

The Walls of Westernfort

by

Jane Fletcher



2005

PART ONE

Walking In A
Dead Woman's Shoes

24 August 553

CHAPTER ONE—A MEETING IN THE TEMPLE

The skies over the city of Landfall had been clear sapphire blue all day, but as the sun started to drop, the color became tinged with a hint of turquoise, and wisps of high cirrus drifted over from the east. Shadows softened in the bustling streets and passageways, and though the breeze now held the first chill edge, the reds and browns of the bricks were richer and warmer.

The light was less glaring, but still it flashed off the polished helmets of the two Guards on sentry duty at the main gates of their headquarters and ran like liquid fire down the edges of their drawn swords. The two women were motionless except for the hems of their long red cloaks stirring in the breeze. Their eyes were glazed, seemingly oblivious to the traffic on the road before them. And for their part, the passersby spared no more than cursory glances for the sentries. Only one dawdling child stopped to stare open-mouthed at the brilliant uniforms and the long, sharp swords until an impatient shout from her mother called the girl away.

The city bells were chiming the hour when a captain appeared in the gateway, her uniform even more lavishly embellished in gold braid than the sentries'. Another Guard marched at her heels. The captain stamped to a halt beside the sentry on the right and then rotated sharply through 90 degrees to stare directly at her.

"Guardswoman Ionadis." The officer's voice gave the impression of shouting without being exceptionally loud.

"Yes, ma'am." The sentry's eyes did not flicker as she acknowledged her name.

"You are relieved of duty and may stand down."

"Yes, ma'am."

In a display of rigid, martial choreography, the sentry sheathed her sword and swapped places with the replacement Guard.

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“Come with me.” The captain snapped out the order.

The road into the headquarters ran between stables and barracks until it reached the central parade ground. On three sides, the open space was bordered by administration offices; on the fourth, it abutted the temple grounds. Few people were about, mainly orderlies running their errands. The captain stopped and, for several seconds, stared at the younger woman as if she had noticed something unusual about her. The subject of her regard stood stiffly at attention.

“I have instructions for you.” The captain spoke in an assertive undertone.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You are summoned to a meeting in the temple. Present yourself at the entrance to the sanctum in one hour.”

“Yes, ma’am.” This time, the Guard’s voice was not so crisp. She was clearly confused, and as the captain turned to go, she spoke again. “Ma’am?”

The captain looked back. “Yes?”

“Is there anything else?”

“You will learn all you need to know at the proper time.” The captain’s face gave nothing away.

“Yes, ma’am.”

Guardswoman Natasha Ionadis watched the officer disappear around the corner of a building before letting her forehead crumple in a frown. “Sanctum?” she repeated, confusion giving way to anxiety. The summons was definitely not the one she had expected, and it would have been nice to have a few hints on how best to spend the intervening hour.

Natasha’s shoulders sagged. Her eyes drifted over her surroundings in bemusement, finishing by looking down at herself. Her uniform had been immaculate at the start of sentry duty, but she could imagine that it now had the faintest coating of dust. She pursed her lips in a wry pout, thinking of the unofficial maxim of the Guards: *When in doubt, polish it.* A wash and general spruce-up were as good a use of the time as any other, but wandering toward the bathhouse, Natasha shook her head slowly and again whispered, “Sanctum?”

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A fair part of the allotted hour still remained when Natasha left the barracks. She paused in the doorway and tried to evaluate her appearance, using the back of her helmet as a mirror—a pointless exercise. She was of medium height and athletic build, but in the helmet, she looked like a potbellied giant. Her softly formed, square-cut face was contorted like a pig's snout, with her lips smeared across. The only thing she could tell for certain was bad news; her hair was far longer than the specified soldiers' close crop. Natasha grimaced. She had put off the visit to the Guards' haircutter for far too long, and there was no time now to rectify it. *Oh, well. Perhaps I'll be able to keep my helmet on,* she told herself optimistically, stepping into the sunshine.

The sight of her uniform cleared the way as she walked up the steps and into the great hall of the temple. Groups of worshippers faded from her path. Natasha was hardly aware of them or of the anxious looks they shot in her direction. She stood just inside the entrance while her eyes adjusted to the scented gloom and felt the familiar waves of peace and reverence wash over her. Directly ahead was the main altar, where Himoti's eternal fire burned. Natasha felt as if the light were flowing through her, filling her with the blessing of the Goddess. She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly; then she took her eyes from the flames and began to walk slowly around the perimeter of the hall.

