attendant of another bus that was heading to another draftee intake."

"Just as long as we don't end up in the same place," Connie said firmly.

"If he tells them you're engaged you *could* be posted where he ends up. My brother and his girlfriend did." And then she giggled. "Only by the time they were finished with their service to the realm, they avoided each other."

"Well, I despise him and there isn't any marriage that's going to happen between us," she said resolutely. She had created a spell at her mother's suggestion to help when it came time for her engagement to be announced. Mother often encouraged her to use her own words and energy to endure or change difficult lessons. Mother called it building psychic muscle and learning about consequences of procrastinating a life lesson. Maybe that's why he seemed so determined to physically dominate her. Some people just didn't respond well to the phrasing of a spell. Then, it wasn't directed specifically at him but rather at not being engaged to someone old enough to be her grandfather. She had no knowledge of Jhef's presence then. Girls and females of all ages didn't mix with any of the males outside of their immediate family. Jhef was age appropriate but a social misfit and illiterate. She found at school his classes were for

those that struggled with their learning, which gratefully, her classes were for the more advanced students. His parents obviously weren't interested in his education, especially in social manners.

Connie silently reminded herself not to be so disparaging about others. Mother and father wanted their children to be educated. However, Jennifer was another matter, she thought with reproach.

"My name's Marian." Marian held out her hand to Connie who looked at it surprised.

You can touch her. She can't feel who you are, Sulu said.

Her guides had cautioned her since she was a child that touching some people would allow them to see who she was. Mother had told her that if she didn't want someone to come close to her, she could make that occur. She noticed mother had something around her that prevented people from stepping too close to her. It did help after Jhef started to push her around when she changed her personal protection spell to repel certain types of behavior. So, maybe outside of the compound she could continue to make that happen.

"You shake it. Like this." Marian demonstrated.

"My name's Connie," she returned, shaking the hand offered to her. Marian's energy was curious. She hadn't met anyone that felt so unthreatening, with no ulterior motives. But then, she hadn't shaken hands with anyone before now.

She's a nice enough girl, Sulu said.

"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, they kiss it 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. They bow slightly forward from the waist, standing up or sitting down." Marian said, enjoying her role of enlightening the sheltered girl.

"Do you travel a lot? What bus stop did they pick you up at?" Connie asked excited at being next to someone that knew so much.

"Edenhill. Your never to be fiancé tried to get on a bus that left for Tailshire from Edenhill but that was by reservation only. Specific skills were sought after on that draft bus."

"His father thought Tailshire posting will get him into a castle," Connie explained.

"Some parents register their kids when they're thirteen 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? It's what skill the draftee already has, and a posting is looking for that specifically. I have five relatives that went through the draft, and they all registered in different cities, and the lottery placed them in different castles. My family works for the Milan Trading Company, so we travel and spend a lot of time in castles. No big deal. Have you traveled much?"

"No. The brethren don't believe females should travel beyond the compound. If I didn't have to go to public school, I wouldn't know what was outside their walls."

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." Connie felt her heartbeat 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 school library but were brought to life from a firsthand recounting and the gossip that went with it. She also enjoyed the energy Marian radiated in her telling and her expressions when she mimicked some of the people she met.

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 with a quick goodbye.

Connie followed the brick path through a garden. Here were the largest flowers she had ever seen and there were so many of them. They crowded their neighbors for space in the weak autumn sun. Intermingled with the large flowers were long furry sticks, some arching higher than the fence wall. Her eyes widened at orange eyes that blinked at her through the fur. At the end of her path was a large building with doors wide open. She could see other paths leading to it. Turning her head slightly she saw a yellow kitten basking in the weak 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 to her to hurry.

Her hesitation was slight as she could hear her fellow bus riders close behind her. She took the steps two at a time, eager to experience the world, mentally signaling that she was open to whatever came her way.

Inside the building an elderly 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 fathers. Next to the figure was a young woman whose uniform was foreign to Connie...but any uniform not of Hillsboro's County Sheriff was. The uniformed woman was at a computer typing in information the elderly woman gave her. She could see Marian was on the other side of the building, her head bent as she spoke to a recorder. Her attention returned to the woman at the desk before her.

The woman looked up at her and smiled, closing the book and pushing it toward the attendant who pushed a new ledger toward the elder. The white-haired woman wasn't as old as she first thought. With a long finger tapered to a painted fingernail, she flipped opened the new book to the first blank page.

"Good afternoon to you. Welcome. You are the first for the day. That means you'll be lucky. Are you nervous?"

Connie nodded.

"That's healthy. Let me see your right hand," she briskly directed.

Connie extended her hand palm down. Would this elder see more of her than most people?

No," Callie Can assured her. Your energy and palm can't be seen clearly.

The elderly turned her hand this way and that, looking carefully for something, and after studying her hand, she gestured for the other. Once both were inspected, she then ordered, "Stick out your tongue."

Surprised, Connie complied.

"Good. Hold this for the count of five and then give it back to me." She smiled at Connie's hesitation. "This reads your biological information and confirms you are who you say you are. Everything is computerized and backed up so that we don't lose anything or anyone. Now, for your four years of service, you shall be known by your given name of Connie. Family or town names are eliminated to avoid prejudices or favoritism, unless you share that information. Go out that way and go around the pond to the blue building. May your service be rewarding."

"Thank you, Elder," Connie said. On what had been a blank page, she noted that her name with symbols alongside it appeared on the ledger's page and the elder added a notation next to her name.

She shifted the pack to her back and hurried down the path the woman indicated. She passed more flowers and a large pond with waterfowl. 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 colorful double-glazed stain-glass doors were wide open. Attendants were waiting near the doors waving to her and others arriving to move forward. Inside was a raised table with twelve busy adults sitting at computers. It felt like another group had passed through recently and they were finishing up with their notes.

From a box near the attendant's feet, he pulled out a translucent sheet of paper and handed it to her. "Take this and sit over to the left. Your lunch will be brought to you. The bus to take you to your assignment will arrive after lunch."

Connie quickly slid the paper in a transparent pocket on her pack where she could see it without having to fold it or stuff it inside her pack and found a seat on a long bench. She was served a glass of water, soup, a sandwich, and directions on how to get to the toilet facilities. Others joined her at the table, with service personnel quickly

bringing lunches to the arrivals. 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. When she finished, Connie fitted her pack onto one shoulder and made her way to the toilet facilities. While she was washing her hands a young girl dressed in nice clothes caught her eye in the mirror. 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, my name's Rachel," the girl introduced herself as they left the facilities together.

"My name's Connie."

"I see by the tab on your sheet you've drawn Castle Omwell." She pointed to the sheet tucked in her packs transparent pocket.

"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 nearly hundreds of different postings had tabs that would identify the place of service it represented. Connie's tab was to Castle Omwell.

She felt disappointed.

"You'll find life a bit...hum." Rachel's lips curled up into a funny smile, wondering why this girl didn't see the advantage of such a rich placement.

"A bit of what?" Connie quickly asked.

"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 must 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, because it has the habit of coming back and biting you. It's best to say nice things about some of the most horrid people, but...it's so much fun to be there. You'll get to hear all the latest gossip of the Commonwealth first, and know why or who is getting done in." She laughed at Connie's

expression. "Not killed, just snubbed. Castle Omwell is a royal family's summer residence. They have the Royal Summer Festival there. People from all over the world visit."

Connie looked at her tab with mixed feelings. This was not what she had in mind about seeing the world. "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 Commonwealth of the House of Eameet and isolated. It's a garrison on the Wall of Morwea near the marsh."

"What does a guard do?"

"I would imagine as a guard you have to learn to fight, learn about the wall, sleep in the wilderness, ride or drive, and other things. It's the military. My own family won't recognize me when I return," she said ruefully.

"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 just to give Jhef a fat lip. Think of the consequences you'll face and lose out on other opportunities, Callie Can warned.

Thoughts are actions, Bau reminded her.

It would be seen as you're a hot head and easy to provoke, Sulu said.

Use your mind to repel those that threaten you. Are you forgetting your lessons already? Gem asked. *It's kept Jhef from bothering you once you began to use the repel spell on him,* she reminded her firmly.

It worked on the bus, Callie Can reminded her.

Rachel looked at her surprised but let the comment go. "Well, I would rather be in a castle. I imagine how nice it is to be dressed in fine clothes, with layers of rich cloth, and eating foods that the royalty dines on daily." She gave a sigh. "You are truly lucky."

"What if I don't have any fine clothes?"

"Your mentor is to provide you with everything. You will 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 know how to start your own business or work for a prosperous

business. Working in the castle will give you all sorts of training, connections and opportunities."

Connie touched her face. She then realized why Rachel looked so different...not at all like a girl but almost a woman. Her face was painted. It was going to be a wasted four 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.

"Are you thinking what I am?" Rachel whispered.

"Trading places?" Connie whispered back.

Rachel nodded.

Trade places, Bau said. It's not like you'll be miss placed! You're choosing it yourself.

It's the adventure you want, Sulu said.

You can learn to defend yourself from the physical bullies, Callie Can said.

It's fate, Gem said. Step forward.

"Can we do it?" Connie asked nervously, feeling her heartbeat increase with hope.

"I've read everything there is about the draft and don't recall anything mentioned about swapping postings with other draftees. There are only two places they take our name, at the registrar's desk where we confirm we've shown up and at the bus where you show this paper with only a destination on the paper. Check yours."

Connie looked over her page. "No. It doesn't say anything about who this belongs to only the destination of the holder." She looked around her and then at Rachel. "Shall we?"

Quickly papers were exchanged. The two looked around again to see if anyone noticed. The hall was full and many of the youth were wandering around chattering and saying goodbye to school friends.

"Oh, great. Here comes Jhef," Connie muttered. She dared not look around like she wanted to hide. She muttered a repel spell around herself, just in case she needed that protection around her. This was a good time to see if the different types of spells she said earlier were still working and if they worked this far outside of the compound. It didn't occur to her that she had put so many different types of protection spells around her that it would disrupt her own energy.

Stand in your power and tell him to go away, Callie Can said.

He's liable to go wild if you start a conversation with him, Sulu warned. *A mental command will do.*

See the way he walks. Stiff legged. He's upset, Gem warned. *He probably didn't get the castle of his desire,* she sniggered.

That's probably it, because I don't think it's just his tight new shoes, Bau said mischievously. *Or maybe it's because he lost his pack. Make a face at him. He's a coward around others.*

"There you are," he informed her belligerently, roughly pushing two boys aside. "You look like a homeless vagrant wearing boy's clothes," he said with disgust.

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

Jhef paid no attention to them as he abruptly stopped an arm's length from Connie then surprised stepped back. "Where are they sending you, girl?" he demanded, recovering quickly from his inability to step closer to her.

"Go away, Jhef!" she told him fiercely, stepping back to put more space between them.

"Shut your mouth, girl. Give me that paper," he said, trying again to step into her space but Marrian arrived at that time and bravely inserted herself between Jhef and a surprised Connie, using her pack to force more space between them.

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

Too bad exchanging insults with him wouldn't send him away, Sulu said. You do have to remember the Law of Return.

Call one of the guards, Bau said.

He's a coward. Call his bluff, and call the guards, Gem said calmly.

Your protection shield is working, Callie Cam insisted. He can't touch you physically. Did you notice he stepped back.

"Leave 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 undecided as both girls stepped in front of Connie. One of the uniformed guards immediately started to walk toward them.

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

"I'll remember this, witch. When we're married, you'll live in the cellar naked with the dirt and rats," Jhef promised in a low voice before leaving.

Connie frowned. They had no cellars in the compound, and she wasn't afraid of rats. Mother taught her that all creatures had a purpose. And she wasn't going to marry him or for that matter return to live in the compound. Too bad his parents didn't teach him about the Law of Return. That was what mother had impressed on her for as long as she could remember, especially when she began to create her own spells. Memories of her learning through failures and now remembered sometimes funny or embarrassing consequences in her practices brought a smile to her lips.

Marian shook her head as he disappeared into the crowd with one of the guards following closely. "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."

"I can't believe boys are permitted to act that way," Rachel said shocked.

"Thanks for checking, Marian, and thank you both for blocking him," Connie said.

"No problem. I could tell from our meeting on the bus that he's really a coward. He drew Closhire County. My family visited there a few years ago. It's a farming

community with few roads and a lot of open land. Not many shops and little transportation. I'm afraid he'll be working really hard in the lifting and cleaning jobs." She nodded to Rachel. "Hi. My name's Marian."

"My name's Rachel. You better learn all you can at the tower, 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. "Females are in the Royal Regiment?"

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

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

Marian giggled. "There's nothing wrong with exchanging postings in the beginning. One of my older brothers 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 help getting drunk. However, when he ended his service his knowledge of wine has put him in good standing in our family business. As for Jhef, I know no one would trade places with him. The chaperone on our bus spoke with one of the officials and pointed him out to them. He made the first mistake of being noticed for the wrong reason."

"I hope you're right," Connie said fervently. She gave Marian a closer look, thinking that she was more than what she presented. Who was she? Did her experiences of visiting so many places give her insight into people?

Of course. Her guides said simultaneously.

Of course, Connie thought. *Her stories showed that.*

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

"Attention, attention, attention," a voice intoned over the speakers.

One of the officials stepped forward. "By the color of this tab," he held up a tab attached to the single page everyone received, "you will board a bus marked with that color. Present your paper with the destination and name to the attendant before stepping aboard. Once you've been identified that is your posting for your four years of public service. Good journey in your adventure and may you all profit from your experiences."

The hall was filled with noise from hurried goodbyes and shouts of directions.

"Come this way," Marian shouted over the din. They could see Jhef was looking their way with a dark expression. His pack looked a lot lighter than it had originally.

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

Too many people in the way, Sulu said.

"I think challenging that bully is like poking a grumpy bear with a stick," Marian said giggling. "I've met a few adults like that, but I had relatives that put a quick end to those threats. They taught me how to use my elbows for weapons and voice to speak out," she added with a grin.

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

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

"Rachel from Goodhew."

Connie nodded. "Connie from Hillsboro."

"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. You'll always be defending your honor. When you're new, it's best not to 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."

"Hillsboro won't be my home after four years, and for sure I'm not going to marry *him*," Connie said. "And I'll write. Don't forget to write to *me*."

"I will. You are sure this exchange is, okay?" Rachel asked, though with Connie's excitement she was certain she needn't ask.

"I'm sure," Connie told her firmly, grinning at Rachel's look of relief.

"Then you won't mind too much when I write to tell you what you're missing," Rachel teased.

"Just as I will write you both and let you know what you two are missing." Connie laughed.

On to an adventure! Bau, Sulu, Gem and Callie Can chorused.

Connie grinned. This was going to be a life-changing adventure.

As she got on the bus her name was taken, and the sheet was used to verify her destination then saved in a device the attendant held. The excited energy in the bus was giddy for Connie and her fellow passengers. They all eagerly introduced themselves and shared their lives with each other. No one was from Hillsboro. Connie was surprised to hear all forty-two draftees in her bus welcomed the draft.

The bus weaved through poor towns, by grand estates, through a few urban cities, and along a stretch of land that looked dry and abandoned for a long time. As each draftee disembarked, Guide Jewel made sure the right draftee got off at each stop and they were greeted by their assigned mentor. She also talked about the post, the city, town or farm explaining about the lands they were driving through, and what place it played in the communities of the Commonwealth, both politically and financially. Connie studied the land at each of their stops and wished the girl or boy that disembarked a beneficial outcome. It was exhilarating to see and feel so much of a land she only knew from pictures on the school computer. What she was able pick up from computer pictures wasn't as intense with being on the land even if briefly as the draftees were left off or when they got breaks at rest stops.

On the fifth day of the journey there were four of them left. Connie was sore from sitting but not unhappy with the trip. It was a tour through places in the commonwealth she would never have thought to visit, and Guide Jewel was a knowledgeable tour guide.

Argu was going to work on a horse farm, and she had never seen a horse up close before. Her feelings of excitement increased as her anxiety lessened, with all of them giggling at Guide Jewel's descriptions of what the care of horses involved, including how equine dung was an important commodity to the surrounding farms.

Warrant was going to work at the Castle Amanet where medicinal herbs were harvested and sold in the Commonwealth's Pharmaceutical Outlets. He was a bookworm that had never dug into anything that was not a book and though nervous, he too was settling into thoughts of his new activity of working with dirt and seeds.

Frail Havo was going to Nordbold Tower, a day's travel by air from Glenhollow Tower to train as a guard like Connie. Jewel gave both advice on fitting in as a newbie in the army and Connie felt it wasn't much different in working at chores in the brethren compound with the difference in that being a newbie wasn't a forever thing and duties weren't gender divided. As they continued traveling, seats were turned into beds, blankets pulled comfortably around them, and drivers were changed as the bus continued to its destinations.

They marveled at how the weather could change so much that the bus's heater was turned on. Guide Jewel explained that they were getting into the higher elevations of the north where it is colder than the lowlands in the south. It was supposed to be gradual so that anyone not accustomed to the elevation would not become ill. None of them knew what that meant since they had never heard of such a thing.

Administration Matters of Goldwah Tower

Captain Sahem looked up from the report the senior staff was studying on one draftee prospect left on their list by the Draft Administration.

"Her record shows she's just the right replacement for Wolf Pack's open slot," Staff Sergeant Em said. "It will be a relief that we found the right candidate for balancing that group out," she said, glancing around the table, hopeful everyone agreed.

"How would you know her temperament is right for sure?" Lt. Hellene said over the speaker phone, teasing the group. They had been going over several young female draftee prospects to add to their student guards since the list had gone out, weeks ago. *"It's not just because you want to hurry up and fill our slot with a draftee we've reviewed before we get sent another reminder from Commandant Elora of the Royal Cadets to get on with it, is it?"*

The others chuckled.

"We need to move on this choice or more likely Commandant Elora of the Royal Cadets will start a letter campaign to the Draft Committee to return Cadet Ora to her proper regiment to be promoted onto her move into the Royal Guards," Captain Sahem said.

“Cadet Ora is suffering at her assignment even if she outranks everyone. Corporal Kendra will be happy she returns to her Platoon, so she does not have to continue mollifying this unhappy guest,” Sergeant Major Bessie said. “I’m not sure the Draft Committees method of filling in guard slots with cadets until a draftee can be found is a fair treatment of cadets or for that matter the young guards. It’s like mixing young adults with teens in many cases still children.”

“Enough said. Let’s move on to this choice. According to this girl’s school records she appears to be a good solid student that doesn’t show interest in sports nor in joining cliques. She spends her free time in school doing library projects,” Staff Sergeant Em said, trying to speed up the decision. “How unproblematic does that sound?”

“Well, she doesn’t look meek either,” Lt. Hellene laughed. “We only have her mentor’s shining report on her to go by. Don Pestal. I couldn’t interview him. He left when the school term ended. His contract expired and he didn’t reapply. Donna Estella, however, was her music teacher and she described her as a loner and extremely intelligent. So, we don’t really know what her temperament will be thrown into our group of hormonal driven students.”

“You’re right, I’d like to take a chance if only to fill in the slot before we’re sent an unknown by the Draft Bureau,” Sergeant Major Bessie said.

“So, it’s decided to claim her as our draftee?” Captain Sahem asked the group. The others nodded. “Then it’s done.” He hit the accept button on his computer and the necessary people were informed, including the Commandant of Cadets.

“Bessie, how’s the testing going for moving you out of substituting as group leader of Wolf Pack?” Captain Sahem said, smiling, relieved to move on to a less annoying problem of management.

“It’s progressing. I’m at the last tests for the corporals to be promoted to sergeants and then I’ll evaluate those qualifying for leadership of the squad. It’s going to be a relief for us all.”

“Lady Margo also had some suggestions on lessons all student group leaders should be trained on. It’s called behavior management in the officer’s training manual. I don’t know why our young students can’t take similar lessons. So, besides for the

present student sergeants I've added it also to lessons for corporals interested in leadership to study. I've nearly finished rewriting the last chapter into age-appropriate language and situations for our budding leaders of the commonwealth with the assistance of the school counselors," she said.

"My cousin's suggestion?" Captain Sahem asked surprised.

"Since her retirement, she's been finding things to do to improve other people's lives," Lt. Hellene said sounding amused.

Those sitting with Captain Sahem chuckled, familiar with the retired colonel, a formable officer when she was in active service to the royal house.

"Then this meeting is adjourned. Let's all have a good day."

Chapter 2

The Tower

When they had dropped Havo at his stop, at Nordbold Tower, the wall and garrison weren't in sight. It was in a rural town marketplace with snow everywhere and clouds shrouding most of the surrounding land. A senior staff member met him, dressed in his impressive uniform with a feather in his cap, and promptly gave him his warm gloves to wear. It was cold and Havo was shivering in his thinner clothing. Connie thought that was kind of the man.

Guide Jewel had chuckled at Connie's belief it was an adult male, explaining the military uniforms weren't meant to denote gender but rather rank in a military hierarchy. The individual was the captain of the tower, Captain Ruri. She greeted all her new draftees at the bus stop in the village's marketplace so they would be fitted with the proper winter clothing with the local tailor. Their tower's garrison didn't have a large storage area, or military commissary on the garrison's premises.

Connie just nodded wondering if her new tower's garrison would also have the same welcome of a draftee, since her shoes were not made for the colder weather. Hillsboro's worst weather was the summer heat when life moved slower, and winter was a light rainfall that usually lasted for maybe a day, with shallow mud puddles to avoid for the fastidious shoe wearers.

At Havo's stop in the village of Nordbold, Connie and Jewel took a break at the traveler's facilities on the outskirts of the village and had a short mid meal while they

waited for a new driver, Gil, to arrive, with a smaller van. Connie was the last draftee to be dropped off at Glenhollow Tower in the east.

Once Connie and Guide Jewel resettled in the smaller vehicle, the sun hid behind dark clouds promising rain. Tired, Connie dozed off, finding the van seats more comfortable than the bus seats. When she woke, she could tell they weren't on a well-traveled road, and the dark rain clouds were left behind and so was the wintry weather. Staring out at the land that disappeared on the horizon she noticed there was only a scattering of dried looking brush along the road. Guide Jewel pointed out where creatures of that land lived. It was Lear Desert where children's stories were told of great wealth in a hidden city beneath the desert sands. Stories of people found dead in the desert in search of the oasis, with either a drawn map clutched in their boney hand, or empty sacks found in their rags that once held jewels.

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

Connie blinked tired eyes open at an unfamiliar sound coming from nearby. Glancing out the window she noticed they were driving by farmland that had long rows of bundled harvested grass waiting to be collected. A monstrous truck was slowly moving along the rows with grass bundles disappearing in its belly and reappearing caught up in a hay hauler.

She was on her sixth day of zig zagging through the commonwealth with the future of the community in the draftees being sprinkled about to enrich each child in life and society at large. It was an amusing thought to Connie.

A buzz sounded. The bus driver, Gil, glanced at Jewel who was napping. "Call coming in, Ma'am."

From her reclined position, she raised her seat. The buzz sounded again. She tapped the device on her belt and touched something in her ear. She spoke softly to whoever was calling then spoke with the driver.

"Gil, change of destination. Our draftee is being reposted to Goldwah Tower." She glanced at Connie. "Tower Goldwah is one guard short, so HQ of Tower

Operations has moved you to balance the number of guards required on their tower. All towers have a fixed number of student guards, which due to the fact that the tower guards are below the age of majority, no understaffing is permitted beyond a prescribed time, which puts responsibility on the Draft Office to fill quickly, and until then a member of the Cadet Corps is dispatched to fill the quota. Luckily for the cadet there're always draftees moving onto the active draftee rolls so their substitution is only temporary. I would imagine for cadets, officially young adults, that are selected to go back to a life when they were not considered adults, they are miserable."

"Not entirely a wasted time, though," Gil said. "They get points and extra pay."

"Yes. There are some compensations," Guide Jewel said dryly. "Goldwah Tower is not that far from Nordbold Tower where we dropped Draftee Navo off," she continued. "Glenhollow would have been another day's travel by van. Shorter by air but draftees get the luxury of being shown how expansive the commonwealth is by traveling by bus on a private tour," she chuckled.

"They replaced Glenhollow Towers troublesome lad quick," Gil said as he slowed the van to exit the highway going east to turn onto a connection to another highway going back to the north where they had traveled, but this time over the highway rather than the rural roads.

"Maybe." She glanced at Connie to explain. "If a draftee is not working out well where they were posted, then they're reassigned to a post more compatible with the draftee's needs. There are many who believe that the draft is the best way to turn a troublesome child into a productive citizen of the Commonwealth, but there are some that are too disruptive with no amount of counseling in a normal environment can help. The only resource available is moving the problem draftee to a specialized environment where there's a different support system available. The draft system tries to help all young citizens to find their place as a productive citizen."

It occurred to Connie that Jheff may fit the "incompatible" character description at his posting and be moved elsewhere, hopefully not to a tower post.

Not going to happen, her spirit guides said confidently.

I pray not, Connie thought and quickly changed her pessimistic view, not wanting to attract unwanted negative energy to her.

“How do you know so much, Guide Jewel?” Connie asked, impressed with her knowledge. She couldn’t be that old.

“I work for the Draft Delivery Service out of the Draft Administration’s Office. I’ve been with them for over seven years, right after I finished my years of service to the commonwealth. My tribe at one time were nomads that wandered over lands that are now cities. I know from experience that the northern towers at higher altitudes have more wilderness to watch over and are colder with short warm seasons,” she smiled at Connie, then continued.

“Captain Sahem will be your leader at Goldwah garrison. You’ll like him.” Guide 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. While Guide Jewel talked about Captain Sahem, Connie studied Jewel, realizing that she was more than a knowledgeable tour guide.

You don’t need to know about her, Bau cautioned her.

Too much knowledge of everyone you meet will become an unmanageable burden, Sulu said.

And with it will be like the burden of Cassandra, Callie Can said.

Knowing too much has its consequences, Gem agreed.

Connie leaned back in her seat and looked for something else to occupy her thoughts. To prevent memories of what she was leaving behind she silently recited the many names of the Creator and the many manifestations. It wasn’t the same as when said aloud accompanied by the clanking of cymbals, but it was something to keep her mind busy.

The new road they were on took them through hilly country where there was white snow on everything. Connie’s eyes spotted what she thought looked like a hawk, circling over some of the trees and then disappearing as it dropped down to catch a meal.

Guide Jewel had the driver stop at a vehicle pull off, so that the three of them could stretch their legs and experience a snowball fight with tossing cold wet balls of gathered snow at each other, then they took refuge in the heated van. Connie’s feet were

cold in her shoes, not made for this cold weather, and her hands white with cold. Guide Jewel had her remove her shoes to hang near the van's heater to dry as they continued their journey, with her hands near the heater to warm up.

Soon they were winding down a hill surrounded by forest on both sides of the road and then back up a steeper incline so when at the top they had a clear view above trees lower on the hill. They had a distant view of the Wall of Morwea. The sight was what storytellers used for creating a mystical moment in their tales. It was like a long snake with no end or beginning in sight. It came from a mist and as it twisted to the left and right, disappeared into another mist.

As they approached their destination Connie was amazed as the wall became massive, filling her view. The road they were on had a forest on one side and the wall on the other. The two towering structures created a dark passage with a grey sky above, making it seem like it was close to evening though it was more like noon time.

Goldwah Garrison Guards

Corporal Kendra rolled out of her cot, immediately alert at movement from one of her bunkmates.

"Ora?" she whispered.

"Go back to sleep, Kendra. You have an hour more...and," she added with a smile in her voice, "you'll be grateful with the rest you can get since you're now SG of Wolf Pack."

Ignoring Cadet Ora's suggestion she began to get dressed. She felt pride in Ora's acknowledgement of her promotion to Steward Guard from Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie's own lips during Cadet Ora's sendoff celebration.

"I'm not letting you leave the garrison when I know there is going to be a stupid prat waiting to prank you." It didn't take long to dress in her winter uniform, including her platoon beret rather than her warm watch cap. She intended on making it plain to any idiot guard that any action of mischief that would shame the honor of their garrison would be met with her reckoning. She had no intention of gaining a mark against her record in an obvious payback, but every guard in the tower knew she didn't put up with bullying behavior, and there would always be a time in a guards physical training where they would be facing her.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Kiku mumbled sleepily.

“Go back to sleep. I got this handled,” Kendra told her.

“Hmmm,” and Kiku did just that.

“You really don’t need to protect me from any staged buffoonery,” Cadet Ora whispered.

“Yes, I do. You’ve been a good mentor to me while you were here, and I don’t want any wag said about our tower’s guards dishonoring a cadet’s time as a fill in for a GDL, guard down slot.”

Cadet Ora said nothing more as she grabbed her duffel bag and quietly followed Corporal Kendra’s lead down the stairs leading to the first floor. Cadet Ora was a tall young woman compared to Corporal Kendra’s still growing figure. Both alertly spotted a male guard dressed in his on-duty winter fatigues standing at the exit to the dim lit hallway to the front door of the garrison.

“Student Leader of Horse Squad First Sergeant Elroy, saying it was a pleasure working with you, Cadet Ora.” His grin was wide.

“And I second that, Cadet Ora,” Sergeant Ruana, Steward Guard of Horse Squad agreed.

“It was memorable,” Cadet Ora said laughing, showing she held no grudges about the pranks and attempts to goad her by the younger guards. She was sure it was done out of jealousy by a few, because she was not just older but considered an adult to their underage status, and to some still children. She was also taller and looked like a woman to their still maturing stature and she stood out in her cadet uniform with her ensign stripes outranking the youths who she worked alongside of in drills and lessons she knew by heart. But the young guards were still learning etiquette and courtesy shown to visiting military personnel, the real ones, not draftees, that they were.

Elroy cocked his head as did Ruana as they both heard in their communicator that a vehicle was seen approaching.

“That, I hope is my ride. Best wishes to you all and thank you for making sure I knew how to leave safely,” Cadet Ora saluted the three and gripping her duffel bag hurried out the heavy door Elroy held open for her.

The three watched her run through the snow to a snow vehicle that was rolling to a stop. Cadet Ora tossed her duffel bag into the back seat and hopped in quickly to the warm interior. She didn't wave or look back as the vehicle took off, slush spewing from its snow tracks.

"Well, that was nice of you two to see her off," Kendra said with a smirk.

"Hm." Ruana said disgustedly. "There's no way I was going to let a few nitwits prank her."

Mac laughed. "Nope. We have everyone in Horse Squad reporting in with their locations and Senior Staff Sergeant Dor is keeping a sharp eye out for any other guards, say from Raven Squad, that may not be where they should be, that is anywhere but here."

"See you at shift turnover," Kendra said and hurried back to her quarters. It would shortly be time for her to start her Steward Guard duties to ensure everyone was up and ready for their morning roll call.

The morning went by quickly and Kendra kept her eye on her watch more than usual. In addition to Kendra's SG duty, she was to escort the newbee to the commissary to be issued her kit. Staff Sergeant Major Bessie as the acting squad leader would introduce and assign the newbee to her first assignment, kitchen duty or GD, Galley Duty.

Kendra sniffed the cold air, as she stomped through the snow from the garrison garage where she parked the air cart after completing her inspection of the wall guards, to the entrance to the garrison's mess hall. Mentally she went over her completed tasks this morning, starting with monitoring Cadet Ora's departure, back to quarters to make sure everyone was up and getting ready for morning assembly, then as Steward Guard, riding the air cart to make sure the Wall Guards were covered for their breakfast rotation; then verifying the WGs were walking their patrols and then back to meal rotations for lunch. That was all done and now her next job was the meet and greet of the newbee, the draftee that was to arrive at the end of their lunch rotation.

Her green eyes sharpened as she stepped into the mess hall, removing her outdoor coat and watch cap. She studied who was present. At spotting the three civilian teachers that most of the female guards avoided, she had a distasteful burn in her gut. They were sitting down for their break. Her eyes moved to where Jov and Hassel were seated with

their lunch trays, the last of her troops to have lunch. Jov was assigned TG, tower guard and Hassel to WG, wall guard. Most of the lunch crowd had already left so Birk assigned GD, galley duty, would probably join their pack members at their table. Sergeant Major Bessie wanted the newbee to have lunch before she was to be guided to the commissary for her kit. As SG of her troop, she was to introduce herself and get a feel for their new member, since she would be bunking with her and Kiku. She wanted to make sure she wasn't taken advantage of by some of the guards that liked to bully newbees. She was sure no one in Wolf Pack would dare. There was no bullying or rude pranking each other in her squad. There were other ways to display friendships and extend a welcome, as her previous mentors had shown her. Also, with Staff Sergeant Major Bessie as their temporary troop leader, none of that was going to happen.

1st Day

"More impressive when up this close," Guide Jewel remarked.

"Yes," Connie breathed in awe. From afar, it appeared remarkable and nearly inconceivable, yet this surpassed her expectations of what was real. She had witnessed the building of the wall around the brethren's compound when she was younger, and that had been a grand undertaking. The laborers shooed away children and adults, while they tried to look like they knew what they were doing. Connie had overheard one of the women mention cynically that only one of them knew how to build a wall and he was a young man newly returned from his four years of service, and he was from outside the compound. The youth insisted that the cement was mixed incorrectly, and the type of brick used wouldn't stand up to wet weather. Connie saw him holding up a book with pictures on how to build a sturdy wall. When the wall was completed after a week, they had a hard autumnal rain and the next morning the entire wall had disintegrated into a muddy circle around their compound. Father had been away on business, but when he returned, he had straightened out the wall business, and the same mistake wasn't repeated. The finished height of the wall was just high enough that a tall person couldn't look into the compound.

That wall was nowhere near the greatness of this one. She tried to understand the enormity of the construction of it. Where did the stones this size come from? The stones were larger than anyone she knew, and the stone's surface was so smooth

windblown snow was unable to stick to it, nor any frost able to coat it. How were they fit? And who were they keeping out or in?

Along the wall was a long three storied building that connected to a tower that rose higher than the wall. Gil parked the van near the forest entrance and away from the three storied building.

“Gil, do you want to use the facilities in the garrison or stretch your legs?”

“Thank you for the offer but I’m good. My feet are nice and dry in here,” he said.

Putting her coat, gloves and cap on, Guide Jewel spoke to Connie, “We’re going to take a few moments to walk around outside. You’ve been traveling for so many days your body needs to get used to the ground that isn’t moving.”

Connie rose and quickly put her coat on and collected her pack. With the first encounter of the cold air that made its way into the van’s warmth Connie pulled up the collar of her coat. Gripping the strap on her pack with one hand the other held the collar close to her face as she stepped out of the van. It wasn’t just the unfamiliar atmosphere of cold air that surrounded her but the vibrant energy from so many different forms of life.

Her shoes had dried out, but the cold and wetness seeped into the shoes easily as she stepped and sunk ankle deep into the snowy ground. The frigidity of the air she breathed was so cold that it wasn’t easy to fill her lungs that seemed to be in shock. To coax her body to adjust to the freezing temperature she inhaled, she took shallow breaths.

“The air up here is thinner, so your body has to adapt but usually by the fourth day you’ll be fine.”

Connie could feel Guide Jewel’s concern and nodded to assure her she was all right.

“Inhale slowly and deeply, until your stomach expands,” Guide Jewel instructed. “To exhale, purse your lips and forcefully exhale. Continue the slow and deep inhales. We’ll walk around a little, so you get the breathing technique down.”

It wasn’t just the cold and thin air, but what was around her that she was feeling with so much intensity that it made her feel off balance. She stared around her to ground

herself in the physical and material reality of what her hyper senses were overwhelming her with. Mother would call it normalizing or dumbing down her sensitivity to realize what those not trained to use all their senses were likely to be feeling in some situations.

She focused on the beginnings of the forest, yards away from the garrison's entrance. She did enjoy studying trees heavy with snow not yet ready to fall from their branches. Her eyes moved up the trees where the wind was blowing vigorously at the top, encouraging the top branches to shed their snow burden to those beneath them and eventually to the ground where she could hear loud plops as their loads hit the forest's floor. Bare branches poked out from bushes covered in snow lining muddy trails that disappeared in different directions deeper into the thicket. Her eyes moved to a noisy flock of small black birds chirping as they covered one bush that had bright red berries peeking out from the white snow blanket. Further in the forest she could hear the rat tat tat of a woodpecker. It sounded just like in the documentary she had seen. Though, there was so much more noise or was it disembodied voices speaking indistinctly? The forest was alive with so much activity.

Connie toned down her senses further, as she caught up with Guide Jewel who had started to walk in a large circle, creating a path in the snow. Connie thought Guide Jewel's recommendation to walk around was also for herself since she too had been in a moving vehicle for six days. Taking slow deep breaths helped release some of the tightness in her throat and chest. It was beneficial to follow in Guide Jewel's footsteps, which compacted the snow, preventing her from sinking deeply enough for her ankles to be covered in the snow.

It's important to learn about your new environment, Callie Can advised. There was a feeling of wariness about her. Connie was sure the advice came from when she was a soldier when she was in mortal form. Callie Can had become her spiritual guide when she was six and faced her first fear of the unknown.

Connie pulled the coat collar closer to her face to keep out the chill. She felt her pack slip out of her cold fingers and drop into the snow. Stopping, she reached down to get a grip on the snow-covered pack strap. As she picked up her pack and gave it a shake to loosen some of the snow, she spotted a shiny black object in the impression her pack left. She could feel its energy.

It's a talisman, her guides chorused happily.

Was it a talisman? She picked up the stone. It would be the first of her collection in this new place. She believed stones had the power to assist. She had left her collection of stones from Hillsboro behind as they had finished their use in Hillsboro. She had blessed them and thanked them and let go of them days before she left. They had been friends from the environment of Hillsboro.

She wrapped her cold fingers around the warm stone. It felt as if it had recently been separated from a warm body. As she slid the pack onto her shoulder, with her other hand slid the stone into her pocket. Glancing at Guide Jewel to see if she had seen her pick up the stone, Guide Jewel's attention was on the entrance to the tower offices. She looked like she wanted to go where it was warm. She did too.

"Let's get out of this cold. We'll use the toilet facilities where we both can freshen up, before I introduce you to your Commanding Officer of the Goldwah Tower's garrison." Guide Jewel led Connie toward the building that butted up against the stone wall. At the entrance there was little snow and plenty of mud as it appeared many feet had stomped through it into the forest. Up this close the building was so high that when she tipped her head back to see the top, she thought she saw someone staring at her and Guide Jewel from a window. As their watcher realized she was seen, the figure quickly backed out of sight.

Was it to be a friend or foe, she wondered? The person was too far away for her to pick up on the person's energy. That wasn't the way to start meeting new people, she scolded herself.

That's being prepared, Sulu said.

You're not prejudging, Bau said.

It would be foolish to enter a new environment with no protection or awareness that both energies can exist, even within one person, Callie Can reminded her.

The burden of Cassandra is to know everything about everyone, Connie thought, *but the lesson is not to speak of others' secrets.* It was one of many warnings mother had imparted to her before she left. However, mother added it is morally wrong to invade another's privacy without being asked by them. Everyone had secrets, which was their right to keep.

She had asked mother what the burden was. Mother had smiled and explained, “Knowing too much about too many. Discretion is the lesson for you and not becoming obsessive with needing to know everything about everyone.” Mother looked at her tenderly, when she said this. The memory of this connection to mother brought warmth to her heart.

Perhaps the real burden was keeping secrets, she thought.

However, there are situations where you can wiggle around that rule, Bau said smugly. Otherwise, how else are you going to learn who can be a friend and who to never friend?

Connie mentally rolled her eyes at her guides who probably didn’t practice any of mother’s moral rules of behavior before they became spiritual guides at different times of her young life. She got the impression they weren’t totally nice people in their mortal lives. They were with her to gain good grace points to enter another realm. There were so many realms that Connie wondered if it were possible for souls to get lost.

Connie’s right hand’s cold fingers warmed in her pocket, or was the stone the source of the warmth?

This talisman is for you to claim.

Was that message from the stone? Connie clutched the stone in a tighter grip, relishing the warmth as well as the discovery of her first talisman. She was sure it didn’t possess dangerous or negatively charged energy. It didn’t feel detrimental to her or her guides would have cautioned her.

Connie’s thoughts recalled one of her mother’s cautions, in dealing with a talisman where its creator and purpose were unknown. It was Connie’s first encounter with a talisman. She was heading home from school while tradespeople arranged their tables and goods for the upcoming weekend festival near the school and shops. At that time, she had felt a disturbing energy from a talisman lying on a jewelers table near the school and described it to mother, who praised her perception of it’s negativity. However, this talisman didn’t radiate any negativity. The energy was benign. Perhaps it wasn’t a talisman.

It is a talisman; Callie Can reassured her. It will let you know it’s purpose in its own time.

Since it found you, it will not hurt you, Sulu assured her.

Yes. It feels like a helping energy, Bau said.

We know a little bit about talismans, Gem said reassuringly. *It's like meeting a new friend.*

It's part of your adventure, Sulu said.

Stones and crystals could be friends, as she learned from mother's teaching.

Guide Jewel pushed open the thick door that opened into a large foyer. It was chilly but not as cold as outside. Energy from a lot of memories were hovering in the foyer. She guessed they were from many nervous draftees entering into a new life experience away from friends and family. The air had traces of the outdoor smells of woods and people.

Guide Jewel led her out of the foyer to another doorway to the public restroom. Once both used the facilities and washed their hands and the travel dust from their face, Guide Jewel studied her and nodded. "Let's go meet Captain Sahem."

Back out in the hallway, directly across from the foyer's entrance was a door with a sign in large block letters above it that read Command Post Offices. Guide Jewel opened the door to the office. Inside this area there were many closed doors, and one had Captain Sahem's name on it. Guide Jewel tapped on it twice.

Looking around the office Connie could see signs over closed doors identifying them as Tower Clinic, Command Post Meeting Room, Office of Lt. Hellene. Second in Command, the name plate below read. There were other offices down a corridor, but all their doors appeared to be closed too. Outside of one door a small creature...a mouse was watching them.

Do you know what that is? An excited Bau whispered.

Quiet, Connie cautioned. She knew what it felt like and depending on how skilled the individual shapeshifter was, could pick up the surface thoughts of those nearby. The talisman in her pocket heated as if it were a warning, or was it for another reason?

"Enter," a deep voice commanded.

Guide Jewel opened the door to an office that smelled of the occupant and the chilly outdoors. She encouraged Connie to step in. The energy of the occupant filled the

entire room. It was his domain. She could feel important decisions about other peoples' lives were made here. Guide Jewel's stories of his military background added to her understanding of his present aura of authority.

The tall, uniformed officer, with his hands clasped behind his back was standing in front of an open window, that let cold air into the warm room. He was looking out on a yard where Connie could hear young voices yelling, then a shriek, that was followed by laughter. The officer chuckled, closed the window and turned to his visitors. He wore a white uniform blouse with splashes of green and matching trousers. His name was on the right side of his blouse and on his left side a patch signifying allegiance to the Royal House of Eameet. On the right arm was an interesting design of a dragon and written above that, Tower Goldwah. His eyes went from light purple to dark, as they adjusted to the darker room. His long face was distinguished but that could be because he wore an elaborate mustache that reminded Connie of a teacher at her previous school that she adored, Don Pestal.

"Good afternoon, Captain Sahem. This is your new recruit, Draftee Connie. Connie, this is Captain Sahem."

"Greetings, Guide Jewel and Draftee Connie," he said.

"Good afternoon, Captain Sahem," Connie said. Connie looked down at her shoes to hide a smile at the mustache that reminded her of her mentor. He made attending school exciting by giving her projects and long hours in the library discovering new sights and subjects on the library computer.

Look up and pay attention, Callie Can chided her.

Captain Sahem walked around his desk and circled behind Connie and then stopped in front of her.

"Draftee Connie, can you look at me?"

