

# Tower Goldwah

*J A Bard*

## PART I

### Chapter 1

#### *The Draft*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Things change in two years,* Gen added.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The other spirit guides agreed.

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

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

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

*It's time.*

"I see the bus!" someone shouted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Connie grinned back at the friendly girl.

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

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

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

"Well, I already despise him."

"I'm Marian." Marian held out her hand to Connie who looked at it surprised.

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

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

"I'm Connie," she returned, mimicking Marian's hand shake.

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

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

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

"He thinks Tailshire posting will get him into a castle."

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

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

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

*Of course we do!* Her guides chorused.

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

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

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

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

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

*No sightseeing*, Sulu commented.

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

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

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

Connie nodded.

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

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

Surprised, Connie complied without hesitation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm Connie."

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

"How do you know that?"

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

"No."

"Come. I'll show you."

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

"What does a guard do?"

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

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

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

*Thoughts are actions,* Bau reminded her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The two regarded each other for a long moment.

*Trade places*, Bau said.

*It's the adventure you want*, Gem said.

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

*It's a good choice*, Calie Can said.

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

"Trading places?" Connie whispered back.

Rachel nodded.

"Can we do it?"

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

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

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

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

*Tell him to go away*, Calie Can said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Call one of the guards*, Gem said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks for checking, Marian," Connie said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Attention, attention, attention," a voice intoned.

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

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

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

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

*Too many people in the way,* Sulu said.

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

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

"Rachel from Goodhew."

"Connie from Hollbo," Connie said.

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

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

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

"I will. You sure this exchange is okay?"

"I'm sure," Connie told her firmly.

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