A painting of the first landfall dominated the bay on her right. It showed the blessed Himoti about to alight from Celaeno's sacred shuttle, her foot descending on the grass of the new world—the world Celaeno had chosen for her daughters. Natasha knew that the shuttle symbolized the loom of fate, with all of creation woven in its great design, but there was also something in the twisting strand of wool reaching up into the heavens that suggested an umbilical cord, connecting the world to the mother Goddess.

A group of the Elder-Ones stood behind Himoti on the enormous shuttle. Studying them, Natasha whispered the words from the *Book of the Elder-Ones*, "Their skins were diverse in tone, and their hair was yellow and red and black, and all the shades between." Her gaze left the painting and flitted over a huddle of

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fellow worshippers. Like all women, they had light brown skin and dark brown hair. Natasha tried to imagine meeting one of the multicolored Elder-Ones, such as the figure depicted at the blessed Himoti's shoulder, with the improbable mane of golden hair and the sky blue face. Natasha shook her head in entranced awe and continued her slow march.

Along all the walls and surrounding every column were shrines where the pious might pay their homage to the appropriate Elder-One, the patron of their trade or calling. The size of the shrine was a fair guide to the status of the occupation. Natasha's destination was one of the more impressive, although none could match the grandeur of the monument to Himoti, patron of Imprinters, the greatest of Celaeno's disciples. Natasha's footsteps halted at the military shrine, set into a deep alcove in the wall. She wished to take time to pray. It was why she had rushed her grooming slightly. She had the feeling that prayers might be necessary.

When the captain had taken her away from sentry duty, she had assumed that it was to learn the result of her application for promotion to corporal, but that would be purely a military matter. She would not be notified at the temple and certainly not in the sanctum. Something else was at issue—something serious. Again, Natasha searched her memory for some clue about the summons but found nothing, either in the barrack-room gossip or the official dispatches.

She tried to push the anxiety from her thoughts and stepped into the alcove. The statues of three of the Elder-Ones looked down at her: the patrons of the Guards, the Rangers, and the Militia. She bowed her head to her namesake, Natasha Krowe of the Rangers, and then knelt before Su Li Hoy, the Guards' patron. The figure's bright yellow skin and flame-red hair mirrored the uniform of the Guards. Natasha's eyes fixed on the comforting statue, and she began to pray:

*Please, my patron; guide me in the ways of honor
and courage
That I might find favor with Celaeno, who is Goddess
over all...*



By the time the bell rang out the hour, Natasha felt far happier. The calm of the temple had soaked into her, and she had reached the reasonable conclusion that she was unlikely to be in trouble. Not only was her conscience clear, but also, if she were accused of a crime serious enough to warrant the Sisters' attention, the authorities would have dragged her to trial in chains.

The entrance to the sanctum was set to one side of the main altar, the secret world within hidden behind hanging drapes. Six Guards from Natasha's company were on duty. Their eyes showed the barest flicker of recognition when she came to a halt, slightly unsure what to do next. Within seconds, the curtain was pulled aside, and a white-robed Sister appeared.

"You are Guardswoman Ionadis?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Follow me."

Stepping into the sanctum, Natasha felt a confusing tangle of emotions. Curiosity and reverence were at the forefront, with apprehension and a degree of smugness playing a part. Many Guards would pass their entire careers without ever setting foot inside the sanctum where the Sisters and Imprinters lived out their daily lives. This was the heart of the greatest temple in the world. Nowhere else could a woman get closer to Celaeno. As she followed her guide, Natasha felt her soul swelling with love of the Goddess—a sensation hindered only by the urge to peer around like an inquisitive child, drinking in every detail of her surroundings.

The route took them through a series of courtyards and corridors. Eventually, Natasha was ushered into a small room on an upper floor, clearly someone's office, with shelves containing books and a large desk covered in piles of paper. A window at one side led to a balcony overlooking the Guards' parade ground. Two women were waiting for her in the room, and at the sight of them, Natasha's feeling of happiness vanished.

The one standing at the side was familiar from dawn parade each morning. Natasha did not need to count the gold stars on the epaulette to identify Commandant Jacobs of the Guards. The face of the other was hidden behind the gauze mask of a Sister, which would have made her impossible to name with certainty, except

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that this Sister wore Himoti's pendant hanging on a thin gold chain at her throat. With a jolt, Natasha realized that the woman seated at the desk was Chief Consultant Pereira, the leader of the Sisterhood, and the thirty-second to have held the title since the blessed Himoti, the first Chief Consultant.

Natasha felt her stomach turn to ice. She could not begin to guess what reason the most important person in the world had to speak with her. Fortunately, her trained reflexes took over, and without conscious thought, she snapped stiffly to attention.