Connie took a deep breath and momentarily looked into the captain's deep purple eyes, then slid past him in embarrassment, not wanting to read what was behind his eyes, as if she could. She didn't trust her need to know as much as she could gather in this new environment. Instead, to distract from the temptation, she thought of Don Pestal who took great pride in his mustache, stroking it often when he was thinking about a problem a student brought to him. She brought a lot of questions to him and

what he couldn't answer, he sent her to the school library. He spoke to her as an equal. Another teacher, Donna Estella taught her to appreciate music from many different cultures and styles and taught her to play the flute which luckily belonged to the school, so it couldn't be confiscated at the gate to the compound. Some of the attendants at the gate had girls empty their backpacks and removed anything they wanted or thought a girl should not have in her possession.

You need to be present and listen, Callie Can reminded her.

Right, she needed to focus on the present moment.

"Thank you, Guide Jewel, for your delivery. Go in good health."

His accent reminded her of a shop owner that sold groceries near the school. He was from the north and told her and some of the other children while they waited for someone to pick them up from school, stories of his childhood home in the mountains. He said his reason for moving to Hillsboro was the weather. It didn't snow. But before she left for the draft, he was talking about how he missed his home, and the snow wasn't so bad after all. He missed his family, she thought.

Focus on the present moment, Sulu reminded her.

No need to be nervous, Bau reassured her. *We are here with you.*

"Good years for you both," Guide Jewel said and turned to leave. However, she paused. "Captain, it appears you'll need to check on your rodent control. A cat instead of your dog, perhaps," she teased.

The captain came over to peer outside his office door, but Guide Jewel shook her head. "Apparently, to be noticed is enough to scare it out of view. A smart mouse?"

Both laughed and Guide Jewel left. However, the captain wasn't pleased.

The captain is not happy about the rodent's presence, Callie Can said softly, agreeing with what Connie observed.

Perhaps he suspects it's not an ordinary rodent, Bau mused.

Friend or foe? Connie wondered. Later she would review what mother taught her through many children's tales about respecting the many possible spheres of existence whether seen, heard, experienced, understood or not. Shapeshifters took up many of the characters in the tales. Didn't mother once say to her...

She got another nudge from one of her guides. Enough of remembering what she left behind. She was here to create new memories and acquire new knowledge, she scolded herself.

"You may remove your coat and your wet shoes. You can place your shoes on the shoe dryer in the corner. They should dry in a short time," Captain Sahem told her.

"Thank you, sir." Gratefully, she removed the coat as it was warm in the office and folded it neatly on top of her school pack. The smell of the herbs stored with the coat was fading. She removed her shoes and went to the corner where a heavy coat was hanging and below that a pair of boots that were drying out on a heater. She laid her shoes next to the boots, feeling a gentle warm breeze coming from the heater. She glanced at the captain's feet as she returned to the chair noticing he was wearing a different pair of shoes.

"Be seated, Draftee Connie." He motioned to one of the chairs in front of his desk.

Captain Sahem leaned against his desk and studied her in silence. He noticed her folded hands in her lap, like the dhyani mudra position for contemplation. Did she learn that in her parents' house or in school? He didn't find that practice in her profile record. He noticed her feet were planted flat on the thick carpet, warming her cold toes. She projected a quiet stillness, unusual for most youths visiting his office. He looked for poise and to see what she would do with the silence. When he thought she endured his silence and stare long enough, though she seemed to not be affected, he moved to sit behind his desk to begin the verbal interview.

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

"Sir, I want to learn to defend myself against bullies," she stated so matter of factly.

That surprised him. No hesitation to think about it. Her voice was strong, and he didn't doubt her determination to accomplish that goal.

"Tell me about your home life. Start with the beginning of one of your days," he said, looking for her story to point to what caused her to want to learn to defend herself. A background check did not show any incidents of bullying in her school life. Was it her home life?

Connie was surprised at the request, and then started her story, picking a school day since she felt that was more interesting than the one day of no school where her day started earlier and lasted longer. When she finished, she looked back down at her hands. Perhaps she should have omitted her time spent with little sister when she returned from school allowing mother time for herself. She didn't offer how she got the willful and contrary Jennifer to doze off by letting her eat as much of the valerian root candy as she wanted.

Her eyes at different points of her story were more revealing than the words she chose when describing a normal school day. How long would it take for her to shield herself against the aggressive girls and boys who were good at reading each other's body language as a means of survival and entertainment? The physical self-defense classes she would be taught would give her some protection, but it was the mental strength she would have to build on her own, he thought.

"Let me tell you what to expect here," the captain said, smiling. She had more promise than most draftees and that would please his senior staff. They chose well.

Connie's head lifted to listen, her head tilted to one side and her focus on the speaker.

Captain Sahem felt the energy of the young girl and was pleasantly surprised. Perhaps he needn't worry about how she adapted to the other student guards. Though, with Corporal Kendra mentoring her, any rough patches she would help her over.

"The majority of your time will be spent studying, which covers the subjects the educational board of the commonwealth requires its citizens to know, and guard duty with physical training and drills in protecting yourself and the tower. You will have two hours free time daily that you can arrange around your classes and guard duty with your squad leader's approval. One day a week, you will have eight hours for religious or spiritual practices. That is on the seventh day of the week, Sundhira, where you will have guard duty but no classes.

"We like to say you get eight hours of sleep, but that's up to you. Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie, provisional leader of your squad, will provide you with your daily schedule. Guarding is a job and therefore a financial account has been set up for

you to receive a stipend. Classes on how to manage your financial situation is one of your assigned classes.

“Tower Goldwah’s garrison has three student guard squads that cover daily, in three shifts, the tower’s assigned area to keep secure and safe for the wildlife and other life forms in the area. Students’ quarters are on the third floor. The three squads are Wolf Squad, Horse Squad and Raven Squad. Males and females are quartered in separate sides of the garrison and there is no fraternizing between the boys and girls in their barracks and that includes visiting civilians. Senior staff are exempt from this rule. Female quarters and their cleaning facilities and restrooms are on the left side of the main stairwell, and males to the right. On the first floor are the Tower Offices, public restrooms, classrooms, social and mess hall. Those areas are always open and that is where everyone mixes. Security protocol only permits the civilian teachers to have access to those four areas and only during authorized times. Student Guards assigned to duty on the watch tower sign the teachers on to the garrison premises at eight forty-five, five days of the week in the morning and sign them all out by four in the late afternoon, no exception. They have a van that delivers them and takes them back to town. No civilians apart from kitchen staff are permitted to be on or in the tower facility before eight-forty-five in the morning or after four in the evening. The civilian kitchen staff arrive at five in the morning and leave at night when Cook feels the kitchen is squared away for the next day. The kitchen is open six days of the week serving breakfast, lunch and dinner. For squads working second and third shift food is left in food warmers located in the mess hall. On Sundhira, the kitchen staff have off, and food is left for anyone that is hungry in the food warmers left in the mess hall.

“The kitchen area is under control by a civilian head chef and only allows her two assistants and assigned student guards to enter the kitchen area. The head chef determines who enters her area of control.

“We are a military-run facility as our uniforms show. This is winter season and therefore our OCP uniforms or also referred to as kakis or camos, are predominantly white to blend in with the snow and some green added for the forest growth. You have been assigned to Wolf Pack and will quarter with Corporal Kendra, acting SG and Lance Corporal Kiku of Wolf Squad. We have three shifts, each eight hours on active

duty patrolling the tower, wall and the forest lands on the commonwealth side of the wall. There are twelve student guards per shift, which makes up a squad, led by a student sergeant which makes thirteen, who is supported by a SG, Steward Guard, a member of that troop. A platoon, that's loosely thirty-nine people counting the squad leaders, serves each of the ten towers that is staffed with draftees. There's a map of twenty-two towers along the wall with their captains and lieutenants listed in the social hall, but you'll only need to memorize the ten towers' draftees are assigned to. Sergeant Major Bessie will go over that with you as well as the rules of this tower." He paused when he heard the rumbling of his stomach, followed by Connie's.

"Any question or reply to me can start with captain, sir or Captain Sahem or end with captain, sir, or Captain Sahem and with Lt. Hellene, she prefers to be referred to as Lieutenant, or Lt. Hellene."

"Yes, Captain Sahem," she replied promptly. It was not much different from life at the brethren's compound or, for that matter, the teachers at school.

"Officers below lieutenant are sergeants, referred to as NCOs...Non-Commissioned Officers and are addressed with their rank designation and name. There are three senior staff NCOs that are easily recognized, as they are adults dressed in our winter camo uniform. Student guards from sergeants to Private 2nd Class are usually addressed by rank and name by Private Recruits and Privates. All ranks but private recruit and private have their rank tape showing here, on this center square. Once promoted to Private 2nd Class ranks are designated on the rank tape. Name tapes are velcroid on the uniform blouse on right side upper chest, as mine is. Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie is the provisional leader of Wolf Pack Squad, Student Guard First Sergeant Elroy is leader of Horse Squad, and Student Guard First Sergeant Mac is leader of Raven Squad. Not all sergeants in the squads are squad leaders but could be in training for the future honor, and some are given the additional role as Steward Guard, assisting the Squad Leader. Official evaluations of each student guard are made with monthly tests. Assessments of progress with an award of a promotion in rank if the guard proves fit, and a demotion in rank if not performing to the expectations of that rank. The decisions are made by senior staff. You can familiarize yourself with the ranks on your assigned computer.

“Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie is the highest-ranking NCO and therefore manages the business of all the squads, with Senior Staff Sergeant Em and Senior Staff Sergeant Dor as her support. Officers, that is me and First Lieutenant Hellene, have our rank tape here on our tactical uniforms but should we be in our dress uniforms we will have bars on our collars or shoulders. As you can see my rank shows two black bars for Captain and First Lieutenant Hellene’s will be one bar. First Lieutenant Hellene is my second in command and on vacation or she would be going over this with you.” He smiled giving Connie the impression he didn’t mind doing something she normally did. “Lieutenant Hellene oversees all the civilians that are employed at the tower and is the medical officer, therefore oversees the mental and physical health of everyone in the tower. Usually, besides civilians, at each tower there is a senior staff composed of adults that hold the ranks of captain, lieutenant, warrant officer or sergeant major, and staff sergeants. There are three squad leaders, at the rank of student sergeants that are eighteen years or younger. Sergeant Major Bessie and Staff Sergeants Em and Dor are part of the senior staff that monitor and guide the three squads. At least three senior staff must remain on site at all times, so on the second floor of the garrison there are permanent residences for myself, Lt. Hellene, Sergeant Major Bessie and Staff Sergeants Em and Dor, as well as guest quarters, which are off limits to any civilian and student guards, with a secured pass keeping the residences private. The kitchen staff uses the guest quarters when the head chef deems it’s necessary, which occurs due to unsafe weather conditions or on special occasions. The only place on the second floor any of the student guards are permitted to occupy is the gymnasium on the left side of the stairs. Entrance to the private quarters isn’t near any of the student stairways so getting lost or misdirected by another student’s prank is not likely to happen without an inkling that it’s a private corridor.” He chuckled. “It’s a common prank that the older student guards play on the newbees to prove themselves by trying to access the off-limits areas. Including the boys sneaking into the girl’s quarters and girls into the boys. You’ll find also that there are many tunnels below this garrison, like honeycombs created before the wall was completed. They are used for storing supplies, and workshops and one, a cavern, is used for religious services. You’ll find if you choose to learn a skill in the workshops either an advanced student will teach you or via a monitor

a master of the skill will oversee you. However, for the religious and spiritual leaders that have been cleared by me and Lt. Hellene they can access from an exterior entrance to the cavern set aside for their services only on Sundhira. Security is monitored by the troop on duty, and the cavern entrance is only open on Sundhira. If you have a religious or spiritual inclination, on your terminal will be a questionnaire as to when you would like to attend the available service.”

Connie nodded.

“You're a draftee until you put on your uniform. Then, you're Private Recruit until you're promoted to private and so on.” He waited for a few moments, noting that she was still relaxed with the information he was rattling off, guessing she had a good memory.

"If any instructor, that is a civilian or student sergeant asks or orders you to do something that you think is unwise or unsafe, or you just have an issue with, you can object to doing it, but you'll be called before a senior staff officer to state why. If the senior staff doesn't agree with you and you want to stand by your decision, it will come before Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie who oversees all the sergeants, and Lt. Hellene who oversees the civilians and if needed, then to me.

"After a month, you should have an idea of how things are run here and what and when to object to something. That being said, let's get something to eat. If I miss anything, Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie will fill you in or your troop mates. Your shoes should be warm and dried by now."

“Yes, sir.”

Connie quickly retrieved her shoes which were warm to her touch. She slipped them on her bare feet and picking up her coat and pack, fell behind the captain and would have followed behind had he not signaled he wanted her walking beside him. On their walk to the mess hall Connie felt a ghostly presence following them.

It was curious about her.

Are you aware of the shapeshifter, Connie asked, not sure if she would get an answer. Its presence left without acknowledging whether it heard her.

Not all ghosts want solids in their business. It'll take some getting used to, but there are a lot of ghosts in this old building. But you'll adapt, Callie Can reassured her.

Your mother cleared any that wanted to hang around her home, so you didn't get a chance to communicate with that realm. You'll get the experience of learning more about them here and you can practice how to block some of them, Sulu added.

Some could be useful, Bau cautioned, so as not to close off prospective help from other spirits more in the know of this new environment.

"The mess hall is the only area the student guards don't need to stand at attention on my appearance or any of the senior staff," Captain Sahem said, bringing Connie's attention to something more immediate. "At breakfast, lunch, and dinner there are usually two squads that will be in the mess hall eating as well as some of the civilian teachers five days of the week. When the kitchen is closed there may be members from all three squads, foraging for something that's left from the other shifts. No one goes hungry," he said chuckling. "But this is the age where growing takes a lot of energy and food is it, so the kitchen prepares large quantities of food for when the kitchen is not open."

The captain stepped into a spacious area larger than what she was accustomed to with tables and chairs. A vibrant hum engulfed Connie and the captain as if they crossed an unseen line. Connie paused a moment to acclimate to the energy, and smell of a mixture of food and people. The captain waited to give her that moment.

Three separate flags representing a horse's head, a black raven and a gray wolf were hanging on one side of the hall above some of the tables. Uniformed guards in their white and green camos, all looking as young as her, were scattered throughout the hall. One of the guards looked up and acknowledged the captain's presence with a wave. The captain nodded and then continued further into the hall, leading the way to a food counter where he rang a bell. It looked like the lunch hall at school, only this counter was higher.

"Cook! You have two hungry guards up front," the captain called.

"Alright, alright. Cook indeed," 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 is an honor. I had to come and witness that it was indeed your voice ordering my presence from the counter," the elder mocked.

"Let me go shine some silverware. It's been a long time since you've taken time to bring yourself here for a mid-meal, Captain. What's the occasion?"

"I'm hungry," the captain said.

"What'll it be? And don't pick something Lt. Hellene is going to chide me for as not healthy for you," she cautioned the captain. "You're not a young man that can eat anything, anytime, she'll say."

Both laughed.

Connie smiled at the exchange of playful energy between the two adults.

The captain selected a tray from a stack to the right under the food counter window and nodded to Connie to take one too.

"I want a good helping from each pot," he said.

Surprisingly enough, the cook gave him generous helpings from the three selections under the covered pots of meat, vegetables and mashed potatoes topped with two scoops of gravy, and a dessert for his tray, then turned to Connie.

"Well, you're new," the cook stated the obvious of Connie. "What group are you assigned to?" When she didn't respond quickly, she added. "Are you mute?"

Connie swallowed in surprise. "No, Ma'am." Since Cook was wearing all white with only food stains marking her clothing, she was unsure how to address her.

"Cook, you're taking up valuable chow time," the captain broke in. "He glanced at Connie. "Keep in mind you need to let your stomach get used to the food you're not in the habit of eating." His grin indicated he was teasing the cook.

"Hey," Cook objected. "My food sticks to the ribs just like good soldier food. You can march for days on one of my meals."

"So, you say. 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. I didn't fix anything for you yet because you didn't let me know you would be joining the troops here in the commons."

"Well, you got me there." He pointed to the apple. "I can't wait until you finish that up baked in cinnamon or maybe caramel coated."

Connie's eyes lit up as she silently agreed.

“You keep throwing out all those suggestions with compliments and you may get first pick fresh out of the oven.”

“I thought I already did as the captain of this post.”

“That’s right. How could I forget,” she laughed and from the three selections, though not as generous helpings, she filled three dishes to hand to Connie to add to her tray, and a dessert of chocolate pudding.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Connie said. She shifted her pack strap to one shoulder and with the other arm balanced her coat and tray.

“Ma’am, is it?” The cook mumbled as the two left the counter.

Connie looked surprised and glanced at Captain Sahem, hoping she hadn’t insulted her.

Captain Sahem led the way back to the tables with the aroma of their food tantalizing two growling stomachs. "Cook is just Cook, Drafee Connie. No worries about you hurting her feelings. She understands you’re new.” He grinned as he walked to a table. “She is head chef and the boss of all that is kitchen and food. Her assistants you’ll meet soon enough. A newbies first duty assignment is working as kitchen staff and since your squad is on first shift, you’ll be assigned to work all three kitchen meals for six days of the week, until your squad rotates to another shift."

Above the table Captain Sahem led her to, had the wall hanging with the silhouette of a gray Wolf against a green background. For a moment the image changed to a red background with a black Wolf turning to stare at her. She blinked.

Remember the Wolf, an unfamiliar voice whispered near her ear.

“Good afternoon, Captain,” four guards chorused. Three outdoor coats were draped over the backs of three of the chairs.

“As you were, Wolf Pack," he ordered. "This is your new pack mate, Drafee Connie.” He turned to Connie, “The rest of your pack is on duty. Two or three at a time take a 20-minute chow break. Then they will return to duty giving the others the time for their break. Nobody goes hungry.”

The captain introduced Connie to everyone at the table as they were seated. “Private 2nd Class [Hassel](#), Private 1st Class [Birk](#), Lance Corporal [Jov](#), and Corporal [Kendra](#), who is SG of Wolf Pack, this is Drafee Connie.”

Three nodded, having their mouths full.

“Welcome to Wolf Pack, Draftee,” Corporal Kendra greeted.

To remember names and faces, Connie repeated each member’s rank and name, getting a feeling for each. She placed her tray on the table and draped her coat over the back of her chair with her pack.

Private 2nd Class Hassel’s red hair was shaved close around his ears with a tuft of bright red on the top of his head. His face was splattered with freckles standing out from his tanned face, with bright green eyes that studied her thoughtfully as he chewed.

Private 1st Class Birk was taller than Hassel, with a tuft of black hair on top of his head curling wildly with the sides of his hair cut close. He had dark brown eyes that showed curiosity, but he too focused on his meal.

Lance Corporal Jov was nearly as tall as Birk with his white hair on top standing up in spikes as if cut too short to lay flat. The hair on the sides of his head was so short his scalp looked pink. His bright blue eyes only glanced at her when she arrived and then focused on his food.

There was no conversation as three concentrated on eating their lunch while Kendra was silent, as if...she was appraising her. Kendra had darker skin than the other three with green eyes a deeper shade than Hassels. Connie had the distinct feeling Kendra was not someone easily fooled or to be taken lightly.

The captain rose when he finished his meal, timing it when Connie finished hers. “Well, Wolf Pack, it was pleasant to share a lunch break with you all. Don’t forget you have your packmates that are hungry and waiting for their turn to eat. Corporal Kendra, I’ll leave Draftee Connie with you to take her to Sergeant Major. She’s in the commissary waiting for Draftee Connie to finish her lunch.”

“Yes, sir!” the four said in unison. The captain left taking his tray and dirty dishes with him and depositing the dishes in a tub on a side table and where there was a stack of trays, he added his.

When the captain left the three boys visibly relaxed.

So that was why they were eating hurriedly. At mother’s house they would have been instructed to slow down and taste the meal she had prepared.

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

Connie swallowed her beverage, unfamiliar with the sharpness of the tea, worried it would get caught in her throat. Clearing her throat she mumbled her town.

"Speak up, Draftee. We're not going to dob you," Private 1st Class Birk said jokingly, waving his fork at her.

"Goon, don't scare her with that fork," Lance Corporal Jov said in a low voice, chuckling. "Show some table manners."

"Wait until you run the trails," Private 2nd Class Hassel cautioned with a laugh. "Then you'll think the Seargent Major is trying to kill you."

Connie nodded at the group, getting a mental confirmation that they were close friends.

"So, where are you from?" Corporal Kendra persisted.

"Commonwealth of Hillsboro, Corporal Kendra," Connie said in a clear voice.

A shadow appeared over their table. Connie looked up. The lanky boy was unhappy about something. His black hair was worn shorter than the boys at her table with no hair on top of his head. His hair looked recently clipped short. His eyes changed into shades of golden brown from the light in the dining room as his gaze moved from each guard to herself and then to Kendra, acknowledging with his eyes, everyone at the table. He was wearing a pack, which Connie realized they all had packs near them.

"Corporal Kendra, Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie ordered you to present the newbee to Ward for setting her up with a proper kit when she finishes her lunch and not spend time chatting her up."

"Thanks, Private Sven. Shouldn't you be sleeping?"

He blinked a few times, as if thinking of a response, then gave a grunt and headed to the beverage dispenser. The four exchanged knowing smiles.

"He had to get his climbing rig replaced," Private 1st Class Birk explained for Connie's benefit. "He was repelling over the wall and lost it, so the wag goes."

"He lost it?" Corporal Kendra asked disbelievingly. "How did he manage that? In the bog, did he?"

"Surely not our bog so late at night?" Lance Corporal Jov mocked.

Corporal Kendra glanced at Connie and explained. "There is one bog just at the border of the forest to the south and before the farmlands so when someone tells a

yammer about loss of equipment, we accuse him or her of losing it in the bog. You can smell the bog strongly when the wind blows from the south. Oh, and a yammer is an untruth.” She grinned at Connie. “You’ll learn our lingo soon enough.”

“Anyway, someone saw something worth wagging about it,” Lance Corporal Jov sniggered, “I would have loved hearing his explanation of his loss to Senior Staff Sergeant Em when he requested a replacement. It hadn’t gone well by the evidence of his new haircut.”

“Had to be a Sigrid bet,” Private 1st Class Birk mocked.

“That git should know better,” Lance Corporal Jov said confidently.

“What was he doing repelling in the dark anyway?” Corporal Kendra asked, sounding suspicious.

“A prank gone wrong?” Private 1st Class Birk suggested smirking.

“Yeah, he was somewhere he wasn’t supposed to be,” Lance Corporal Jov said with conviction. “The consequences of the loss are going to be very embarrassing,” he added giggling.

“Did he try and scale our side of the barracks?” Corporal Kendra asked incredulously.

“That’s the wag I heard in the kitchen, straight from Sarod’s own witnessing,” Private 1st Class Birk said. “It had Cook’s staff asking Kelere for confirmation at such foolishness, but you know student guard Kelere, she keeps her head down and just works on her kitchen duties. Secrets and gossip aren’t going to be heard from her.”

Corporal Kendra shook her head and looked at Connie. “Newbee Connie, grab your pack and coat and we’ll go. Without a uniform you’re just a newbee. Once you get a uniform, you’ll be Private Recruit with a badge of the tower and beret of our troop. Private 1st Class Birk, dump her tray and dishes on your way back to the kitchen, please. And you lot, back on patrol duty. She’s got us right about chatting too much with the newbee,” Corporal Kendra said lightly.

The boys chuckled and gathered up their trays and empty dishes, leaving two outdoor coats draped on the back of their seats to be retrieved on their completion of dumping their used dishes and trays.

"Will do, Corporal Kendra." Private 1st Class Birk rose from his seat and neatly stacked Connie's tray and her dishes with his and followed the two boys to where the captain dumped his empty dishes and tray.

Connie noticed none of the boys were bothered with Corporal Kendra ordering them around.

This is going to be interesting, Callie Can said.

Girls giving orders to boys, Bau said.

Kendra picked up her outdoor coat and pack from the back of her seat and led the way to the exit. Connie noticed on their way out of the mess hall there was a small group of civilian adults staring at them as they headed to the exit. She hadn't noticed them when they entered. Kendra gave a quick nod at them to acknowledge their presence. However, her feelings were not so complimentary of that group.

I smell a rodent, Bau whispered.

Secrets, something whispered. Connie glanced at the three flags hanging from the wall suspiciously. There was going to be a lot of information to sift through to feel her way through the social order of this place, the seen and unseen influences.

"Who are they, Corporal Kendra?" Connie asked softly when they were in the hallway, hopefully out of their ear shot. She didn't feel any of them were adults' father would approve of her being alone with. Did she perceive the tower as more like the compound's environment compared to the diverse and inclusive atmosphere of the public school? With the stone tucked in her pocket close to her body, she felt it heat up. Was it from the shapeshifter or the group?

"They are some of the civilian instructors," Kendra replied in a low voice.

"There's a dozen in all. The others are probably conducting classes."

"What do they teach?" Connie asked.

"Lessons that the commonwealth's Department of Education requires all children that graduate from lower schools into the draft need to learn. In our four years of public service, we are to become literate citizens in the commonwealth and trained with a job skill if we survive," Kendra mocked. "The civilians teach art classes, like music, painting, dance, and then the practical classes like math, politics of the realm or more like the politics of workplaces with law thrown in, and then logistics. Military

skills are taught by our senior staff and rangers. We address the civilian teachers with ROA and then their names, like ROA Artherton, he's one of the dance instructors, ...well, all except the logistics teacher. He insists on being addressed as Tutor R. No other name. Lucky me; I've completed my requirement in logistics before he arrived. He's a creep," she muttered in even a lower voice least anyone overhear her. "Even Cadet Ora avoided being in the same room as him. Telling, that." She glanced at Connie. "When we're short of draftees or working guards the Royal Corps of Cadets sends a cadet to make the number of guards in a squad up to proper count. Poor Ora was suffering from her stint here," Kendra explained with a little laugh. "She just turned twenty, looked like a young woman more than a teenager, and was ready to graduate out of the Cadets when the lottery picked her name to be dropped into filling a space in a tower. Otherwise, her promotion would have her moved to the Royal Corps Marine barracks in the castle of Isa." Kendra sighed. "She said she had thought she managed to escape the assignment during her cadet duty, but bad luck that. Everyone that goes from student guard duty and wishes to enroll in any of the Royal Corps, knows as a cadet they may get pulled in the lottery to fill in at a tower staffed with student guards, until the Draft Board gets a proper draftee to fill the slot. The hard part for all us grunts, that's student guards, in reality, she out ranked all us tower guards and was smarter than any of us. She managed to keep her cool when dumb gits tried to pull stupid stunts." Corporal Kendra snorted disgustedly. "Their squad leaders should have put those bouffons on report with serious consequences. That will not happen in Wolf Pack!"

Kendra was miffed with the two guards who she caught carping on the cadet who weren't under her supervision, if that's what it could be called. Kendra did feel the older cadet knew her way around working as a tower guard when she was a draftee, and though she didn't complain about the attempted foolish sabotage or interference she was experiencing, she was quartering in Wolf Pack's quarters. She hadn't been told of what consequences the two squad leaders imposed on the two guards, but she felt personally insulted. Taking a few deep breaths to let it go she turned her attention to the new draftee that was her responsibility to oversee and protect from any carping done by any of the other guards who had a history of malicious mischief toward Wolf Pack members.

“Anyway,” Kendra continued to inform the new member of her squad, “we have instructors that are available online for the evening and night shifts. Senior Staff Sergeant Dor teaches night watch and security, whom you won’t meet until we move to 2nd and 3rd shift. Nothing like learning how to spot trouble in the dark.”

Connie nodded, feeling the implied warning of some of the teachers.

“Life is full of things to do here,” Kendra continued. “It’s to keep our young curious and restless minds occupied and our bodies healthy with plenty of physical activity, though it doesn’t work for everyone,” Kendra glanced at Connie. “So then, what interests do you have?”

“Everything and anything.”

“You sound like you’re starving for excitement,” Kendra teased. “What I learned here is saying something like that opens you to just that.”

“You mean be careful what I wish for?”

“Exactly. You will be welcomed into Wolf squad,” she said with firm conviction. “Wolf is the pathfinder, and the moon is our power ally.” She smiled at Connie’s serious face as she listened intently, thinking she would either be very nervous about wolf, their totem, a spiritual animal as their teacher for this particular time in her life, or take it as a childish belief that adults thought up to keep some type of order among them in being loyal to their group. Not all the tower guards took the totems of their squad seriously at first and looked on it with disdain as a means of the adults to hold their squad’s animal honor code ethics by group pressure. By the end of the second year, it was what their animal represented that gave them pride and the psychological means to overcome many challenges including their first love encounters and failures at relationships outside of their squad. She grinned, thinking of Master Sergeant’s reminder that hormonal imbalances were the bane of all teens and a welcome into the world of painful love mishaps and jealousy from those left out.

Corporal Kendra glanced at the newbee wondering how much of a challenge she would be to meld her into their wolf pack camaraderie. Grinning she added.

“There is no howling under a full moon and dancing naked like the witches of lore, though in our village there are a dozen witches in the village that do tell fortunes, create amulets for the superstitious, and create love potions for the puerile minded tower

guards.” Chuckling, she continued mischievously. “Some of our superstitious guards not only carry amulets from the local witch shop but naively attribute failed love connections to love potions of another or a more powerful power opposed to them, like mutual attraction. My unsolicited advice to them is if it's not meant to be, then just leave it. Spending one's earnings on objects to manipulate another's desire is foolish.” Kendra laughed. “Not even strong perfume is going to turn an uninterested person into a passionate devotee.”

Connie wrinkled her nose, thinking of some of the strong perfumes for men and women that the local vendor back at home sold, that would choke anyone in an enclosed room.

Kendra shook her head looking amused. “As a member of wolfpack, you can call upon our wolf spirit to guide you to find your way. Or just ask me.” She grinned widely. “I'm sure I can point you away from trouble.”

Connie glanced at Kendra who was now alongside her. It took her a good five strides to get a feeling for this girl. She had the energy of a leader and someone whose opinion would be well to listen to. However, she didn't see or anticipate any romantic liaisons in her future. She had other more important lessons to learn, like how to blend in with young people her age with no idea what their interests were.

Kendra pulled open a door and gestured for Connie to proceed her down the stairs. Connie hesitated. It wasn't dark, but it wasn't a well-lit passage, and a ghostly presence was pointing at something on the stairs.

“Are you afraid of the dark?” Kendra asked.

Connie shook her head, waiting for her eyes to adjust better to the change of light, to see just what was being pointed at.

Kendra looked down the stairs. “Oh, someone dropped something,” Kendra said, spotting a lump on the steps. She started down the stairs first and picked up the box, reading what was on the box. “You have good eyes. So, are you ready for anything? Sounds like you led a sheltered life.”

“I was lucky in that I had a chance to attend a public school and didn't have anyone bothering me if I took my time returning to the compound as long as I returned before dinner time.”

"You a member of a cult?" she asked.

"Females are not members of anything," Connie quoted. *Given the choice, I wouldn't join under any conditions.* Something told her she should not be making such quick decisions. Stubbornly she refused to agree with the caution.

"Well, this is the military. You're expected to become integrated with your troop members and work well with the rest of the guards. In Wolf Pack, we're a team and support each other. If you have any problems with a pack member, let me know. All the troops are balanced with an equal number of males and females. You'll notice that our civilian teachers and the rangers that teach us trail awareness, and wilderness skills are old enough to be our elder parents or grandparents. If you develop any romantic feelings towards any of those authority figures, please note that senior staff will provide guidance and counselling on how to get over it!" She giggled at that. "Some girls or boys think their coquettish and amorous feelings are not obvious. And it gives the wrong message to our teachers who don't need encouragement to be overly friendly. Fraternizing in romantic or imagined relationships with our elders is not age appropriate," she finished in a mocking tone.

Connie studied Corporal Kendra's smirking face and touched her energy field cautiously. "I guess secrets are hard to keep around here," Connie ventured.

Kendra broke into laughter and shook her head. "Lt. Hellene, Sergeant Major Bessie, Staff Sergeant Em and Cook know whenever one of us guards is off our usual performance. And if it's to do with a romantic secret that is affecting the squad it is affecting the smooth running of the towers business. They liken such relationships that sour group harmony, as one rotten apple in a barrel, and attribute it to hormonal indiscretions. There really aren't many emotional secrets around here. We can't pine for another without someone knowing about it or if there is a breakup with another guard. Hearts do get broken," she added sardonically. "It also keeps the gossip mill busy."

As Connie listened, she realized Kendra was not speaking only in theory. Romantic entanglements and their effect on group harmony seemed to be an ongoing concern in the tower—and perhaps one Kendra knew personally. Her sardonic tone suggested that emotional secrets rarely stayed hidden among the close-knit members of Wolf Pack.

The corridor at the end of the stairs was wide and long but had brighter lighting. Pictures of various people lined both sides of the walls, all in various styles of uniforms.

Connie glanced at Corporal Kendra's midcalf laced boots with her pants tucked in.

"Can I ask you a question, Corporal Kendra?" Connie's voice echoed in the passageway.

"Ask away, Draftee."

"How come I can't hear your footsteps?"

Kendra snorted. "Well, it took me nearly a year to tread lightly, as our previous Wolf Pack leader Sergeant Burkee described it. By the end of your rank of private if you can't tread lightly in your boots, you're not likely to rise higher than private. It's an issue with our present Sergeant Major. You will soon find that Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie is very fair and knows all," Kendra mocked with a grin. "I think she can put her hand on a tower wall and know what goes on within its enclosure." She glanced at Connie, amused, wondering what she would think of that comment.

Connie was going to ask another question, but they arrived at the Commissary. There was a large sign above the wide doorway that announced it was the Commissary, Under the Management of Senior Staff Sergeant Em. The interior was bright with lights and warmer than the upper floor they came from. From the doorway Connie had a glimpse of shelves with boxes of plainly labeled contents along one of the walls.

"Corporal Kendra. It's about time. What did you do, stop and chat?" An older woman, dressed in the same camouflage uniform impatiently gestured to Connie to enter. Her name tag on her uniform read, Senior Staff Sergeant Em. She wore her gray streaked hair pulled back into a bun. The few strands of gray hair that were too short for pulling back were pinned so her hair didn't touch her ears. Her face was deeply lined around her mouth and dark gray eyes, and her energy was pleasant, giving Connie the impression she laughed a lot. Connie liked her immediately.

Inside the room there was no echoing of their voices, and it smelled of things, lots of things. This was Senior Staff Sergeant Em's province. It was warm and pleasant and not at all feeling like they were underground with plenty of room for storage along the walls and further down a cavernous walk between filled shelves.

“No, Senior Staff Sergeant Em,” Corporal Kendra said with a smile, not taking the tone of the Staff Sergeant’s as a reprimand.

“Put your belongings on the chair near the door, Draftee,” Staff Sergeant Em directed.

“Yes, Senior Staff Sergeant Em,” Connie said.

As she laid her pack on a chair near the entrance she refolded her coat over the pack.

“This was dropped on the stairs, Senior Staff Sergeant,” Corporal Kendra said. Corporal Kendra had read who the package had been addressed and was curious why it had been left on the stairs, but she didn’t dare ask the Staff Sergeant, for Staff Sergeant Em didn’t gossip about guards to other guards.

Connie noted there was a board game in progress on a side table. At home, occasionally brother and father played with father giving lessons on the strategy of each move. She was only allowed to sit at a distance as she and mother prepared herb sachets. Board games were for males in the compound, however, at the public school that was different. She scared the boys when she played them. She played to win in as few moves as possible. That’s how father told brother the game was played. It wasn’t too long that not many of the boys wanted to challenge her to a game, but she did have a few shy girls that wanted to learn.

"Apparently, not everyone is happy with their mail. Dump it in the outgoing mailbag to be returned to the sender. Now, I don't have all day, so let's get this task going. Looks about a size 12 alright with little or no alterations. We've got plenty of clothes for her right off the racks but there's always something that isn't quite right. I imagine after a month of workouts she'll need alterations. Yep. More than likely," she continued chatting as if not expecting answers from any of them.

A woman, sitting in a chair near the game table, suddenly stood up, startling Connie. She hadn’t sensed her. She blended in with the shadowed corner even though she wore a white camouflage uniform. Her rank was on a patch on the top button of her uniform blouse. She had more stripes than Senior Staff Sergeant Em and she was tall enough that Connie had to look up to see her face. She conveyed authority and a different sort of power than Senior Staff Sergeant Em. This wasn’t her space, but she

dominated it. Her eyes were difficult to identify in color, but her blond brows stuck out sharply from her tanned face. She wore her curly blond hair pulled back, with curls touching her ears and the curls on top of her head looked flattened, as if she had been wearing a hat. Her pant legs were neatly tucked inside of her boots, like Corporal Kendra's. Her name tag identified her as Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie.

"Corporal Kendra, deposit her pack and coat to bunk #5 in your quarters. I trust Cadet Ora has cleared her belongings and removed her bedding before she took leave?"

"Yes, Sergeant Major. She was packed and ready to go before dawn." Kendra grinned. "I don't think she slept a wink with the prospect of leaving today."

"Yes." Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie smiled. "She did her best to fit in, though she had served her four years at another tower. We can only hope she has fond memories of her time here. Make sure clean bed linen, blankets and the proper pack is on Private Recruit's bunk. Then return to duty. You and Lance Corporal Kiku have the responsibility to welcome Private Recruit Connie to the pack."

"Yes, Sergeant Major."

Kendra put her outdoor coat on, slid her own pack on one shoulder and collected Connie's belongings then left.

"Cook better save us some baked apples," grumbled staff sergeant. "I can smell them baking down here. Makes me grumpy feeling like my sweet tooth isn't getting treated with respect."

Connie sniffed the air and a grin on her face testified that she too could smell whatever was baking was promising to be delicious.

"I'm Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie. I'm your troop leader and everything else that is important in your life for the first six months of your training, and if you're lucky, for the rest of your four years of duty to the commonwealth."

"Yes, Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie," Connie said.

"Let's get her a kit before you feed her that troop bluster. There's always something a newbee is going to feel off balance about that you won't be able to cover. Let's get to it, draftee," Staff Sergeant Em said.

"Don't be undermining my supreme authority, Senior Staff Sergeant, or you may find out in the next game of Regent, you'll be mumbling your apologies as I quash

your regiment by the second move,” Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie threatened with a laugh.

Regent? An indignant sniff sounded near the board. *Child’s play.*

It’s not likely she’ll win this round, another voice piped up.

What do you mean? She’s got you fenced in!

Senior Staff Sergeant Em turned to look at Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie with a raised eyebrow. “Not unless you got them dice weighted.”

Did she hear the disembodied conversations going on around her? Connie took another look at the board game and could see two pale apparitions on either side of the game table. If they were giving pointers to the two mortal players, someone was at a disadvantage. It may look like one player was winning but as father had pointed out to Ottir who sometimes would gloat too soon in a game, to watch out for the least likely player you’ve thought was too far from being a threat.

“Alright Draftee. Let’s get you squared away with a proper kit.” The first thing Senior Staff Sergeant Em pulled from the nearest shelf was a folded bag that she shook out vigorously. It had wheels on the bottom of the bag and was pushed toward Connie. “This is a duffel bag to be used for carrying your clothing to your barracks and where your dirty laundry can be stored until you’re scheduled time for laundry duty.”

While Senior Staff Sergeant Em pulled out various articles of clothing, Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie explained differences in the winter camouflage uniforms she would be wearing and why the white and green was their winter wear. Staff Sergeant Em gave each article of clothing a good shake, regarding them before refolding them and placing them in the duffel bag. From the dress uniform complete with socks and shoes, that Senior Staff Sergeant Major explained was worn when visiting the nearby town, Truncel, to the two different types of uniforms, which she referred to as OCPs and camouflaged, one for off duty and one for patrol duty. OCPs were worn in the tower. There was no civilian clothing to be worn by the guards. Additional shoes, socks, nightwear, underclothing, workout sweats, covers and a fleece outdoor coat were added to her collection of wear. While Senior Staff Sergeant Em pulled out clothes and shoes Sergeant Major Bessie also explained what six months of training with her was to accomplish. It sounded exhausting what to wear and when, but

Connie felt excited. For the first time in her life, she began to see herself beyond life in the compound...beyond mother's teachings?

Focus on the now, Bau reminded her, just as mother would.

Once the duffel bag was packed with what Staff Sergeant Em described as her winter kit Connie was led back to a chair.

"So, how are we going to fix your hair?" Staff Sergeant Em asked.

"Can you cut this off?" She held her thick braid up. It was the last show of rebellion to her life in the compound.

"It would make your life easier. How about something like this?" She showed her a picture of a woman wearing shorter hair.

"Yes." Connie didn't really study it. She just wanted to have the heavy braid removed.

Once the haircut was finished, she changed into her new uniform. Staff Sergeant Em handed her velcro patches to wear on her blouse. The exact positioning of her name, on the right side of her chest and to the left the Wolf Pack patch with the Tower Goldwah velcroid on her left arm and the final patch that identified her as being in service to the Royal House of Eameet on her right arm, she was ready to be welcomed as Private Recruit.

"Yes, Private Recruit Connie you're now looking like a tower guard. And now a snapshot to add to the rank and file of the tower guards of Goldwah," Staff Sergeant Em said.

"Put your maroon beret on." Sergeant Major handed her a beret. "The patch of the Wolf is over your left eye. The other side of the beret pulled to the right but not touching your ear. Center the cap." Sergeant Major directed. Once she was satisfied with Connie's pose, she took a snapshot. "You have three caps. Your beret is part of your uniform when in formal dress or should you be summoned to the Office of the Commandant even if you're wearing your camo uniform. There is a program on your assigned computer that will tell you when and what to wear when you leave your quarters. All your head covers have your troop badge. Each squad has its own beret color. Horse Squad has a brown beret with the horse badge and Raven Squad has a black beret with the raven badge. When the summer season comes around your

uniforms will change to brown OCP but not your covers. You finished, Staff Sergeant Em?”

“My job is done. I’m going to visit Cook now unless you have any other job on your to do list for me.”

It wasn’t really open for discussion as Staff Sergeant was moving to the door.

“I can’t think of a thing,” Sergeant Major Bessie mocked, as she followed the Staff Sergeant out the door, motioning for Connie to follow. Connie rolled her duffel bag behind her.

Staff Sergeant Em posted a sign on the outside of the door letting anyone who came to see about something in the commissary that it was closed and if anything was needed make an appointment.

As Staff Sergeant Em ran up the stairs, Sergeant Major Bessie showed Connie how to roll the bag without it pulling her off balance. Then she led the way to her new quarters, four flights of stairs up. She followed Sergeant Major’s silent progress up the stairs while her footsteps were louder in her new boots.

“Are you interested in the board game we were playing, Private Recruit Connie?” Sergeant Major Bessie asked as they climbed the stairs.

“I could see who was winning, Staff Sergeant Major Bessie,” Connie huffed as she followed Sergeant Major Bessie. The stairs were dimly lit, giving just enough light to see the steps.

“And who would that be, Private Recruit Connie?”

“Your side if your pieces were the dark players, Staff Sergeant Major Bessie.” Too late, Connie realized that maybe she gave too much information.

Sergeant Major laughed. “*And how did you know they were mine since I wasn’t sitting on that side of the board, Private Recruit Connie?*” She had just moved to that seat to wait for her new recruit’s arrival, wanting to have a good view of the new recruit as she entered the commissary. Usually, that was Em’s seat since the commissary was her domain and anyone entering her sphere of influence was immediately identified and appraised for trouble or business as usual.

Connie didn’t answer her, knowing it was a thought not meant to be overheard, though through her expression she didn’t bother to keep her thoughts unheard. This was

going to be an interesting learning experience. She needed to tone her senses down further. She didn't want to be a Cassandra, as mother warned about the burden of knowing too much about the people around her.

We'll remind you, Sulu teased.

Senior Staff Sergeant Major Bessie pushed open a door marked as Wolf Pack Quarters #4. The light in the room immediately came on when they stepped in. The walls were a crème color with no windows. The energy in the room was confusing, but nothing threatening. Her nose itched. Someone put a protection spell in the room. It wasn't very strong, so maybe it was fading.

It's not fading, Callie Can said.

It's a ward off. If someone with ill intentions toward the occupants tries to enter, they will be repulsed! Bau said with excitement.

It's very well done, Gem said.

Connie was impressed and wondered who created the spell. Was it one of the witches from town?

There were five cubicles that opened up to one side of the room with a trunk at the end of each bed. A bed, desk with a computer terminal and a closet were in the cubicles. Directly across from the cubicles on the wall, were coat hooks and below space for shoes. Two of the cubicles' coat hooks had rain cloaks hanging. The first and forth cubicles beds were unmade, but the second and third were neatly made. Her pack was sitting on the fifth bed, in the cubicle furthest from the door, with the coat she arrived in hanging from a coat hook across from her assigned bed. Folded linen, blankets, and a pillow were on her assigned bed, with a pack that had the wolf patch on the back flap. She was shown where and how to store her clothing and then how to make up her bed. The trunk in front of her bed was empty.

"When the seasons change you will be issued a different set of OCP uniforms for the warmer weather. Then your winter clothes will be stored in this chest," Sergeant Major Bessie explained.

She now had a heavy cold weather coat and a rain cloak hanging next to her borrowed coat on the coat hooks across from her cubicle. Her closet had more change of clothes than she could imagine she needed, and shoes neatly lined up next to the shoes

she arrived in. Her pack from home she didn't bother unpacking but pushed into the corner of the closet. When Sergeant Major left her alone, she would retrieve the talisman from her borrowed pants. Already she was missing it, and she hadn't said a claiming prayer over it yet.

Claiming? That's presumptuous, Sulu said amused.

"Corporal Kendra is the SG of Wolf Pack, and my second in command for this squad. SGs, Steward Guards support the Leader of the Squad. Because she is also the highest ranking in your quarters, she will be responsible for seeing that you're turned out properly and Lance Corporal Kiku and her will help you learn the rules. On the hierarchy of ranks, which is how this garrison is organized, as Private Recruit you are at the bottom of the ranks and when you are promoted to Private you are still at the bottom unless we get a Private Recruit. You are part of Wolf Pack and are expected to respect all those with ranks higher than yours. It's very tedious but let that be an incentive for you to study hard to be promoted. When you start your studies, you will see what our code of conduct is for ALL guards and civilians. If anyone doesn't follow it, then notify me. As Sergeant Major, I'm the top NCO and I'm the one that gets troop complaints before it reaches Lt. Hellene and or Captain Sahem. If one person falls below good conduct, it affects the whole garrison. It's like a rotten apple in a barrel, trying to get the others rotten. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sergeant Major 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 mother's lessons may not have a place here. "I will obey the rules and guidelines, Sergeant Major Bessie."

She felt the Sergeant Major mentally scored both her answers as correct.

"We'll talk about it after you've had time to review them and think on it. We train our troops to think unless there is no time and then it's what was set down as the rule of order. Now, let's get to your backpack. I'll show you the essential things we've put in it and then you can add what you want. If you need something the commissary is the place to go. That is Staff Sergeant Em's responsibility area, and she will find it for

you. Just keep in mind the weight. Your backpack is with you everywhere you go and don't lose sight of it if you lay it down. We never know when the tower alarm will go off for the troops to assemble for an emergency. In your pack, as you can see, are emergency rations for three days, water, a first aid kit, mirror, whistle, knife and other things you might need when on duty for long hours. Go through your packs contents daily to make sure all is in order. Make especially sure your first aid kit is fully stocked. A list is in the kit which tells you what the contents should be." Sergeant Major checked off the contents before closing the pack. "It looks like Corporal Kendra has made sure you have the necessary items." She left the pack on her bed and gestured to the terminal in her cubicle.

"As you can see with the schedule showing on your terminal, Wolf Pack has 1st shift of the day at 5AM. Your work assignment is starting in the kitchen at 5:45 in the morning until our squad is rotated to another shift. Cook is boss in her kitchen, even over the captain," she smiled. "Cook supervises everyone in her kitchen and her assistants are civilians but can supervise you under Cook's direction. Cook works six days a week fixing breakfast, lunch and dinner and meals for 2nd and 3rd shift after the kitchen is closed. Kitchen staff's day off is Sundhira. Cook and her staff have plenty of food for three shifts, and three meals for each with plenty to snack on until they return the next day. No one goes hungry, is her motto.

"As you will notice, all guards wear their packs even in the kitchen. Private 1st Class Birk from Wolf Pack is who you will be relieving when Cook thinks you're ready to work on your own. Besides working in support of the kitchen's civilian staff you are also guarding against any nonauthorized people from entering Cook's domain. Cook will let you know how to recognize those she doesn't want in her area. She has an exceptional sensitivity to who enters her kitchen. In the past, we've had a few guards and civilian teachers that thought they could just walk into Cook's kitchen looking for food. There is no excuse for that since there is a bell at the mess counter. After hours, when the kitchen is closed it is locked down. This is a military installation staffed by student guards and secured against any random wanderings by civilians and student guards in Cook's area of authority.

“You are to report to the kitchen in two hours to begin your duty. You’ll be helping get the kitchen ready for the dinner meal. Usually there are two guards from different squads that help in the kitchen with the three main meals, breakfast, lunch and dinner. At breakfast, a member of the late shift lends a hand, at lunch and dinner, night shift lends a hand. Day shift works in the kitchen for all three meals. There’s a lot to clean up so the kitchen staff can operate at what they do best, keeping us well fed in a clean and sanitary environment.”

Connie stifled a giggle thinking of the mouse, in the tower office that had the captain unhappy.

“Yes?” Sergeant Major asked.

“I...ah, was thinking of the mouse outside of the captain’s office.” She shrugged, feeling embarrassed. “I was thinking of the bus attendant Guide Jewel’s comment that Captain Sahem needs to get a cat rather than a dog to clear out the mouse.”

Sergeant Major frowned. “A mouse, was it?” Then her face relaxed, and she chuckled, but it wasn’t because she thought it was amusing.

She’s not happy to hear about the mouse either, Sulu said.

I don’t think they welcome shapeshifters, Callie Can said thoughtfully.

I don’t think any of them can feel the presence of one, Connie thought.

Well, of course not. It takes training. Look how many years you’ve been studying the art of such detection. Of course, it meant you didn’t get much training in conversing with the ghostly realms.

Connie thought Bau was snickering at that. Bau was the last spirit guide she was introduced to, and it was the day before she was to know who she was engaged to.

“Do you know the way back to the kitchen?” Sergeant Major Bessie brought Connie’s attention back to the present.

“There is an entrance marked for kitchen staff and that is where you go. I’ll inform Cook you’ll be down for the dinner shift and replacing Private 1st Class Birk, eventually, as if she didn’t already know.” Sergeant Major Bessie paused to see if she was reading the new draftee right, and she was hearing what she was saying.

“Yes, Staff Sergeant Major Bessie,” Connie said quickly.

“I expect to have you acclimated to the high altitude here in three days. Your physical training will start this evening with a self-defense class, and the intensity of workouts will be increased as you adjust. By the time the shifts rotate hours, you will be running the trails with the rest of the troop. Our civilian teachers are addressed as ROAs instead of Dons and Donnas as it is in the lower civilian grades. Besides civilian teachers teaching the required classes the Board of Education requires, we have professional wilderness experts, known as rangers, acting as guides in various skills we train our guards in our responsibility to protect the wildlife and the woods around our tower.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major Bessie,” Connie said, feeling ready to fit in.

The Sergeant Major was surprised with the happy smile on the young girl’s face. That didn’t happen often.

“This is your terminal to study on. It’s already set up with your name, class schedule and menu, and when you’re to report for duty and where, and uniform to wear, starting with the beginning of your shift. It will beep you if you’re logged into a class and you’re scheduled to report somewhere. In your case it will be to the kitchen.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major Bessie,” Connie said peering at the menu that was pulled up. Connie glanced up at Sergeant Major grinning. She did tend to get focused when she was studying.

On the terminal screen was the Goldwah Tower’s Education Menu with a selection on how to use it. An assigned class on the introduction to Tower Guard Duties, with a test at the end. Sergeant Major sat in the chair and gave a quick tour of the test, so she knew ahead of time it was a test of what she read. The test was mixed with multiple choices and written answers. Choosing any of the multiple choices had another box appear asking for her reason for that choice. Connie smiled. She never had a test like this.

“Should you want to find any place on the tower or for that matter, in town, Truncel, you put the name of the place you’re looking for, and a map comes up with a person in place of a cursor.” Sergeant Major typed in the medical office and a person appeared as the image at the front of her room. A map came up that showed the directions to the office she had met the captain in.

Connie leaned closer to the terminal. “That looks like me, Sergeant Major Bessie.”

“Does it? You don’t think all guards look the same, Private Recruit?” she asked in a teasing voice.

Connie hesitated.

“If you follow any religious or spiritual systems Sundhira is set aside for guards that want to practice their beliefs. On the menu is a guide to the various times leaders of a particular practice hold their gatherings and which classroom or tunnel is used. On Sundhira only eight hours of guard duty covering the three shifts is necessary. The eight hours usually set aside for classes plus the two hours of free time are up to the individual what she or he wants to do on that day. However, there is no leaving the garrison unless given authorization by, me, Lt. Hellene and or Captain Shaem. Should you be given permission to leave the garrison, you shall have another guard paired with you and you will be wearing your dress uniform and maroon beret.

“Rest rooms, showers and laundry room for all three female squads are down the hall to the left and clearly marked. Let me show them to you.” She pointed to Connie’s new pack for her to bring with her. Then Sergeant Major walked quickly out of the room and further along the hallway. “This is the toilet facility and where you can wash your hair, brush your teeth and relieve yourself. Clean up after you finish. Any sanitary pads or menstrual supplies are here with waste receptacles, which each student guard leader assigns a student guard to keep replenished and emptied. Next door is the shower facility. This is also kept cleaned by assigned student guards.” She pushed open an adjoining door and rows of showers separated by partitions lined one wall. “And through here is the laundry facility.”

There were three girls in that room who looked startled at their appearance and jumped up, standing tall and stiffly.

“Good afternoon, Sergeant Major!” the four shouted.

“As you were, guards,” Sergeant Major Bessie said. “Corporals Sada, Lana and Kaveri of Horse Squad, this is Private Recruit Connie of Wolf Squad.”

“Welcome to Tower Goldwah, Private Recruit Connie,” they chorused, and resumed their seats.

“Laundry times are assigned and usually, the student group leader assigns from whoever is in the laundry room to clean toilet, shower and laundry facilities.”

Sergeant Major quickly led her back to her sleeping quarters with #4 on it. “You now have an hour and a half until you need to be in the kitchen. Working in the kitchen you wear the indoor camo as you are now wearing. Indoors you usually don’t wear a cover, a hat, or beret so you leave your 3 covers in the closet except if you’re called to the tower’s offices or going into town. Then you wear your beret. In the future, Corporal Kendra will see that you are properly turned out at the beginning of your shift.”

“Thank you, Sergeant Major Bessie.”

“And Private Recruit, don’t mention to anyone but senior staff and only if asked, about the mouse you saw. Welcome to Goldwah Tower.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major. Thank you.”

I don’t think the news of a shapeshifter in their tower is something they are happy about, Bau said.

There are some things best left for senior staff to handle.

Connie didn’t register where the last comment came from. Her attention was focused on settling in. After moving the talisman to a pocket in her new clothing, she took another look around her new room, cautious not to explore the first cubicle too closely. The protection spell came from someone that had at one time slept there. What was she protecting the room from? The fourth bunk had no lingering energy from its last occupant, the cadet.

She held the stone in her palm, looking at it closely. It was a talisman, that she was sure of. Stones had properties that could be used to enhance the holder’s energy field. They could be encoded for specific jobs, then reenergized or cleaned and reprogramed. A talisman was programed for a specific reason, no matter who possessed it. It controlled or manipulated whoever carried it to execute its mission. She never had a talisman before, but she knew she would have felt it if it were designed for a nefarious mission or something that was against her nature. At one time it may have been in a recognizable shape of something meaningful, but now it was nearly a smooth black stone with too faint of etchings to decode. Later she would meditate on its use, when

she hoped to have more time. In her walk around her new quarters the stone offered no insights, and she had a lot to read on her terminal before heading to the kitchen.

Connie returned to her terminal and scanned the menu. Her first lesson was information about the tower. Goldwah is said to be the last dragon that spoke with humans, she read. The tower flag is a dragon. It is one of twenty-two Towers along the Wall of Morwea that runs along the hills not far from the Woods of Morwea. The guards' purpose was to keep poachers and vandals from harming the wildlife or destroying the land around the wall and prevent anyone from crossing over the wall. No reason was given as to why the wall was erected. A more interesting menu gave a picture of each guard at the tower and their squad, and which squad was presently on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd shift.

It would be helpful to know the faces of who I meet and see if I can pick up something about them.

You don't have that much time to do an in-depth study, Calie Can mentioned.

You can do a quick look. You should be able to figure out who will need a closer look later, Sulu advised.

Start with the people in your pack, Gem suggested.

Connie studied the guards in Wolf Pack, thinking how some of them looked scared on their first day, wearing their new uniforms and putting on a brave face for the file. She moved onto the other two squads, quickly scanning the faces.

And then, there was one face that reminded her of a person who would soon be transitioning into another level of consciousness. Mother explained it was a five-year process for a transitioning child to adapt and accept themselves to living in two worlds. Was that why the shapeshifter was here at the tower? Touching the young boy's image on the screen she worried about him. Closing her eyes, she sent a heart-felt prayer to Private Trey of Raven Squad.

After going through the three squads' members, she wondered if she should wait and see before she added her own energy to the existing protection spell over her sleeping quarters.

Just over your cubicle will do.

Startled, she looked around the room.

Not from us,” an amused Sulu said.

But we can tell there are some not so nice people here, Callie Can said.

Yes, I can feel that too, Connie thought. She touched the talisman again but felt no danger or warning as she had felt when the mouse was watching the business going on in the captain’s office and when she passed the teachers into the mess hall.

She glanced at the clock on her computer screen and noted she had fifteen minutes before she had to report to the kitchen. She opened another section that listed what was required of her as a guard with the rank of Private Recruit. So, she was to eventually learn about the forest, how to catch poachers, to support other groups, etc, and that would lead her to becoming a useful member of society. Was she mocking her new life and vision someone thought young draftees would be excited about?

You’re tired, Sulu said

There are other things you can learn tomorrow, Callie Can said.

You have the opportunity to meet people your age and they’re from all over the commonwealth, Gem said.

The good, the bad and the not so smart, Bau joked.

“Yes. So, should I not pass such a quick judgement on what I felt about each guard until I meet them in person? Sometimes not knowing makes for a better first meet,” Connie said aloud.

Like a surprise encounter, Gem said, sounding too cynical.

You do have a protection spell for physical danger and your new talisman to warn you of those close encounters if they are a threat, Callie Can reminded her.

Connie took the test for the section she read and kept her reasoning for her answers minus her cynicism. Was she tired? She still had work to do in someone else’s kitchen. How different would it be from mothers?

Connie sighed.

Homesick already? a thought taunted.

Not a chance! She thought fiercely.

It’s probably the schedule, another voice piped in.

She’s fine! The familiar voices of her spirit guides chimed in.

I am a fast learner and read fast too. Not too much different from the public school and mother's teachings.

An alarm from her terminal reminded her that she was due in the kitchen. She closed her program and turned off her computer, just as she did in school.

Awkwardly she fitted her pack onto her back. It wasn't that she wasn't used to a backpack, but her school pack had few things in it, since the watchman at the brethren's gate didn't approve of girls having books or other schoolwork to take home. This pack had lots of things that would take some getting used to since some of them were poking her in the back. She removed the pack and shook it to resettle its contents then again put it on. Much better.

Going down the stairs had its ghostly visitors, but they ignored Connie just as she ignored them. Ghostly visits weren't something new to her. In her dreams she remembered being somewhere that had a lot of ghosts, but trying to remember where her mother explained that everywhere had ghosts from times when the ghosts in their mortal forms lived or visited. Even the land the brethren's compound was on had a past. Mother told her she had cleared their house and the land around them of such visits because it scared some people.

As she continued her way down dimly lit stairs it occurred to her that she never asked mother why she had never encountered any outside of the compound.

Three student guards were entering the kitchen door as she arrived, one turned toward her that she recognized from meeting earlier.

"Private Recruit Connie! You're my replacement for kitchen duty. Let's get this done!" he said enthusiastically. He introduced himself again as Private 1st Class Birk. "I hate smelling all this great food cooking and fearing eating my way into a larger uniform. Ah, good. You have your pack. Don't remove it. You'll get used to wearing it all the time, maybe even falling asleep with it on," he chuckled.

"Yes, Private 1st Class Birk," she said. Connie thought that wouldn't be likely.

One of the other guards nodded to her. "I'm Private Lio of Raven Squad, Private Recruit Connie. Welcome to Goldwah Tower."

"Thank you, Private Lio." His hair was longer than most of the boys she had met so far. His reddish hair formed a round bushy shape around his head that touched the

tips of his ears. He turned slightly to another person. His pack had a black raven on it. “This is Corporal Kalere also from Raven Squad. She’s here to learn about cooking and Cook and her assistants are the best teachers.” Private Lio was beaming with pride when he presented his squad member.

“Corporal Kalere,” Connie said to the silent guard that blushed at his attention.

Corporal Kalere’s red hair was long and secured in a net which was pulled her hair back over her ears and was knotted in the back of her neck. Raven Squad members appeared to like longer hair.

Corporal Kalere nodded shyly to Connie.

Connie reflected Private Lio’s wide smile and feelings. “I’m pleased to meet you all.” It was nice to place the faces seen on the terminal with the actual person, whose energy didn’t always translate from the terminal screen to the solid person. So far, all the people she met were genuinely nice.

Cook came bustling into the kitchen wrapping a fresh white apron on, with her three assistants close behind her. Connie felt her energy the moment she entered the kitchen area. It was energetic and warm, and she covered them all with her energy. Connie’s smile widened. This was a nice kitchen that smelled of baking as well as filled with good energy from the people present.

“Good afternoon, Cook,” Connie chorused with the three guards.

“Okay, being on time is a good start to getting a meal ready for the troops!” She turned to one of her assistants, a robust man also dressed in white. “Henry dear, work with Private Recruit Connie. The sooner she’s trained right, the faster Private 1st Class Birk can be moved to actual guard duty. Yeah?” She laughed at Birk’s expression. “It’s a grand challenge for him to not nibble on the food being prepared for those that are working on an appetite from what some say is real guard work, and so that he doesn’t suffer too greatly, we make sure he has bits of food to munch on. We don’t want him to faint from starvation. You would think these boys don’t get fed enough.”

Everyone laughed, including Birk.

“And you Private Lio, it’s time you trimmed your hair or wear a net,” Cook regarded him critically.

“Yes, Cook. Staff Sergeant Em’s office was closed this afternoon when I went down for a trim.”

Cook grinned. “Yes, she was busy up here testing the apple fritters.”

“I’ll get it cut, Cook.” He glanced at Henry, and grinned. “I don’t see myself wearing a hairnet.”

Cook nodded to Kalere. “Kalere dear, let’s get you started on preparing a decent sauce for the mashed potatoes, so it’s just as tasty when late shift has their meal. Your fellow guards prefer mashed potatoes and gravy over baked potatoes. I don’t know why, but we’ll give it to them.”

Kalere’s shyness disappeared, and a professional demeanor changed her appearance noticeably as she confidently followed Cook into another part of the kitchen.

“Hi, I’m Henry, Cook’s second, PR Connie. And this is Maltie, Cook’s third assistant.”

“Hello, Maltie,” Connie said.

“Hello, Private Recruit.” She leaned close to Connie and spoke. “In Cook’s kitchen and the mess hall, it’s not necessary to address your fellow guards with their rank unless you just need the practice. Cook is very strict about respect and if you respect everyone, she doesn’t like the ranks being constantly announced here because some of the guards will make a big issue of hazing you because of you being a newbie. So, Birk is Birk, Lio is Lio and Kelere is Kelere here in the kitchen but, watch out for the bullies out there.”

“That’s the truth,” Henry said laughing. “Cook will not tolerate bullying in her domain; that’s the kitchen and mess hall. Now, I’m going to show you an important part of your assistance and that is to us cooks.” He grinned. Connie liked him instantly. He was Cook’s favorite assistant, she thought. He was clean shaven and under his chef’s cap he had his long gray hair tied and bound in a hairnet behind his head. He was a portly man that moved with confidence around the kitchen equipment, moving at an unhurried pace to the dishwasher.

Henry pointed at the dishes from the midday meal cleaned and dried. “You need to stack the cleaned dishes onto this cart and roll them out to where we, the cooking

staff, will fill them with the prepared food for this evening's meal." He leaned close to her and whispered. "Cook found letting the guard staff handle dishing out the meal portions became an issue of favoritism and withholding food for personal reasons. Too much of an insult to Cook's rules for all are fed equally," he chuckled. "Cook is boss of the kitchen and all kitchen duties, including the student guards assigned to do cleanup."

Quickly, he showed Connie where to line the cleaned dishes so Cook's chef assistants would be able to easily reach the empty dishes and deposit a hot meal on the trays for the hungry guards that queued up at the food counter. He then showed her how she would then need to keep the cart with the trays full of clean trays and move the dirty dishes to the dishwashers in the back of the kitchen. While Henry was showing her what was needed, the other two privates were cleaning. Large pans cooked food had been emptied from had Lio busy and Birk was mopping a section of the food preps floor.

Connie only took a few moments to glance around for water and a toilet facility before she became too busy.

Henry noticed her look of uncertainty and nodded to a room marked with an unfamiliar symbol. "Toilet. Don't forget to wash your hands when you've finished, and the drinking water is over to your left. It's hot in here and you don't want to dehydrate, especially when you're going to be working up a sweat cleaning up and carrying that pack," he smiled.

By mealtime, when the first group of student guards and teaching staff entered the mess hall, Connie was ready to begin her next job of picking up the used trays, wiping them and placing them back at the front of the line, and delivering the dirty dishes to the wash area. As she bustled about, she noted that everyone wore their hair at different lengths, but most preferred the shorter lengths, including the girls.

On her second trip to where the trays and dirty dishes were, a tall and lanky guard dressed in his OCP camos was standing near the trays waiting for her. His blond hair was shoulder length, the longest she had seen any of the boys or girls wear it. The talisman heated up in her pocket and her natural intuition warned her he was looking to give her a difficult time. His two male friends sat at the table under the raven flag, observing her as she approached. With a casual sweep he sent the dishes to the ground and then moved to the trays and dumped them on the ground. Two loud crashing sounds

drew everyone's attention. What was his purpose? He had a dark cloud near the left side of his head and then it moved to the right.

He thought to embarrass her?

Ridiculous, her guides chorused.

Not going to happen, she agreed. Jhef scared her because of the craziness behind his violence toward her. She didn't pick that up from this boy's picture on the guard list. Corporal Tabor. Raven Squad. It was contrary to his now exaggerated self-assured swagger. It was a thin cover for his insecurity. What had changed with him between his arrival for his first picture to now?

Don't do it, whispered Bau.

Don't touch him, Callie Can agreed.

"Oh, looks like you got a mess to clean up, Private Recruit!" he said loudly in an accented voice, as if she was deaf.

Make me! Shouted a ghost.

Now that was funny. A ghost thinking it could be heard.

Oh oh, Callie Can said. *That can be a problem if he can hear it but not knowing where it came from.*

Connie giggled at the idea, resisting the impulse to see where that ghost was. Instead, she said in her favorite tone of voice when managing Jennifer's tantrums. "You made it. You clean it up yourself." Though her voice was calm her giggle may have destroyed the effect of her intended effect at not being the slightest bit disturbed.

"Corporal Tabor, stand down!" A youth sitting at another table had jumped up at hearing the first crash and headed toward them. Connie's quick glance identified him as Raven Squads Troop Leader, Student Sergeant Mac. His face was red with...embarrassment?

"Stop harassing our guard, Tabor!" Birk yelled.

"You stupid git, Tabor," Lio shouted next to Birk.

Connie glanced at the kitchen counter, and nearly all the kitchen staff were peering out to see what the crashes were about.

Tabor looked startled and confused. With one hand he brushed the hair hanging over one ear, back and glanced back at his two friends watching him. Did he hear the ghost? Or was it his sergeant leader Mac, Lio and Birk's shouting.

Or, maybe it was Cook's sudden appearance, heading straight for him. Connie stared at her transformed appearance in astonishment. She was enraged.

"You don't mess with my staff, young one! There's going to be consequences for you." Cook's anger had Tabor backing away from Connie and the scattered dishes on the floor, adroitly missing a lone dish near his retreating path. The energy Cook projected at Tabor reminded Connie of a mother protecting her children from bullying. It reaffirmed her impression of Cook surrounding her staff and the kitchen with a loving protective force, that would not tolerate disorder among her charges.

"Corporal Tabor, you're on NJP report," the voice was from Captain Sahem who made a sudden appearance. He turned to First Sergeant Mac. "He's to clean up this mess and then escort him and his two pals to my office when he's finished."

"Yes, Sir."

By then there were more people in the hall than Connie had first thought. It was embarrassing.

Sergeant Major Bessie watched Connie to see how she would handle bullying and decided with an audience, she did fine. As for Corporal Tabor, at seventeen he was beginning to test the rules and seeing how far he could bend them. Perhaps a demotion in rank would be the one step needed at putting him back at not challenging protocols such as harassing a newbie from another troop.

She would check with some of the townspeople to see if his days off to spend in town had any behavioral complaints. He had been such a dependable guard in fair treatment of everyone until he turned 17 and was promoted to Corporal. She would check with Lt. Hellene to see what mental challenges he was going through for him to change so much. Love interests? She had thought his relationship with Corporal Gafna had a good steady influence on him. Yes, his cherished long hair was going to be clipped as well as demoting his rank. That was the standard punishment for dishonorable conduct. Sergeant Major Bessie shook her head. Sometimes these young ones for their one step forward, two steps back were needed to remind them they

weren't children. However, with children a parental swat on the bottom was enough to remind them of household rules.

With the trays back in order and the dirty dishes back on the cart, he was handed a mop with a bucket by one of the boys at his table to clean the floor. Connie rolled the restacked dirty dishes on the cart to the kitchen and tried not to hurry.

"You did good out there, Connie," Birk said proudly when she entered the kitchen. He was beaming and patted her on her arm.

"He's been a pain since he got his promotion," Lio said, sounding relieved the situation ended as well as it did. "That prat probably did that on a bet."

"Thanks, all of you," Connie said.

"For your first day here, you stood up for the honor of our troop. We don't clean up another troops mess unless Sergeant Major says so, and there is no bullying Cook's staff whether civilian or student guard!" Birk added crossly.

"You got that right," Henry said.

"No dessert for that guard," Maltie said.

Cook gave her a gentle pat on the back, chuckling as if it was not a big deal, and peace was restored in the kitchen.

By the time the dinner crowd left, and the second cleaning was completed, the kitchen staff sat for their own meal. They had a large mound of mashed potatoes and gravy, with vegetables and meat still warm, and for dessert, Cook had apple pie fresh out of the oven with a scoop of ice cream. She gave Connie two scoops. Finished with their meal, Cook's assistants directed the privates to roll out large warming containers where they stored meals for the late-night guards and Staff Sergeant Dor. As Lio and Connie moved the warming containers filled with meals into the mess hall to the front of the food counter Lio explained to Connie how the later shifts accessed their meals warm from the food cabinets when the kitchen was closed.

Once Cook felt everything was cleaned, she gave them the okay to leave. She gave a cheery nod to Connie. "You did good out there, Connie. You didn't let that foolish boy push you around."

Connie was going to say that she did nothing. It was the other people that stopped the bullying; however, Cook and Henry were walking into the back of the

kitchen, checking to see that all the facilities and equipment were turned off for the night, and Maltie was locking up the freezers.

“No rest for the weary,” Birk told her as he met her near the kitchen exit. “We have to change and get ready for a self-defense class.” He chuckled. “Though, I think you know a thing or two already.”

Corporal Kendra, dressed in black sweats, came to collect Connie.

“Private Recruit Connie, you got your hair cut. Looks nice. The good thing about haircuts, the hair always grows back if you don’t like it.”

“I already like the shorter hair,” Connie said.

Kendra laughed. “Whether you do or not, every new recruit gets a regulation cadet cut. The boys get their hair shorn off to the scalp and we girls get a short cut like you have now. Eventually, the boys can grow to regulation length as the cadet corps allows, provided they keep it neat and tied back for longer lengths. We girls can let our hair grow out as long as it doesn’t touch the top of our collars and or covers our ears when on duty. Some let their hair grow past their shoulders but tied up, but if it doesn’t pass the first muster at shift change, it’s a visit to the commissary and Staff Sergeant Em’s giving them a cadet regulation cut. Everyone is held to neatness and cleanliness.” At that Corporal Kendra chuckled. “There are some who miss the clean and pressed appearance at first assembly. It seems they didn’t do their laundry on their scheduled time or didn’t feel the need to put on a clean uniform for their first daily assembly. They are assigned dump duty, that is cleaning latrines and maintaining the compost heap, as well tending the tower gardens, otherwise known as weeding, which is only pulling the weeds and not herbs. We have an old and very strict supervisor for those jobs that can make it unpleasant punishment or passable. He is senior Om and never let anyone hear you say anything negative about him because he will know and make your life miserable working off your dump duty assignment. Alright?”

“Yes, Corporal Kendra.” Already Connie picked up on the image of an old bent man working his row of vegetables when he suddenly looked up and seemed to stare at her.

Eee ah, Callie Can said softly in her ear. He’s man nor woman. Om is an ancient one. You picked up Corporal Kendra’s energy of Om and Om felt her thoughts. There

are many energies that fill this tower and that you need to learn about so be very careful at what you're touching mentally and physically.

Connie felt her other three guides agreed to Callie Can's warning.

Connie followed the corporal up to their quarters where another girl was dressed in sweats and slipping on soft-soled shoes. Her dark hair was pulled back into a tight bun, no hair covering her ears or her neck. Her eyes when they lifted to study her were a soft brown that Connie felt didn't miss anything. It seemed both her roommates had the same ability to size up a person quickly. She couldn't criticize their critical evaluation of her since she did the same thing.

Kiku was tall with a round face that looked like it was dropping the childish fat cheeks her picture on the guard listing showed and was developing into a thinner more refined profile.

"Private Recruit Connie this is Lance Corporal Kiku. You need to change to your workout sweats and soft sole shoes. Your soiled clothing goes in your duffel bag which you will take to the laundry during our scheduled time." As Connie changed, Kendra continued, "For laundry duty, each squad has a scheduled time three times a week, so it doesn't become too crowded with some people pulling rank and doing theirs first. For as long as we're on the 1st shift our quarters, #4 has a scheduled time at 2pm after your lunch duty tomorrow and every other day. The three of us go together and while our clothes are getting washed, we clean the latrines, showers or laundry room, whichever hasn't been checked by the previous group. The girls before us should have done some cleaning in one of the three areas and they'll have checked off the board. If there is a discrepancy, we report it. Cheaters aren't tolerated," Kendra mocked.

Kiku nodded. "That's for sure. Welcome, Private Recruit Connie."

"And while we're in our quarters, you don't have to address us with our ranks unless you want to practice," Kendra said smiling.

"Or when we're in a class like self-defense," Kiku said. "There's no ranks showing on our workout sweats as you can see, so no need to address anyone but Sergeant Major by rank."

"It would be ridiculous if every time one of us tosses a pack member to the ground, we're apologizing using rank and name."

Both girls giggled. “You’ll see why,” Kendra said.

As they left their quarters three more girls in sweats joined them hurrying down the stairs to the second floor.

“Welcome to Wolf Pack, Private Recruit Connie. I’m Lance Corporal Amoke. Have you picked your field of study yet?”

“Ah, no, Lance Corporal Amoke,” Connie said. What was offered for the field of study, she wondered.

“Welcome to Wolf Pack, Private Recruit Connie. I’m Corporal Bly.”

“Thank you, Corporal Bly.”

A tall red haired skinny girl said with a grin, “I’m Corporal Gafna. Welcome to Wolf Pack. I need another body in fencing, if you have an interest.” Gafna demonstrated a few parries on the stairs with Amoke dramatically showing herself mortally wounded.

“I’ve never fenced,” Connie said surprised.

“I heard Corporal Tabor on a bet *carpped* on our new troop member, and she gave him attitude!” Lance Corporal Amoke said.

“That git. That guy used to be nice before he turned 17 and got promoted to corporal,” Corporal Gafna said. “We’re going to have to see that doesn’t happen again.”

“No revenge action necessary, Gafna. Sergeant Major said he was sent to the captain’s office, and the idiot lost a stripe and got the cadet cut for his lack of sense,” Corporal Kendra said soothingly.

“Oh, he lost his blond locks?” Amoke mocked.

“He’ll either get his ears red from frost or red from embarrassment,” Bly said.

On the second floor in the gymnasium boys and girls in Wolf Pack lined up. Sergeant Major introduced Private Recruit Connie to the group and then quickly began stretching exercises. Once that was completed Sergeant Major assigned the squad in pairs with Kendra and Kiku to work with Connie. For the member that had no partner, Lance Corporal Amoke, Sergeant Major worked with her.

Kendra demonstrated on Kiku in slow motion the tactics that were expected for her to duplicate in hand-to-hand combat. She had Connie replicate the moves repeatedly until she thought Connie knew how to move without much thought when grabbed. The

hard part was learning to fall correctly. By the sounds around her, Connie realized she was lucky Kendra and Kiku were not so hard on her. There were a lot of thuds and loud sounds of exhalation as bodies crashed to the mat. While Connie slowly got up from the mat, she noticed some of the girls were tossing the boys about without any hesitation, likewise, the boys didn't seem to mind tossing the girls. There was giggling and apologizing when the players got entangled with others on the mat.

Lance Corporal Amoke was away from their group getting pointers from Sergeant Major and when Amoke was tossed her quick response, the retaliatory move, had Sergeant Major on her back. Connie was distracted by watching the moves that happened in a blur. The distraction caused Connie to be tossed on her back and the wind knocked out of her.

"You need to pay attention," Kendra admonished. "Sergeant Major is working with Amoke to get her ready for the Ten Towers Competition."

"Her test will be if she can beat Kendra, then all her bruises earned from working with Sergeant Major will be worth it," joked Kiku, who again managed to toss the off-balance Connie.

After two hours they were dismissed to their quarters to either study or take care of other interests. Connie joined the other three girls of Wolf Pack in the showers where there was a lot of laughter and sharing tower gossip. The gossip was on Tabor's error in judgement, which was grounds for demotion, back to lance corporal and retaking the lance corporal tests, and his bruised ego that his blond hair that he had been proud of, was now shorn off. Many of the girls that had been guards years before Tabor's recent promotion were disappointed in how he changed to a disagreeable git.

"Nowadays that git even has nasty remarks about people he used to hang out with. If he were a girl, I would say it's his time of the month!" Corporal Bly said.

"And it's been a long month!" Kiku mocked.

Everyone burst out laughing.

"He needs to stop listening to Sigrid. Maybe he thinks he'll be able to do her if he plays his cards right. She's all talk I hear, and no real action," Corporal Bly said as if she knew the inside story.

"You would know that better than the rest of us," Kendra said teasing.

“Well, it’s not going to happen. He’s not going to fit in with Sigrid’s type of boys she fastens her wiles on,” Corporal Gafna said. Connie could feel Gafna’s hurt and realized they had been a romantic pair until suddenly they weren’t. It wasn’t something Connie wanted to delve into about why romantic liaisons suddenly turned sour. She didn’t need her spirit guides to offer any sage advice that it wasn’t her business.

“There aren’t any goings on besides heavy petting and grouping when its dark and it will have to be quick before security catches any unauthorized persons in a secure area. That is just enough to frustrate the boys,” Corporal Bly chuckled.

“And frustrate us girls,” Kiku remarked.

“I don’t feel that’s Tabor’s issue,” muttered Gafna. “Frustrated, yes.”

Connie was amazed about how much information she could gather in the showers. Gafna’s comment stopped all the gossip about Tabor and showers ended as did the gossip.

Kiku was in a hurry to leave the shower room.

“What’s the rush?” Kendra asked.

“I want to finish the last chapter of that section’s test before I go to bed. That way I can dream of that chapter and the section before taking the test tomorrow,” Kiku said. “Ansell said that’s how he does so well on his tests.”

“He does, does he? Well, I can think of better things to dream about,” Kendra said. “Connie, you need to get some sleep. Your eyes look too tired to read anything.”

“You’re right about that,” Connie mumbled.

Connie changed into her issued sleepwear and fell asleep with her hand curled around the stone, neatly tucked under her pillow. She dreamt of all the faces of the people she had met so far and her impressions of them. She placed them in categories of likeness. It reminded her of mother teaching her how to sense out people without judging them, just noting similarities. Passing judgement on people was a dangerous defense maneuver when the whole picture of a situation wasn’t available.

What did she mean by that?

Rigid categories didn’t allow for the fluid movement of people changing with time and situations, her mother’s voice explained.

Tabor came to mind. From the talk in the shower, he had a radical change in his personality.

Teenage angst, a thought from outside of her remarked.

Too much grouping with no satisfaction, another snide voice added.

Too much relying on dreams at night to release sexual energy, added another.

What do you know? You've been hanging around the tower for ages.

Shut up! Connie shouted mentally.

With her hand around the talisman, she hoped for a clear message of what its purpose was that brought it to her. The stones she had picked up when she resided in the Hillsboro compound were nothing like a talisman. When she meditated on a stone's properties it would let her know whether it was protective or healing. Some stones could have multiple uses. However, she felt this stone was meant for her. Why?

Dreams. It was a busy night for her subconscious thoughts.

2nd Day

It's time to get up, voices sang to Connie's sleeping mind.

We can tell her that, Sulu informed the voices.

I heard all of you, Connie told her waking mental alarms. Then there was a buzz coming from all three terminals.

Connie could hear her bunkmates stirring.

"I think today is our day to lead the trail run and it's through snow," groaned Kendra with an audible sigh.

"Not *our*...yours," returned Kiku grumpily. "Don't expect me to be sloshing closely behind you in the cold wet mush. You're the one intent on scoring high for the sergeants rating. My interest is get promoted one more grade for a pay raise...and no additional responsibilities," she finished with a heavy sigh followed by the sound of feet hitting the floor. She could hear feet clad in slippers running to the toilet facilities.

Kendra appeared in Connie's cubicle. "Up you get newbie. Make a quick use of the toilet facilities and be back here to dress in your tactical uni for troop's assembly." Then Kendra was gone as she hurried to join the rush of the other troop members to the toilet facilities.

Connie stifled a groan from her sore muscles and winched from the cold of the floor when her feet missed the utility slippers under her bed. From the noise coming from outside their quarters, others from her troop were up and about their morning business. When she finished her toilet visit, she hurried back to dress. Before leaving their quarters, Kendra gave Connie a look over making sure her patches were velcroid on properly, that she had her watch cap on and gloves, and that her tactical trousers were tucked in the correct pair of boots. Then she followed Kendra and Kiku down the stairs where the other girls in Wolf Pack were laughing and giggling as they rushed to the outdoor quad to beat Sergeant Major's appearance.

However, Sergeant Major was waiting with a clipboard in her gloved hands. The outdoor quad was cold and patches of snow close to the walls reminded those about to run outside of the quad that they had a snowy run to look forward to. Connie, unused to the cold, shivered despite her warm cap, socks, winter coat, and gloves.

"Give it time. By the second year you'll be used to the cold," Kiku assured her.

"Alright Wolf Pack! Line up right and adjust to our new recruit's presence in the second line. Corporal Gafna! Up front and lead the troop in warmups for the first thirty minutes. Then let's introduce Private Recruit to marching in proper military order, that will be your turn at choosing the right cadence, Private 1st Class Turi. Consider it a test of your memory of Wolf Pack's favorite marching cadence."

The members of the troop laughed.

"Arms out and space left, space right!" Corporal Gafna shouted. "Begin with..."

Connie had no idea what she was shouting but she had Kendra on one side of her and Kiku on the other to follow and there was someone in front of her and behind her when directions were changed. In 30 minutes of warmups, Connie was panting but her sore muscles were loosened up and she wasn't shivering. It was learning to march in cadence that was a true test on listening to the directions. Thankfully, it all came to an end and Sergeant Major read off each member's assignment on the wall and in the watch tower and one in the air cart and one roaming.

"Alright Corporal Turi, you did good. Private Recruit was actually able to follow the directions. Private Recruit Connie, and Private 1st Class Birk, clean up and then off you two go for your duty in the kitchen. Private Recruit don't forget to remove

your patches from this uniform blouse and reapply to your clean uniform blouse and change your footwear too. Use the mirror before you report to the kitchen. Corporal Kendra, our SG leads the squad around the pond. Make your run quick! You have 3rd shift guards from Horse Squad waiting to be relieved and then SG, you can arrange who goes first for breakfast breaks. Dismissed,” was her final order.

Connie had ten minutes to remove the Velcro names on her discarded blouse, to shower, put the name tags correctly on the cleaned blouse and make it to the kitchen on time. However, someone had not only laid out her clean blouse on her bunk, but the tags were correctly velcroid on making her preparations faster. Too much in a rush she didn't wonder who laid her uniform out.

By the time she was at the kitchen entrance, she was leaning over to catch her breath before entering.

“Ah! There you are Connie.” Cook looked her up and down and gave her a short laugh. “It's the altitude. You'll adjust. There are dishes left over from late shift that you can start on. Birk beats you by a few minutes and has the honor of cleaning pots and pans. And where is Private Abasi from the late shift?” She turned to the kitchen entrance expecting him to show. “Always late!”

Connie felt her talisman heat up in her pocket after she had moved the late-night dirty dishes into the dish cleaner. An unfamiliar voice began to apologize with exaggerated excuses to the Cook at the kitchen entrance. Connie peered around the kitchen equipment that surrounded the dishwashers. Abasi appeared to have come from the outside as his boots were wet and snow on the tips of his toes were leaving small clumps of themselves on the clean dry floor.

The impression Connie had of him from his tower profile was that he was an arrogant boy, possibly an only son or the eldest. It was difficult to read past the arrogance which she willingly disconnected, not wanting to know more of him. Connie thought he was a boy who was facing his first adventure away from family support. Apparently, he hadn't been able to drop that attitude of self-protection. His mouth was fixed in a scowl, and his shoulders were slouched as he dropped his outdoor coat and watch cap carelessly near the entrance, missing the coat rack, and all landed on a cart near the doorway. She didn't see Cook. Who was he looking around...for her! He

expected her, as the newbie to pick up his coat and cap! Another bully? And in Cook's kitchen?

Spotting her, with a sneer he slung his pack over his shoulder which hit the side of the door and didn't make it onto his shoulder. Another Jhef?

He's quite clumsy, Sulu whispered.

Not like Jhef at all, Gem giggled.

Another delusional boy, Calie Can said with disgust.

Cook appeared suddenly and gave him a critical glance. "Abasi, do I look like one of your guard buddies or your sergeant? Don't tell me your problems outside of the kitchen! Clean out the food warmers and move them back into kitchen storage! And hang your coat right! You're not a two-year-old! And mop up the mess you're bringing into my kitchen! Henry, do something with that sorry lad."