"Guardswoman Ionadis reporting, ma'am." Natasha was surprised to hear her own voice.

The Commandant acknowledged her and said, "You may stand at ease, Guardswoman, and remove your helmet."

Oh, no, my hair, Natasha thought in anguish, even as she moved to obey. She prayed that no tufts were sticking out and fought the temptation to try frantically to smooth them down. It would only draw attention to her lapse. Natasha's mouth was dry as both women continued to study her, but after several nerve-racking seconds, she realized that neither appeared to be hostile.

At last, the senior Guard spoke again. "I guess you're wondering why we've called you here."

"Yes, ma'am." Natasha was not sure if she should admit to curiosity, but to deny it would have been blatant lying.

"That is understandable." Commandant Jacobs' lips compressed in the tight line that was the nearest her habitually stern face ever came to smiling. Jacobs was well below average height and was rumored to cultivate a stern demeanor deliberately to counteract any perceived deficiency, although other schools of thought claimed that she was just naturally humorless. She exchanged a look with the seated woman, as if asking permission to continue. The Chief Consultant indicated her consent.

Jacobs relaxed her stance slightly and drew a deep breath. "We're planning a very important mission, and we're looking for volunteers. For several reasons, your name has been put forward as a candidate, but before I say more, I must warn you that the chances of our agents returning is low—not impossible, with the grace of the Goddess, but very unlikely. Which is why we want volunteers."

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“I’ll do it,” Natasha said instantly, almost before the Commandant had finished speaking. It was the sort of opportunity she had not dared dream of. Then she remembered the status of her audience and tried to restrain her childish overeagerness. “I...I would count it an honor, ma’am.”

Commandant Jacobs’ face showed approval. “Which is the response I’d been led to expect from you. However, before I accept your offer, you must learn more of what the mission involves, and this is what the Chief Consultant wishes to talk to you about.”

Natasha turned her attention to the woman behind the desk. For a few seconds, the eyes above the gauze mask continued to regard Natasha in silence. The skin around them was deeply lined; the Chief Consultant was not young. Her body was completely concealed by her white robes, but from the way the folds lay, the form underneath was approaching skeletal thinness. When she spoke, her voice held a trace of a waver.

“Guardswoman, what I am about to relate is not in complete agreement with what we are obliged to tell the general population. If you’re accepted for this mission, you may discuss what I say with the other members of the team, but you must give your oath never to repeat it to anyone else.”

“Yes, ma’am. I swear by Hoy’s sword.” Natasha gave the traditional Guards’ oath.

The Chief Consultant pressed her fingers to her pendant in recognition of the vow. “Then first, I would like to know what you have heard about the heretics who follow the accursed Gina Renamed.”

Natasha drew a deep breath, torn between pride and nervousness, dreading that she would say something wrong and disqualify herself from the mission, but it was not a difficult question. “The heretics set themselves against the divinity of Celaeno. They renounce the teachings of Himoti and the Elder-Ones, and they use their perverted creed to justify the hideous crimes they commit. Most have been brought to account for their sins, but a few have escaped and are hiding in the wildlands.” From the nod of agreement, Natasha knew that she had given the right answer.

“Have you also heard of the place known as Westernfort?”

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This was a slightly more awkward topic. Natasha hesitated for a moment before restating the official account. “It’s the name given to a fictitious town the heretics are supposed to have in the mountains.”

“And what have you heard via the barrack-room gossip?” The eyes above the mask narrowed shrewdly.

“Er...” Natasha swallowed, but she could not refuse to answer, and lying was unthinkable. “Some Guards...claim there really once was a strong, defended base, and we took heavy casualties before finally conquering it.”

“I suppose it was only to be expected that the survivors would talk.” The Chief Consultant’s voice was quietly rueful. She tapped her fingertips together and then looked up sharply. “And lastly, do you recognize the name of Kimberly Ramon?”

It’s a trap. The thought shot through Natasha’s head. Everyone must have heard the banned songs, but only a fool would admit it. Natasha’s eyes fixed on the paneled wall as her stomach contracted, but before she could formulate an answer, the elderly Sister spoke again.

“It’s obvious from your face that you do. Don’t worry. We didn’t bring you here to accuse you of spreading sedition. I’m afraid there are very few who haven’t been exposed to the doggerel.”

Natasha found her voice. “I’ve paid no attention to it. The few bits I’ve heard have been idiotic fantasy. It couldn’t—”

The Chief Consultant interrupted her with a quote from a song:

*For all the Sisters’ traps and plots,
Ramon cannot be caught.
She lives safe with her love behind
The walls of Westernfort.*

Silence filled the room until the Chief Consultant sighed and continued. “Yes, it is fantasy, but unfortunately, there’s a basis of truth in it.” She pushed back her chair and walked to the window.