Henry's gesture to Abasi had him quickly rehanging his coat and moving out of Connie's view. However, when Cook turned away from Abasi, Connie and Henry didn't miss his resentful look as she moved to Kalere's side. Kalere was moving a half empty cart of eggs out of the refrigerator, saying something to Cook.

"That's our last cart of eggs? I'll order more eggs for tomorrow's morning delivery. It was that new recipe I was trying out," Cook said. "Whoever wrote it didn't put in enough eggs. How's a chef to follow someone else's recipe when the writer doesn't know how many eggs in the mix it takes to make the batter light and fluffy!"

Kalere and Cook's assistants smiled at Cook's criticism.

Cook walked over to Connie who was moving a cart of cleaned dishes to the front area. "Don't let that Abasi anywhere near Kalere, and that includes talking distance. You get me?" she said in a low voice.

"Yes, Cook." Maybe Cook did see Private Abasi's reflection, Connie thought. She wondered how she would keep him away from Kalere.

"I've told Private 1st Class Birk the same thing when Private Abasi was assigned here, so you're just taking over Birk's added duty."

"Yes, Cook."

“I can tell by yesterday’s dealing with Tabor you can take care of yourself. So, don’t be caught alone with him yourself. He’s trouble.” With that said she moved to the griddle that was warming up. Cook tested it by dropping water on it.

“Henry dear, do you have the batter ready?”

Henry resumed his position over the large mixer. He laughed. “It’s not instant, Cook! I must get the last of the lumps out.”

“That’s right. There are to be no lumps in pancakes from my kitchen,” Cook laughed. “Alright. By then the griddle will be hot and ready.”

Kalere and Maltie, the other cook assistant, were mixing a bowl of scrambled eggs with diced food in the mix to pour on the griddle next to where the pancakes would be poured.

Connie said a protection prayer for both her and Kalere’s safety as breakfast preparations seemed to be working in the chaotic energy of four cooks, yet things were getting done. Cook was not only physically preparing breakfast for two squads, but also verbally preparing the lunch and dinner menu with Henry to be sure they had the ingredients.

“I got him,” Birk told Connie when she was trying to locate where Abasi was. “Go on and keep up with cleaning dishes. I’ll keep watch on him,” he said smiling. “Abasi’s too lazy to do anything helpful, but not from being a nuisance. Because I outrank him, I can give him orders. And don’t worry about Tabor bothering you anymore. He lost a stripe for his brazen behavior and got his golden locks cut off. Sergeant Major doesn’t put up with bullies.”

“How does he feel about that?” Connie asked, thinking about the possible consequences she may face.

Birk shrugged. “That git deserved it. He’s been a prat since he was promoted, prancing around like a prized stallion. Gafna’s no slouch and split up with him and he started hanging around with Sigrid’s small group of *bouffons*. Abasi is one of them.”

Don’t delve into his problems, Bau cautioned.

You’re not a Cassandra, Sulu agreed.

Connie gave a silent sigh and shifted her concern to Abasi’s location. He was lurking around the equipment near the freezer, doing nothing. Would he bother Kalere

if she had to go into the freezer? However, Birk was close by, keeping himself busy with cleaning some equipment and moving everything back in place. Birk said something to him and thankfully, Abasi moved to finish mopping the kitchen entrance from the spots his wet boots left.

When the breakfast crowd had left, which included her Wolf Pack members, and the kitchen staff finished their meal, Cook dismissed Abasi. There was some cleaning left but not enough for Abasi to hang around.

Doing as little as possible was Cook's appraisal murmured to Henry.

Sergeant Major Bessie entered the kitchen area to see how her troop was doing.

"You're going to have to speak with that private's SGS," Connie heard Cook tell Sergeant Major Bessie. "He's always late with an attitude AND I can't trust him to be alone with any of the females unless there's another male guard around. He's a creep that gives me the stink eye and has a bad mouth with the girls, Bessie. I can't keep an eye on him and do my work! He's poisoning the atmosphere in my kitchen!"

Connie didn't hear any more of the conversation as a loud crash came from the stored trays.

"And he can't do anything right!" Cook said exasperated.

"I'll have a chat with his troop leader Sergeant Elroy and SG Sergeant Ruana. We can't reduce him to a lower rank without removing him from Tower duty."

"And then who would the Draft Administration replace him with?" Cook snorted. "Ahh, the worries of the management of teens and the draft picks they send you."

Connie went to help pick up the scattered trays. Birk was mumbling under his breath about Abasi and his intelligence.

"I don't think it's entirely his fault," Connie said softly. "The cart is tilted."

Birk removed the trays they had stacked and turned the cart over.

Sergeant Major Bessie and Cook came over to see what the two guards were looking at.

"Send it to the repair shop," Cook said. "Don't waste time with equipment that's not working properly. We have other carts in the storage room. Go on and see what we have available, Birk. It's a good time to take inventory. Henry dear, go along. You know what the storage room should look like." Cook glanced at Sergeant Major Bessie.

“I don’t want to rely on what we have in the storage room since Abasi takes a long time when I send him to deliver or remove items from there,” she said in a softer voice.

“I’ll send Private 2nd Class Hassel along with Private 1st Class Birk to check the storage. He should be finished with his promotion test by now.” Sergeant Major pulled out her communicator and called the watch tower to send Hassel to join Birk in Cook’s storage facility.

“Private Recruit,” Sergeant Major said to Connie who was restacking the trays on another cart that later would have dried dishes on it.

“Did you eat your breakfast yet? Then you have time for class work before you report back here for the next kitchen shift. You can leave now.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major.”

Connie left Birk restacking the trays while waiting for Private 2nd Class Hassel. Connie ran as far as the second floor before she was too winded to continue her run.

It’s the altitude, an unfamiliar voice said. A ghostly figure dressed in a different style of uniform informed her. *You’ll adapt. We all did.*

You don’t need to tell her that, Callie Can said protectively. *We’ll look out for her.* Connie’s other guardians echoed the same sentiment.

You’re in my territory now. I know the safe places to hide, the voice taunted.

“Hide?” Connie muttered to herself, deciding to tone down more of her receptivity to her environment. Her footsteps were loud in the dimly lit stairwell, so she didn’t hear the ones above her.

“Hide what?” demanded a voice above her.

Connie looked up the stairs startled. “Ah, from Private Abasi? Sergeant Ruana,” she added guiltily as Ruana walked down the stairs into better lighting. Steward Guard Sergeant Ruana from Horse Squad. She recognized her from the faces she studied and recognized her brown beret for Horse Squad. She wore her camo uniform with sharp creases in her pants, that were tucked neatly in her boots. What she projected in person reflected what her photo did. Serious and reliable.

At the mention of the private’s name the sixteen-year-old grimaced.

“The bane of every squad in this Tower. Sometimes I rue the day I’m on the fast track for troop leader,” she mocked smiling. “I spend more time protecting the girls in my squad and in the other squads from his behavior, than I do get time to work on my game skills.”

“Game skills, Sergeant Ruana?”

Sergeant Ruana grinned. “You haven’t been told about the competition between the athletes of the ten towers, Private Recruit Connie?”

“No, Sergeant Ruana.” That was what Kendra had mentioned yesterday, she remembered.

Sergeant Ruana’s smile widened. “Well, by your huffing and puffing, you would more than likely be interested in the board games, if you choose to compete this year. Those games can be done via your terminal rather than taking weeks off and visiting the tower that is sponsoring the competitions this year.”

“Do you have a sport, Sergeant?”

“My favorite is hand-to-hand combat. Though there are twenty-two towers on the wall only ten towers are staffed with draftees and that’s who we compete with due to the age restrictions. Can’t have a forty-two-year-old man built like a brick wall compete against one of the boys that’s the size of a peanut in comparison.” She laughed. “Can you see one of the boys here squished like a bug, or one of us girls tossed to the mat by one of the female Royal Mountaineers? I wouldn’t even try to enter that match!” she laughed.

“I’ve never seen a Royal Mountaineer,” Connie said.

“They specialize in mountain rescues no matter the weather. Tough women and so are the men. They raise their children to work the rescues too, starting with handling the rescue dogs. Anyway, Britton Tower and Rose Tower have been strong contenders for the championship for the girls in the last three years that I’ve been here, with our Tower managing to edge them out with our own star Student Leader First Sergeant Burkee!” she smiled. “However, just as we lost Burkee so have those two towers of their top athletes with their service years completed and it looks like the boys from our tower have a new threat from Istobel Tower. I plan on being one of the next fourscores champions. I’m focusing on taking the swimming, climbing, hand-to-hand and running track top scores, if I get more time to train,” she finished sounding discouraged.

"I think Corporal Kendra is good at hand-to-hand," Connie said.

"That she is. You noticed that and only with one day's training. I'm impressed and will keep an eye out for you," she joked. "But she's no longer interested in competing. On her second week here, a Private Recruit, I heard she competed against Burkee, her teammate, who was already an all-around champion. She made Burkee work for her accolades that year. The next year she was Burkee's trainer. They were an unbeatable team in the tower competitions that year. Even the boys in all three troops recognize Kendra as a top-notch trainer and are still asking her for pointers." She grinned. "I spent my time sharpening my skills with her. My goal is to get the fourscore in athletics with a day off in town and prize money to spend."

"Swimming. Where would you practice swimming, Sergeant Ruana?"

"At the local village's magistrate's indoor pool. Running the peak is standard practice for us all and climbing the wall, well that isn't for everyone."

"Climbing the tower wall, Sergeant?" Connie asked surprised.

"No." The sergeant laughed. "You obviously haven't seen all the trials and skills we must learn as tower guards. I must go. Five times a week civilian counselors give us student sergeants lessons on how to manage the troublesome teens in the lower ranks and Lt. Hellene translates it to what is expected of us realistically since we are the same age as those, we're supposed to be whipping into responsible adults." She giggled at her joke. "The gossip is an unwise corporal in another troop thought to embarrass you on a bet and you stood him up. You did good. Welcome to Goldwah Tower, Private Recruit Connie!" And she resumed her rush down the stairs, with one hand holding her beret in place, unaffected by the ghostly apparition she ran through.

Connie and the apparition watched her taking two steps at a time down to the first floor. The apparition laughed, and then it moved through the wall of the stairwell as if to follow her.

That was her spirit guide, Connie thought surprised.

Everyone has at least one. You know that, Callie Can said.

Yeah, but I don't normally see people's guides, Connie thought as she resumed her climb. *I felt the difference from the other spirits.* That pleased her that she had been able to feel the difference. She entered the door marked Wolf Pack #4 and was surprised

to find another person in their quarters. However, when Connie stepped back to check the door label and peered back in, the room was empty. Carefully, she opened her senses to see if there was any negative energy left behind.

It's not the shapechanger, Connie thought, and her guides affirmed it.

Shapechangers had a particular feel and smell to them in or out of their transformed shape. Her talisman had not alerted her either.

She looked at the bed the previous Sergeant of the squad had occupied. There was the lingering energy from the previous occupant. Did she just visit in an astral projection? Why? Was that why she was given the cubicle furthest into the room? She rather liked having a stone wall near her when she slept. She hadn't felt a previous guard's energy in her cubicle. Perhaps someone came through and cleared the energy but had not for Burkee's cubicle for a reason.

Connie remembered mother periodically reinforcing her spells of protection over their house as well as weekly burning incense around the house. The only one that complained was Jennifer, but Connie knew she placed protection stones around Jennifer's room as well as the whole house, just not when Jennifer was present.

She had once mentioned to mother that she didn't believe Jennifer was her sister. When mother asked her why she thought that Connie was hesitant to say why. She was ten years old and finally in a whisper, Connie told mother because Jennifer had a dark cloud over her shoulders and no one else had that.

Remembering how self-centered and difficult Jennifer had been since an infant; Connie felt a little guilty that Jennifer was now solely mother's worry. Alan, her younger brother, not ready for the draft, was lucky that he spent his days and most nights in the boys' quarters to escape Jennifer. Perhaps, when she returned when her time was finished serving the four years at the realm's expense, she would just return for her mother and leave Jennifer.

That's not going to happen, Callie Can said.

A lot happens in four years. Wait before you make plans, Sulu advised.

One day at a time. Be present, in the here and now, Bau said.

This was going to be an interesting four years. The tower with its occupants and visitors from various realms would stretch her in using mother's lessons, she thought.

Not feeling any threat, she sat for her next class assignment. Before the program allowed her to move on to the next chapter a review of her previous chapter was necessary. That she quickly finished with a short sentence for each reason why she chose a particular multiple-choice answer.

Her computer program alarm reminded her to prepare for the lunch shift in the kitchen. Corporal Tilda of Horse Squad replaced Abasi and was already working on collecting dishes when Connie arrived. Birk arrived a few minutes later and was directed to move supplies from one storage to another. Kelere was at work on something with Maltie. According to the schedule, Corporal Kelere was permanently assigned to the kitchen staff, so her duty started when Cook started and continued through the day until Cook closed the kitchen. Maltie and Kelere were preparing a fruit salad with a lot of diced fruit with small marshmallows and were laughing over their work.

Connie spotted Cook on the other side of the counter, in the mess hall speaking with Sergeant Major Bessie and Student Guard First Sergeant Mac of Raven Squad. The contrast in age made Connie realize Mac looked like a young boy standing in front of his elders. Though he was a robust looking lad in his warm outdoor coat, gloves still on, and his knitted skull cap pulled over his ears, he still looked young.

Tilda and Connie had the dish carts filled with clean dishes and tray cart checked to be sure there were clean trays and then they began cleaning what pans the cooks had finished using. Birk was still moving supplies from the basement to the kitchen cupboards. Dates and logs were meticulously kept on the food and any expiration dates with Henry verifying what Birk wrote down. Tilda and Connie were ahead of the cleaning, which meant their lunch shift had some relaxing moments, where Henry rewarded the three, Birk, Tilda and Connie samples of his cooking to see if the other guards would like it. Of course they would, Tilda, Connie and Birk assured him enthusiastically.

Cook came bustling into the kitchen looking satisfied. "Well, the place is looking good. Nice work, you two. Alright Tilda, I understand you're a competitor in the Ten Towers Competition and need to leave after lunch to practice." She turned to Connie, and Birk, "Do you think you two can handle the rest of the clean up by yourself and this

evening or should I request someone from Raven Squad not in training? I can tell them I'll have cinnamon buns baking." Cook laughed at that.

Connie nodded and Birk smiled widely. "Of course. Easy peasy." He glanced at Connie and she guessed he was thinking no need to share the cinnamon buns with unneeded help.

Sergeant Major appeared at the kitchen entrance smiling. "Isn't that refreshing to hear? Student Leader First Sergeant Mac of Raven Squad was just discussing with Cook and I about rotating an acceptable Raven Squad member that meets with Cook's approval and that doesn't have to rush off for practice. And I'll take one of those cinnamon buns too."

"You're welcome, Bessie. I know we go through this every year, and I should be used to it by now, but it's disruptive to the efficiency of my kitchen. Now, after my criticism of how you run your troops, I would like to add that this morning your two guards did a good job of dragging out all the kitchen equipment that needed maintenance. Henry found some non-kitchen objects also which looked like someone's personal items perhaps reported stolen? I didn't realize we had so many carts that needed wheel maintenance. I was hoping to be able to order the automated carts, but it might be too tempting for the late shift to use them for cart races in the dark while everyone shouldn't be messing with my kitchen supplies."

Sergeant Major Bessie did a huff of disbelief. "That's probably why those carts wheels were damaged. I thought we put a stop to the carts being used for night games. The items found may have been lost wagers." Sergeant Major Bessie gave Birk a strong stare.

Connie glanced at Sergeant Major thinking that it was no surprise to her. By the feeling she received from the two women, they both knew about it. Birk's face turned a shade of red.

"You better get your student squad leaders squared away. I had Henry order a lock for the storage so the night riders can find something else to entertain themselves with."

Even that comment from Cook, Connie didn't feel there was any conviction in her voice. Did Cook and Sergeant Major Bessie have a secret code of conversation, Connie wondered?

The lunch shift went quickly with Tilda excitedly explaining what training for the tower games entailed. Birk added a few tidbits that made everyone laugh. The cooks smiled at her enthusiasm.

"Don't forget the boys," Birk hinted to Tilda.

"Yes, the boys have their own athletics competitions for the overall award," Tilda explained. "There are also individual awards given for high scores. There are board games also, which I'm not that interested in."

"She's not that interested because there are only two of the senior staff that challenge her," Birk teased.

"Nor am I interested in the final tower quiz for student guards. Of the ten towers competing, Tower Istobel will be a stiff competition for the boys overall and for the girls Rose Tower for sure."

"I bet you will make our tower proud. Now go and get your practice in," Henry said, as he shooed her out the exit when most of the cleaning was done.

"Birk dear, help Connie move the warming containers," Cook said. "Usually, it's done before the kitchen's dinner shift starts," she explained to Connie. "We'll fill the warming carts after we eat our dinner."

Finishing with their lunch shift, Birk asked her if she wanted to go with him to watch a class on feathering.

"I have an appointment with laundry duty. Perhaps another day," Connie said.

"Oh, yes. There is that never ending job," Birk said smiling.

Connie was going to ask him about feathering but the mental image she got from him was puzzling. Later she would ask about it.

Connie was running up the stairs to the third floor, feeling some of the effects of altitude weakness on the second level, when she met a guard on the top stair. The lighting on the stairwell didn't clearly show who it was but it wasn't an apparition.

"Do you need help?" Connie asked, feeling out of breath.

The talisman in her pocket warmed up.

The girl looked down at her and nodded. Connie felt the look was more than her higher position on the stairs but an attitude of superiority. She was sizing her up and even from this angle, Connie could feel this wouldn't be a friend. But she did need help, and it would be rude not to help. There were a few ghostly visitors, watching, though they kept a distance from the seated guard. She could feel her spirit guardians looking over the guard as if they too didn't like her energy.

"Thank you, Private Recruit. Lt. Hellene put an herb wrapping on, but I got it wet in the shower, so it fell apart." The way she said her rank reminded Connie she hadn't followed protocol acknowledging hers.

Connie looked at the first aid kit the girl had opened near her feet. When the guard sat up straighter, Sigrid was the name on her uniform. So, this was the much talked about Sigrid. She was a member of the Raven Squad. She also remembered her first impression of her image was of a girl that thought a lot of herself. Was that self-confidence or arrogance? It occurred to her that little sister Jennifer would probably be like Sigrid when she reached her age. That is, unless something happened to change her stubborn and entitled...yes, that's what it was. Entitlement. Jennifer and this girl shared the energy of entitlement. Was that what attracted some of the guards to her circle of allies?

Connie picked out a poultice of dandelion wrapped in a see-through package and took the bandage wrapping from the corporal.

This girl was difficult to read, as if it was intentional. What was she hiding behind her air of superiority? An amulet flashed from under her uniform blouse.

"So, you're the new draftee, Private Recruit Connie." She said condescendingly.

"Yes. Is it painful Corporal Sigrid?" Connie asked as she carefully wrapped the bruised ankle.

"No. Just an inconvenience for now. I'm competing in the ten towers competition and my spotter on the wall dropped me."

She didn't seem concerned about being dropped or the person that dropped her. In fact, she was amused. The image flashed too quickly for Connie to put a name to the spotter only that the spotter had been distracted.

“So, what kind of skills do you have that Captain Sahem sees in you, Private Recruit?” she asked with...mockery?

“I don’t know. I’m not into athletics, Corporal Sigrid.”

“Hidden potential? She chuckled disdainfully. “What about board games?”

“I’m not familiar with them.”

She looked over Connie’s wrapping critically. “Well, you’ve only been here two days. I’m sure they’ll find a place for you in the competitions, maybe patching the injured losers. I’ll vouch for you, newbie, otherwise they wasted filling the spot you’re occupying. Who are you quartering with?”

“Corporal Kendra and Lance Corporal Kiku.”

“Well, do tell.” There was a definite chill she radiated at the mention of the two girls. “I thought they would have quartered you with a... less needy pair.”

Connie didn’t know what she meant by that...but she was sure she would hear about it from someone with more detail. Gossip, as she was finding, was difficult to not occur with so many people in one place. Apparently, what she had heard so far about Sigrid was that she wasn’t a well-regarded person.

It reminded her of the women’s circle in the brethren compound. Mother had warned her NOT to eavesdrop or listen to the daughters of some of the women as well as the women. She didn’t need mother to tell her about some of the members of the compound since the energy they gave off was warning enough.

It’s best you keep sharp around her, Callie Can whispered to Connie, as if the corporal may overhear.

Connie closed the first aid kit. “You’re missing some items,” Connie said.

“Yeah,” she said snickering. “Some git pilfered my pack. I’m on my way to the commissary for replenishment and to hear a lecture about misplacing supplies. It may have been as a lesson not to leave our packs unattended, but I left my pack on my bed while taking a shower. Elora said it’s one of the ghosts that keeps this place haunted.”

“Ghosts?”

“You’re not afraid of ghosts, are you?” Corporal Sigrid sneered. The girl’s attitude was a warning to keep a distance. Was it because of who she was quartered with? Competition? For what?

“No. Mother told me spirits haunt and visit just about everywhere.”

Corporal Sigrid harrumphed sounding more like a snort. “My mother comes from the Bedeum community that holds seances, reads cards, bones and buttons and takes honoring their deceased relatives seriously,” she said as if to enhance her status. “Father’s family doesn’t,” she said disdainfully. “Mother gave me a *vobou* ceremony for my leaving for the draft,” she bragged. “Father gave me a big hug and whispered to me not to go to an old castle because there are too many ghosts.”

“And here you are in an old tower with ghosts,” Connie returned with a smile.

“Yes.” The corporal got up and quickly slid her pack on and hurried down the rest of the stairs, seemingly unaffected by the injured ankle. Did something scare her? What did her talisman represent?

Imagine that, Connie thought to her guides. Her talisman didn’t protect her from her injury so what does it protect her from?

Perhaps from the ghosts that wander around here. They don’t seem to want to go near her, Gem said.

She sounded very proud of her mother’s community so no doubt she likes to scare the nonbelievers here in the tower, Callie Can warned.

That corporal will be spinning a juju bag over your image because she can’t read you, Sulu said.

Her talisman is nothing like the one you have. Her’s is very shallow, Bau said.

There’s always cliques, Connie thought. Now I believe I know why there was a protection spell over our quarters, but not why there was an astral visit from the person that created the spell.

Keep yourself safe by using what your mother taught you on perception and discriminating in sharing, Gem warned. Remember your mother put a protective veil over you for people like her, but it’s not meant to prevent lessons that are meant to help you grow into your own power and stature.

So, you think she’ll be poking at me to see what gets me upset? Connie was thoughtful. She knew about those types of people. Living in the brethren compound she met many people of different ages that harbored ill will toward others not caring about

who their ill temperament affected. Tonight, she would meditate on the talisman she found and discover if it does more than warn her of unfriendly energy.

Connie ran the rest of the way up the stairs past the wisps of ghostly presences and cautiously entered her quarters. She was alone. Did she miss Kendra and Kiku for laundry? Their laundry bags were still full.

She heard running steps outside and Kendra and Kiku came rushing in.

“We stopped at the kitchen, but they said you already left,” Kendra said. She grabbed her laundry bag, and Connie picked up her nearly empty bag and followed the two girls as they ran down the hall to the laundry room with its large washing machines, dryers and ironing boards. It was warm inside and as they arrived another group was leaving.

Kendra showed Connie the basics of loading her clothing into one of the twelve machines and adding soap and then went to the chore chart which showed what area was left uncleaned, the toilet facilities, the shower or laundry room.

“No surprise. The toilet facilities,” Kendra mumbled. “Let’s get to it before we think how unpleasant it is.”

Kendra showed Connie the cleaning cabinet and pulled out the buckets, gloves, brushes and cleaning liquid.

“Thank our lucky stars we don’t have the boys’ latrines to clean.” Kiku filled her bucket with water and soap and began to mop the floor.

“Kiku! Put the wet floor warning out,” Kendra admonished.

It took less than thirty minutes with the three of them cleaning and just in time to move their washed clothes into dryers. From there Kendra put a check on the cleaning board of their cleaning the latrines then went to the nearest terminal and began some coarse work.

Connie accessed one of the corner terminals and looked up information on the ten towers competition. There it was. A list of boys and girls from Tower Goldwah that were competing to be chosen to represent Tower Goldwah. Scheduled times for them to practice their skills was given so that they had the opportunity to stay on top of their form. Neither Kendra nor Kiku were on the list. So why did Corporal Sigrid feel

unfriendly toward them? She returned to her lessons, not wanting to fall behind her imposed time for learning the chapters.

By the time her clothes were cleaned, dried and ironed it was time for her to report for kitchen duty for the dinner meal. Most of the cooking had been done, it was cleaning the kitchen for the end of the day that would keep her and Birk busy.

Kendra and Kiku deposited their cleaned clothes neatly in their closets while Connie only had one day of laundry to put away, then headed to the kitchen.

Kitchen business was busy as Cook was preparing a special dinner for the captain's table. When Cook left the kitchen area with Kalere pushing one of the carts of food to the Tower office, Henry watched over the kitchen business.

"It's a meeting with officials for the Ten Tower's Competition," Henry explained. "They were very important people before they retired."

"And still are," Maltie said. "You don't just retire after you've spent your life, from birth to present age working for the commonwealth."

Henry snorted. "From birth?"

"Some of them prepare their child when it's still in the womb," Maltie said.

Birk nodded, giggling at his own memories.

"You mean read to them? I can understand that. How else are they going to remember their family line if not started early?" Henry teased.

Corporal Kele from Raven Squad shook his head. "My mother sang to us from the moment she knew she was pregnant. Even now in my sleep I hear that song of the battle of Murgan's Valley and the names of good folks that gave their lives. When I'm married and my wife gets pregnant, I'm going to sing happy songs to make them and me happy."

"Thank the stars my ma was too busy to read to me, and my pa slept a lot. He worked two jobs to send my older brother to apprentice at a stone mason's shop," Birk said.

Henry smiled. "My wife stopped me from reading out loud recipes to her very pregnant belly, from my favorite book because it was getting her hungry."

"That's not when she was pregnant with Basil, was it?" Maltie asked.

“Yes. And the boy popped out like a butter ball and still is. He’s not interested in cooking but always is eating,” he said. “Perhaps he’ll become a food critic that every eatery will either regret his visit or welcome it.”

Everyone in the kitchen laughed as kitchen business progressed smoothly without Cook’s happy disposition.

You were read from a book of... Sulu started but abruptly stopped.

A day will come when you all will have to stop holding secrets from me, Connie thought impatiently.

It’s not us. We get shut out of seeing things too! Bau said.

After chores were completed to Henry’s approval Connie and Birk raced to their quarters to get ready for a physical workout.

The training workout started with practicing marching in line with one of the corporals giving the cadence and the troop replying. After an hour of marching right and left and about face in the small area, weapons training with stun sticks and how not to shoot oneself in the foot commenced. It was a mixture of hand-to-hand and making sure the opponent didn’t seize the stun stick and use it on you. Connie took a lot of dumps onto the mat where she learned to defend herself from a larger opponent with a stun stick. Kendra was a good instructor and Kiku seemed to like tossing Connie. For a moment she wondered why Kendra wasn’t interested in participating in the ten towers competition but by the end of their workout, she could see and feel Kendra’s enjoyment of teaching and the respect everyone gave her.

Though tired and feeling battered at the end of the session, Connie made sure she spent time on her lessons before going to bed, since she felt she needed to finish a lesson a day, and the chapters were five in each lesson. However, after thirty minutes the computer closed its programs and went into sleep mode. Connie was suspicious of who was controlling students’ computers. She noted that the two other girls were still on their terminals. Resigned, she went to bed. The marching cadence played for a while in her head with her struggling to be on the correct foot as the troop turned around and about. Finally, her mind tired of practicing marches. Then she sank into deep sleep with her hands wrapped around the talisman. In this stage of sleep, she said a protective prayer and introduced herself to the spirit of the rock.

I am a warning stone. You can use my warning to ground yourself when danger is near you.

And then her dreams took off in another direction, mixing too many bits of information with other things.

3rd Day

By the third day Connie was awake before the alarm on all three of their terminals went off. The last dream she remembered was a satisfying image of her tossing an annoying tower guard onto the mat with a loud thud. She had a feeling something important had been shown her but... it was frustrating to have only a fragment that was quickly fading, and it made no sense.

She realized the thud was from Kendra who tripped over a boot which was left in the middle of the room. Connie quickly grabbed her slippers and made a run to the toilets. She could hear Kendra's curse as she left.

"Damn meddling ghosts!"

And she followed Connie and the others that were making a morning rush to the toilets and to brush teeth and comb hair for their assembly.

"I told you not to be saying anything offensive toward our resident ghost," Kiku told her as they returned to dress.

"Ghosts?" Connie asked, pulling on her boots.

"Yeah. Haven't you bumped into our visitor yet, or better yet found your terminal suddenly powered on or off?"

"Or your uniform all nice and neatly laid out for you? And those are the nice things," Kiku said.

"We won't mention the unpleasant surprises, besides boots or laundry scattered about. Burkee said her name is Criso."

Kendra found her other boot under her bed. "Why would she put it here?" she muttered.

"What do you do if you see her?" Connie asked.

"Oh, we don't actually see her. She takes offense if we don't at least say hello to her visits. She also keeps unwanted visitors from entering our room. She's not the only one roaming the tower, you should know. I heard from a storyteller in town that there

was a great battle on the land surrounding the wall before it was built so here and in some parts of town there are many souls from that time that wander. Some of the other student guards aren't quite understanding of the ghostly visits around the tower, and go to Sigrid for a juju bag," Kiku laughed scornfully.

"Only because she's not afraid of the witch in town that puts them together. Before your arrival, we had our own ghost friendly draftee Sergeant Burkee," Kendra explained, smiling widely.

Connie smiled at the energy around Kendra at the mention of her friend.

"Sergeant Burkee was our squad leader. She slept in the first cubicle." Kendra pointed to the cubicle near the door. "She and Sigrid weren't on friendly terms and therefore, she took a dislike to all that quartered with Burkee, that was Mufeh, Kiku and I."

"Burkee's service was over months before you arrived," Kiku explained. "Sergeant Major Bessie became our provisional troop leader because no one in our squad passed the promotional tests, with those qualified graduating out. And then there was replacing our other bunkmate Student Guard Mufeh, who left a few days later, with a temporary cadet until they drafted you."

"Anyway, Burkee said she was going to join the Royal Guard, which means she's probably now in the cadet corps. She's the cousin of some officer in charge of something or other. She didn't speak too much of it. I think she was embarrassed about her connections," Kendra said.

"She wasn't embarrassed because of that! Unlike Sigrid she didn't name drop or brag about who she was related to. Once Sigrid found out she had royal blood, she tried to undermine anything Burkee accomplished...like winning the fourscore in the girls ten towers competition or Burkee being promoted to Wolf Pack troop leader at the end of her second year here," Kiku sniggered. "I think the promotion to troop leader is what really drove Sigrid to despise her. Sigrid came to the tower a few months before me. It's not like Sigrid would ever be considered for anything above corporal. Burkee had her figured out and stopped her dead cold, especially in the athletic competitions. Lucky for us all that Burkee finally graduated out because I think Staff Sergeant Em had enough of Sigrid's nasties."

“As you can tell, Corporal Sigrid is one of the girls you need to steer clear of,” Kendra warned.

“That may be too late. I met her in the stairwell yesterday when I went to collect my laundry. Once she knew I was sharing quarters with you two, she got a bit unfriendly.”

“Oh, joy. For sure she’s going to go back to making trouble. Just make sure someone in our pack is around you when she’s around.”

“Or be sure you’re in view of a security camera.”

That may explain the relationship between my bunkmates and Corporal Sigrid...but there must be more. Connie heard a ghostly chuckle. Her own spirit guides took an interest in what gossip their ghostly visitor knew. Of course they would, Connie thought.

Corporal Gafna was to lead the squad in their morning exercises in the second-floor gymnasium. They were all lined up, waiting for Sergeant Major Bessie’s appearance. She had the board of assignments tucked under her arm as she entered the gymnasium.

“Corporal Gafna, you’re up to lead the pack in morning warmups, then Lance Corporal Amoke lead in marching drills, and pick a different cadence than First Class Turi. I think we all can agree we don’t need to hear it too many times in a week.”

After 30 minutes of warmups and then trying to follow the military marching drills of left, right and about face and keeping track of which way to turn, Sergeant Major dismissed Connie to change clothes for kitchen duty and the rest of the squad broke ranks to grab their winter coats and hats for outdoor sentry duty. Birk was to return to sentry duty on the wall. This time Connie wasn’t breathless when she arrived at the kitchen.

Cook gave her a quick once over and then nodded as she resumed her work on breakfast. Corporal Sada from Horse Squad joined her shortly after. She hung her winter coat up and stuffed her skull cap with gloves in her coat pockets. She was humming a lively tune as they removed dirty dishes from the food warmers, then with Connie’s help, rolled the empty and cleaned food warmers into the kitchen storage.

“I was the roaming guard, delivering the meals to the guards on the wall and I didn’t leave spilled food in here,” Sada said. “I think someone came down to sneak a snack during their rotation off the wall and spilled the food. It’s cold up on the wall and a warm snack will hit the spot. Cook usually leaves plenty of food for 2nd and 3rd shifts.”

“If you think we need to leave more, you let us know,” Maltie said as she handed a pot to Sada to clean.

“You can bet on that, but I personally think for me and the girls it’s more than enough. You know the boys. Bottomless pits for food consumption, my mother used to say.” She laughed with Maltie and Henry.

“You must be glad to be in the warm kitchen,” Connie said.

“The luck of the draw and I don’t take much time changing uniforms,” Sada laughed and resumed her humming, sometimes breaking out into a song.

“You keep singing like that and you’ll be enchanting the breakfast cereal,” laughed Henry.

“It should taste good enough with all that honey you guards pour over it,” Maltie teased.

“It tastes good enough because I know how to make a decent guards morning meal that will carry them through their next meal,” Cook said waving a large spoon at them. “Now let’s see what the delivery brought us. Henry dear, get the list of what we ordered, to check against what we got, and what we’ve been surprised with.”

Everyone laughed. Connie enjoyed the happy energy that filled the kitchen area. Sada was also one of the competitors in the girl’s fourscore competition. After her breakfast shift, she was heading to a workout swimming with Lance Corporal Amoke and Lance Corporal Jov from Wolf Pack and Private Lio from Raven Squad. Their trainer was Captain Sahem who was once a champion swimmer on the Royal Infantry’s Competitive Team.

While Captain Sahem was away from the tower, Lt. Hellene was in charge and had sent out a test to all the squad leaders on first aid training which they would then teach their squads. Sergeant Major Bessie passed it directly on to Wolf Pack members to complete by the end of the day.

On Connie's first break after the breakfast shift, she sat for the test. It seemed easy to her since mother was one of the healers in the brethren compound though she was seen as a last resort. No one in their family got sick no matter what influenza or virus was passing through Hillsboro's population or carried into the brethren's compound. Connie felt her mother preferred to be a last resort and cast a spell to make sure that happened.

Connie hurried to the kitchen for lunch shift, curious who would be assisting from Horse Squad.

"Corporal Tess! Well, it's nice to see you on time. No practice today?" Henry said. There was no warmth in his voice, just a polite inquiry.

"Only if I'm needed. I've got stuff to prepare for," she said importantly. She looked Connie up and down disdainfully, as if she were competition. Competition for what, Connie wondered. Her talisman gave no warning that she was a threat... now.

Something was familiar with her. Was she the figure she spotted in the tower looking down at her as she disembarked from the bus? The energy around her was like Sigrid only with a slight tinge of something else. Her face was thinner than in her guard picture, but her mouth was pulled down into a sulk as in the picture. Yes, she pegged her for the type of person that would never be happy with her lot in life. There were a few women among those in the compound who had that feel about them. Mother explained to her that their condition was an example of what one expects in life but doesn't work toward the possibilities and potentials before them, and settling for nothing, got nothing.

Even if Connie's new talisman didn't find anything to warn her about Tess, Connie didn't need the talisman to let her know Tess was not one to seek friendship with.

Cook came into the area and waved to the exit. "I don't need any more help, Corporal. Report back to your squad leader."

"Right you are, Cook," she gave another glance at Connie with what could be a sour look, and left the kitchen.

Connie thought mother wouldn't have allowed a person with such low energy in her kitchen either. They would poison the pot with their presence.

Cook gave a harrumph and went into the refrigerator looking for an ingredient.

Henry chuckled. “She was expecting to see Birk. She’s been chasing him since she gave up on Hassel. He was too shy to connect with her, and Berk is too smart for the likes of that young one.”

Connie nodded and went back to her work while filing away that information on another guard of the tower. So far, her impressions from the photos on the characters of the guards were mostly correct. With Tabor, a miss, it was a reminder that it was necessary to meet the person to get a clear reading on them, because as mother pointed out often, people change with situations. All of life is fluid and all in life is connected.

Maltie came in and after sharing a laugh with Henry filled Connie in with more detail. “That girl, Corporal Tess is at the boy crazy stage or just plain crazy. It seems each week she has a new target on her mind. Recently it’s Berk. She’s so darn jealous of any girl working with her latest interest. Kalere isn’t into the boys yet so she shouldn’t even consider her a rival. Kalere’s focus is studying as much about cooking from us as she can, so she’s prepared for her first year in cooking school. Scholarships are not easy to earn and keep,” she teased Kalere, who blushed before focusing back on her meal preparations.

“I’ll be sure to not cross anyone’s love interests,” Connie assured her.

“Well then, let me give you the scoop on who to watch out for,” laughed Maltie as she handed Connie a dirty pan to clean.

By the time Maltie listed who was romantically interested in who with Henry adding comments and Cook laughing at how silly teens were on their crushes, Connie was sure she knew who to keep away from so as not to interfere with any romantic liaisons. Just as the gossip in the showers was informative, the gossip in the kitchen had its usefulness. And then Cook added that in a week after the Ten Towers Competitions the love interests would change and was hoping Connie would remember that she needed to keep her mind on her job and not pine over a fleeting love interest.

“I honestly don’t believe that is going to be a problem,” Connie said seriously.

“Ha,” Cook said. “You’ve been only here for three days and haven’t met everyone yet. You young ones are at the hormonal age. And don’t fall for the delivery

drivers! They like to sweet talk you young girls as if they don't have girlfriends or wives their own age in the village."

"Wait until you get to the lessons in sex education," Maltie teased.

"Sex education?"

"Oh, yes. All new recruits are instructed on the subject by Lt. Hellene, and she is very thorough. Classes are on your schedule and any questions you have, AND don't, she has the graphic answers. You learn about boys and their urges, con games, and your own and then...have you started...?"

"Yes!" Connie said embarrassed.

The three adults laughed at her red face.

"Don't listen to them. They're just jealous because they've passed the embarrassments of their hormonal trysts," Staff Sergeant Em said. As she entered the kitchen she removed her gold-colored beret, the color for senior staff.

"Staff Sergeant Em, you're ruining our fun!" Maltie laughed.

"Hmm. I came for a taste test of your new dessert, Cook. And what do I get? An earful of embarrassment to our newbie. Where's Corporal Kalere? She's probably bored with your sexual innuendos. You do know that could be reported as sexual harassment? You all are adults and she's still a kid."

"She's not a kid," Maltie objected.

Connie had opened her mouth to object to being referred to as a kid but closed it at Maltie's support.

"She's safely in the other room mixing up a batch of those apple fritters you're looking for," Cook said. She left the area to make sure her favorite student was doing okay. Staff Sergeant Em followed close behind her.

"Are you alright with our teasing?" Maltie asked Connie.

"Yes. I'll survive. Mother did teach me about...sex when I was nine."

Henry laughed. "I had to speak to my sons about it when I caught them...well, anyway. Boys need to be respectful at a young age before they get sidetracked with their male friends and their competition in telling tales on others."

Connie nodded, remembering her mother's warning to her about trusting her intuition of who to not be alone with, male or female. However, she didn't pick up any nasty intent with the three adults. The energy in the kitchen was still light and friendly.

By the time lunch was over for the guards on duty and the kitchen staff, and dishes cleaned, Connie's thoughts were on her lessons. To her surprise on her terminal, she had a request to stop by Lt. Hellene's office.

Don't forget your cover! And her terminal was shut down.

"Thank you," she remembered to say to their helpful ghost, if it was a ghost.

You don't wear a cover in doors, another voice said impatiently.

You wear a cover when you are ordered to report to the COs office, was the sharp retort.

Connie didn't want to argue and count how many ghosts were occupying their quarters at this time when her bunkmates only thought there was one residing with them. She grabbed her maroon beret from her closet and carefully made sure the flash was above her left eye, and there was no puffing in the back of her head, the extra fabric was pulled over to the right side but not touching her ear, and the cap was over the center of her head, then rushed down the stairs, with one hand holding her beret in place. She ignored the comments of her ghostly audience in the stairwell.

The door to Lt. Hellene's office was open. From down the hall where, previously on her arrival at the tower, the office doors were closed, Connie could hear a musical instrument being played. It stopped and after some words were spoken, the music resumed.

"Come in, Private Recruit Connie," Lt. Hellene invited. Sergeant Major Bessie was with her. Both were studying reports spread out on Lt. Hellene's desk.

"You requested my presence, Lt. Hellene?" she asked breathlessly. The energy in Lt. Hellene's office was busy.

I don't think you're in trouble for anything, Sulu whispered.

Sergeant Major Bessie gestured to Connie to remove her beret.

"Yes. We did. I have the results of the test on first aid you completed this morning. In fact, the time it took you to complete the test I would say you have more

knowledge of first aid then most citizens of the commonwealth. We've been going over some of your answers which I think are good suggestions."

"Where did you learn first aid?" Sergeant Major Bessie asked.

"At home, Sergeant Major, Lt. Hellene."

The music from one of the closed offices changed which Connie recognized was a piece...

Pay attention to the present, Callie Can whispered.

"Well, the reason why we're interested in your knowledge is because I need an assistant, other than Sergeant Major Bessie at the Ten Towers games. For that you'll need to pass a test, which is the actual demonstration of wrapping wounds and setting broken bones in splints."

"Do you know how to apply splints?" Sergeant Major asked.

"I've only seen how it's done on two broken arms." She pushed away the memory of both incidents which mother was called on to assist. Grown men fighting over a... She stopped before the images became clear.

Sergeant Major looked at Lt. Hellene with a quizzical look. "Have we ever had broken bones to treat?"

"Not here. One foolish guard on a day pass in town had a fall, and the town doctor treated it promptly." Lt. Hellene turned to Connie with a smile. "I've seen how you wrapped Corporal Sigrid's ankle so I know you can wrap sprains and the proper herb poultice to apply for a bruise." She looked over at Sergeant Major Bessie with a grin. "That's more than enough."

"Good. I don't like leaving the tower for the games with our borrowed replacements from the Royal Cadet Corp tending our tender teens," teased Sergeant Major. It was a joke understood by the lieutenant who laughed with her. Connie relaxed with the energy the two shared. A problem was resolved.

The music continued, with more instruments contributing to the piece. It wasn't done with the smoothness of a professional band. It was halted and whoever was conducting was rapping on a podium calling for...

"You need to move your office hours when the music lessons are over," Sergeant Major suggested.

“Sometimes they get it right. Thank you, Private Recruit. Please report to the commissary for your medic uniform and cap,” Lt. Hellene said.

“You’ll get further information on your terminal,” Sergeant Major said.

“Yes, ah,” Connie hesitated not knowing who to address first.

Sergeant Major pointed to Lt. Hellene and then to herself.

“Yes, Lt. Hellene and Sergeant Major.” As she left the office, remembering to put her beret back on, the music resumed.

Staff Sergeant Em was arranging her new uniform on a hanger when Connie arrived.

“Well, another uniform to add to your collection. Your closet will be full soon,” she teased. “And this is just the winter uniforms. Try this on. Let’s see if it fits.”

The ghosts in the room were shaking their heads, sitting around the board game. Was that all they did?

Don’t talk to them, Sulu advised. They’ll tell her you can see them.

After the fitting she rushed back upstairs with the uniform and cap to store in her closet. She was due in the kitchen and hurried back downstairs hoping in the dim lighting she wouldn’t miss a step. Breathing heavily, she stepped into the kitchen where the dinner shift staff congratulated her on being added to Goldwah’s Tower competition team. News traveled quickly.

The kitchen helper from Raven Squad wasn’t Corporal Vivian but Private 1st Class Sven. He was grumpy and didn’t have anything to say then polite hello reporting for kitchen duty, Cook. However, he did his job cleaning and stocking the warming bins for the two later shifts. He also preferred no assistance in moving the warming bins for easier access to whoever was assigned to deliver the meals to the guards on duty for the later shifts.

Don’t do it, Bau cautioned Connie when she was going to tune into him to see what was bothering him.

Remember the burden of Cassandra, Sulu agreed.

I’m not going to be a meddling hag in other people’s burdens, Connie insisted. I can just...

Send him blessings and let it go, Bau suggested. *Your mother would say the same thing.*

It did annoy her not to know what was bothering him, but her guides were correct. She didn't want to develop the busy body habit of knowing what everyone was thinking and then the big question of why. Not her business.

Connie was relieved when the dinner shift in the kitchen ended. She ran up the stairs with only a few ghostly figures present and found Kiku and Kendra changing clothes for calisthenics.

"Congratulations on your appointment to Student Medic, Connie." Kiku gave her a hug.

"You will get a chance to see a lot of the other students from the ten towers. Careful you don't get caught up in the exchanging of addresses," Kendra warned. "Each tower used to have small pins and would exchange those but that created problems with theft and the cost each tower spent in having the pins made."

Kiku added, "It was before my time so I only got the horror stories of how some of the contestants would gang up on loners and steal their collection of pins."

"Each contestant received 12 pins to exchange," Kendra added. "It was before my time too. The one time I competed some of the contestants' exchanged jerseys and the next year I didn't go but I heard from Burkee, computer addresses were being exchanged instead of jerseys."

"None of those practices our Captain approved of, and when it was computer mail being exchanged, all incoming mail was inspected before passed on to the recipient," Kiku laughed. "There were some guards from our tower that were very upset with the censor's objections to their contents."

Both girls giggled. "Sigrid and Tess had their computer mail suspended for six months."

"What's that?" Corporal Gafna asked as she and the other three girls joined them in the stairway.

"Unbridled love messages mailed out and received," Kendra mocked.

“Censored as too much for our tender hearts,” laughed one of the boys who overheard Kendra’s remark. There was shared laughter as they joined the boys in the gymnasium. They seemed to know exactly what she was talking about.

Hassel dramatically put his hands over his heart and moaned sounding like a mournful dog as it bayed at the moon. The laughter continued until Sergeant Major entered the gymnasium. Rather than having Connie practice with Kendra or Kiku she had her rotate with different partners from Wolf Pack. Connie found it interesting that some of the boys, like Shermal, were hesitant at first grabbing her aggressively, while others, like Birk, weren’t shy about that and dumping her. His grin while peering down at her while she took a few moments to recover, had her struggling not to giggle while trying to catch her breath. As for the other girls in her pack, Corporal Bly had an interesting approach to avoiding Connie’s counter grip; Corporal Gafna wasted no time dancing around and tossed her and pinned her aggressively on the mat. In the time that she came in direct contact with her, Connie knew she wasn’t someone she wanted to tangle with. Private 1st Class Ada seemed shy but that was a front and Connie just in time countered her grip. It was an interesting two hours of practice to get to know more about her pack members. It made her realize that Kendra’s lessons were showing her in good stead. She was thinking her dreams were going to be interesting since that was where she did a lot of processing her day.

“Before you all head to the showers I want you to know it’s official that Private Recruit Connie will be assisting Lt. Hellene as student medic trainee at the tower competitions instead of myself. And just so you know that she knows how to bandage a scrape, she managed to tape up Corporal Sigrid’s bruise without any complaints from her.”

Everyone laughed. Connie wasn’t sure just how that could be funny.

On the way to the showers, Kendra explained. “Corporal Sigrid would rather put a hex on anyone in our squad, so I’m surprised she let you tape her up.”

“Was that when you met her? And it was a real bruise? She was probably feeling you out. Everyone would know you’re with Wolf Pack the day you arrived, just not who you were quartered with,” Private 1st Class Ada said skeptically.

“I think she’s just interested in if you’re going to be competition in her latest love interest. Like whom can keep up with her current fixation?” Corporal Gafna snickered.

“Since our hero and troop leader, stole heart throb Ricardo from Istobel Tower right from under her nose at the last Ten Tower Competitions, anyone in our squad is subject to suspicion at interfering with her love designs,” Lance Corporal Amoke said, fluttering her eyelashes as if standing in front of the very person, Ricardo of Istobel Tower.

“Her love potion that she got to whoosh away any resistance Ricardo may have had at her advances, didn’t work because her friend Tess stole the vile for her use on Sammon. Sigrid bet her that she couldn’t get slow Sammon to fall all over himself for her. What an embarrassment for them both. Sammon was so horrified at Tess’s advances he insulted any feminine wiles she may have thought she was enticing him with.”

Laughter came from the others in the showers.

“Oh, please, stop. I can’t forget the look on Ricardo’s face when Sigrid interrupted Ricardo’s very intense conversation with Burkee over where she plans on going after her graduation. Very intense,” Gafna said tittering.

“Very one-sided. Burkee wasn’t even interested in him,” Kendra said. “He was just another Istobel guard on the wall that our guards chatted with when we meet on the security walk.”

“It’s not just the girls chasing the boys. Too many of the boys as they get close to their release date feel they need to train to be a gadabout and play with females older and smarter than them before they come of age. Something to brag about in grownup bars,” Lance Corporal Amoke mocked.

One of the girls in the showers laughed uproariously.

“Right! Kiku who is there at the gate in her pressed uniform with beret and cleaned boots, waiting for any delivery man from one of the village stores.”

Laughter from the other girls had Kiku joining in.

“They are so right, Kiku dear,” Kendra teased. “That Gildro is married with more kids than his wife can handle, and he has girlfriends at each of his deliveries and flirts with the girls whoever has the guard shift when he arrives.”

“I’m just practicing my feminine wiles,” Kiku said mockingly, fluttering her eye lashes with a fingertip touching her chin. “Besides, Gildro is spoken for by Bly. Am I right Bly?”

“You can have him back. He’s a dullard,” Bly replied, and giggled.

“Anyway, about Sigrid,” Kendra said as they made their way back to their quarters. “She tried to hex our quarters, like I said, but we already had our own protection from our resident ghost and Burkee. If Burkee and Sigrid had a face off, Burkee would be the one I’d put my coin on.”

“Oh, Kendra. Burkee was too smart for something like that. Right now, she’s probably enjoying life at her family home, before joining the cadet corps,” Kiku said.

“Do you know what the amulet Sigrid wears is for?” Connie asked.

The two girls laughed loudly then lowered it to giggles. They knew exactly what Connie was referring to.

“I told you how some of the girls and guys in the tower go to her to make juju bags to keep the ghosts away? Well, when she tried to enter our quarters when no one was here, our resident ghost must have scared her half to death because Sergeant Major found her shaking in the hall. A week later she started to wear that amulet which she said a local witch in town created for her.”

Both girls started giggling again.

“And?” Connie encouraged.

“She can’t enter any of Wolf Packs quarters. Burkee said the resident ghosts in the tower avoid her. Burkee knows the sorceress in town and whatever mischief Sigrid intended to do to Burkee wasn’t going to work. Burkee has her own magic,” Kendra said smiling.

“Magic?”

“Well, that’s what we call it. It was her magic, alright,” Kiku said. “It’s something about her and even now, and I’ve only known her for almost three years.

Talented in just about everything she did. And she was nice to everyone, including Sigrid no matter how stupid Sigrid was to her. Even the boys were silly about her.”

“I do miss our training together. Some say I was her trainer, but it was her teaching me. I’m sure she is happy to leave us behind and move on, but I miss her. She made us feel safe from the stupid things Sigrid and Tess would do out of jealousy and spite.”

Connie studied the two girls. Did Burkee cast an enchanted spell over them? No, that would be impossible. Or would it?

The three prepared for bed then sat in front of their terminals for an hour of study before turning in. However, Connie knew she had to turn in when her terminal shut itself off. No reason to argue with a ghost. She was happy with her progress through the lessons on her class menu. They seemed easier than she thought the higher classes of the realm’s educational requirements would be.

4th Day

Whatever Connie’s dreams were about she didn’t feel any more enlightened about her fellow tower guards nor very alert when she awoke. She felt tired.

At morning assembly Connie followed calisthenics as if she were still asleep. If Sergeant Major noticed she didn’t say anything. She was also late for the kitchen shift, but no one said anything in the kitchen either. Lance Corporal Sammon was Horse Squads contribution to helping with the breakfast meal.

“*Wake up!*” A voice shouted at her. Connie took a deep breath as if she had been holding it. Looking at her hands she automatically put the dish into the dishwasher.

What happened? She asked her spirit guides.

You were netted by that creep Sigrid, a voice not from her spirit guides explained. *She’s figured out how to close off your access to your spirit guides in your sleep. She had your amulet.*

Connie frantically felt for the talisman in her pockets and couldn’t find it.

“PR Connie, what’s taking you?” Henry asked as he came looking for the dishes she was supposed to have delivered to the servers.

“Sorry, I guess I was off on cloud nine or something,” she muttered.

“Not that cloud of unrequited love, is it?” he teased.

“Gods no!” she said in a huff. “Spare me the reputed hormonal rush you old folks speak so lovingly about.”

Henry laughed heartily.

“All right. Have your laugh, but it’s not anything like that,” Connie pushed the filled cart with the cleaned dishes toward him as he continued to laugh. He moved the cart to its needed place.

Whatever had put a cloud over her was gone but so was her connection with her spirit guides and she lost her talisman. Mentally she thought about how to counter it without letting Sigrid know she had scored on her. A reverse spell? The dream she had the previous night of wrestling with someone may have been a warning. The problem with any spell, was there were always consequences. She didn’t want to spend her time worrying about what Sigrid would think up to continue this tit for tat game. She wasn’t Burkee, so why did Sigrid need to poke at her? Should she touch Sigrid’s energy to get a reading of her? No, she wasn’t that foolish. She was just another form of entertainment to Sigrid. Mother would say the girl was bored. But how did Sigrid get her talisman?

While she was sorting her thoughts on Sigrid and her missing talisman, she was getting annoyed with Sammon and his angry glances her way. He was stumbling into some of the larger equipment while he seemed to be focused on her and needed constant direction from Cook’s staff to do a job he was holding up.

When the breakfast duty was finished, she headed to the stairs to get to her studies when Lance Corporal Sammon aggressively stepped in front of her.

“Private Recruit, I’d like to speak with you...*alone*,” he demanded, angrily.

Perhaps if she listened to him, it may explain why he was glaring at her when they were in view of each other. However, she felt certain to be with him alone would not be in her best interests. She was sure her protection spells were active. Or were they? She still felt in a mental fog.

“I would prefer not to speak with you alone,” Connie said. Alarms were going off in her head. She didn’t have her spirit guides voices, but she did have her intuition.

“Guards, what’s going on here?” Sergeant Major asked.

Lance Corporal Sammon looked startled at her appearance and then uncomfortable. “I just want to clear something with Private Recruit. I don’t want to complain about her but since you’re here...”

His voice had changed from anger to...was that a whine in his voice, like a child caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to be doing? It took Connie by surprise.

“Let’s take this in my office,” Sergeant Major said and gestured to the stairway that led to the commissary. Connie followed Sammon as he led the way down the stairs as if he knew the way from previous visits. She wasn’t getting a good feeling about this and then suddenly...

We’re here! Her guides shouted. She can’t block us down here.

What’s going on? Connie asked.

Nasty lies about you from Sigrid and her friend Tess from Horse Squad.

Sigrid visited town yesterday and went to the local witch with your picture and talisman. She found it in the laundry trap.

Sergeant Major’s office was cooler than the commissary located next to it. It was a plain space with one desk and a terminal and a few chairs around it. The chairs didn’t look comfortable. Connie didn’t feel Sergeant Major spent much time in this room. The two weren’t offered chairs to sit and Sergeant Major moved to stand behind her desk.

“Now, Lance Corporal Sammon, what about Private Recruit Connie do you have a complaint about.”

“She didn’t address me properly by rank or even by name, Sergeant Major. And she’s spreading stories about us!” he burst out.

Connie looked surprised. She shook her head and hoped it would clear more of the fog from her thoughts. Though, she worried more about the loss of her talisman. It was upsetting that she was so careless about something so important to her. She was sure she had not left the talisman in her uniform pocket when doing her laundry and was sure she hadn’t met Sammon until today.

“You’re a liar!” he shouted, and his voice broke into a high-pitched squeak.

Connie took a step further from him. “I...I don’t even know you.” Was he in a mental fog too? She only had the photo image of him where her first impression of his character was to know whether he was a danger to her or not. Now that she met him in

person, he was a riddle to her. Even in his emotional outbursts and accusations he wasn't presenting all that he was about. He had a secret, and it wasn't the same as Trey's.

Don't, many voices whispered to her when she was tempted to touch his energy field.

"Sammon. How old are you?" Sergeant Major took a seat at her desk, still not offering either guard a seat.

"Sixteen years, Sergeant Major," he stated proudly.

"And how many times have you been pranked with untruthful rumors during your two years here?"

"Sergeant Major, that doesn't give her the right to..."

Sergeant Major held up her hand which silenced him immediately. He looked chastised, as he hung his head.

"The kitchen environment is one of the places not necessary to address a fellow student guard by rank. I know everywhere Private Recruit Connie has been and there has been nowhere she could have met you before today. I know how many hours she puts in on her terminal and the subjects she reads. I know she met Corporal Sigrid whose favorite gossip partner is Corporal Tess. I know those two like to pull pranks on you because you are easy to bully. I also know about your communications and your movements when on duty and off. I am the Sergeant Major responsible for all the student guards serving on this Tower and I know what everyone is doing. It's a very tiring responsibility, but which I take very seriously."

Sammon's face was red as he tried to think of something to say in his defense.

"Who told you Private Recruit Connie has been interested in you, Corporal?" Sergeant Major asked in a soft voice that had the force of a command. Connie dared to look at Sergeant Major who was using her voice as mother had taught Connie when forcing another to do something against their will. Sergeant Major's eyes were nearly black.

"Corporal Tess," he quivered.

“So again, you’ve been pranked and by the same people. What makes it difficult with assisting you in your interactions with these two guards, is each time we’ve intervened in their bullying, you’ve gone right back to listening to them.”

Sergeant Major looked at her monitor and typed something.

“You’ve made three reportable errors in judgement since your promotion to lance corporal. All could have been preventable if you followed your lance corporal’s manual. I understand you don’t contribute in any of your classes. Falling asleep is what your teachers describe in their reports.”

To give Student Guard Sammon some credit, he looked abashed.

“You have disputed a Private Recruit’s behavior that’s been here for only four days, on the accusations of someone that in the past has not been truthful with you. You weren’t going to go through the proper channels for handling it, until I had stepped in. Just that behavior is grounds for demoting you back to private.” Sergeant Major turned to Connie.

“I want you to see that this type of behavior in any of our guards will not be tolerated. I had you read the code of conduct, and this is my responsibility as Sergeant Major to correct problems dealing with any guards’ misbehavior.” She turned back to Sammon. “See Sergeant Em to return your lance corporal stripe, private.” She turned to her terminal and typed in something else. “In case you’re wondering, Student Leader First Sergeant Elroy knew of Corporal Tess’s lies to you, and she has been put on report to be demoted to Lance Corporal.”

“Well, what about Corporal Sigrid? You said she was part of it. Those two witches!”

“That is something Lt. Hellene and Captain Sahem will take care of. It’s beyond my scope of how to handle witches. I just handle ordinary bad behavior. You both are dismissed.”

Was that said with sarcasm? Connie wondered.

“Yes, Sergeant Major,” Connie said and hurried out of the room. As she ran up the stairs, she heard Master Sergeant Em’s voice admonishing Sammon. “Young one, you need to find better company that doesn’t bully you.”

At the top of the stairs, Sergeant Major Bessie stopped Connie.

“Private Recruit. Hold on a moment.”

Connie froze and waited. “Yes, Sergeant Major.”

“In a few days after your arrival, four guards in other troops have been demoted due to their behavior toward you. The complications are that the gossip among the tower guards will be a mix of how they treat you. The senior staff’s concern is that both of these individuals were motivated by two other individuals who have marked you as a target. We are monitoring but as far as I’m concerned, you have handled yourself very well, but we can’t be everywhere, even if I make that attempt. Be aware that your troop will be there for you. Share any concerns you have with Corporal Kendra and Lance Corporal Kiku, your bunkmates. They have experience in being targeted and can give you support and advice. Unfortunately, this type of behavior is typical toward newbies, and we do discourage it as much as we can.”

Connie nodded. “Yes, Sergeant Major.” Then Connie smiled. “Thank you, Sergeant Major.”

Instead of going to her quarters to study she headed to the kitchen hoping for the nicer energy of Cook’s domain. There she was sure she could figure out how Sigrid got the talisman. Did it mean the talisman had left her? Did she do something against its purpose?

You’re thinking in the wrong direction. It could have fallen out of your pocket.

It should not have fallen out of my pocket unless it wanted to, Connie thought despondently.

If it’s meant to be then let it go. It’s just a tool. You are stronger than that. You have will. Life is full of lessons, and they come in failures and...

All right! Connie shook her head to clear her thoughts. All that thinking wasn’t even from her guides or the spirits in this building. They were coming from her. She was reacting as if something of great value was lost. It was a material thing. Was she relying on something outside of her too much? She was capable of sensing danger outside of herself. Was she relying too much on the stone? No. She didn’t have it that long.

The kitchen was busy with the three cooks and Kalere mixing bread dough for the evening and the next day. Connie sat and watched, thinking of her mother and the

other women in the brethren's compound that got together once a month to bake for the village market that had tables from food to crafts and elaborate art displayed. Plays and pantomimes from local citizens and neighboring towns participated, however, only males from the compound attended, displaying food and some art that their members contributed. She loved the smell of the baking bread and other foods that the women jointly cooked as they sang. Yes, she missed the communal singing of the women. Softly she hummed a tune which Cook smiled at her and burst out in a vibrant off-key rendition of the song. Many women and girls sang it when preparing communal bread for village celebrations. Henry added his low voice, almost drowning out the girls and women's higher voices. The words weren't always the same, but it seemed to be a well-known song by many people in the commonwealth. Connie smiled while she imagined the village women, some with their infants on their backs, working together to celebrate the harvest. Yes, that's what it was. The song of the harvest.

After they finished the song, Henry told stories about life outside of the tower that had Connie and Kalere laughing. The village Truncel, had some entertaining citizens, which Henry described in detail with Cook and Maltie adding small details. He mentioned a shop that in the backroom was where love potions and juju bags were fixed for customers specific needs. He also mentioned it was a favorite place for Sigrid to visit dressed in her best uniform and beret, when she had a day's pass.

"The rule is all tower guards with their day's pass go in pairs and in their dress uniform into Truncel. Wearing the uniform is to keep them on their best behavior so if someone is slighted it's easily reported to the Tower's office," Henry explained.

Cook laughed with Maltie giggling.

"Right, right. As if under scrutiny keeps those meaning to misbehave on their best behavior," Henry said.

Sigrid's visit interested Connie. She studied Henry who was looking at her when he told that story. After his story he discreetly passed her a small box.

"One of the women is my sister-in-law. She gave this to me to return it to you," he said softly. "Perhaps on one of your visits to town you'll stop at the shop House For The Curious and thank her. She's a good soul. She also is one of the teachers of

meditation in the tower's cavern on Sundhira, if you're interested. Early morning before sunrise."

Then Corporal Kedom from Horse Squad joined the kitchen for lunch preparations and everyone became occupied with kitchen duties. Kedom was subdued and said nothing to her or Kalere. Kedom focused on his duties and seemed to be in a hurry to finish his lunch shift and leave. Was it something to do with her? Did he blame her for his two fellow guards being demoted? Why was she feeling guilty?

Everyone has ordinary problems, Connie heard from an unfamiliar voice.

Boys and girls have crushes, a different voice added. *No need for you to get involved in their life lessons, especially those dealing with youthful infatuations.*

Was that what he was bothered about?

The two comments Connie was sure about weren't from her guides. It was like mother giving her advice on not involving herself in another's business when it was not a life and death situation and even then, would it be her responsibility to say something? That was part of the burden of Cassandra, she thought sarcastically, that no one believed Cassandra's warnings, no matter how well intentioned. It also reminded her of the phrase *Primum non nocere*, to do no harm. Mother had told her there were two layers of understanding with this phrase and to do something or not, each had responsibilities.

Feeling rightfully put in her place about meddling with other people's lessons in life, she finished her chores only half listening to Cook's directions to her staff for later dinner preparations. She returned her attention to the contents of the small box. She wanted to see what was in it but not in front of anyone.

During the break instead of going upstairs to her quarters to study, Connie went to where they stored the food cart containers, next to the kitchen, where an entrance to one of the underground tunnels was. Not wanting to investigate the tunnels alone, she instead leaned against the wall and carefully opened the box. Inside was the talisman with a cord. Touching it cautiously Connie waited for something.

I am here. I am yours until you no longer need me.

Well, that's about what they all are about, Sulu said reasonably.

When Connie had picked her other stones in Hillsboro and meditated on them, the message was the same.

Where are you from? Connie asked.

Here. My energy has been used by many soldiers and civilians that have lived here over many years. My purpose is to warn and protect whoever holds me. I cannot be removed from this land as this is my source of energy. When you leave, I remain for the next claimant.

Did I pick you or you pick me? Connie asked.

We chose each other.

It was what mother had described as a true talisman, created for a specific purpose or mission, and attracting the right person at the right time to accomplish its mission. Connie remembered she had spotted one in a shop on the way to school and described it to mother because it felt dangerous. Mother nodded at her description and warned Connie to stay away from that shop since whoever created it either lost their life or it was stolen. Either case, the talisman would continue its mission with another, until someone more powerful than the creator destroyed the talisman or completed its mission.

Connie held the talisman close to her heart, feeling its purpose and picking up some of the energy of those that had claimed it for a while. This was her first talisman. One of the previous holders was Burkee, whose energy she felt was around the first bed in her room. Usually, she picked up stones and crystals whose energy was useful, ready for her to program it. Why she or the talisman's purpose felt she needed to be protected had her thinking about Sigrid. How had Sigrid gotten the talisman? Is it possible to lose a talisman before the partnership was ended? But Sigrid relinquished the talisman to Henry's sister-in-law. Why? Was she compelled or didn't know its significance? Well, for whatever reason, the talisman was returned to her, and she was given an invitation to visit a witch or village shaman. Some people didn't know the difference between the two. Would Sigrid? She claimed to come from a family of diviners. On Sundhira should she visit the cavern? Who else would be there? Sigrid?

She studied the talisman. Was there an intelligent force behind the creation of this talisman where the visit to Henry's sister-in-law was something it was directing her to? Mother had once tried to explain the complexity of universal power, but she fell asleep as

mother's tale of intelligent design and universal power went on in a story she didn't understand.

Connie was early for her dinner shift, since she was near enough to the kitchen to hear Cook and her staff arriving.

From Raven Squad, Private Lio rushed in, breathless and looking like he had taken a quick shower from a strenuous workout. He was smiling.

"I qualified to be on the Goldwah Team!" he said loud enough for everyone in the kitchen to hear. "I had the highest scores in archery, climbing, swimming, and staff work! Running, I was second." His gesture was that that wasn't of consequence.

"Well, we shall be proud to hear of your winning the men's medals," Maltie said. "We'll bake a cake for your wins!"

She turned to Connie who was smiling at Lio's happiness. "They call it the Fourscore Medal, however, since the games took on a serious competition among the ten towers, it's more than four tournaments the winner competes in. Like winning the most addresses of the competitors."

"It's the most won of all the tournaments competed in. Your highest scores are taken and compared to everyone else's," Lio said proudly. "I plan on concentrating on the games, not in collecting names and addresses," he added disdainfully.

"So much confidence," Cook teased. "We shall have fun baking and filling your cake with custard. Is that what you like?"

Everyone laughed at Lio's blush and nod.

When the dinner shift was over still nothing was said about the demotion of three guards. Connie joined her squad that was preparing for a night run equipped with their night gear, down three of the paths into the forest and back to the tower.

For those in the best of shape, the distance could be completed within an hour according to Sergeant Major. To evaluate Private Recruit Connie on her stamina and her reaction to running at night in unfamiliar territory, carrying a weighted load in her pack, Sergeant Major announced to Connie she would be taking a shorter route around a pond, with her accompanying her. She expected her to mix her jogging with walking and estimated it would take about 45 minutes to complete her route.

Wolf Pack assembled outside the tower with their headlamps and weighted packs, eager to finish the night run. Connie shifted her shoulders to find a comfortable spot to carry the weight of the pack. The additional weight in her pack was poking her in the ribs.

“Wolf Pack, on your way!” Sergeant Major shouted. Some of the guards from Raven Squad that were on duty shouted encouragement.

Connie had memorized some of the paths from the computer and felt she knew the path around the pond. However, even with her headlamp shining the way, she found the markers in the dark didn’t look as recognizable as they were in daylight on a computer.

Sergeant Major pointed out the entrance to the path. The path, by the light from her headlamp, wasn’t wide enough for two people to run side by side. Sergeant Major signaled Connie to lead. Connie shifted her pack again to a more comfortable spot and by the time the lights from her squad became nearly impossible to see, Connie began a jog, careful to keep her light on the path and not shining around her lest she run off the path into the brush or stumble over a rock.

“Keep your light tilted so it covers a few yards ahead of you, PR Connie. Listen to what is going around you,” Sergeant Major said softly. “Keep in mind at night predators are out hunting. For us, the predators will be poachers setting traps.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major,” she whispered back.

After ten minutes of jogging Connie slowed to a walk to catch her breath. Relaxing in her walk she could sense some of the nightlife around her. A soft hiss from something she wasn’t sure of what it could be and then a splash had her halting and scanning the dark waters of the pond with her headlamp. When she took a step forward, she tripped on a root and went down with the pack hitting her in the back of the head. Sergeant Major made no attempt to help her up or comment on her fall. As she rolled to get back to her feet. Her palm rested painfully on a stone. She picked it up and stuffed it in her pants pocket without looking at it. She brushed her hands off and resettled her pack before starting off again.

She felt strongly that there was danger there. And the talisman’s increased warmth confirmed her feelings

Yes, her guides whispered. Move away. Trap.

It made Connie happy that she could feel the connection of her guides again. Maybe whatever influence Sigrid had was fading. It reminded her to use a different protection spell that even with a picture of her, or a talisman that she hadn't put an ownership spell on yet, couldn't be used to harm her.

Ownership on a talisman? Connie laughed at herself. She didn't need her guide's amusement to that thought to remind her talismans had their own commitment.

Connie felt Sergeant Major halt close to her. She said nothing but Connie didn't pick up any concern coming from Sergeant Major, so she resumed her jog, hearing another splash as they left the pond behind them. She could sense different life around them, but it was hard to identify what they were.

The Sergeant Major didn't hear what Connie had stopped for, but she did hear the second splash and would have stopped but decided to move on rather than get involved in something with the Private Recruit present. Strange noises in the dark needed two people who knew how to handle trouble, and Private Recruit Connie wasn't near skilled to handle nighttime trouble. She would have Raven Squad, who was on duty, check out the pond area for unwanted predators. She studied the back of Private Recruit Connie jogging ahead of her, wondering what she had sensed to make her pause, and trip over the root she missed noticing. It was right in front of her on the trail, she thought. How could she have missed seeing it?

Connie's noisy footsteps disturbed the nightlife, that moved away or slunk behind a rock until they passed. Sergeant Major believed they were probably used to the young guards running through their territory. By the time they had made it back to the tower the headlamps of the front runners in the squad were bobbing into sight.

Connie could feel her breathing was tight, but she had made her first run without having to walk most of the way.

"By next week you should be able to run on the higher slopes, Private Recruit Connie. You did well."

"Thank you, Sergeant Major," Connie huffed. Connie could feel Sergeant Major was pleased with her first field run, even though she tripped over a root she missed spotting.

“Don’t forget to include in your report of what you saw or didn’t see but expected to. You’ve read enough about the wildlife in our woods to be able to write an intelligent report.”

“Yes, Sergeant Major,” Connie said. She had read about the wildlife around the pond during the daytime but didn’t read any information on the wildlife at night.

Connie was joined by her bunkmates heading to the showers with the rest of the women of Wolf Pack trickling in. They teased each other about their running times and who would be the next leader of their pack on the peak run. The boys headed to their end of the hall, chatting and boasting to each other who was slacking off as they headed to their showers.

None of the girls said anything about the recent demotions, much to Connie’s puzzlement. It should have been an active gossip subject.

“I’m so tired I’m hoping we get light duty tomorrow,” Kiku said. “Maybe I’ll get to be a rover or even better, ride the air cart. Being posted to Tower watch wouldn’t be bad either.”

“I wish you wouldn’t say that. It’s bad luck,” Kendra said. “We have laundry at fourteen hundred hours and that is our rest. I’ll fetch you from kitchen duty, Connie, if you’re still in the kitchen. You have a nice collection of dirty clothes this time.”

Tiredly, the three wrote their reports on what they had encountered or observed on their night exercise.

Connie was looking forward to her dream time with her returned talisman and new stone.

Sergeant Major Bessie found Squad Leader Sergeant Mac, of Raven Squad with Senior Staff Sergeant Dor, both inspecting the surrounding area via night goggles in the Tower next to Private Lio who was listening to communications between the Wall Patrol. They listened to Sergeant Major’s report on suspicious activity around the pond with excitement. It meant their night patrols would be interesting.

“I’ll send you a written report when I return to my office. No incidents requiring a medic,” she reported chuckling.

“I was tracking your squads run, Sergeant Major, and did see more life forms around the pond than usual. I’ll investigate with Lance Corporal Nels who is showing

an interest in tracking,” Senior Staff Sergeant Dor said. “And send an update of what we do or don’t find to the rangers on night patrol.”

Squad Leader Sergeant Mac looked at Sergeant Major Bessie apologetically. “I want to thank you for handling that gossip mess, Sergeant Major. We’re the same age and correcting some of them doesn’t always have the same result unless it comes from you, Sergeant Major,” he said abashedly.

“An elder’s touch does the trick, does it? I think Private Sammons will always be the victim unless someone mentors him, Sergeant Mac. Maybe help him find someone who can support him? Oh, Staff Sergeant Dor, take the air cart in case it’s a suspected poacher encroachment. I would hate to lose you to a poacher trap,” she teased.

“Me too, Sergeant Major,” the elder laughed. “I kind of like working at night and would hate to see you replacing me while I’m in recovery.”

“And me too,” Sergeant Mac said. Lio nodded his head vigorously in agreement.

On Sergeant Major’s Walk back to her quarters she was thinking of speaking with the counselors that were training the troop leaders on guiding their members to healthier outlets. Sammon was falling into cracks and too often guards like Tess and Sigrid found it too easy to bully him.

5th Day

At Wolf Pack’s morning assembly, Sergeant Major was not looking pleased.

“Listen up Wolf Pack. Did you fall asleep writing your trail inspection report?”

Connie could feel the group’s uneasiness.

Sergeant Major glared at her assembled troop. “You’re no longer in primary school. Some of you have been here nearly three years and the majority of you failed to mention obvious placements of objects NOT usually along the trail you ran. Your trail runs are always inspections of the area you cover! In addition to that, the other two squads during their patrols identified poacher activity in our portion of assigned patch of the woods to patrol, and only a few of you from Wolf Pack did.”

She waited a few moments before going on. “For the few that did write an informative report you’ll get rewarded with a surprise dessert from Cook.” She grinned at the moans from those that knew they didn’t write acceptable reports. “Before you

take your sentry posts for the day, read the report from 2nd shifts squad leader. He summarized what his squad observed during their security watch. This is daily procedure so why is it necessary for me to remind you? Because you're slipping," she answered for them. "The present squad will give you a verbal turnover and note what needs to be followed up. You are tower guards and being paid to do a job with responsibilities. You're not children anymore getting an allowance for doing nothing."

Sergeant Major read the names and what positions of guard duty the squad members would be taking. Connie was relieved she had kitchen duty.

Connie stood up straighter, startled. Did she hear right? Would she be accompanying Sergeant Major on her inspection flight along the wall and parts of the forest?

"Wolf Pack, you've got a lot of reading to do before you're on duty. Read and eat fast and don't be late. You're dismissed."

Kendra grabbed Connie's arm as she hesitated to follow the rest of the squad that was hurrying for the mess hall.

"There's nothing to be alarmed about riding an air patrol cart with Sergeant Major," Kendra said. "Every Private Recruit gets a glimpse of changing of the guard on the wall. She'll ask a lot of questions to see just how much you observe. Sergeant Major does it with every Private Recruit in all the squads," she reassured Connie. "All the sergeants in the troops get very nervous that they may do something wrong or NOT do something that should be automatic. You'll do okay. You read enough to know what's what and she'll not expect you to know the entire subject a second-year guard should know. Remember. You need to observe and listen very carefully because you'll be writing a report on this inspection."

Both girls grabbed the rolled breakfast meals that could be eaten on the run and sat in front of the terminals in the hall to read the shift report the Sergeant Major ordered them to read.

"Where do I go?" Connie asked between bites.

"Follow Corporal Bly. She's going to join Horse Squad's Student Guard Corporal Mauli on the air bus to pick up Horse Squads guards on duty and replace them with our guards. That's where..."

Sergeant Major chose that time to enter the mess hall and gestured to Connie. She wore an outdoor warm coat and wore a gold beret. This wasn't going to be a usual training run, Connie thought. Usually, Sergeant Major wore the maroon beret when she worked with Wolf Pack.

Connie was going to take her half-eaten breakfast wrap when Kendra touched her shoulder and shook her head. "You don't want to eat in an air cart the Sergeant Major is flying. Go, I'll pick up our dishes."

Bly on seeing the Sergeant Major was already getting up and heading to the garage. She waved at Wolf Pack guards that were to be posted on the wall, to join her in the airbus.

The air cart Sergeant Major got in was a four-seater. "Strap in, Private Recruit. We're going to be watching not just the changing of the guards but hear the verbal shift turn-over report, compliments of our link with the watch towers communications."

The air cart moved out of the garage and into the air before Sergeant Major finished speaking. Connie thought about the little bit of food she ate; grateful it was only a few bites.

Sergeant Major flew her cart along the wall that Goldwah's first post would be stationed. "Our guard at post one will walk for 20 minutes to where the Nordbold tower's student guard will walk her or his length of a 20-minute patrol. If they should meet, they share reports on activity they had spotted whether suspicious or not. Pretty from up high in the daylight. But they mustn't get distracted with the beauty to miss anything out of place."

Connie agreed it was beautiful up so high, as the tips of the trees below them were not covered with snow like the branches further down. By the looks of the bending tree tops it was windy outside of their air cart, however Sergeant Major held their cart steady, so the wind's effect was insignificant to their flight.

"The twenty minutes' walk include the guard's report of any activity in the land around the wall. The guard is actively looking. When the two tower guards meet they will give a brief status of their patrol and head back to their starting point. The Goldwah Tower guard will repeat over their communicator a short version of what the Nordbold guard had to say. This information is passed on to the Goldwah Watch Tower Guards

who pass it on to all the guards along the wall. It sounds effective enough,” Sergeant Major said in a tight voice, “however, minds wander and chatting with a guard from another tower too long gets tempting. That’s why the squad leader monitors the guards and keeps them focused.”

From where the two different tower guards would meet Sergeant Major flew the cart above the forest giving Connie a bird’s view of the wall’s both sides with more snow on one side, and lots of trails leading into the forest on both sides. Just as Connie thought she saw a lot of movement in the forest on the commonwealth’s side Sergeant Major suddenly changed course and was back to flying along the wall.

“I think the changing of the guard should be taking place now.”

Connie was about to say something but remembered Kendra’s advice of observing unless Sergeant Major asked a question and leave the rest in her report.

The communicator in their air cart confirmed the air bus was at post one.

They arrived to see Kiku stepping out of the hovering bus but before the Horse Squad member got on the bus an argument seemed to be going on between Bly and Maui.

“What do you think is going on there?” Sergeant Major said softly. The chatter over the communicator was muffled. Connie glanced at Sergeant Major wondering if she wanted her to say something. Sergeant Major nodded to her.

“The exchange of information is not what Corporal Bly feels is adequate enough for a shift turnover to Lance Corporal Kiku,” Connie guessed.

Sergeant Major laughed. “Exactly. Good guess.” She turned her attention back to the arguing pair, but she was amused at how well Connie could hear or read lips. Then Connie surprised her by adding. “It was an easy guess, Sergeant Major. Corporal Bly’s stance and shoulders are like she doesn’t like what she’s hearing.”

“That is a good distance read,” Sergeant Major praised.

The conversation ended and the Horse Squad guard got on board the air bus and off it went to the next post. They left Kiku starting her 20 minute walk in the direction of Nordbold tower.

“It’s good that she wants to establish connection with the other tower’s guard. She’ll probably have to wait a few minutes for their guard to reach her. Sometimes the

twenty-minute walk is done faster, or slower, or not in sync with the other guard. No worries because there is on-going communication with our watch tower on where each guard is on their patrol.”

“What makes it important to get a turn-over report?” Sergeant Major Bessie asked Connie as they headed to the next post.

“To be able to continue watching a particular active spot or confirm with watch tower who is also completing a shift-turnover with the previous troop that what is or isn’t reported is what the guard will follow up with.”

“Very good. So, the troop previously on the wall patrol will eat a quick meal and head out to inspect the trails that their troop may have reported some activity on during the night. That is their follow up to see what they observed through the night scopes in daylight. Poacher activity is one of our main responsibilities to report. In the case of post one, because it crosses with another tower it can be vulnerable to poacher activity. Lately, post one has been too quiet for a vulnerable area and Corporal Bly was observant to note that and object to Corporal Maui’s guard’s lack of a detailed report to Lance Corporal Kiku.”

At the next two posts exchanges all went smoothly. Sergeant Major decided to move to the last post, six, where the two tower guards would meet. Instead of a tower guard, what was waiting was an air cart with two passengers and with no guard in sight.

“Sergeant Major Bessie to watch tower, report.”

“Ranger Burg reporting that the investigation and necessary clearing has commenced, and students are standing down until directed to return to their duty.”

“Thank you, Ranger Burg. Be nice to my young guards,” Sergeant Major warned.

“On my honor, Sergeant Major. No bruised feelings. Out.”

Connie glanced at Sergeant Major. It was an arranged meeting.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Sergeant Major Bessie of Wolf Pack.” The uniformed pilot stepped out of her air cart. Like Sergeant Major Bessie she wore a gold beret, and her warm coat had sleeve markings like Sergeant Major Bessie’s. She turned to a young girl dressed in what could be a uniform. “She’s a good example of what happens when

the Draft Board makes mistakes. As Sergeant Major she is responsible for all the troops of Goldwah Tower so when a slot isn't filled..."

"Sergeant Major Hillary. What are you teaching to the youth about leadership? I remember not so long ago you had a gap of your own to fill."

To Connie's surprise the two suddenly laughed as old friends.

"So, they sent you out here too, so that Sergeant Majors that know too much can't interfere with the ranger's investigation and the conservationists' removing traps. It would have been a great learning experience for the student guards to be part of the clean up," Sergeant Major Hillary said to the young girl sitting in the passenger seat.

"How big is it?" Bessie asked.

Sergeant Major Hillary glanced at her passenger. Connie thought she was asking silently her permission to speak.

We think you need to stay out of this, Callie Can whispered to Connie.

The two women stepped away from Connie to continue their conversation.

Ten minutes passed and then the passenger rose from her seat as communication devices went off.

"All clear," her young voice said.

When the passenger rose to stand, Connie could feel this wasn't just a passenger along for the ride. Her stature may have been that of a young person, but she conveyed authority. Her uniform had unfamiliar emblems. Of course. The Domono's had a picture of their son in his sailor uniform with similar emblems. The young girl was far from the sea.

The two women moved back to their air carts.

"Well, Sergeant Major, it was nice visiting with you," Hillary said to Bessie.

"Nice visiting with you and Ensign Neda," Sergeant Major Bessie said, glancing at the ensign.

"It was nice meeting you, Sergeant Major Bessie. Be safe." Ensign Neda's gaze went to Connie, and she added. "Walk in awareness, Private Recruit. **Your time will come.**"

Connie was surprised at the salutation, for she was sure she had heard it before. And the last thing she said. She felt it as if it was a physical touch on her solar plexus.

What had mother taught her about the importance of knowing her chakras? She didn't have much more time to think about it as Sergeant Major Bessie was rising and accelerating quickly back toward their tower. Connie held on tightly as her stomach gave a lurch. It was good she hadn't eaten much for breakfast.

Sergeant Major Bessie turned the communicator up as Sergeant Major Hillary's air cart disappeared toward Istobel's tower. They both could hear their watch tower confirm the student guards had been given back control of the tower. From the distance a lone figure was walking toward them from Istobel Tower.

Connie turned toward Goldwah Tower and could see Private 1st Class Turi approaching quickly, almost at a run. Sergeant Major Bessie quickly slowed down and settled the air cart on the walls walk so Turi didn't have far to reach them. Breathlessly he tried to say something to Sergeant Major when he reached them, but she silenced him with a hand signal.

"Keep alert and report only what you see, Private 1st Class Turi. We all know the rangers and conservationists made a sweep so anything they missed; we need to spot it first."

Still out of breath he nodded and waved at the other guard approaching.

"Don't chat too long and know that our watch tower needs an update of his report," Sergeant Major said.

Sergeant Major didn't wait for a reply but had the air cart up and moving quickly out of the tower's walkway and headed into the forest. Then suddenly veered back to the wall.

"Looks like they're still cleaning up and don't want a nosey Sergeant Major poking around."

Sergeant Major Bessie left Connie in the garage with a warning to say nothing of what occurred until Captain Sahem asked in person.

Connie was assigned for the rest of the day to help Cook arrange for a large Captain's dinner. It was from Corporal Lana who excitedly reported that due to evidence of poacher traps scattered in the woods it was ordered from the top general overseeing the preservation of wildlife habitats that a special detachment of the Rangers and the Conservationists of Wildlife would search and remove traps along the wall and

around all the ten towers' draftees were assigned. Apparently, their tower wasn't the only one that had poacher activity reported.

Connie was again surprised for a gossip tower, no one was commenting that Sammon and Tess were demoted. She worried about Sigrid's state of mind. No one said anything about her or if she was demoted too. If so, Sigrid's visits to the old woman's backroom would be expected and since she was related to Henry, Cook would know what Sigrid was up to. She wondered if Sigrid would be at the Sundhira early morning meditation.

Her thoughts moved back to what Corporal Lana was saying about reported poachers in the area and recalled the splash she heard on her run. Maybe it was from poaching activity. She was relieved she did mention it in her report. On her first break she intended to read more on poacher activity and how to spot it and what to include in a description in case she witnessed a suspected poacher presence. During her laundry time with Kendra and Kiku she would catch up on what was written by her troop that brought disapproval from Sergeant Major.

By the time she finished her laundry with Kendra and Kiku she learned who in the troop did not report what they had observed because they believed their running partner would report it. Kendra, as SG would know who slacked off in their report. She was very detailed in her reporting, hoping to be promoted sergeant with good marks. Kiku, was less detailed but did report the obvious and wasn't interested in earning sergeant stripes before her four years were up.

And finally, Kendra did mention that there were three guards who were demoted in rank for malicious gossip. Kendra didn't mention the names but by Kiku's snickers they both knew who they were.

"Some people just don't learn and certainly prove changing one's character is going to take more than hitting them with a witches wand to change," Kendra said.

Both girls snickered then burst out laughing.

Connie looked at the squads list of members on her terminal, the names and their ranks were posted, with a reason for their demotion. Next to the reason she could see the privilege to visit the town on a day's pass was revoked, length of time undetermined.

She needn't worry about the shortcomings in shift turnover report writing. When Raven Squad relieved Wolf Pack from guard duty, Sergeant Major had everyone studying how to write a proper report for shift turnover, with detailed instructions on checking the trails around the tower. And instead of hand-to-hand combat training before turning in, weapons training was given. Since deadly military grade weapons were not cleared due to their age, stun sticks, bully sticks, and discovering how to use what was on hand should any of them be confronted by armed poachers was given. Sergeant Major again emphasized that when they patrol anything out of place it was to be done in pairs with their radios operational and in constant contact with the tower guards, to receive and pass on information. They were not to rely on the coaching of the rangers that accompanied them on training sessions, to write their reports.

6th Day

On Connie's 6th day instead of running up to her room to study during her kitchen break she choose to explore some of the tunnels shown on the tower's map to see what was in the rooms marked with runes. According to the computer translator they referred to what the building was originally designed for, now used for other things, from student crafts to entertainment. She would also see if she could locate where the cavern for religious and spiritual practices was. She had checked times for the various religious teachers and found the spiritual meditation was the earliest. However, she was curious what the other religions were about and would visit each.

One of the entrances to dozens of underground tunnels was near the kitchen's food and supply storage area. It would have taken her a while to figure out how to open the door since there wasn't a handle on the outside, only the outline of the door. However, Corporal Lana of Horse Squad suddenly burst through the doorway that swung open and a startled Connie took a step back. Lana appeared to be frustrated and was crying. Embarrassed Lana stepped back into the tunnel. Connie caught something Lana had been holding as it flew out of her hand while another item dropped to the stone floor. When Connie stepped into the tunnel to hand Lana what she caught and pick up what landed on the tunnel floor, the door closed. The tunnel was well lit showing a smooth stone floor, walls and ceiling. It was amazing. The diagram didn't say anything about how the doorways opened.

“You nearly lost these...” Connie could feel the energy from the stones when her fingers curled around them. One was made of obsidian and the other of clay. She turned them over in her hand recognizing the designs. “I know these symbols. Isa and Inanna,” Connie said surprised. “One is used by a sea village in the north and this one, Inanna is from the mountain villages in Mortallian, not part of the lands of the Royal House of Eameet.” Connie smiled at Lana’s surprised expression. “The old women that run a shop of Treasures in my hometown had them and other divining and sacred objects to sell and teach others about them. I remember in one reading, the rune of Isa she compared to her tarot card of the Hanged Man and Inanna as what occurs when in meditation, which she called introspection.” Connie chuckled. “The reading was for a woman who was going to marry for the third time.”

“Oh. You know the ancient languages of the witches and seers,” Lana said surprised. “Are you going to attend the early morning meeting in the cavern on Sundhira?”

“It’s the language of ordinary people too. I just listened while people came to their shop.” Connie explained. “On rainy days after school let out, many of the parents stopped in the shop for advice.” Connie smiled in remembrance. “They would tell others it was just for fun, yet their children said they believed. Some of my schoolmates had their entire life changed with warnings.”

Connie continued to turn the two tokens around in her hand.

Lana studied Connie for a few moments, her tears forgotten. She was rethinking her information about Connie. Perhaps, she was a witch like some of the guards warned when their pranking her backfired on them.

“You made these?” Connie looked down at the tokens and asked.

Lana sighed. “I do for extra funds for the shop of the Curious. It’s called House for the Curious. The owner gave me the designs, and I created them in the workshop. She pays me for my work.”

“What has you upset?” Connie asked.

“Someone got into my cabinet and destroyed all my work except these two items.”

“Ah. No, lock on your cabinet?”

“There shouldn’t have to be locks. Honor and respect are the issues here!”

“Do you know who did it?” Connie could see the anger in her eyes.

“I don’t have proof. Our workshop is managed by fellow guards for each shift. Someone isn’t always there only when help in a design is requested.”

“These have power, energy. Did you do that?”

“Well, maybe,” she answered defensively.

“Obsidian is a powerful stone to keep as protection.” Connie handed her back her work.

“Well, on Sundhira I’m going to ask our leader to see what needs to be done.”

3rd Week Ten Towers Competition

The Tower Competitions arrived on Connie’s twentieth day at the tower. The competitors that passed the final qualifiers from Tower Goldwah filled the bus with their sports equipment, tent, cots and other necessary supplies for the two weeks, which would take them to an air carrier to fly them to the city of Arbre that was hosting the event. Squad emblems and ranks were not displayed on their sport uniforms since they were representing Tower Goldwah as a group. Ruana was the first on board, then Jov, Sada, Amoke, Gafna, Lio, and Lana who replaced Sigrid with Vivian boarding last, and no Tess who had bragged she was planning on being among the chosen.

The captain joined Medic Connie as part of the medical support team in an air cart which flew them directly to Arbre with Lt. Hellene before dawn. Connie’s medic uniform was distinctive as her new beret that was white with blue piping on the crown. She was addressed as Student Medic Connie by Lt. Hellene and the Captain.

Lt. Hellene kept Connie busy with verifying where the supplies were stored on the shelves in the medical tent. The supplies had begun being delivered shortly after they had arrived. While Connie took a break one of the judges, an older ranger with a white closely cut beard and gold stars on his coat, explained to her that Arbre was a wealthy area with manicured yards and polite but distant citizens. They were hosting because they already had all the venues for their citizens. Connie wondered for a moment if their children were drafted, but when a young Arbre Tower guard appeared with snacks for her and Lt. Hellene, she guessed they didn’t get moved far from home.

He wore none of the patches she was familiar with that Tower Goldwah used to distinguish squad or rank, nor cover, but his hair was a thick wild reddish color, that any cover would have been difficult to fit. Perhaps he was a newbie and they didn't cut their members hair as short as Tower Goldwah did.

The sport uniforms bore only the wearers Tower affiliation but once the competitors began arriving everyone mingled as if remeeting, exchanging challenges and gossip. Since it was a yearly two-week competition, she guessed many of the veterans of the competitions knew each other. She watched from the medical tent as rivalries began to take on a more serious tone. Tents for each of the competing towers were set up with flags for each tower flapping in the wind. Each tower's tent had privacy areas for changing as well as sleeping areas for cots at nighttime. Curfew was strictly enforced with no comingling between competitors or youthful romantic visits between tower guards or amongst the boys and girls in the same tower.

Captain Sahem, with his distinguished beret, his flash depicting his past affiliation with the Royal Guards as well as his current assignment as captain of Goldwah Tower, the dragon, walked to all the staging areas to keep the Goldwah Tower entrants focused on their events. When Lio stopped by the medical tent for a word of support from Connie, his confidence wasn't as strong as it had been. The tower he thought he had to beat in the boy's fourscore, turned out it wasn't. Connie reminded him he had spent a lot of time working on his timing and skills and if he did his best, he could win his events.

"Well, Doc Hellene, did we supply you with enough for repairing the young, injured champions," a pleasant voice asked. The voice had the same accent as Captain Sahem.

Connie was outside of the tent carting in another box of bandages when the delightfully dressed elder walked into their medical tent, politely giving Connie space to wheel in the supplies.

Hellene laughed. "Margo, this is exactly what an army on their first skirmish would need supporting them. Student Medic Connie, this is Lady Margo who has invited the ten towers' planners to have these competitions in her very pretty city."

Lady Margo tossed her red silk scarf over her right shoulder, in a well-practiced move as it slipped off the left shoulder. “Well, it was a tough one at first to win over the others. They don’t even use all the equipment or areas themselves. It’s languishing!” She leaned over toward Connie and said in a low voice, “Even their precious teens that they get posted in their tower don’t use them. Wimps, the whole bunch.”

“Maybe the games will inspire them,” Hellene said amusingly.

“The four who are inspired are here to ogle the girls. I’ve sent in another complaint with the draft board to prevent such favored postings.”

Connie studied the woman whose eyes changed colors as she moved from shadow to light. They were the same color as Captain Sahem’s; however, her hair color was as bright red as her scarf, unlike Captain Sahem’s dark hair that was cut short for this event and his mustache freshly trimmed and treated with wax to keep the ends curled up, which Connie thought was impressive.

“What has you thinking so hard, Student Medic Connie?” Lady Margo asked.

Connie quickly thought of something to say and not about her fascination with Captain Sahem’s mustache care. “I noticed the guard that came by with refreshments had no patches.”

“Oh, that young boy,” she said exasperated. “He hasn’t been drafted yet. He wants to be in the Royal Cadet Corps, which his mother refuses to acknowledge, so he goes about in the uniform of the Arbore tower guards, preparing himself for his imagined future. He’s my last child,” she admitted with a dramatic sigh.

Hellene patted her on the shoulder. “Look at Captain Sahem, your cousin! He turned out alright and a fine leader of...”

“Draftees!” she said exasperated. “I don’t know why he gave up his...” she stopped, realizing Connie, still a child to her way of thinking, was listening.

“If you want to know what our tower guards have chosen for a uniform, totally not practical, you can see a few of them standing outside of the swimming pool. They hope to impress the girls. I hope those teenagers don’t lose focus on winning the prize and not on romantic encounters that don’t have a chance of lasting beyond these two weeks.”

“I’ve seen the uniforms of each tower on the computer,” Connie said. “They look nice in their dress uniforms, Lady Margo.”

Lady Margo laughed. “That’s their favorite uniform! Well, except when the weather gets cold like today. Then they do have a coat. The boys and girls take too much time in learning to march in formation, forgetting their primary duty is to guard the tower. However, they do look pretty when in a formal assembly and march about in perfect step when dignitaries visit.” She glanced at Hellene. “Our city offers the rangers a retreat for the tired and over worked to languish about,” she teased, “so we do have a healthy number of rangers protecting our pretty city, as you refer to our home.”

“That isn’t a retreat, Student Medic. It’s a training center to keep their skills up to date in technology,” Hellene corrected with humor.

“Of course, since we have the funds for such a center. It’s our way of paying for a safety net incase some nutcase wants to challenge our one person police department.”

Connie smiled at the faces Lady Margo made and her grand gestures when talking.

“Here come the first casualties,” Hellene said softly.

“And I must get going. I need to put the face of the city around the various game sites and see how cousin is faring. And I must see if his magnificent mustache is holding up to the cold weather. He does still have his mustache?”

“Oh, yes!” Connie said enthusiastically.

Both women laughed and Lady Margo waved goodbye.

The first two casualties were not for their participation in a sport but for their warmups. Hellene let Connie tend to one of the boys while she bandaged up the other.

“When you warmup, don’t work so hard,” Hellene advised.

His friend snickered. “It’s the fair and lovely Tower Goldwah’s Guard Sada, that he had his eyes on and NOT where he was going. Woe is me,” he mocked, “that my partner gets so distracted before the meet and injures us both by running our vehicle into a rampart.”

“Says you,” his friend challenged. “You need to keep your focus on the games and not shoot a bystander with an arrow!”

The two left the tent, with bandages to support their wrists, still arguing over whose fault was to blame for their injuries. They were participating in the stick fighting competition and archery.

“Kids,” Hellene said. “This is one of the downsides of these competitions. Too many hormonal teens running about. They’ll get the computer mail address of someone they’re interested in and whatever they do write to another their computer mail will be scanned for anything a concerned parent would be scandalized with and censored. Keep that in mind,” Hellene cautioned Connie.

“No worries there. I don’t open my computer mail,” Connie said.

“You don’t? You don’t have anyone that writes to you?”

“The few I opened on my first day were offensive. If I went by Sergeant Major’s code of ethics, it would be my duty to report receiving such messages. I would rather spend my time on the computer studying my lessons and looking up interesting subjects than bothering about sorting through what is and isn’t acceptable.”

Connie studied Lt. Hellene. “Do you think my avoidance is something like being derelict in my duties?”

Lt. Hellene laughed. “I think you are good at managing your own time.” Lt. Hellene was suspicious about the originator of the offensive messages. Since messages were reviewed by senior staff on a rotating basis, and she hadn’t heard from anyone about reading Connie’s mail, she wondered just who was assigned to being mail monitor on Connie’s arrival date. She would investigate that. She had been away during that week so maybe the person assigned to it took care of it themselves. Would that be Sahem?

As the games progressed more injuries came in either for wrapping a leg that needed additional support or a scrape from the climbing wall.

“How many guards come to these games, Lt. Hellene?” Connie asked between patients.

“Well, all ten towers participate, including Arbre, regardless of Lady Margo’s downplay on their participation, so about a hundred. The Draft Administration that encourages these competitions sends a military cadet to fill the slots of the missing guards at the various towers. It’s become tradition.” Lt. Hellene grinned. “And that

causes a bit of chaos when an adult cadet ranks below a boy or girl of higher rank orders the adult around. That is another reason Sergeant Major needs to remain behind. With her and the Staff Sergeants, they keep the chaos down. The cadets are usually only a few years older than the tower guards, but they are considered adults whereas the student guards are seen as children. There are some student guards that get it in their heads to bully the cadets, or the cadets choose not to take direction from what they see as a child.”

“I can see where that would be a problem.”

“Yes. And you and I don’t have to witness any of the headaches.” Lt. Hellene grinned. “Of course, Cookie does her own keeping the peace with her cooking. Never underestimate the cook in the military.”

Connie grinned. “I won’t.”

Lt. Hellene pointed to a young girl with bright red hair trailing behind her as she hurried down a slope. “That is Lady Margo’s older daughter who is a student tower guard. She’s a darn good athlete but this year is her last year in the guard, and she has decided not to compete. She doesn’t really have anyone to challenge her skills in the tower competitions since our guard Burkee left, so she competes in the neighboring city at their intercity competitions where older competitors with skills that match hers give her a challenge. She is eighteen and, in less than a week, will end her four years of service.”

“Lady Margo didn’t mention her.”

Hellene laughed and was silent for a few minutes. “She trains with her father, the town’s athletic trainer who encourages her and a dozen or so athletes at Arbre Tower. I suspect the idea of her youngest child, Earnie, who plans on joining the Cadet Corps after his four years, comes from family tradition not from her talented daughter that she suspects of as the reason. She is so much like her mother at that age. I would imagine Captain Sahem will give her some advice on what to include in her job application to the Cadet Corps. Chances are, she’ll make her cousin proud as well as her mother. She’s more like Captain Sahem’s side of the family. Soldiers all of them,” she laughed. “Margo was a good soldier too! She was a colonel until she retired. Now she manages Arbre like she did her troops. Only it’s not the same, as troops have to follow

orders, and the civilian residents of Arbore need to be coddled to get things done properly.” Chuckling, Hellene turned away to pick up some loose tape that didn’t make it to the trash can. Connie could feel Hellene’s love for Lady Margo. Connie felt certain they were related. Was Lt. Hellene related to Captain Sahem?

Rangers, in their camouflage uniforms, and some Regimental Soldiers acting as judges dressed in their full-dress uniforms, with badges of honor, stopped by the medical tent. They were impressed with their supplies for being from a small tower like Goldwah. Hellene didn’t bother telling them the supplies were from the town Arbore. She took it as teasing and returned with her own jibes and then another group of young athletes that had bumps and bruises came in. No broken bones, thankfully.

After an intense week and then another week of the final competitions, Tower Goldwah took a fourscore award in the girls and boys and other awards in single competitions. Tower Britton took one of the singles in swimming, with Istobel Tower taking the rest of the singles in the boys’ competitions. And Rose Tower, staffed by girls only, tied Tower Goldwah in the fourscore for the girls and in all the singles, though some of the other towers did get second and thirds but the prize sought after was taking first place. All in all, it was festive and fun even if Connie hadn’t time to stroll around the grounds to meet other tower guards. Connie did meet one of the male competitors she took a liking to that cut his hand on wall climbing. They took an instant like for each other.

If Connie wasn’t so dead set against being one of Cook’s predicted romantic connections, Connie might have done more than noted his name, Eric. Her experience with Sammon was also enough to keep acquaintances at casual verbal meetings and no exchanging of computer addresses. Since she shunned opening her computer mail, it was a safe decision on her part.

Lt. Hellene didn’t miss the interest the two teens showed in their body language. Teen’s, Lt. Hellene thought. Sergeant Major Bessie was going to have a lot to say about their trying to be casual about their chat within her hearing which was about nothing.

On returning to the Tower, the newly promoted Corporal Lio and Corporal Gafna’s fourscore award for the boys and girls of the Ten Tower Competition was proudly displayed in the mess hall. Cook made sure each had a huge cake of their

favorite flavor to share with all the tower guards. Captain Sahem arranged for the two to have a day pass in Truncel to spend their winnings, if that was what they wanted.

This occasion required participants to wear their finest uniforms, complete with squad berets and ribbons signifying previous competition achievements. Local businesses extended congratulations, while food retailers offered sweet samples in recognition of their accomplishments.

Surprising enough, the other competitors from Tower Goldwah were gracious over not winning the fourscore awards but did place in individual competitions. Connie thought it had to do with Cook's baking a large cupcake for each of them. Cook stuffed the cupcakes with cream, chocolate or cherry, depending on the taste of the winner. Cook knew the tastes of everyone, especially after years of feeding them.

5th week of Connie's Duty

Senior Staff Meeting

Senior Staff met after the kitchen lunch staff cleaned up so that Cook was able to attend since she had a lot to say about the guards that were assigned to assist in her kitchen. The attendees were Captain Sahem, Lt. Hellene, Sergeant Major Bessie, Staff Sergeants Em and Dor, Cook and Henry, Cook's assistant. Maltie was left to manage the kitchen so the food simmering in the pots for dinner didn't just have Student Kelere worrying over so many cooking pots.

"Has everyone had a chance to read our review of outstanding problems, guards, kitchen support, tower maintenance successes and failures, etc.?" Captain Sahem asked.

All hands were raised in assent.

"Does this update have my request for a future draftee replacement when Kelere graduates out?" Cook asked.

"A permanent assignment?" Henry asked hopefully.

"Did you write up a request for a draftee on a permanent four-year assignment?" Em asked, wondering how lucky Cook would be in getting another permanent student assigned to her staff.

"Can't I just make a verbal request?" Cook asked.

"This is a military base, of sorts," Em said amused. "We still must push such special requests through the chain of command. Think of the administrators for

assigning draftees finding a reason to assign a new four-year post to a military institution, and what educational program to devise that allow the draftee a basic education and at the same time learn a trade having nothing to do with guarding our tower.”

“They’ve had over four years,” Cook grumbled.

“And we’ve made it work, during that time, but really not without hearing some of the student help bemoaning that they think Kelene is getting off easy,” Henry said.

“It has put a strain on the troop that she was assigned to. They had to cover all three shifts they’d been assigned with one person short. I’ve been sending inquiries about opening a teaching slot in the kitchen. It would be a shame to waste your teaching talent, Cook,” Sahem said.

“In that case, on the same request to the Draft Board, Sahem, we need to add our requests for draftees with specific talents or interests that will be replacing our graduates that are leaving by the beginning of next year, and those a month later,” Hellene said.

“I’ll add Cook’s request to my long wish list. How are the sergeant tests for the Wolf Pack squad leader coming along, Bessie?” Sahem asked.

“Good. To finish off the requirements for the best qualified, trail test in snow and rain will need to be completed. I already have someone in mind but it’s only fair to finish the qualifying skill tests,” Bessie said.

“How is the new draftee, Private Connie doing?” Staff Sergeant Dor asked.

Everyone looked at him surprised.

“I’ve read her glowing report as a kitchen staff worker, but I find it hard to anticipate any learning difficulties she may have at night work on guard duty. I like to be prepared when she’s moved to 2nd shift,” he explained. “It’s this week, yes?”

“Starting tomorrow are the shift rotations. This is her fifth week, and she’s shown she’s a fast learner in her online classes and tasks that are demonstrated to her. I’ve added more advanced studies to keep her challenged,” Bessie said. “We can start her slow with pairing her with Corporal Ancell. He’s patient and a good teacher in the maintenance of the air carts and doing messenger duties along the wall.”

“Unfortunately, her intelligence and likeability among most guards does make her a target to some of our students, for they are still remembering another gifted guard from the same group who ran circles around them,” Hellene said.

“You’re speaking about the questionable computer mails sent to another tower’s guard?” Sahem asked.

“Indeed, and the trouble is coming from the same two that were causing her trouble since she’s arrived. They’ve been demoted due to it. How they found out that Medic Connie spoke to Corporal Eric of Briton Tower is still puzzling, but the explicit and vulgar mailings sent in her name from the public library in Truncel by Lance Corporals Tess and Sigrid need to be addressed with harsher punishments than demotion in rank and assigned to dump duty. How many NJP actions are on the list now? Counseling doesn’t seem to be working with those two girls,” Hellene said. “Their gossip is undermining a unified and cohesive working relationship between the troops.”

“I have removed those two guards from day passes,” Sahem said. “But we do need to make sure they get the message. This is the same behavior they exhibited toward Student Guard Burkee.”

“Public humiliation?” Cook asked. Cook looked around to see how her suggestion was received. “I really like Connie.”

“The demotion was public humiliation,” Bessie explained. “How old are they, seventeen and on their 3rd and 4th year?”

“I’ll call each of them into my office and make sure they know if they get another conduct disciplinary action, they will finish their service in a behavioral correctional institution. Not a good mark for us on correcting bad conduct but according to their past record they were sent to a military type setting for the discipline the Draft Administration had hoped would turn them around. They must stop sending so many problem children to our tower, hoping for miraculous changes. What’s happening to the youth in the commonwealth?” Sahem said disappointedly.

Hellene didn’t bother to answer that rhetorical question since every generation had problems with children, however, their tower did seem to get difficult draftees before they had the last problem handled.

“One more chance, it will be, if we agree, Sahem? Good. Then we shall move on to the boys that have behavior problems,” Hellene said. Since she ran the clinic her mental and physical reports were closely examined by the senior staff and another agency in the draft administration that monitored all draftees’ medical records.

“I have something to say about a few of them,” Cook said. “I’ve already had my say with the girls that I don’t want assigned to my kitchen and as for the boys, there are three.”

Henry made a sound of agreement.

“Alright, I have here Private Abasi and Private Sammon of Horse Squad and Private Trey of Raven Squad,” Sahem said. “Let’s leave Sammon and Trey separate since Bessie has information on them.”

“Private Abasi is 18 years old and in his last year here. I’ve had discussions with his squad leader who has been attending the sergeants training and showing on his tests that he understands the methods of handling bad behaviors, but I think Student Guard First Sergeant Elroy of Horse Squad who is 18 and is finishing his last year, has lost his enthusiasm for applying his leadership responsibilities. Student Guard Sergeant Ruana, his support and next in line for the leadership has more of an interest in keeping up the discipline but she needs the support of her squad’s leader, Elroy,” Bessie said.

“I agree with what she said,” Em said. “I’m all for just sending him packing to an institution that is made for handling such foolishness.”

“I think you’re both right about Abasi, and Cook,” Sahem nodded to Cook who was going to say something. “I’ve already informed Abasi that one more misconduct or complaint about him he’ll be transferred to a correctional school.”

“What about Private Sammon, Sahem? He is gullible and slow to learn, besides being clumsy. On reading his record, on the trails if there is something to stumble over, he’ll find it,” Em said.

“I may have information on that,” Bessie said. Sahem nodded at Bessie to go ahead. “Yesterday, one of the rangers that monitors the troops when they’re out on the trails thought he might be a *lowlet*.” Bessie waited for the group around the table to digest this information.

“I thought a *lowlet* was a gnome or dwarf or a fairy, or something along those types of beings,” Cook said.

Hellene looked up Sammon’s parentage at the terminal near them. “Well, he was an orphan from the farmlands along the old trail that crossed into Morwea lands before the wall was erected. Do you think one of his relatives crossed the species line?”

“Doesn’t each draftee processing center have a medical team looking over each child before accepting them?” Dor asked. “I ask that because I’ve had no problem with him on night security, with the exception of his writing poor reports.”

Sahem sighed. “If that’s Sammon’s case, it took us too long to recognize his predicament. He’s been here for over two years! Why didn’t the ranger tell us sooner of his suspicion?”

“It was the elder Ranger Selwell. He’s new to training on our part of the wall,” Bessie said.

“Well, from what little I know of any of the other forest dwellers and guardians of portals they aren’t shapeshifters, but they can morph into something needed to survive in a hostile territory,” Dor said.

“So, are you saying this overweight clumsy student guard may be something else than what we see?” Henry asked worried.

“And in my kitchen!” Cook said.

“Now wait a moment. We don’t know and as my cousin would say, not all in our three-dimensional world is as it seems and is a threat.” Sahem started to chuckle. “Why else do we not shudder with all the ghostly spirits wandering this tower?”

“Not in my kitchen,” Cook said strongly. “They don’t dare.”

“There’s a reason for all the spirit activity around here. That horrific battle that was settled with the wall and towers erected to separate us and those that live on the other side must have left a doorway around here,” Dor said. “I can’t feel it but I’m sure rangers can. Why else do we have so many rangers volunteering to teach our students about the wilderness in our backyard?”

Dor shrugged his shoulders at the others who were staring at him. “I grew up with war stories. My lineage goes way back to when my ancestors guarded a battle line along here, probably near a doorway or portal.” He smiled. “My ancestors worked with

the dragons to build this wall with its twenty-two towers to bring peace between the warring people. But if there are portals on this side of the wall and the rangers are keeping that a secret...”

“The energy just inside this tower can be frightening or amusing,” Em said.

“Well, that would explain the shapeshifter that joined our civilian teachers,” Bessie said.

“Not entirely,” Sahem said. “I asked my cousin to look into a few of the people here in the tower, civilians, helpers, guards, etc and she informed me that if an adult shapeshifter is here, it’s because one of our student guards is going through the five-year transition process and no it’s not Sammon. It may be Private Trey. Her advice is to wait so that the guardians of such transitions can extract him without a fuss and move him into their school. It’s important to note that negative transitions are caused by the stress those outside of his trust cause him. We all have heard of shapeshifters that have gone rogue. It’s what our children’s tales are about, supposedly to teach tolerance to those from other dimensions.”

Em laughed. “Like ghostly apparitions. So, we now have more information on at least two of our problem guards,” Em said. “And I want to add, I don’t mind the ghosts or spirits floating about. It makes my little area quite entertaining.”

Sahem sighed. “Well, this is another meeting that we may have gotten some important information exchanged however, the problems with some of our young guards is still on the priority list but,” he glanced at Hellene. “It’s going to have to be given another closer review by your office staff Hellene. Your civilian counselors must have some interesting insights and why didn’t they spot Sammon and for that matter Trey? Abasi has been a problem since day one as has Sigrid and Tess and,” he looked thoughtful. “I think the threat of transferring the three out to a correctional institution with more skill in handling them is a relief for me. Trey and Sammon, I’ll let you monitor that directly Hellene.”

Sahem looked around at his senior staff members. “Anyone have anything else to add?”

“I’ll be pleased if I get my permanent replacement for Kelene. I like teaching those young ones,” Cook said.

Henry laughed. "I can say a happy head chef is enjoyed by all."

"Another bunch of good ideas out of our team meetings," Hellene teased. "By the way, besides sending Private Connie advanced classes on health, when are you going to send her over to me for some on the spot work like going for a walk and pointing out our local herbs we use for various healing ointments and sachets?" Hellene asked Bessie.

"Once I get the one leader out of our three prospective corporals in Wolf Pack in a strong position to pass the muster to lead Wolf Pack. Then, you can have her for as long as you need," Bessie said. "What can you find under the snow?"

"You'd be surprised," Hellene said.

"How long more do you have when you give the next sergeant tests?" Cook asked curiously.

"This week and into the new year. That's when we usually experience snowing for weeks at a time. The troops will have more time to study and show us what they know of snow conditions and what to look for on the trails for predators. It will give us time to get the newly promoted student sergeants trained to take over from the two student squad leaders that are graduating out. We should be getting new draftees in on the same day our graduates leave so the bus will be dropping off and picking up," Sahem said.

"That's the middle week of January. And we all need to pray we don't get a snowstorm that week. Those graduates may not wait for the bus to take them to their next stop."

"Or if we get early snowstorms in late December and early January. That will change everyone's calendar of events," Henry said. Cook nodded remembering the previous year's unusual bad weather events.

"Well, unless there's more to discuss, meeting is adjourned," Sahem said.

"I agree. Back to babysitting," Em said.

After the staff left Lt. Hellene motioned Captain Sahem she wished to speak with him.

"Rodent problem is more than what meets the eye. It's being handled," she said softly.

On Connie's return from the Ten Tower's Competition, the three squadrons were rotated to another shift schedule and Wolf Pack from the 1st shift was changed to the 2nd shift, with Corporal Amoke from Wolf Pack filling in with kitchen duty for the dinner meals. It meant Horse Troop took over the kitchen duty for the three meals, with Raven Squad sending one of their members to cover the breakfast and lunch meals.

Wolf Pack went from starting their day at five in the morning to starting at one in the afternoon. Workouts started their day of forty minutes, then fifteen minutes to eat and by two in the afternoon they were relieving the first shift, Horse Squad from guard duty. The winter days were usually cold and overcast and the evenings wet and cold, mixed with snowfall.

Connie was promoted from Private Recruit to Private and assigned to messenger duty which meant she was trained to fly an air cart, which included doing minor maintenance work. Here she learned what feathering meant to flying air carts. She felt overwhelmed at something she knew little to nothing about, however Corporal Ancell showed great enthusiasm over showing her how easy it was to fly the air cart and keep up the maintenance. He loved flying air carts which he explained the civilian air carts weren't as nimble and protected with armor as the Tower guards air carts were. His family had three civilian air carts, which on their farm all the children learned to fly at the age of seven. It was a working farm, he explained. Everyone had a job to do.

At the end of her shift working the wall security, as she was heading back to her quarters to change for physical training Sigrid met her on the stairs. The talisman in her pocket warned her it wasn't going to be a pleasant encounter.

"So, Private Connie," she said spitefully, "You're just another royal brat trying to pass as a commoner. You and Burkee think you're so smart mixing with us, but I got you pegged. I know of some people that would pay good credits to know you're here without your bodyguards!"

Connie wasn't sure if she should laugh and just pass by her but instead, she asked, "Just who do you think I am?"

"Royal bitch! Don't pretend with me. I read your cards."

“Right, as if you could read cards correctly,” Connie said disdainfully. “What has you so angry with anyone that you feel is above you? Kendra, Kiku, who else? Do your cards tell you that your bitterness will lead you to a dark path of unhappiness?”

Sigrid’s face became suffused with so much anger Connie thought she would have struck her except the footsteps of others on the stairs had her pushing past her, nearly knocking her over the railing.

“What was that all about?” Demanded Kendra.

Connie looked at her surprised. “I have no idea. Just who was Burkee, really?”

“Besides being an outstanding scholar, athlete and a genuinely nice person, she believed Burkee was a princess and felt insulted that she was training as a common tower guard. I don’t know if Burkee was a princess, but she did come from a royal household.”

“Why does she think I’m a princess?”

“Maybe the same way she found Burkee was,” Kiku said.

“How’s that?”

“Her cards.”

Connie shook her head. “I’ve watched the card throwers outside the compound I grew up in, and I can say that if someone is described with a court card, it doesn’t mean they are royalty. If that were so, Old Harriet that was nanny to the baker’s kids who kept coming up as a queen of swords, would have been ruler of that shop, instead of being a sweet old woman that loved kids. And forget the thought that I’ll marry and become such a person. Please, I just want to finish my four years here and then take the train pass to travel the commonwealth for a year for free.” Connie grinned as she climbed the stairs with the two girls. “I want to stay in the traveler’s hostels and visit places that I’ve only seen on the computer. A princess.” She shook her head. “I don’t believe in what the card throwers say. Otherwise, I would be training to be a shaman.”

“A shaman?” Kendra asked, pushing their door open.

“My mother is a healer and it’s not something I’m interested in making a living at. Even she was reluctant to be the first person the people in the compound came to. Most of those people were superstitious and catty.”

“Are you saying you don’t have a bed side manner?” Kiku asked.

“No, I don’t,” laughed Connie. “Men who get drunk and break a limb, or have a hangover, or who have beaten their wife and drag their wife for mother to patch her up every time they go on a drunk, is not what I see in my future.”

“What kind of place was that?” Kendra asked.

“Aside from small minded and otherwise dull, not a place to raise a child,” Connie said, as she tossed her uniform into the laundry basket and changed into her workout clothes.

“Why is your family there?” Kendra asked.

“I don’t know. Even my older brother said he doesn’t want to return to live after his four years of service.”

“Well, for someone that was raised in a closed compound, you know a lot,” Kiku said.

“Because I read a lot at school and took my time in walking back from school to the compound. I liked listening to the shopkeepers and visiting the Crone’s Shop where a card reader entertained people with her readings. Hillsboro is a diverse city that used to be at the crossroads to a summer castle before it was abandoned as too expensive to maintain.”

“I never thought of traveling around on the Silver Pass,” Kiku said thoughtfully. “You’re not afraid of traveling alone?”

“Not with the self-defense classes Kendra’s teaching,” Connie smiled.

“What are you going to do after your draft is over?” Kiku asked Kendra.

“Well, it’s not traveling on the Silver Pass. I plan on seeing if my love interest is still worth my interest,” Kendra said.

“You have a love interest?” Kiku demanded.

“Maybe.”

Their conversation ended as everyone gathered.

“Love is waiting for you?” teased Gafna, who overheard their conversation.

“Probably not.” Kendra said dryly. “Who wants to return after four years of sailing around the world?”

Kiku giggled. “Maybe, someone that gets homesick?”

“Not me,” Kendra said firmly. “I’m planning on visiting my aunt when I get out and returning to helping run the circus, that she calls her family.”

“I thought you said your aunt and her husband ran a horse breeding ranch?” Kiku said.

Gafna groaned. “I got thrown from a horse and never again will I ride one.”

“They train horses for the cross-country racing circuit,” Kendra said. “Running their barn or keeping the trainers from getting drunk is like a circus.”

Connie turned to look at Kendra. Kendra told a lie. She wondered just what she really intended on doing that she wouldn’t or couldn’t share. Since she told a lie about what she planned to do she didn’t feel she had a right to criticize.

6th Week

“Hear that?” Corporal Ancel asked.

“It sounds...choppy?” Private Connie asked.

“Exactly. Someone assigned to fly this air cart had to give it too much throttle when it wasn’t getting enough lift. Not even mentioned in the shift turnover reports. So, what do you think is a good way to smooth it out?”

Connie thought for a few minutes. It was a week of Ancell’s patient teaching and her studying on the computer to fill in what she didn’t understand. “I would replace the accelerator. If a heavy hand operated the throttle causing the equipment to not operate smoothly, then the present equipment isn’t up to specs.”

Ancell laughed. “Did you read that somewhere?”

“The manual.”

He nodded happily. “You got it. But another thing to consider. It’s cold outside and we had another temperature drop with snowfall. Chances are the last guard didn’t warm up the air cart before he or she took it outdoors.”

It took Ancell ten minutes to locate the replacement part and install it. Then it was time to pick up and deliver a late dinner with something hot to drink to their troops, and then they would start rotating guards along the wall so those on post had time to warm up before returning to their post. Connie picked up the sandwiches from the

warming cabinets and beverages while Ancell cleaned up the repair area and warmed up the air cart they would be using.

He had Connie fly the air cart to deliver everyone warm sandwiches and beverages and then they would rotate guards. They also scanned the area on the ground for any civilians too close to the wall, though Ancell didn't believe there would be any poacher activity in the cold weather, but Staff Sergeant Dor wanted the security troops he monitored to be thorough in their inspections.

"You don't have to fly so carefully. It's not like we're on a road where another air cart is going to demand right of way." He grinned as Connie increased their speed. However, when they approached Corporal Kendra's post Connie's decrease in speed was so dramatic they were straining in their seat belts.

"You need to feather your speed down," Ancell laughed.

"I thought you were going to whiz right by me," Kendra said. "So, what's for lunch? Did you happen to bring something warm to drink too?"

"No," Ancell said, teasing.

"Yes," Connie said. From the back of the air cart, she pulled out a wrapped sandwich and beverage.

"Anything to report," Ancell asked.

"Yeah, a pair of hunting hawks but not on our side of the wall. They didn't have leg tresses, so they were wild. Nothing on this side of the wall AND tell Lance Corporal Kiku if she doesn't speak clearly over the radio, I may think she's speaking with her mouth full and demand to know where she got her snack before me."

Kiku had the coveted 6th position on the wall which meant on her inspection walk she would be meeting up with Istobel's tower guard on her or his sentry walk. The 1st position which met with the Nordbold tower guard on duty were the two coveted security walks. A lot of information passed between the four tower guards since many of them had been on tower duty for over three years. Staff Sergeant Dor made sure the visits didn't become a long conversation of nothing that dealt with security on the wall. He had his own air cart which he put to good use. After working with Ancell on the air carts she could now hear the differences between the air bus and the four air carts.

“Connie can tell her,” Ancell said. “If I tell her again, that she’s mumbling or speaking with her mouth too close to the radio, she’s going to pop me one.”

“Maybe she wants to be a professional singer, and you know how they get so close to the mic,” Connie teased.

“Have you heard her sing?” Kendra demanded.

“Yes. She throat sings. It’s traditional among the steppes,” Connie said.

“How would you know that?” Ancell asked.

“I study during study time,” Connie mocked. “And I enjoy listening to her and the tower’s singers when they practice.”

“I hear you’re pretty good on the flute.”

Connie made a face. Her music instructor could play a flute. She was just practicing at it.

“You need to get out and visit the village Truncel,” Ancell said. “They have madrigal players visit during the street fairs when the weather is nicer.”

“Why?” Connie asked.

“I’ll give you a year here and you’ll be looking forward to getting a day pass and meeting real people rather than places on the terminal,” Kendra said.

“Have you seen who I would be pairing up with on those day passes I’ve been offered?” Connie asked. “I don’t mind waiting for the right person.”

Ancell laughed. “I’m up for the next pass in our pack, so eat your heart out Kendra.”

Kendra made a face at him. “Well, at least you don’t have to worry about being paired with the problem kids. They’re still on probation with no day passes. Hurry back with my relief,” Kendra waved them off and she stepped back into the warmer watch shack that gave her some respite from the weather. She had a few minutes to eat, then she would begin her twenty-minute walk to warm up and then return to her watch shack, then back out the other way for another twenty-minute walk. Hopefully her relief would arrive between one of the walks to give her time to use the toilet facilities which were warm and then back to her guard post. It was dark and cold and searching for any kind of activity was tiring on the eyes and body.

That night another snowstorm hit the tower lasting for three days straight with no one going out even in the quad. Cook had anticipated heavy snow in the tower and ordered plenty of supplies previously, stored in the places bored student guards couldn't access.

10th Week of Connie's Duty

"Come," Captain Sahem called. He and Lt. Hellene were going over their records preparing for five new draftees that would be arriving that afternoon to fill the slots of the three delinquents and Sammon and Trey who were all being transferred to more appropriate support residences. It was the last week of December, and another snowstorm was in the forecast.

"Are we late for the meeting?" Bessie removed her beret as did Staff Sergeants Em and Dor who followed her in. It was early in the morning and there would be no sun shining through the clouds this day. Everyone felt tired with the long periods of darkness and kept busy with tiring repetitions of the same tasks.

"No, no. Let's move to the meeting table. You came at a good time. We have five new draftees arriving this afternoon. Three to replace the slots opened by Sigrid, Tess and Abasi and one opened by Sammon and the other by Trey. The three delinquents were picked up at the local jail late last night by their handlers. The Constable said he didn't mind holding them. He wasn't surprised those three were caught stealing from the curio shop. The owner had complained on different occasions that he felt they were watching the place too closely. We are lucky the Draft Board was so quick with supplying us with their replacements and not with a cadet."

"It shouldn't have been any surprise to the Draft Office since they knew they were delinquents when they sent them here," Bessie pointed out. "Those kids had a lot of chances to change."

"Yes, they did and good that we kept detailed records to pass on to their new residences. With Sammon, he was transferred to a group that will be able to support him to his benefit in the early hours of this morning," Hellene said. "I would think due to the aftermath of the recent snowstorm, they wouldn't be able to send someone to pick him up, but we're speaking of another world than what we know. As for his replacement,

which by the rules governing the management of our youth, *they* have provided his replacement so a cadet will not be used to fill his vacancy.”

“Just what kind of replacement?” Em asked.

Dor laughed. “Well, I’m happy not from the Royal Cadets.”

“I want to know just what we should prepare for,” Em said, smiling. “Replacing a potential problem for our current one is not doing anyone any favors.”

“Alan is 14 and has gone through review by another section of the protectors of the commonwealth,” Sahem said with amusement. “He is from the southern regions. Lady Margo vouches for his steadfastness. He is shorter than most of our student guards and he will be delivered safely this afternoon with all the new draftees.”

“And for Trey we know with certainty that the *shapeshifter* that was here was not here for supporting Trey. Lady Margo found him to belong to a group that likes to spy on the tower activities. All the towers. No one really has an idea of just what they are about, but it is being investigated,” Hellene said.

“Trey should be leaving now with a ranger from the transitioning group. Raven Squad is on the 1st shift so it’s easier to move him out, and Em, by noon you will have his replacement too. His name is Jenkins, 14 years and he’s from the mountain tribe of Acorn. He’s tall, I was told.” Sahem smiled at Em and the others. “But nice news for us all. Five newbees before we get the next bus load when our students graduate out.”

“Yes. And we have details on them. I’m pleased to say someone on the draft council was kind enough to send their medical and school records in this morning’s transmissions.

“Well, let’s have it then. Horse Squad has three draftees for Sergeant Elroy and his backup Sergeant Ruana to introduce their 2nd shift to,” Bessie said.

“Okay, then. We have draftees Myra, Alan and Jacko. Myra’s primary school records show she had interest in taking things apart and putting them back together, however as she moved to secondary school, she became shy and just stuck to her school lessons. A follower to keep out of sight.”

“That’s a difference from Tess, but it’s someone Ruana can influence positively. The other girls and boys may take advantage of her, but I think Elroy and Ruana will keep an eye on her,” Bessie said. “I’m hoping what happened to Tabor for his trying to

harass Connie will make the other guards think hard before they try to harass any of the new recruits.”

“When I’m measuring her up for uniforms, I’ll check out her interest in tinkering,” Em said. “I love encouraging the tinkerers.”

“Alan I already gave some background on and as for Jacko... Hellene what do you make of him?”

“He’s what the draft records say, is a bit too interested in older girls. He is the youngest child and the only boy with an absent father. He’ll need your guidance on this Sahem and on his first day before Bessie and Em have a go at him.” Hellene grinned.

“Hm,” Em glanced at Bessie. “I’m wondering how he’ll take my measuring him and giving him the draftee haircut.”

“We’ll have to see. Most of the boys when they had their first haircut were shocked at no hair. Some of the girls were upset that short hair was their welcome to the military style for newbees, though it’s not as short as the boys. Hair grows out and if they keep their appearances neat, they can grow it out to the Royal Cadets standards.”

“I’m sure their squad mates will be supportive of the change. Afterall most of them have been here for 3 years,” Bessie said.

“For Raven Squad we have Hilda. Brilliant in her studies. She’ll be the apple of your eye, Em!” Sahem laughed. “She’s good at various board games. I don’t think she’s the type to enjoy our rougher self-defense classes, but she may surprise us all. I’ve already told you about Jenkins.”

“Now, I’m very happy with Jenkins possibilities,” Hellene said. “I can rotate Connie’s assistance in the clinic with Jenkins. The mountain tribes teach all their children first aid due to their remoteness to city infirmaries.”

“So, at noon we’ll be processing five draftees and as senior staff, we get to practice our smiles of welcoming.”

“Bessie, have you been able to restore some of the harmony in your Wolf Pack since Sigrid started a rumor that Connie was a princess in disguise?” he chuckled.

“I had a talk with Kiku and Kendra, since they are her bunkmates. They felt hurt that Burkee didn’t share her royal life with them and were wound up that it was the same with Connie. But they spoke with Connie, and she described her childhood raised

in a cult, far from the life of a princess. I reminded them that Sigrid was a manipulator of truth for her own benefit and wasn't someone to believe. I don't see any problems with Wolf Pack. And I don't think Burkee is a princess, but she does have royal blood. A cousin is more like it."

Hellene frowned. "What's the big difference between a baker's child and a cousin in the royal household?"

"Well, it's all part of bonding, making friends, and falling out," Em said. "Teenagers are so touchy about status."

"So silly, these kids, and their prejudices."

"We can say that because we've been around all sorts of people in our years in the military," Sahem said. "So, Bessie are the Royal Cadets that are filling in for the student guards quarantined in the clinic facilities, staying well?"

"As usual, yes. We have this seasonal flu outbreak every year as well as the other towers so it's not like we have been surprised."

"If they would use some sense, we wouldn't have to deal with this," Em complained.

"They believe themselves invincible. The good thing is the Royal Cadets have better sense and take the recommended precautions," Hellen said. "As usual, we'll ride it out and exchange communications with the other towers on how they are surviving this season."

"So, let's adjourn this meeting. We all have long to do lists," Sahem said.

Along with the winter cold weather came the dreaded winter illnesses of colds, fevers and the flu. It was a seasonal occurrence, and it required the ill to be separated from the healthy and quarantined in older barracks that were used for the clinic hospital. When too many guards in one troop were out, by the standards from the Draft Administration, the Royal Cadet's Commandant, was to supply members to fill those roles, just as when the tower games needed temporary replacements for the competing athletes away from the tower. All guards with over a year of service recognized the

scene: mature-looking cadets in various uniforms appeared, contrasting with the younger guards in their standard attire.

To keep the healthy members occupied the senior staff had them work on snow rescues in the deep snow that piled in the quad, run tests on their terminals on snow rescues and keep up with their other class work. For exercise activities in the gymnasium and hall, challenging competitions were devised for the guards and cadets, to devise ways to rescue and steal equipment from competing squads.

It was Connie's tenth week at Tower Goldwah, and shift rotation again with Wolf Pack moved to 3rd shift sentry watch, relieving Horse Squad on the 2nd watch and Raven Squad relieving them in the early morning hours. It meant she was now getting up in the dark at nine in the evening, to relieve the 2nd shift at ten in the evening. Connie had thought the 2nd shift wasn't too bad since it was still dark when they went to bed, however, 3rd shift was difficult to adjust to. She now understood why some of the other squad members on 3rd shift were wandering around the mess hall during the day.

Connie was happy that she had passed her promotional test and was now Private 2nd Class. She felt familiar with the roles each member of the squad performed. There were six security guards on the wall, two in the watch tower which was where the student troop leader usually monitored her or his troop, two operated the air patrol and messenger service and two were roaming guards that relieved the guards on sentry duty to eat or take a needed break and one of them was also the guard that lent a hand on kitchen duty. All their meals, apart from the morning breakfast, were what Cook and her staff provided in the warming food cabinets in the mess hall. Cook gave the guards choices on what they would prefer to eat from sandwiches to soups and if they were snowed in, their meals were for dining at a table rather than eating out on the wall or in the watch tower.

All night security work was monitored by Staff Sergeant Dor, whom Connie felt was a night person that blended in with the darkness. He had his own air cart and would observe, unnoticed by the students until he needed to correct them. He said only what was necessary. From him she picked up nothing more than how to use the equipment to keep watch over the tower and its lands within view of the towering wall.

Her sentry post on the wall was the third post, looking out into the darkness with night goggles and noting what life she saw in the land around the wall, including both sides of the wall, though they weren't responsible for what went on outside of the realm's responsibility. She had thought she would fall asleep, but the cold and walking from one end of her assigned area to the other where the other Goldwah Tower guards and her would meet kept her awake. The break in the monotony was the messenger in the air cart that came by often delivering warm snacks, drinks, fifteen-minute breaks with relief from the roaming guards, and brief conversations on what she had seen.

Kendra's sentry duty was post six and it covered the length that reached the sentry guard from the tower of Istobel, where she and their tower guard, Corporal Lacey, would exchange pleasantries and then returned to their walk along the wall. Corporal Lacey and Corporal Kendra knew each other from previous years they met on sentry duty.

On the other side of their tower was the tower Nordbold of the Lion Heart. Ancell was sentry one, and he touched bases with their guard and found himself collecting jokes from Corporal Hibern. Corporal Ancell wondered why they hadn't met before on their shared guard duty on the wall. That got another joke from Corporal Hilburn. By the end of their 3rd shift, the jokes Ancell passed on of what he heard from the Istobel sentry was like a chain message, reaching all the sentries along the wall and in the Watch Tower, and Kendra passed it on to the Istobel sentry guard. While walking her post, Connie thought of Havo and his posting to Nordbold. Maybe one day she will meet him on his sentry walk.

Wolf Pack finished their 3rd shift guard duty on the wall and waited impatiently for Sergeant Major to give them their final assignment for their shift. It was six in the morning and eleven guards' warm clouds of white from every exhale did little to warm cold faces. Feet stamped for warmth and little talk was made.

"Alright Wolf Pack. Go get to your breakfast and then gear up for tracking. There are some animal tracks that need to be checked to make sure there are no animal traps poachers put out. Dismissed."

"Yes, Sergeant Major!" They said in unison and relief.

They were hungry and cold.

For Wolf Pack, Kendra, Bly, Gafna and Ancell had completed the Sergeants written exam and were waiting for their scores on their field tests. It would determine if any of them met the qualifications of the new Wolf Pack leader. Bly was graduating out, so it meant Kendra, Gafna and Ancell had a chance at being student squad leader. As they hurried into the building, they spoke about what was mostly on their minds. Promotions.

“You never know what Kendra would assign us to if she’s promoted to squad leader,” Ancell teased looking over at Kendra who was stomping her feet to clear any snow off her boots before stepping into the building. “I was hoping I would always be working on the air carts and instead I get rotated to working sentry duty on the wall and then to the Watch Tower. And just so you know, I’m not interested in SSL. I don’t mind making the student sergeants rating but not student squad leader.”

“As head of the troop you should like that,” Connie said. “You get to check all the electronics and check with all the sentries on duty. Complete control of the information,” she teased. She picked up a tray and slid it along the counter, sniffing the warm oatmeal with apple spice and pointing at the large muffin for smiling Henry to add to her tray.

“Two scoops or one,” Henry asked as he held a bowl for the oatmeal.

“Two.” Connie said. And moved off the line and headed to their table.

Kiku settled near Ancell who had his oatmeal bowl filled to the rim with nuts sprinkled on top.

“Plus, the messenger drops off your meals first,” Kiku pointed out. Kiku was looking forward to getting the results of her promotion test to corporal and the waiting was making her restless.

“In this snow I would rather hurry up and check out the trail we spotted from the tower then get back to the gymnasium and put up some targets to test out the new bows Staff Sergeant added to our collection,” Bly said.

“Listen to you, Bly who will be leaving all this behind very soon,” Kiku said. “Weren’t you working in accounting or something like that? You’ll be the first to graduate out to civilian life. Are you counting the days or is it hours?” she teased.

“And do what, join the rangers or transfer to the Royal Regiment’s accounting office?” Ancell asked. “I think you’ll be bored.”

“If it’s in the Royal Regiment, you’ll still have to take their tests to see if you’re qualified to wear any stripes on your uniform,” Gafna said. “You’ll be wearing the same uniform as those cadets. Just think how you’ll get sent back here to fill in when the tower guards get sick. That’s a gloomy thought,” laughed Gafna.

“I think all of us that took the sergeants test passed. Why else would Sergeant Major be wearing a big smile on her face this morning?”

“I think Sergeant Major has one more test to give us and it’s nice of her to let us eat a warm meal first.” Kendra said. “I think she’s looking for someone to take her place as Wolf Pack Leader. Just think. A new SGL”

“Well then. I’m ready for our final test,” Kiku said laughing. “I’m looking forward to a promotion to Corporal. That’s good enough for me.”

The group hurried through their breakfast. Sergeant Major came in with tactical sheets and a large golden dog.

“Alright Wolf Pack. While on wall a few of you noticed a lot of animal activity along some of the paths and Raven Squad in the Tower reported a disturbance that needs to be checked out. I’m assigning you in pairs to inspect the trails marked. I’ll be watching from the tower, so no one disappears in a snowdrift. Private 2nd Class Connie, this is Chavi. Your run will be along the lake path past the pond and over some paths the snow covers. So, you don’t get lost, Chavi will accompany you.” Sergeant Major smiled. “We’ve lost a few privates that thought all paths lead back to the tower, since it’s hard to miss. Am I right Corporal Ancell?”

Some of the others in the troop laughed.

Corporal Ancell looked like he was going to argue the point but decided not to.

“He thought he found a shortcut and got stuck in the mud,” Sergeant Major said. “We sent Chavi out to find him. Everyone, these are wood skills you need to use. For those of you interested in earning the stripes to lead this pack, which I will willingly hand over, you will be watched. Notice the path, the place where the sun should be shining, the wildlife around you and Private 2nd Class Connie, Chavi will be sure to not let a poacher hurt you.”

There were some chuckles from her troop mates.

“Form into groups of two. Corporal Kendra, hand out a map for each group. Each of you will follow the trail marked on your map and look sharp because you will write a report on what you see. An intelligent and detailed report and not a word for word copy of your partner’s report. Don’t expect the rangers to point out what you should be seeing. They’ll be grading you too. Alright all, move out.”

With the order given Sergeant Major left the quad to go to the watch tower to watch their progress from a high perch.

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 at a loose lope down a snowy trail Connie was vaguely familiar with. The dog stopped abruptly to sniff at something, letting Connie catch up with her, then Chavi was off again. As Connie jogged, she studied Chavi. Its pauses to sniff along the way kept them near each other; however, with its long legs it didn’t take long for the dog to be ahead of her. Connie’s eyes wandered over the area and picked out some landmarks she thought she remembered. She was surprised bugs hovered over snow covered plants in this cold. Sounds from wildlife began to be noticed. Chirping, chittering, peeps, and other noises she couldn’t describe filled her ears. Breathing the cold in deeply she picked up scents she was beginning to recognize. Movement was all around her and an occasional cold breeze that swayed plants, enough that they dropped their snow burden, birds flitting from tree to tree, and a variety of creatures that scurried away from the trail as she jogged on. This was life!

A dislodge rock in the path brought her attention back to where she was jogging. It was a well-used path by wildlife and could very well have been a road wide enough for two people to walk abreast. There were mud holes where snow had melted. Those she leaped over. Excited at spotting a familiar herb her mother grew for her meals, she stopped and leaned down to pinch a leaf. She sniffed deeply the essence of the leaf. They were not as hearty as her mothers were, but they probably didn’t receive as much care, and it didn’t snow in Hillsboro.

Further up ahead, Connie spotted the golden dog investigating something in the rocks that were covered in snow. Chavi had her nose buried in some brush growing

between the rocks. She snorted and stepped back then thrust her face back into the brush. Curious, Connie climbed over the rocks, pushing the snow clear, to see what had made her so curious.

"What's this?" she asked softly as tiny fur balls mewed plaintively. Chavi looked at her and her jaws quivered, however Connie had no idea what that meant. Chavi licked the tiny creatures, getting more cries from them.

Her guides had nothing to say about the tiny creatures. But they were curious.

Connie looked around for its mother and spotted a cloud of flies hovering over a spot on the other side of the path in a 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 moved alongside 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. "I wonder why whatever killed her didn't go after them."

Connie squatted near them, looking down at the five bodies wondering what she should do. In school a teacher spoke of the law of the wild but somehow Connie couldn't just leave the little ones to die if that was their deceased parent. She stared, frowning at them, trying to figure out a way to care for something she didn't know was.

"What are you doing?" a slurred voice demanded behind her.

Startled, Connie turned quickly, and Chavi turned also, pressing against her leg, growling loudly. The young boy wasn't wearing a uniform, but Connie remembered Private Trey well as one of the boys Kendra had warned her about, and who until now she had avoided meeting. He was the boy with the energy of someone about to transition. It could be months or even a year. She wasn't good with time.

"Just looking..." The talisman didn't warn her that she was in danger, so she assumed she could handle this boy, though he was bigger than her, but it could just be the winter coat he was wearing. It wasn't a guard's issued coat. Well, this was what all the self-defense classes were about, she reminded herself.

Don't take your eyes off him, Callie Can said not sounding alarmed.

"Lagging behind, are ya? A private with no guts, huh?" he taunted. Then he heard the hungry mewling. "What do you have back there? Get out of the way, girl."

She stood her ground.

He grabbed her from the side the dog wasn't on and pushed her into Chavi, moving them both out of the way. She stumbled off balance, displacing snow from a large rock. She should have reinforced her protection spells, though with the self-defense classes she had gotten lax about her other defenses. She could feel herself becoming angry, which she knew if she tapped into the feelings, she could bring up enough energy to become physically violent. Did she want to? In her self-defense classes she had recognized how angry she could become when someone threw her to the mat harder than she expected. Mother had taught her that if she were to use energy from being angry to not letting the anger cloud her judgement. There were many times her little sister angered her, and it made her ill. It finally dawned on her that she was suppressing the anger instead of finding a safer outlet. Wasn't that what mother meant? But this was a different problem. The boy's judgement was clouded and there was fear behind his meanness. The boy was drunk. She saw how violent adults became when they were drunk and angry.

"Arg. Damn chaddie kits!" He looked around and spotted the flies. He laughed as if it was funny. "Well, that's just too bad they lost their mama. Another lost litter isn't any big deal. You better get after your pack, girl, and you're all alone with that mutt? Scary things happen to girls when they're alone." He lowered his voice as if trying to scare her. His expression changed quickly. "Now scram!"

Connie could smell the alcohol in his breath. If he attempted to attack her, she should be able to knock him off balance. And then what? Run and leave the small helpless critters with him?

Chavi's growls turned into snarls, but the boy didn't take them seriously. Perhaps he was too drunk, Connie thought. If a dog growled at her like that, she would back away.

"What are you going to do to them?" she asked, while slowly letting her pack slide off her shoulders. She intended on using the pack as a weapon.

"Maybe I'll pick one of them up by the tail and fling it over towards the swarm. End the little beast's suffering. It'll be my good deed for the day."

"No!"

"And who's going to stop me, girl," he jeered, stepping closer to her with a threatening gesture. "That mutt?"

Connie noticed that he kept her between him and Chavi. Her pack rested on the rock behind her, within easy reach of swinging at him.

"I will, Private Trey," a voice from behind them had the two jumping.

"What are you doing, following me?" Private Trey demanded. He stumbled a little off balance.

"You do need a babysitter," Sergeant Hadid said. "You've been restricted to your quarters so, what are you doing out here? And drinking?" He sniffed the air. "You're not of legal age to drink alcohol. That's another black mark in your report. You're out of uniform and don't have a day pass. That's two marks more."

Connie knelt down to reassure one of the creatures that was crying piteously.

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

Private Trey laughed without mirth. "You're going to eat your words, Hadid. That stupid girl touched them."

"Return 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, and burped.

"You left barracks without authorization, private, and you're out of uniform. You appear to be drunk, too. Have you forgotten you've been restricted to your quarters? Any more insubordinations and you'll be so low in rank you'll be taking orders from Private Recruits. Chavi, from now on, you can bite him if he threatens you. Now double time it back to barracks, private, and put your uniform back on."

The order to Chavi had Trey looking worriedly at Chavi who advanced two steps toward him. He unsteadily backed up and glared at Hadid.

Connie's hands sought the tiniest one and though she didn't pick it up, she let her hand rest above it, giving it some warmth.

Hadid lifted his pocket communicator. "Base, this is Sergeant Hadid. Missing guard has been located, drunk, outside the tower and out of uniform."

"This is Base and Captain Sahem. We're waiting for his return. Over."

"It's up to you Private. Return or run away. It's still the same result, a visit to the captain's office."

Scowling, Trey turned back to the tower but not in a hurry as he unsteadily made his way to the tower.

"Private Trey heading back to Base. Over." Hadad then turned to Connie.

"Not all members of my squad are impressed with my leadership, yet."

Connie squinted up at him, the sun shining in her eyes. "Sergeant Hadad," she acknowledged. "I saw you passed your sergeants field test."

"Sergeant Major is tough on her field qualifiers," he nodded with a grin. He squatted next to Connie and studied the nesting then glanced at the swarm of flies. "Well, Private 2nd Class Connie, it looks like we've got another poacher kill, leaving the kits to die."

"Poachers? But don't they take the body or sell what they capture?"

"Not chaddies. Poachers, chaddies, 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."

"Are you going to let them die?" Connie asked concerned.

Hadad blinked at her surprised. "Do you know how to care for them?"

"No." She studied the youth, as he considered the small mewling's, his brow wrinkled in thought. She liked his calm demeanor.

"Well," he glanced at Chavi who was patiently waiting. "We need to transport them back to the tower to the captain. He 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.

"All right, Private 2nd Class. 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 she set her pack on the ground. "They're too fragile for that and you don't want them to get too used to your scent. Chavi, guard Private 2nd Class Connie and the kits," he ordered the dog. "Oh, and here." He handed her the stun stick he pulled out of a slit along his pant leg. "I'm sure you know how to use it, and won't shoot yourself or Chavi, and don't let anyone steal it from you," he said, chuckling. "It's checked out in my name."

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."

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

We'll help, her guides offered. It's an adventure!

"I wonder how I'm going to write this up. Should I have hit him with my pack? He was unsteady on his feet...but, I wonder how Master Sergeant will suggest I should have handled it," she wondered aloud. Her guides were silent, but they were amused at her questioning her actions.

She cleared a spot to sit comfortably with her back against the rock, letting the winter sun warm her face. Occasionally she would glance over at the nesting's occupants. While she sat still, she was entertained by various wildlife visitors that were either ignoring her or weren't aware of her presence. Squirrels, small creatures she had read about, ran about making their noise, while 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 stare hard to see 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 something up that may have alerted Chavi to danger. There were too many new scents. Looking up she noticed the sky was rapidly getting dark with more snow falling or was it going to turn to rain? She dug into her pack and found her emergency rations. She offered a bite to Chavi, but she only sniffed and resettled in her spot. Connie pulled her coat more securely around her and pulled the skull cap over her

ears. She was sure Sergeant Hadid and Sergeant Major Bessie wouldn't leave her out here if it was going to snow or rain.

* * *

Wake up, Connie, an unfamiliar voice said softly.

The voice wasn't from any of her guides.

Nope. Not us, Cali Can affirmed.

We're not the only ones out here watching out for you, Sulu said.

Remember there are rangers that scout the area when students are on the trails.

You may not see them...but they're out here.

It was dark and cold. Flakes of snow were falling. Startled, she glanced around her. A light shining on the path was coming toward her. Chavi was leaning against her, keeping them both warm.

"Sorry it took so long, Private 2nd Class Connie. Cold? I hope you had a good rest. Watch Tower was keeping an eye on you."

"I guess I fell asleep," Connie apologized. Her hands were cold. She had removed her gloves to give warmth to the chaddie kits when they cried. Quickly she put her gloves back on.

"No problem. You had a long night, and this is your time to sleep. It's into 2nd shift's turnover. Besides, the tower guard, Chavi would have woken you if there was something to worry about. The senior staff was in an emergency meeting dealing with Trey, so I didn't get a chance to mention you were out here protecting chaddie kits. I went ahead and contacted the Conservationists and let them know another chaddie's been killed. They insisted on sending someone to remove the survivors from here, but they had no one available. When the senior staff came out of their meeting, I was able to inform them you were out here protecting chaddie kits. Since another storm is moving in, we had to quickly locate a chaddie nursing box, and Cook had to mix up a special formula and..." Hadid's headlamp lit up the area they were in. His chatter reassured Connie that she hadn't slept her entire rest period away.

Tiny voices set up a loud chorus for a meal.

"It all took more time than I anticipated. We've got a lot of business going on. We have five new draftees being processed. Trey, Sammon, Sigrid, Tess and Abasi

have been transferred out. Looks like my squad has two new draftees and Horse Squad has three.”

“Today?”

“Yes. Senior staff surprised us all. I brought some nursing milk.” Hadid leaned down and laid a covered box beside her. “We’ll put them in here. Staff Sergeant Em remembered one in the commissary, and it took us a while to find it. Someone’s been moving stuff around.” He laughed at this. “Staff Sergeant Em had a lot on her hands fitting the newbees in uniforms, making them presentable for their pictures and listening to Sergeant Major giving the newbees what life for them will be all about. And I was trying to locate this box remembering my first day here.” While he chatted, he was setting up the box. He pushed buttons and a timer then adjusted 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 their entire nesting. We need to come into as little contact as we can with them. Lift their nest at those two sides and I’ll get these sides.”

The kits’ hungry voices continued to break the night’s stillness as snowflakes continued to fall. The water she had been giving them held them for a while but with their cries it was not enough. Before shutting the lid over them Connie and Hadid watched as they all weakly crawled to the teats, smelling something better than water.

“Sergeant Major Bessie has ordered Sergeant Ruana of Raven Squad to help carry the chaddie box to your quarters. Your squad is sleeping so it was decided not to wake them.”

Sergeant Hadid gestured for her to pick up the other end of the box, which was heavy with a clutch of kits. Now she understood why she would need help carrying the box up the stairs.

Connie could see the tower lights as they neared the barracks. In silence her thoughts were on looking up information on the care of chaddies. Silently she repeated her mantra of ‘I trust my inner guides to lead me through lessons I need to grow into the person I can be.’ She also had a selection of her mother’s protective spells that she hadn’t used for a while. So far, the one she had been using had been working. Trey

didn't harm her. Didn't her mother say protection spells work, but not always how you expect them to?

Sergeant Hadid delivered her and the kits to the tower, where Sergeant Ruana was waiting. She gave a stern look up the tower stairs and a sigh. Corporal Trahern arrived breathless.

"You and Corporal Sarod have the tower while Staff Sergeant Dor is checking the wall guards in this snowfall. You're responsible for what goes on. Think you can handle it?" She asked him.

Trahern nodded. "Not a problem, Sergeant. I gathered from the rumors we have three private recruits to break in." He grinned then looked down at the box as noise came from the box. "Another poacher kill? They're stepping up their work around our tower again."

"Which is why we need to keep sharp. With this snowfall, Staff Sergeant will be pulling everyone off the wall, so you'll have more guards here and maybe our newly turned-out private recruits. If the newbies are sent here and I'm not back, call me. I want to speak with them."

"Will do, Sergeant." Trahern nodded and ran up the stairs tower.

Sergeant Ruana picked up one side of the box and Connie picked up her end. As they walked back into the main area of the barracks Sergeant Ruana regarded Connie critically.

"You know, there's a rumor going around that you're a witch and put a curse on people you don't like."

Connie snickered. "Is this another one of those malicious gossips by the same two or three that spread that story about me and Student Guard Sammon?" She felt relieved it was a witch she was accused of and not a princess. Some of these guards were biased against those with royal blood, so being accused of being a witch was easier to handle.

"Maybe. As sergeant I need to report unacceptable behavior," she said grinning.

"I'm surprised that those listening to gossip about curses aren't remembering about the hexes and curses and juju bags being created to protect against wandering ghosts was happening before I arrived."

Ruana smiled. "So, what did you hear?"

"That Sigrid and Student Group Leader Burkee had a disagreement going on and foolish Sigrid tried to put a hex on Burkee and her bunkmates and failed, leaving Sigrid embarrassed in front of her admirers."

"And your bunkmates told you that story, did they?"

"Well, there's always multiple sides to a story and over time even more versions are told. I would rather say a prayer to protect myself and let those that protect me send whatever negativity comes my way to go back directly to the sender. It's uncomplicated that way."

Sergeant Ruana laughed softly. "Well, if praying for your own safety makes you a witch, you're doing a lot better than Sigrid and her gang. They're the reason why we have five new draftees replacing them. Right Chavi?"

The dog that was quietly following them looked up at Sergeant Ruana. Connie thought the dog smiled at her. Was she imagining that in the dim lighting?

"What's going to happen to Private Trey?" Connie asked.

"Why are you asking?"

"Just curious."

Sergeant Ruana nodded. "Well, he was being transferred early this morning, but he was not in his quarters when his new handlers, as they're called, came for him. It must have been planned because one of the draftees is his replacement. We have three for my squad and two for Raven Squad."

When they reached Connie's quarters they didn't have to knock on the door before entering. Apparently, her roommates were anxiously waiting for her with the door open.

"Ruana, you could have called one of us. We would have helped carry the kits box," Kendra said.

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

"I'll leave you in your bunkmate's hands," Ruana told them.

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

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

"It...I didn't really rescue them. Chavi did." She pointed to Chavi who 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."

"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. Sergeant Major Bessie doesn't want us to think it's our cub but..." Kendra shared a knowing glance with Kiku, not finishing the sentence.

"While you were out, five new draftees arrived! Do you know anything about that?" Kiku asked.

"There was a lot of noise with the newbees being shuffled off to the Commissary for haircuts, and new clothing not fit for a civilian," Kendra laughed.

"And cries as their hair was cut cadet military regulation length," Kiku said. She patted her hair. "Mine took months to grow out to what I like."

"They'll get over it. Look at Connie. She was happy as a spring bird to get rid of her hair. Kiku, it was long, down her back."

"I'm going to bed," Connie said, shooing the two off her bed.

The kits, or was it Chavi, woke Connie up after what she guessed was a few hours of sleep. She checked the box in the dim lighting and could see a red light indicating their liquid food was empty. Removing the container for nourishment she quietly left her quarters, leaving Chavi to watch over the kits.

Connie should not have been surprised but Cook and Staff Sergeant Em were up and it seemed like they were waiting for her.

Cook gave a replacement container of nourishment, and it was warm, in exchange for the empty one. Connie ran back up the stairs, passing a few wandering ghosts, but no one was solid. Tiredly she napped until her bunk mates woke her. They were cooing over the kit box.

“So, what’s been happening while I was away, besides the new additions to Raven Squad and Horse Squad,” Connie asked as she noted Kiku’s uniform now had corporal stripes and Kendra’s sergeants.

“Oh, yes. We didn’t mention that before we went to bed, Sergeant Major let us know who was promoted in Wolf Pack but didn’t have the final scores for the next Wolf Pack Leader. And you passed your promotion to Private 1st Class. You didn’t stay as 2nd Class long. I think you study too hard,” Kendra said.

“All that, I missed!”

“Well, you did have your bit of excitement. And the tower has quieted down from the procession of the private recruits being introduced to their new quarters for the next four years.”

“So, who’s in the running for Pack leader,” Connie asked.

“Our newly promoted sergeants and bunkmate Kendra, Bly, Gafna and Ancell,” Kiku said.

“Not Bly, she’s graduating out as Sergeant in a month, or weeks, the way the Draft Administration has been pushing draftees,” Kendra said.

“When will the final results be announced?”

“When the Senior Staff goes over our records. The other squads got theirs at the beginning of their shifts. Today they’ll have some more adjustments to missing some of their squad members, which I’m sure they are happy about, and welcoming in their replacements. And their temporary cadets filling in for the sick guards are anxious for those sick to hurry up and get well so they can get back to their own platoon.”

“Everyone is wound up with promotions and new recruits. I’m glad we don’t have any newbees and no need for a cadet,” Kiku admitted.

Connie moved to her terminal and brought up the updated tower roster. Kiku came over to see what was on Connie’s screen.

“Why is your computer mail blocked,” Kiku asked.

“Oh, I blocked it,” Connie admitted. “On my first day here, I got some unpleasant mailings. It’s easier just to not have to read them all to know what to delete.”

Kendra came over to see. She frowned, feeling she should have been aware of that since she was responsible for Connie since her arrival. It was something she would bring up in the sergeant's meeting.

"Look at all the new faces with their shorn locks of hair. You can tell who is happy to be here and who's not."

"You didn't look so shocked on your first picture."

"That's why on my second year when I was given the choice to update my picture I said no."

"Let's get to assembly and catch up on the gossip. By the way, you do know the kits have to be watched at all times, yes?" Kiku asked as she reached to lift one end of the chaddie box.

Kendra took the other end, and both looked at Chavi that was attentive of the mewling in the box.

"Let's go see if Master Sergeant is back among the living. She looked tired the last I saw her."

They got no further than the kitchen when Cook and Henry took over watching the chaddies with Chavi continuing her vigilance.

"Go to your assembly. We'll keep up the feeding routine. We've done this before, ya know?" Cook said, waving the girls off.

Most of Wolf Pack was already in the quad, wrapped warmly as it was still snowing.

Corporal Birk was animated about his promotion and removing his warm coat to show his new stripes on his arm to Sergeant Ancell, also newly promoted. Both were going around congratulating others on their promotions.

While they were waiting for Sergeant Major the snow started to come down in larger flakes. On Sergeant Major's arrival she had everyone move into the mess hall. The 2nd shift they were to replace on the outside posts were in the gymnasium already, with the new private recruits working hard to learn about their new rules to live by.

"Line up!" Sergeant Major Bessie shouted over the noise of her troops.

She looked them all over and then nodded. "I have some good news and some bad." Sergeant Major Bessie was wearing a warm coat over her uniform, leaving some of

them thinking they would be going back outside in the snow. Some of the members groaned.

“No. You’re not going out in that storm. You are all at too young a tender age to go where only the desperate and stupid would go, out in a full-blown snowstorm in uniforms not designed for weather like this. What I have to announce is Wolf Pack now has a student guard troop leader.”

The quiet in the room was suddenly disturbed with shouts of WHO!

“Why, the person that has scored the highest in all the sergeant exams. First Sergeant Kendra is now SGS.”

Kiku was the first to let out a whoop! And laughing as she pounded Kendra on her arm. Kendra looked as surprised as most of the troops were.

“And I’ve been moved back into management of all the squads and promoted to Warrant Officer of Goldwah Tower.”

Connie was grinning at Warrant Officer Bessie who was watching everyone as she removed her outdoor coat. Did they hear her over their congratulating Kendra? It was then that others noticed that Warrant Officer Bessie was not wearing Master Sergeant stripes on her new uniform, but had a bar on each of her shoulders, and her beret which she put on, was gold with the flash of the purple dragon of Goldwah Tower.

Everyone went silent. Newly promoted Sergeant Major Em smiled widely as she surprised the troop with her presence. Staff Sergeant Dor walked in behind her smiling broadly. Connie thought he was relieved that he remained Staff Sergeant. His only concern was training the student guards to be proficient at night security.

“I offer my congratulations to all of us in our promotions and most of all to Warrant Officer Bessie.”

Connie shouted congratulations and it was quickly followed by the rest of the squad.

“I will introduce myself to the assembly of the entire tower with introductions and positions of the new private recruits. In case you haven’t been smelling the surprise Cook has been baking for ALL of us that have been promoted, she said she’ll be ready tomorrow and after Captain Sahem and Lt. Hellene say their piece.”

Bessie felt happy with her promotion, and Connie suspected it was because she had been spreading herself thin by managing all the squads and especially being responsible for Wolf Pack during each of their shift changes.

Connie turned to Kendra who was surrounded by Wolf Pack congratulating her. Her face was red with embarrassment, and she was trying to look calm about the leap in promotion. Connie felt she deserved it. She had been studying hard to get her Sergeant promotion and maybe Student Guard Sergeant 1st Class Squad Leader.

Connie wondered if anyone realized that with Warrant Officer Bessie only having to focus on Warrant Officer duties, rules of conduct would be her focus, as she was annoyed by some of the teen age sergeants and the squad leaders not managing the disruptive lower ranks as they should since they've been receiving training classes.

Warrant Officer Bessie turned to Sergeant Major Em. "Well, Sergeant Major Em you're going to be busy with ordering additional new uniforms for our supplies since you've been handing out new uniforms rather than sewing on their new stripes. I see yours are sewed on right."

"And when you get through prancing around in your new uniform, we have a board game to finish," Sergeant Major Em said in a low voice. That got a laugh from Warrant Officer Bessie. "I need to practice since that new recruit beat me in my favorite game!" It made Warrant Officer Bessie laugh harder.

With that Master Sergeant Em left the hall with Staff Sergeant Dor who was chuckling at something Sergeant Major Em shared with him.

"Wolf Pack!" Warrant Officer Bessie called for order. "Student Guard First Sergeant Kendra will now put you through a workout of her choosing. Since there will be only watch tower duty in this weather, I'm sure you all don't want to hear complaints from Cook and her assistants that you're pestering them for free samples of her surprises. Student Guard 1st Sergeant Kendra, step forward. Wolf Pack is now yours."

"Yes, Warrant Officer Bessie!"

Connie was amazed by how quickly Warrant Officer Bessie left the hall, but Kendra immediately called roll and then assigned four to the watch tower, while the rest were sent to the terminals in the hall to study how to do rescues in snowstorms. The gymnasium was already taken.

3rd Month

Rangers of Lewah

Captain Sahem was pleased with Connie's speedy adaptation to her duties and agreed with Lt. Hellene and Warrant Officer Bessie to further train her in being a medic. Troop leader Kendra felt she needed more work in self-defense and for that Kendra gave the task of training her in the more advanced moves with Sergeant Gafna who was aggressive in attacking and defending.

Connie met Private Recruit Jenkins while Lt. Hellene processed him through the infirmary. He had a sense of humor that Connie appreciated. He was the middle child of a mountain rescue team. Holding his arm, for his blood pressure test, she could feel he had seen a lot of death in his youth. She sent healing thoughts to him.

Snowfall was often enough that the tower walkways were kept cleared and deiced with private recruits getting lessons in hauling bags of deicer to the air carts and spreading it on the walls walkways. Once it stopped snowing, sentry duty on the wall day or night was a short rotation of 2 hours on, then another squad member replaced them. The two-hour rotation continued until the squad completed eight hours of active duty on the outside. The small guard shacks were just enough to keep out of the cold wind. Staff Sergeant Dor was kept busy making sure they kept alert even in the cold weather. However, it meant more guards were in the watch tower, where it was warm, and where more eyes were scouting the area around the wall. Air carts were busier, flying along the wall to support the guards in the weather and deliver a brief respite out of the cold snowfall.

When it turned into a heavy snowstorm, not even the air carts were active. The previous month they had reports on forest rescues from the other towers. Captain Sahem didn't want to be unprepared and had those on duty practice rescue missions in the quad with various situations set up by Warrant Officer Bessie, who had PR Jenkins assist her setting up instances with actual rescues he witnessed. Staff Sergeant Dor's lessons were teaching his 2nd and 3rd shift student guards how to recognize in the dark when the

weather was changing by the night creatures that were changing their routine in their hunting around the tower.

It was early in the third week of her caring for the chaddie kits that their mewing woke her, before her bunkmates. Showering quickly, she dressed for morning drills and hurried down the hall to the mess to get milk for the kits.

Cook was waiting for her. She handed Connie a newly warmed container. Her kitchen smelled of baking bread. It was dark and chilly outside of the kitchen. Due to the tower being snowed in, Cook's assistants were staying in the guest quarters, however, for some reason, Cook was too restless and was baking instead of sleeping. Considering how many student guards were milling around the mess hall with their respective sergeants monitoring them to see that they spent time studying, Connie could understand Cook's nervousness about protecting the sanctity of her kitchen from the student guards pilfering her refrig of its sweet contents. With the mixture of cadets, private recruits and bored guards, there was no telling who would challenge another to invade Cooks bakery shelves.

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

"They're hungry." She grinned. "I'm surprised anyone can sleep through the racket they're making but my bunkmates were still sleeping when I left."

The door swung open, and Warrant Officer Bessie walked in. She looked pleased that Connie was up and attending to the kits' needs.

"Good evening, Cook. Private 1st Class Connie, bring the chaddie box and have 1st Sergeant Group Leader Kendra assemble her squad in the Central Hall," Warrant Officer Bessie ordered.

"Yes, Warrant Officer Bessie," Connie said.

Returning to her room she found the other two up and dressed. "Warrant Officer Bessie wants us to report to the Central Hall with the chaddie box."

"Did she say why?" Kendra asked.

"No. Just assemble Wolf Pack in the Central Hall."

Kendra touched the troop alert button on her computer and added where they were to assemble. "Let's see if everyone is assembled within 15 minutes."

"What happens if it takes more than 15 minutes?" Connie asked.

"Nothing," Kendra chuckled. "Did she say why?"

"It may be that she wants to help protect Cooks kitchen from the other guards. I hope they didn't empty the food warmers," Connie said.

"Ah," Kendra said rolling her eyes over to Kiku, who lifted the other side of the box. "As troop leader, I'm now protector of the food for the 2nd and 3rd shift."

The three hurriedly made it to the Central Hall before any of their troop members. The chaddie kits were turned over to Staff Sergeant Em and Cook. Both didn't seem to be sleepy. There was a scattering of Raven Squad and Horse Squad with cadets and private recruits. Apparently, there were a lot of guards unable to sleep.

"All right Group Leader Kendra you need to pick your members for watch tower duties that you consider at the top of their class. Staff Sergeant Dor has a week off to check on his family so you're responsible for the watch tower. The rest of your troop can stay here and protect the kitchen so that Cook can go to bed. Reliable protectors that you know won't raid the Cook's kitchen."

"Will do Warrant Officer Bessie."

When Warrant Officer Bessie left some of Wolf Pack was trickling downstairs. The three girls' growling stomachs reminded them they were hungry.

"The food cabinets are empty!" Kendra announced upset. She looked around the mess hall where some of the other squads' members shrugged their shoulders or didn't look at Kendra.

It was then Sergeant Ruana came walking in, eating a sandwich. She smiled at Kendra and held up her sandwich. "It was the last and I was hungry. Cook said she's cooking up more food."

Cook leaned over the counter and grinned at Kendra's disappointed face.

"I've been here long enough to know that during the snowstorms every shift sneaks down for comfort food. You're darn lucky I love to cook."

By the time the entire troop was in the mess hall, Cook had her fires going on the grill with Henry and Maltie coming downstairs to help. Connie offered to help in the kitchen with Ada. They cleaned and munched cinnamon buns hot out of the oven. Horse Squad didn't feel left out, though they had emptied the warming food bins.

Once it was time to relieve Horse Squad in the Watch Towers, Kendra had assigned four members to the Tower, with Sergeant Bly to keep a keen eye on the other three. She then had two students guard the kitchen and divided the rest to work on subjects they needed to work on. When it was time to rotate her guards in the watch tower Connie and Amoke with Sergeants Gafna and Ancell were sent.

At the end of their shift, six in the morning, Raven Squad sent four of their guards with Master Sergeant Em accompanying them. Connie was surprised when they turned over the watch tower, that Master Sergeant Em asked questions about their watch that they had not noted in their turnover reports. It was embarrassing to Sergeant Gafna since she was the ranking officer and soon to graduate. Sergeant Ancell merely shrugged his shoulders. He was soon to graduate too, but it wasn't that important to him.

Kendra's drills afterward were enough to tire them all out, perhaps as punishment for their poor reports, which as group leader wasn't a good reflection on her.

Back in bed Connie had just fallen asleep when Warrant Officer Bessie shook her awake. She silenced her questions with a finger to her lips. Chavi, who was a familiar resident of their quarters, was standing alertly near the chaddie box. Bessie signed for her to dress in her uniform. Connie quickly dressed and was handed her beret then signed to pick up one end of the box. They both left the quiet of the room and made it downstairs with only a slight disturbance from the kits.

In the captain's office they rested the chaddie box on the floor. There were four rangers dressed in winter coats with their skull caps pulled over their ears. Reddened faces gave evidence of the cold weather outside.

Connie removed her beret and waited for the moment she realized she was anticipating with regret. They came for the chaddies.

"Ranger Captain Leah this is Private 1st Class Connie that has been caring for the chaddie kits since she rescued them," Captain Sahem introduced.

Nervously Connie nodded at the captain with the silvered eyes that studied her.

"Captain Leah," Connie acknowledged.

The ranger turned to another ranger who could have been her sister. “Lt. Morra, take charge of the kits.”

Lt. Morra stepped forward and stared into Connie’s eyes. Connie felt disorientated for a moment as if something shifted within her. **“Do you trust me young one to care for the welfare of these kits?”** It was asked so softly; Connie wasn’t sure if it was spoken.

“Yes.” Connie whispered. And then said louder, “Yes, Lt. Morra, I trust you are better trained to care for the chaddie kits.”

With little effort, Lt. Morra lifted the box and left the office with Chavi giving a wide yawn and then leaving the gathering.

“Thank you, Private 1st Class. You have done a great service for our forest friends,” Captain Leah said, and turned to leave, but stopped at the door and turned back to stare at Connie. Connie again felt another shift in her awareness.

The ranger captain nodded to the captain and Warrant Officer. She signed to the two “She hears.” Then again looking at Connie, she gave a smile and left.

Connie took a deep breath and felt a great relief as if a huge responsibility was removed from her.

“How do you feel, Private 1st Class Connie,” Captain Sahem asked.

“I’m happy for the chaddie kits, Sir.” Then she smiled. “I won’t have to lose sleep over running downstairs for refills for their nourishment.”

“That’s all? I’m asking because usually when a bond is made with chaddie’s especially the kits it’s rather difficult for the foster parent to give them up,” Captain Sahem said.

“A bond, Sir?”

“Like a parent to its child,” Warrant Officer Bessie said.

“It wasn’t just me caring for them, Warrant Officer Bessie. And it wasn’t just Wolf Pack. Whoever came over to their box talked to them and some of them sang to them. Cook gave them the right nourishment and Sergeant Major Em and Cook watched over them when I was on duty where I couldn’t have them near.”

“You can go back to sleep, Private 1st Class. You have a few more hours of down time,” Warrant Officer Bessie said.

Not wanting to think about how she would miss the time she spent caring for them, she genuinely gave them a mental heartfelt blessing for their futures and hurried up the stairs to what she was looking forward to... sleep.

Captain Sahem was silent as he thought of Private 1st Class Connie. It was Warrant Officer Bessie who put what he was thinking into words.

“She’s another Burkee. How many chances do we get in having a chance to witness a future ranger blossom into her full potential by graduation?” she said in a teasing voice.

He shook his head. “I suspect we’ll be seeing more of the rangers who will be keeping an eye on her.”

“Who’s to say they haven’t already?” Warrant Officer Bessie thought about Connie’s ability to recognize a young boy close to transitioning, and a rodent that wasn’t a rodent. She didn’t think Burkee had that ability or if she had, would she mention it to senior staff? There were a lot of things Burkee took care of herself without senior staff’s help. Burkee, a member of the royal household, would have known how to recognize a shapeshifter and a lowlit. Yet she had said nothing at her departure from either youth.

Chapter 3

3rd week of 3rd month

Intruder Alert

Due in part to dealing with the weather and seasonal illnesses it was a busy time for Lt. Hellene for dispensing out medications for colds and a few with the flu. Since Connie was being trained as a student medic assistant, she was rotated to day shift on day shift with her spending her breaks with Lt. Hellene making cold brews. When she worked in the kitchen she was spared and thankfully, not having to visit those with the flu. PR Jenkins had some knowledge of healing and was enlisted to also spend time in the clinic.

Sergeant Kalere on permanent duty as kitchen staff for the rest of her proscribed service, and the two private recruits with three of their members ill, meant Raven Squad

had three cadets working the wall and the tower watch, with PR Jenkins filling in where Student Guard First Sergeant Hadid thought he could work. Student Guard First Sergeant Mac, soon to be out of guards in weeks, also filled in where assistance was needed. Connie was relieved she wasn't assigned to work with any of the private recruits. Corporals or sergeants were paired with them, leaving the more experienced cadets to work on the more skilled jobs along the wall and tower.

Thankfully, Staff Sergeant Dor was back and was finding that some of the student guards and cadets had gotten lax in their reporting night incidents that they found trivial. By the time Warrant Officer Bessie went over their poor reports, all the shifts whether day or night were nervous how they wrote their reports, since facing Warrant Officer Bessie was not a pleasant experience, especially when her additional assignments meant they lost their two hours of free time. The cadets were not immune to a bad report from Warrant Officer Bessie, but they were more attentive to their duties.

Connie worked in the kitchen and put some of her study time in the clinic helping to mix cold remedies. In the kitchen she felt confident she could handle the cleanup by herself for lunch and dinner. Horse Squad's assigned helper for breakfast wasn't any of the private recruits since their three were on the sick list. Corporal Sarod, a singer, kept the kitchen humming to his songs. When he left at the end of his duty, Connie was still humming.

Kalere had only four weeks until her four years of service were over. Already she had a position awaiting her at a culinary school in Ettenburg with her schooling paid for by the royal treasury. She and the kitchen staff were excited for her, and they all had suggestions for her on her first year at the culinary school. All those that finished their four years at the top of their qualifiers for furthering their education in a trade school or in an education that required more specialized training were rewarded with a scholarship paid for by the royal treasury.

Connie was sorting the cleaned lunch dishes from the drying rack to the cart for dinner when she felt an unfriendly energy behind her and the talisman with two additional stones she had added to her collection, warning her. Turning alarmed, she mentally checked to see if she remembered putting a protection shield around herself.

She walked out from behind a large kitchen mixer to see what it was. A tall stout young boy, with the beginnings of a scraggly beard, was standing at the entrance for kitchen staff, focused on locating someone. There was a dark cloud around his head.

“Hey! You! Stop right there! Guards!” shouted an angry Cook. “Get that intruder out of here!”

The intruder alert, a nearly deafening alarm went off. Connie didn’t know who hit the intruder alarm so quickly because her focus was on preventing the intruder from entering further into the kitchen, however he was already past the refrigerator. To stop the intruder, she wheeled the cart with the cleaned dishes in front of his path, only to have it stopped by him and with a lot of force pushed back at her, knocking her off balance. The alarm had everyone in the kitchen looking around for the intruder. Kalere looked frightened and was standing frozen holding a pie ready for the oven.

Connie regained her balance and grabbed one of the dishes from the cart and tossed it at the fellow’s head as hard as she could. It would have been successfully fended off, however Connie was picking up and throwing dishes in rapid succession, getting solid hits at the intruder’s head and shoulders. He turned to find where the dishes were coming from and Connie could see angry red eyes staring at her.

Soon the kitchen was filled with guards and cadets that had been eating or resting between shifts. The intruder was bigger and stronger than the four boys that were determined to take him down, and they were easily tossed aside against kitchen equipment and wall. The two cadets near enough to assist, became entangled with the guards that were on the floor.

Connie blinked in surprise as the tall husky intruder headed for her with a murderous intent, then before any more harm was done, Warrant Officer Bessie felled him with one blow.

The intruder alarm alerted the entire tower of an emergency and what area the alarm was set off in. The captain rushed into the mess and found cheering guards and a few of the cadets with wide grins, hanging over the kitchen counter, shouting Warrant Officer Bessie’s name as the hero. Warrant Officer Bessie dragged the intruder from the kitchen area and into the hallway where he was surrounded by guards from Wolf Pack and some of the other student guards in their workout uniforms that had been in the

gymnasium with their stun sticks. The larger and more mature guards from the cadet corps that surrounded the intruder were more formidable threats to the hunched figure on the floor. There were a dozen stun sticks pointed at him. Melting snow from boots were leaving the stone floor in the hall slippery. Hopefully no one slipped and hit their head, Connie thought.

Who was guarding the tower wall? The intruder wasn't unconscious, but he wasn't moving. Connie was sure the stunning blow would be in their next hand-to-hand combat training with First Sergeant Kendra if not Warrant Officer herself, demonstrating on some unlucky guard. Hopefully, not her.

Connie returned to the kitchen and was about to clean up when Warrant Officer Bessie ordered everyone to leave the kitchen. It was now part of the incident scene. Warrant Officer Bessie had First Sergeant Kendra and First Sergeant Elroy of Horse squad restore order as sergeants from the other squads began to check on their members' whereabouts and what they did on hearing the tower's intruder alarm. The captain dragged the intruder to his feet and into his office where another group of investigators would begin the incident investigation. Lt. Hellene was on the phone notifying the other towers of a disturbance by a civilian intruder and that a formal investigation was ordered.

It seemed in less than thirty minutes air carts filled their airspace and military personnel dressed in full combat gear were dropping down ropes from air carts. All the tower guards and cadets were ordered to their quarters and those with weapons to surrender their arms to their sergeants who confirmed all were returned. A uniformed armed guard patrolled their hallways saying nothing to the young tower guards or cadets. The official incident investigation had begun.

Cook, not to be ordered about, knew what had to be done and had her assistants collect the food and store it in overnight storage lockers Henry rolled out from the kitchen storage into the mess hall. Sergeant Kalere, still in shock, was taken elsewhere by Master Sergeant Em and Lt. Hellene.

Connie had felt the youth's rage and though it wasn't like Jhef's madness, this young person was consumed with rage, and it was scary when he directed it at her.

Connie's mind kept playing over Kalere's frozen face and her thoughts as she faced this person that she hadn't seen for over three years, who felt betrayed by her. Was this all in her imagination or was she picking up on Kalere's thoughts?

The stones in the tower's walls would record it all, available for an intuitive reader to tap into it. Though, she was sure the security cameras would provide a more visual report of the comings and goings of everyone.

With little restful sleep Connie was up earlier than their 5AM assembly. She wanted to speak with Kalere. To offer her something she needed. Relying on her mother's words and lessons she dressed quickly and quietly ran down the hallway on their third floor toward Raven Squads quarters. The military from the Royal Regiment were no longer patrolling the hallways. Their investigators had collected enough information as to how an unauthorized person had gotten into the tower's lower floor unchallenged.

She found Kalere by sound, huddling on the shower floor softly crying. Connie knelt beside her, taking her hands into hers and sending energy into her body. When Kalere's hands relaxed in Connie's she leaned forward to whisper a prayer her mother taught her.

When Kalere withdrew her hands from Connie's she touched her forehead to Connie's and whispered a thank you.

Connie hurried back down the hallway to make it to Wolf Squad's assembly, if there was to be an assembly.

Wolf Pack's five in the morning assembly was in the meeting hall where it was warm and without the cold snow soaking their feet. Everyone was quiet and fearful. They all had witnessed a section of the Royal Guards descend on their tower in air carts to begin a full investigation into how a civilian had managed to gain entrance into the tower property and as far as the kitchen without being challenged. Since Wolf Pack was on guard duty, it was a shadow over their reputation, and First Sergeant Kendra was taking it personally.

"This invasion and threat to one of our tower guards is a shock and a reminder that we are an important part of protecting the commonwealth from outside threats, and not just poachers that are usually what we prepare to defend our section of the wall

from.” Warrant Officer Bessie glanced at each of Wolf Pack’s members. Some fearful of looking into her eyes, however those that did realized there was a kindness she was reflecting on.

“Yes, you are still children in some peoples’ eyes, but don’t make the mistake of believing your four years here is not important to the commonwealth. The section of RGs that is now taking up the three shifts on the tower are giving us a chance to go over how this incident could have happened without placing the blame on any one person or troop.”

“It was during our duty shift, Warrant Officer Bessie,” First Sergeant Kendra said, sounding upset.

“But it didn’t originate during your shift, First Sergeant. So far, the chief investigator has found the intruder had been studying our tower’s operation for weeks. He was hired as a delivery service person for a food vendor in Truncel, which the deliveries occur usually between three to four in the morning hours. That day the intruder had passed inspection on his arrival with supplies as he usually did every three days. The guard on duty had his name and identification noted from his work badge on the official entrance sheet. What was missing was his sign out due to his companion passing on information that wasn’t verified with a face check, that he was already in the truck. He was able to hide in the kitchen’s storage until the bin that had its shelves removed was where he hid as it was moved next to the kitchen staff entrance.”

“Why was he angry with Sergeant Kalere?” Kendra asked.

“They grew up in the same village. He was a quiet and lonely boy that hung around her and her friends. All of their friends that were drafted the same day were scattered about the realm in various occupations. Sergeant Kalere said five of them made a promise when they got out to meet back at the local meeting hall to exchange news on what they experienced and had plans to do with their lives. However, he finished his four years of service before Kalere and learned where Kalere was stationed and came to meet with her when her service ended. Someone told him that she would not be returning home when she completed her service but going on to further her education elsewhere. His mistaken belief was when they both returned from the draft they would marry.”

“Wow, did he ever misread that,” Kiku said. “Never in our conversations did Kalere mention returning to her village to marry. She only spoke of her dream of going to a cooking school.”

“The relationship was only in his mind. Kalere didn’t consider him anything more than an older boy in the village that liked to hang around with her group of friends until he was drafted,” Warrant Officer Bessie explained.

“I heard when Connie started throwing dishes at him, he looked like he was going in for the kill.”

“Fat chance that,” Connie laughed nervously. “Warrant Officer Bessie gave him one jab and down he went.”

Everyone laughed.

“So, Warrant Officer Bessie, what’s going to happen to him?” Connie asked.

“That’s out of our hands. He will be observed and given a mental evaluation.”

“When do we go back to our duty stations?” First Sergeant Kendra asked.

“You have the RGs taking your shifts to make sure all paperwork and reports are done. It gives a chance for the other guards still sick to heal. Lucky that your troop has Medic Connie to harass you all to drink the prescribed herb teas prepared by Lt. Hellene three times a day. Yes?

“Also, the RGs have better cold weather gear and can stand guard posts in the snow for longer periods. Fortunately for them, no snowstorms are predicted. Each one of you will be called in for an interview. Right now, Raven Squad is going through the interview and afterward Horse Squad since when our visitors leave, they will resume their late-night guard duty. Wolf Pack is last because you drew the short straw. So, you’ll do your exercises in the gymnasium and do class work in your barracks cubicles until you’re called for the interview. I’ll be monitoring your class work so don’t skip it. And don’t forget, a written report of your experiences from yesterday is mandatory. Dismissed all.”

When a message summoning her presence appeared on her terminal screen, she shut down her program and turned off the terminal. As she passed her bunkmates staring at their terminals, they both gave her a thumbs up. Kendra teased her and whispered that if she were a witch or princess, he could see through her. Since she was

neither, there was nothing to see. That was her mantra as she rushed down the stairs. The energy in the hallway to the Tower's offices was heavier than she remembered it ever had been.

Lt. Hellene motioned her to enter the captain's office. Connie paused, not comfortable with the energy around the door.

She rapped on the door twice.

"Come!" a deeper voice than Captain Saham ordered. This person wasn't pleased with this assignment.

"Private 1st Class Connie, reporting as ordered." As she stepped in, she removed her beret.

The officer she was facing reminded her of an angry bear, which she had only seen in pictures. The captain and Warrant Officer Bessie weren't present, however there was a civilian with the Lieutenant giving the interview.

"Be seated, Private 1st Class." He gestured to the civilian. "Elora will be recording this interview. Now, Private 1st Class Connie, tell me about yesterday, starting with your reporting for duty."

"Yes, sir. The assembly was at five in the morning. Calisthenics for forty minutes, then I reported for my kitchen duty assignment at 5:45."

"Did you see any furniture or storage for the kitchen near the entrance?"

"No, sir."

"You are sure?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir. If the food warming cabinet was there, I would have cleaned it and moved it to the kitchen storage until dinner shift when it will be moved back for the meals for the two late shifts to be stored."

"Were you in the kitchen for your entire duty?" he demanded.

"No, sir. I have an hour break after breakfast cleanup and also after lunch cleanup to study or to work with Lt. Hellene in the clinic, and then I return to the kitchen for dinner preparation to setup for Cook."

"And what do you do in the kitchen?"

"I clean dirty dishes, pots, pans, the floors, and the oven, and keep the kitchen area clean and free of clutter. I collect discarded trays and make sure they are clean and

on their cart for the guards to pick up to carry their food dishes to their tables. I also make sure only authorized people are allowed in the kitchen area.”

“Who decides who is authorized?”

“Cook.”

“Cook?”

“She is the sole administrator of her domain, the kitchen.”

He was quiet a moment wondering why he hadn’t thought to question the civilian cook.

“You must notice who is around the mess hall during the breakfast, lunch and dinner gathering when you collect dishes.”

“Yes sir. All three squads frequent the mess hall for all three meals, and some gather during their free time.”

“You’re a tower guard that is responsible for the security of the mess hall and the kitchen area. Don’t you think you should be aware of what the other squads are up to in the mess hall?”

“Do you mean listen to their gossip while I’m gathering dishes, Sir?”

“Gossip is passing on useful information if you know how to translate it. Am I correct, Lieutenant?” A new presence entered the room. He was a large robust man who wore his clothing well and kept a well-trimmed beard with his long hair tied back. No elaborate mustache. He wasn’t wearing a uniform, but his energy filled the room as a man of influence.

“Lord Drewford,” the lieutenant said dryly.

Lord Drewford gave what could be described as a grin through his facial hair.

“May I question the young guard?”

The lieutenant gestured for him to continue.

“What did you notice that was different when you entered any of your kitchen shifts, Private 1st Class?”

“Sir, normally, at five in the morning the food warming cabinets are in the mess hall, waiting to be cleaned out and then moved from the mess hall into the kitchen storage shed, so the mess hall is cleared. There were no cabinets in the mess hall in the morning and no wet patches from the night shift that would have shown the cabinets

were moved recently. When I arrived for the dinner shift, I noticed only one had been moved from the storage area close to the kitchen's staff entrance."

"And why do you think the cabinet was missing in the morning?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Hazzard a guess," Lord Drewford encouraged.

"Someone from the late shift who would be assigned to breakfast shift had anticipated the cabinets needed to be cleaned and moved to the storage and did it during his or her break."

"And the appearance of the one lone cabinet in the late afternoon?"

"To get to the kitchen's storage shed the person moving it would have had to go outside for a brief time and they would have left wet tracks around the kitchen's entrance which Cook would have noticed the wet on the ground as a hazard and one of us would have been directed to dry the area, so I'm not sure when it was moved. As for only one cabinet and too close to the staff's entrance, I guess whoever did it may have not had kitchen duty before." She was thinking maybe one of the cadets, then discarded the idea. None of the cadets were assigned to kitchen duty. Cook wouldn't have it.

"You're only fourteen or fifteen years old and you single handedly nearly knocked the intruder three times your size to the ground. What were you thinking when your Cook's sacred space was invaded?"

"To slow him down until help arrived, sir."

"Who pressed the intruder alarm?"

"I don't know, sir."

"What were you doing?"

"I was loading cleaned dishes onto a cart. I heard Cook say there was an intruder, and for him to be removed."

Lord Drewford looked down on the captain's desk where there was a drawing of the kitchen and where kitchen staff personnel were when they became aware of the intruder. He pointed to where Connie was and looked up at the lieutenant. She was out of sight of the staff's entrance due to kitchen equipment. He tilted his head as if to indicate the interview had ended, or so Connie hoped it meant.

"You may leave, Private," the lieutenant said.

“Thank you, sir.”

Connie headed to the mess hoping there were still warm meals in the food lockers Cook had set up, before she headed back to her quarters. She found a dozen sandwiches among the covered meals and picked the fattest sandwich. Lord Drewford stopped her before she went up the stairs with a sandwich warming her hand. He looked up the stairs where there was always a ghost or two, then studied the wolf on her beret.

“You don’t belong here,” he said softly.

Connie couldn’t think of anything to say, and her spirit guides were silent, and her talisman wasn’t giving any warning.

Before he could say anything more Master Sergeant Em appeared. The two nodded to each other and Master Sergeant Em started a conversation in another language with him, which Connie took to mean her presence was no longer needed.

She ran upstairs thinking that she would look up that name, Lord Drewford.

Why would he say that? Cali Can asked.

Maybe he knows she switched places with Rachel.

How would he know that? Connie demanded and ended the conversation with an impatient swipe of her hand.

Kiku and Kendra were at their desks but wanted to know how the questioning went.

“About as drawn out as yours. I don’t know what exactly he was looking for.” Connie said impatiently. Hungrily, she bit into her sandwich. It was meat, beans and cheese with a spread of hot sauce. Just the way she liked it.

“We didn’t have anything to say about the matter. We were in the watch tower where no one entered nor exited the tower entrance, which the security cameras showed,” Kendra said exasperated.

Warrant Officer Bessie knocked on their door and walked in. Connie’s hands hovered over her keyboard ready to key in Lord Drewford’s name.

“1st Sergeant Kendra, the Draft Administration is sending a bus load of draftees that will be replacing all the guards graduating out earlier than scheduled due to the report of another snowstorm approaching, as well as a replacement for your promotion. Those graduating out will be taken to town on the bus or driven to where they want to

be left off. Travel tickets complement of the draft board will be given. You will have five draftees assigned to your pack. Notify your pack, 1st Sergeant Kendra. They have two weeks to prepare to leave.”

Chapter 4

3rd Day After Intruder

Back to Duty

The investigation section of the Royal Regiment left as late-night duty was to begin their shift, with cadets still filling for sick members.

When Connie arrived at the kitchen the next morning, a cadet was assigned to kitchen duty, which was unusual. He was taller and bigger than any of the tower guards, so Connie felt it was more of a reassurance to Kalere. Khelif, the identified intruder, was moved elsewhere under sedation. When Connie tried to touch Khelif the previous night, she found a confusing mess of thoughts with faces that were haunting Khelif’s drugged mind.

She didn’t sleep well. She had forgotten that her mother had taught her how to reach the inside of people’s thoughts to calm them and remain unaffected herself. It was an exercise to calm her younger sister Jennifer’s tantrums. It was not a pleasant exercise then and now, in an adult’s chaotic mind, it was uncomfortable. So why did she do it?

She needn’t have worried about Kalere. She was not only cheerful but smiled at Connie as she moved about the kitchen under Cook’s motherly eye. She obviously received the news she would be leaving earlier than expected. Henry was chipper too, telling jokes and keeping everyone in stitches with his story about his eldest child trying to boil water over a campfire in the snow. What could be funny about that? His son was using his wooden cooking spoons for the wood kindling.

Connie and Kalere enjoyed the energy the young cadet brought to the kitchen. He wasn’t handsome by any measure but his manners and respect for everyone made him attractive. Cook was especially taken by his charm and made sure he had lots of extra samples from her menu. Her reservations about letting cadets join her kitchen staff were gone with this cadet.

Everyone had a new excitement to focus on. In two weeks, twelve tower guards would be leaving as their four years of service were coming to an end. Bly, Gafna, Ancell and Shermal from Wolf Pack, Eleora, Kalere, Vivian, Mac of Raven Squad, and Elroy, Sada, Kaveri and Kedem of Horse Squad. The guards that were newly promoted to lead the squads were getting the last helpful tips from the previous leaders, and as the week approached speculation on how well the new leaders of the Squads were fitting in was with jokes and pressure. First Sergeant Kendra of Wolf Pack; First Sergeant Hadad of Horse Squad and First Sergeant Ruana of Raven Squad were taking the ribbing with good humor. That meant new draftees would be filling those slots too as well as the expected four to keep the number of 12 guards per squad, not counting their Sergeant leaders and where the newbies would be bunked was another conversation as some of the guards wanted to change their bunkmates.

First Sergeant Kendra put a stop to that in the Wolf Pack. Some of the girls were grumpy as they thought moving to new quarters would change their restlessness with their own end of service time nearing.

Chapter 5

12th week

More New Draftees

Connie stared out the window. She had been called by Lt. Hellene to assist in working in the clinic. Jenkins was still sleeping.

There it was. The anticipated bus with eleven draftees pulled up. It didn't take long for the entire tower to know that the expected draftees had arrived, as arranged before the anticipated snowstorm.

Ancell, Shermal, Gafna and Bly in Wolf Pack were excited as that meant they could leave early. Dropping off all their guard gear and uniforms in the commissary to be cleaned and recycled, they and seven others hurried through the chaos of hugs and tears and then, all went silent as the bus pulled away to return their friends to civilian life.

The twelve new draftees were first taken to the captain's office where they were introduced to Lt. Hellene who would give them health checks and how to avoid the illness that some of the guards were suffering from, then to Warrant Officer Bessie who

gave them the names of the squads they would be assigned to and their troop leaders. Then they were introduced to Captain Sahem. From there they would be introduced to the mess hall and Cook and her staff. And if they were hungry, given a meal, then one by one taken to see Sergeant Major Em for uniforms. The squads they were assigned to their First Sergeants would escort them to their new quarters and if their bunkmates were awake, introduce them and register them for classes and acquaint themselves with their work schedules and what to dress in.

Unfortunately, for the cadets, they would remain until the sick guards were back in form. These Private Recruits were not qualified to take part in some of the duties whereas the five private recruits that had arrived weeks earlier were all proud of their knowing more than the newer arrivals, though a few were put back on the sick list as they didn't follow Lt. Hellene's instructions.

Connie was dressed in her Medic Uniform, as it was required when she worked in the clinic, and looking into the faces of young teens she wondered if she looked as uncertain as most of them on her arrival. Connie's job was to hand out herb teas with Lt. Hellene instructing the draftees to drink the tea three times a day to avoid getting sick. Lt. Hellene pointed out what would happen to them by using the five sick recruits that came earlier as examples of not following her instructions.

When Connie got back to their quarters, she noticed Burkee's cot had bedding on it, waiting to be made. Changing out of her medic uniform she dressed warmly so she could return to standing sentry on the wall.

The air on the wall was eerie to Connie. She had the 1st post which meant she would be meeting Glenhollow's security guard. She was thinking of asking him or her about Hovo. However, as she made her walk to the point where the two tower guards would meet, she could hear an air cart being pushed to its maximum speed. Turning to watch the fast approach, she could pick up the excitement of the two in the air cart. One of them was Private Recruit Jenkins. What was a Horse Guard doing up at this time?

"What is it?" Connie asked as the air cart came to a sharp stop, with both passengers leaning against the straps.

"A storm! It's a big one," the Cadet said. "Glenhollow Tower's been hit hard and called ahead that it's moving this way fast."

“I can feel it!” Private Recruit Jenkins said excitedly. “The other air carts are picking up the rest of your squad on the wall.”

Connie turned in the direction of the Glenhollow tower and could see a very dark cloud approaching. She hopped into the passenger seat and could feel the power increase in the air cart, pushing her into her seat. The engine was straining. She hoped that Hassel who took over departed Ancell’s job of keeping the carts well-tuned was as capable as Ancell because at the speed they were going to have a failure would hurt them all.

They made it back to the tower garage as the storm arrived with enough power to bend the trees near the tower and cover the area in a white cloud.

“Where did that come from?” Connie asked as the three of them took refuge in the watch tower. The force of the white cloud slammed into the building behind their entrance.

“It arrives the last of the month of January and sometimes into February,” Cadet Benjamin, said. “Normally, the rescue squads and cadets in training are holed up in squaddies that are underground and spread around the wilderness areas ready to make inspections after the first storm hits.” He grinned. “I’m glad to be here instead. Eating warmed up trail grub isn’t my favorite storm experience.”

“I sure hope Cook is prepared to cook with the food she has stored,” Connie said.

“Cook?” Cadet Benjamin laughed. “Cook knows all about preparing meals for soldiers during weather lockdowns. Warrant Officer Bessie had Private Recruit Jenkins, and I take one of the air carts and get to you while she had all the air carts up and running to pull those out on the trails and up on the wall back safely in the tower. She doesn’t want to lose any of the Private Recruits that are just learning to wear a uniform.”

As they neared the Mess Hall they could hear the hum of conversation. It sounded like something was going on that wasn’t usual.

“What’s going on?” Connie asked her two companions.

“Private First Class Connie, your squad is assembling in the gymnasium,” Master Sergeant Em said. You Cadet Benjamin and Private Recruit Jenkins are to report to the captain’s office.”

Connie pulled her skull cap off and tucked it into her coat pocket heading to the gymnasium, resisting the impulse to take a peek in the mess to see what the noise was about.

In the gymnasium the rest of Wolf Pack was assembled with the new faces.

Connie fell into line next to Kiku with a Private Recruit on the other side of her.

“All right Wolf Pack. Listen up!” First Sergeant Kendra ordered.

When it was quiet Kendra looked at a clipboard in her hand. Was she hiding a frown, Connie wondered.

“You will notice we have new members in our squad. The draftee bus barely arrived to beat the predicted snowstorm and all the guards that were to be released at the end of the month were released early, as Warrant Officer informed us would happen. Gafna, Bly, Ancell and Sermal are gone. So, we have Bly replaced with Private Recruit Thomolyn; Gafna is replaced by Private Recruit Nadine. Private Recruit Bonjo replaces Ancell and Private Recruit George to replace Sermal. And due to my moving up to First Sergeant Private Recruit Genevieve is taking that slot. Welcome to Wolf Pack Private Recruits. To avoid conflict, the new members will be taking the bunks vacated by our graduated members. PR Genevieve will be bunking with Corporal Kiku, Private 1st Class Connie and myself.”

Everyone in Wolf Pack turned to the new private recruits and shook hands.

First Sergeant Kendra had everyone line properly for an inspection. From there, she dismissed everyone to return to their quarters and return dressed for a self-defense class.

Connie was curious about Private Recruit Genevieve. Neither Kiku nor her needed to explain to her how to dress for their self-defense class. Kiku said little and Connie smiled at Genevieve and waited for her to follow them down to the gymnasium on the second floor.

Everyone in Wolf Pack kept their eyes on Kendra as she demonstrated the self-defense moves. Kiku was the unfortunate one she demonstrated the grips then moved

over to pick on some of the boys. For the boys she had them learn to protect themselves from attacks on their sensitive parts. It had everyone laughing when one of the boys whose eyes were on PR Thomolyn as she practiced went down in a painful heap.

“Keep your focus on...” Kendra said aloud.

“Your opponent!” the troop shouted back.

It was interesting that Sergeant Ruana was right. The boys preferred to be tested by Sergeant Kendra. She not only was able to best them but showed them how to evade the same failure again. As for the girls, Connie didn’t mind working with Kendra because she was able to pick up quickly the moves.

However, though Kendra’s mood picked up with training her troop, she could feel Kendra was upset.

When Connie studied PR Genevieve, she saw a very secretive person and well protected. PR Genevieve noticed Connie studying her. She waved at Connie which had her smiling and waving back. Corporal Amoke worked between PR Thomolyn and PR Genevieve with Kiku happily working with Birk. Those two spent a lot of time giggling.

Wolf Pack was a very tired troop that crawled into their beds when it was time for the lights to go out. Genevieve had small bags of protection herbs and some stones that Connie noticed she placed about her bed.

Kendra’s lips tightened when she noticed.

“We shall all sleep very deeply,” Connie said. “You worked us so hard that we shall be very happy that we have no outside duty tomorrow. Being snowed in has its advantages.”

“Speak for yourself,” Kiku muttered when Kendra left their quarters. “She is in a foul mood. The last time she was like this it was when she caught Sigrid sneaking into our quarters with some kind of bag.”

“What happened?” Connie and Genieve asked.

“Burkee happened,” Kiku said grinning.

“My cousin? Usually, she’s very sly if she’s caught someone doing a nasty thing to her or her friends,” PR Genevieve said casually.

“Your cousin? Burkee is your cousin?” Kiku said astonished.

“Yes. She is.” Kendra came back into their quarters looking apologetic. “PR Geneive, I want to apologize to you if I made you feel unwanted.”

Geneive grinned. “Burkee didn’t want you to know. In fact, father was the one that had me placed with Wolf Pack. Burkee had a lot of good things to say about you two and the other girl that was here. I forgot her name.”

“Mufeh. Your sister is my guess. Burkee and she were as thick as blood relatives,” Kendra said.

Connie watched the three women closely. Mufeh. At the mention of her name, Kiku gave Kendra a frown. Kendra’s lips were in a tight smile.

Genevieve smiled. “Well, I think I’m ready for some restful sleep. Burkee said the ghosts in this tower are friendly, it’s some of the other guards not so friendly.”

Connie wondered just how long Genevieve would be here as a tower guard. She looked as young as all the draftees. But her looks hid an older and wiser person.

She’s not a danger to you, Callie Can said.

She’s not a friend either, Sulu said. Her other two guides were silent, as if thinking about this new enigma in their quarters.

Her talisman gave no notice and the two other stones she had found weeks earlier, along with a dozen others, were safely tucked in her bed. Mother often told her that it’s the mind that is the best protection. Stones and talismans are merely tools.

Chapter 6

Under Seige

Being stuck inside the tower was driving nearly everyone to be tense and sensitive with short tempers bringing out deeper conflicts. Even Connie recognized sexual tension between the new and the older guards and within troops. Physical exercises meant to tire everyone out and classes harder than usual didn’t divert all clashes. With Sigrid and Tess gone it couldn’t be blamed on their interference or gossip to incite jealousy and hurt feelings. As those who were ill were back on their feet, the Cadets taking their place were eager to leave, even if the food was better than what they would get once they were back with their platoons. Connie suspected it was, as Cook

would say, youthful hormones overactive and the older soldiers were dragged into it, though they weren't that much older.

Connie was finding that Genevieve seemed to always be around where she was. It was getting to the point where she was going to ask her, but she liked Genevieve and didn't want to challenge her for anything. She didn't need her spiritual guides to tell her not to tap into Genevieve's energy any more than viewing her troop picture. And that, she found, had a spell over it, just like she put over hers.

"Connie?"

Connie nodded but continued listening to her headphones as the security guards on the wall reported in.

"Private 1st Class Connie!"

Connie held her hand up to Private Recruit Genevieve.

"Can you repeat your message?" Connie asked.

"He's reporting a large gathering of perhaps poachers at Corporal Amoke's post," Kendra broke in. "Sound the alarm to all posts and the Command's Office of the Captain. Stand down Private Recruit Genevieve. No need to...oh!"

"Outside of our tower, smoke within view, 1st Sergeant Kendra," PR Genevieve said impatiently.

Kendra took one of the binoculars hanging from the wall and peered in the direction PR Genevieve was pointing. Connie was also looking but didn't notice any smoke.

Kendra looked conflicted. Was the smoke a distraction?

Warrant Officer Bessie stepped into the tower.

"Report. What smoke? And how many does Sergeant Amoke guess?"

Connie waited for Kendra to speak first when she tapped on her communicator and nodded. Kendra was still receiving updates on her communicator.

"A dozen, Warrant Officer, was the first guess," Connie answered softly.

"Post 6 is covered by two different towers. Very suspicious. And the smoke? Was it signaling or a badly tuned vehicle? It's cold out there and a vehicle just turned on after being off for more than an hour will put out a puff of exhaust."

“Sergeant Amoke reported that on closer inspection a vehicle unloaded maybe a dozen figures dressed in camouflage who dispersed in different directions, Warrant Officer,” Kendra reported. “Is it another test, Warrant Officer?” Kendra asked.

“Not that I was notified, and this is going to be a test with all our shifts loaded with Private Recruits.” Warrant Officer Bessie spoke into her communicator and signed off. “The captain is calling it in and notifying all the other towers too. He hasn’t heard of any ranger or military maneuver going on. It’s a matter of courtesy to at least notify the captain of the tower,” she said irritated.

“What about that air cart that delivered a passenger an hour ago?” Kendra asked.

“Oh, that was a chef trainee that Cook ordered,” Warrant Officer chuckled. “She’ll be taking up a bunk in your quarters. She won’t be training as a proper tower guard, but the Board of Education has designed a schedule for her so she won’t be ignorant of her basic knowledge that a citizen of the commonwealth should know, like the school classes you all take. She will be a test to see if sending a draftee to a tower to train as a chef is different than those trained in the castles or hotels.”

“What’s her rank?” Kendra asked.

“Well, that’s up to Cook. She doesn’t want her to be bothered with marching around and some uninformed guard trying to order her around. She’s Cook’s trainee and we’re all going to be put to the test to welcome her. After all, she’s the one helping with preparing your meals.”

“Does this mean we don’t have to assign someone to work in the kitchen?” Kendra asked.

“She will not be cleaning pots and pans or picking up dishes,” Connie said, laughing.

“She’s cooking, not cleaning. I got it,” Kendra said impatiently. “Just why is she staying in our quarters if she’s not sleeping the same times as us?”

“Because the honor has been given to you to make your schedules work,” Warrant Officer said impatiently.

Connie tapped her headphones as if to focus on what was being said.

“All student guards on sentry duty get ready to stand down,” Warrant Officer announced. “The Royal Regiment is sending their troops to secure three of the towers’

areas where disturbances have been reported. You all should be grateful. They'll be out in this cold weather instead of you."

Warrant Officer glanced at Kendra. "When you've sorted your troops to secondary activities, report to Captain Sahem's office."

When the Warrant Officer left Genevieve shook her head at Kendra. "What has you so upset with having a roommate you can't outrank?"

"I don't think it has anything to do with ranking but instead with responsibility," Connie said. "Newbees, whether under someone else's direction or hers doesn't mean Kendra isn't going to worry that some nutball will try to bully her."

Kendra rolled her eyes at Connie. "You think you're a know it all, so how do you think some of those new recruits that are going to treat someone not wearing a guard uniform and doesn't have to go through the adjusting to shift rotations?"

"I'm sure those classes you student guard leaders attend, has some suggestions and a place where you all can talk about it to prevent it from happening," Genevieve said. "You do worry too much. But you can give our troop a good talk so she doesn't have to worry about..."

"Oh, I think I know what's going to happen," Connie said grinning. "The other day Cook and Henry were talking about the guest rooms in the private residences."

"Cook is protective about her staff, whether it's guards or civilian staff. I wonder if then this newbee will be wearing a uniform, like all white," teased Genevieve.

Kendra had Wolf Pack gathered in the gymnasium along with Raven Squad. Kendra and Hadid decided to have marching drills to teach the Private Recruits and Privates to practice close action marching drills. With Hadid calling out the cadence Kendra headed to the captain's office.

"Squad Leader of Wolf Pack reporting as ordered," Kendra said, removing her beret and standing stiffly in front of a group of senior staff and Cook's staff.

"Student Guard Sergeant Kendra of Wolf Pack," Captain Sahem greeted. "We've received an interesting challenge to our tower personnel. Cook has been granted her request to train a draftee under her direction as a military trained chef. The challenge is what to do with such a person that is not considered a tower guard nor as a civilian that is based daily to train under the direction of Cook. We have concluded that our first

decision to have her stay in your quarters makes it awkward in that you as the leader of Wolf Squad has no real authority over her.”

“I should say not,” Cook said firmly.

“So, instead of bunking with your troop, she will be bunking in the private residences on the second floor where Cook and her staff will watch over her and guide her in tower protocol and see that she studies the classes required by the department of education.”

“Feel better?” Warrant Officer Bessie grinned at Kendra.

“Yes, Warrant Officer Bessie. It makes more sense.” Kendra allowed her body to relax, and a small smile appeared on her face before returning to a serious look.

“Good. Her uniform will be that of a chef trainee. According to Cook, the draftee trainees in the castles usually wear red and black checkered pants and shirts or dresses with the traditional long white apron. Cook has decided to go with the uniform of red and black checkered pants and shirt, since all female guards wear pants. Her name is Glenda, or Trainee Glenda.”

“In my kitchen she is Glenda,” Cook stated strongly. “I will not have my staff treated like they do in some of the other kitchens, where the newest member is treated badly. Anyone who doesn’t know the difference between your military order of rank-and-file treatment and my civilian order where everyone is treated with respect doesn’t belong in my kitchen.”

Warrant Officer Bessie laughed. “We do have private recruits and privates that are still new to kitchen protocol. They may see doing kitchen shifts as less noble than walking security, but I’m sure soon enough they’ll know it’s an honor to work the kitchen shift.”

“Especially during the cold days,” Sergeant Major Em said. “It all works out in a few days or weeks even.”

“So, Student Guard Sergeant Kendra, by now Glenda is quite settled in her new quarters and dressed in her uniform, ready to work in the kitchen. She will have time off to study and will be interested in participating in sports and such during the times she’s not working in the kitchen. You and all the group leaders will be given instructions on how she is to be treated, with respect and no bullying.”

“Yes, Captain Sahem.”

Cook got up from the table. “Come on you lot, it’s time to collect our student and get lunch ready.”

Kendra waited until Cook and her staff left and would have left also except for Captain Sahem’s sign for her to sit down.

“Sergeant Kendra, originally, she was placed under your wing, so to speak, because you were considered an even-tempered leader and able to watch out for Glenda’s welfare. That expectation is still our belief that you can watch out for her when she’s out in any of the public areas. All our draftees must learn self-defense if not how to march in order. You are our most qualified to teach her and with Cook you two can arrange time for her to train.”

Warrant Officer Bessie grinned. “We don’t want her to be a chubby graduate when that time comes for her to end her trainee time.”

Kendra smiled. “I remember when I spent time as kitchen cleanup crew, I was getting too many samplings of everything. I don’t see how Cook and Milia stay as slim as they do. Now, Henry is what I see as a healthy image of a chef.”

“Henry has always been robust, as he likes to describe it. Cook can smell her food and know what it needs or is too much. Henry must taste. Milia says she exercises when no one is around in the gym in the private residence,” Lt. Hellene said.

“So that’s what that humming noise is late at night,” Captain Sahem said. “So, Sergeant Kendra, I expect you to greet Glenda when you check on your assigned guard on kitchen duty. You will be the example of how she will be treated.”

“Yes, sir.”

Chapter 7

Trainee Chef Glenda

Glenda was a tall, big boned girl with bright red hair, freckles and a smile that never left her face. Connie, like Genevieve who was assigned to cover the three meal shifts, were attracted to her sweet disposition. For Connie it was interesting to see Cook treat her as favorite child and Henry and Milia treat her as a relation. Lightly touching

Glenda's energy Connie realized she was a protective being that had a mysterious energy around her that had everyone treating her as a specially gifted person. It was hard to see her as a teenager as tall and big as she was. She wasn't clumsy nor was she especially agile. She was difficult to describe. Connie didn't think anyone would mistreat her because she didn't pose a threat to anyone. Connie wondered where she was from and if all her people were like her. Connie had only fifteen minutes to study her as she hurriedly ate her lunch, but back on duty, Glenda was forgotten.

Glenda wasn't even mentioned in the shower gossip. It was in Connie's dreams that she dealt with this mysterious person. Mother came to Connie in her dreams and explained Glenda's tribe were from the lands on the other side of the wall. They carried their own magic, not from the same world of things. They were solid beings and had the ability to charm even the worst of others. Glenda appeared to everyone differently, but as a non-threat. Connie was warned not to trifle with her nor to wonder about her. Just accept her as she was.

The next morning, Genevieve was moved from kitchen duty back to tower duty and Thomolyn was switched to kitchen duty. Connie wondered if Cook had mentioned she would rather Thomolyn than Genevieve around her kitchen staff. Kendra was distracted by a project Warrant Officer Bessie had her working on, which was reviewing Wolf Pack on their sentry duty and assigning them to a new ranger as they went on trail runs.

The new ranger was Neda, who Connie remembered her as an Ensign that Sergeant Major Hillary from Istobel Tower was carting around. Ranger Neda would be bunking with Connie, Kendra, and Kiku. Patrols of rangers were on alert around the woods because too many people were nervous about strangers driving through the village and into the woods. Each of the three squads had a ranger assigned to their squad to train and gain experience of working with the tower guards.

Connie's sensitivity to wildlife and spending more of her private time in the woods had her forget about Glenda and her strange effect on everyone. Ranger Neda was a slight distraction because she had been introduced briefly by Sergeant Major Hillary of Istobel Tower. Then she was an ensign wearing a mariner's uniform.

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 emergency muster.

Connie untangled herself and dressed quickly in a warm duty uniform. Neda was waiting by the door impatiently while Connie fumbled with her coat 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 three 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 has towers and walls. Raven Flock, you have the air. Move out." Captain Sahen glanced at Commander Herder whose eyes were studying each guard that arrived as if sizing them up.

Neda glanced at Connie. "You're with me Private 2nd Class."

Connie's eyes blinked in surprise. Warrant Officer Bessie was in her air cart watching her squads move to their appointed positions.

Neda's skills at handling an air cart was something Connie envied. It was not as abrupt and sharp as Warrant Officer Bessie, but she was going much faster.

"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 passed. It was ten minutes later that a reading outside of their area of inspection caught Connie's attention.

"Ranger Neda, I have a reading of about sixteen hot spots to the left of the river."

"Call it in, Private. 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 hunter. We're lone scouts, sniffing out trouble." She grinned at her description.

"I seem to have a knack for that," Connie mumbled, not taking her eyes off the screen. "I'm seeing a yellowish glow. What's that from?"

"Dango!"

Suddenly the air cart was rising quickly and banking over the wall to the other side. Something Connie thought they could not do due to the buffer around wall. She didn't have time to worry about a breach as something hit the flyer on her side and the air cart shuddered.

"Hang on! Don't jump unless I tell you to!" Neda shouted above the high pitch whining from the air cart.

They hit the side of the hill on the other side of the wall with a thud and the air cart rolled over. Connie heard a grunt from Neda as they slid down a hill, and with one bounce high into the air it went over a cliff. Connie's eyes opened wide as she watched the world around them rotate slowly as they dropped. Their halt was sudden, with a bang and they became entangled in branches and vines. The two were silent for a few minutes listening to the loud snapping of branches and the creaking of wood as the branches bent from their weight. Connie hoped it would hold them.

"Are you alright?" 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."

We are about to start a new adventure, Callie Can said. The others agreed. Connie wasn't going to entertain that thought until she figured out where they were.

Cautiously Neda 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, bouncing her against a hard surface. She lost her grip and fell out the door hitting a branch that they heard crack. Connie made a grab for her wrist, loosening the air cart further in whatever precarious resting place it had landed in.

Neda gave a painful grunt as the air cart dropped, breaking more 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 stabbed 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 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 hurts to breathe."

"I can't come in there to get you. You must move yourself. No sudden moves and go slowly."

With Neda's guidance, Connie crawled out of the bent 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 our side of the wall."

She gave Connie some moments to gather herself. The only reason she wanted to move away from the air cart was that it may drop from the tree it crashed into. Her ribs were too bruised in the fall preventing her from further 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. Now we wait for a ride." Neda let out a puff of air. She hurt all over. Pulling out a cloth from her pocket, she leaned

over Connie to stop the bleeding from her injury. Two wounded warriors too weak to help each other, Neda thought humorously.

Connie heard her but was in too much pain to give an answer.