Natasha glanced at the other woman in the room, hoping for some hint of what was meant, but Commandant Jacobs’ expression was as stony as ever. Eventually, the senior Sister left

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her contemplation of the scene outside and turned around.

“Kimberly Ramon was a Ranger.” A bitter tone had entered the Chief Consultant’s voice. “She even reached the rank of lieutenant before her true nature was discovered and she was court-martialed. Then she deserted, taking the rest of her squadron with her. They joined with Gina Renamed and her heretics, hiding in the western mountains, and together, they founded a settlement, which they called Westernfort.”

Natasha stared in wide-eyed astonishment. The Guards held an ingrained contempt of the Rangers, seeing them as irreverent rabble, but for a whole squadron to desert was unbelievable, and the Chief Consultant had not yet finished.

“That was sixteen years ago. If we could have located the settlement immediately, we might have been able to do something about it. Alas, by the time we found them, they’d dug themselves in. We sent every Guard we could muster to capture the site, but I’m afraid both the official and unofficial reports fall short of the truth. We were unable to overcome the defenses and lost nearly two hundred Guards in the attempt.”

A faint sound from the Commandant as she shifted her feet was a momentary distraction, but Natasha could not take her eyes from the woman in white.

“For the last five years, we’ve been forced to leave the heretics in control of the western mountains. The 23rd was a top-notch squadron. Guards are no match for them on their home ground, and the Rangers we send have a tendency to go over to their side. Ramon may lack any sort of morals, but she doesn’t lack powers of persuasion.”

The Chief Consultant walked forward until she stood scant centimeters from Natasha. Her eyes were as hard as her voice. “Their lives are an insult to the Goddess, and a day does not pass without my praying to be forgiven for allowing them to continue in their foul depravity. But at last, Celaeno has given us the chance to strike a blow in her name.

“Yesterday, we captured a group of three heretics who were fleeing to join their confederates. From them, we’ve been able to learn their planned route to Westernfort. It’s our intention to send three disguised Guards in their place. Once our agents are inside

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the defenses, they'll carry out the death sentences that have been passed on the leaders. It's too much to hope that resistance will crumble, but it will be weakened, and the Goddess will know that we do not ignore insults to her divinity."

The elderly Sister returned to her desk and sat down. She gestured to the Commandant, passing control of the briefing to her. Jacobs cleared her throat.

"Guardswoman Ionadis, your name has been put forward for three reasons. First, we believe you possess the quick wits necessary to carry off the impersonation. Second, you bear a passing physical resemblance to one of the heretics. Third, the strength of your devotion is beyond question, and this last point is the most crucial. It is not an easy mission. You must be ready to kill to order, not in the heat of battle.

"And as I started by saying, there is little hope of your returning to Landfall. The season is against you. By the time you reach Westernfort, it will be winter. Even if you escape after fulfilling your mission, the weather in the mountains will make the return journey impossible. It will not be counted against your record if you decline this mission."

Natasha's head went up. "It would be an honor to destroy the enemies of the Goddess, and I am not frightened to die in her name."

"Then all that remains is for the Chief Consultant to tell you of the three leaders who will be your targets. All three have been duly tried and sentenced in their absence, and in executing them, by whatever means, you will not be committing murder. You will be carrying out the sanctified orders of the Goddess' earthly representative."

The Commandant bowed respectfully to the leader of the Sisterhood. The Chief Consultant acknowledged the action and turned to Natasha.

"Indeed. The first is Gina Renamed, the leader of the heretics, who first began spreading the blasphemous lies. To our shame, I must confess that she was once a Sister in this temple. She did suffer a severe brain injury, which might explain—although not excuse—her actions. She is the source and root cause of all that has happened and deserves to die a hundred times over.

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“Your second target is Kimberly Ramon, and she will probably present the greatest challenge. She’s an experienced and capable soldier. Do not underestimate her. The Goddess has blessed her with many admirable qualities: courage, leadership, even personal charm. But she has chosen to use her talents only to defy her creator. The deaths of the Guards who attacked Westernfort were her work.”

The Chief Consultant paused. “Your third target is in many ways the most serious. She’s called Lynn. She has no last name, since she is an Imprinter.”

Natasha felt as if a whirlwind had blown through her head, scrambling her thoughts. The most impossible part, in all the preposterous songs, was the claim that Kimberly Ramon had won the heart of an Imprinter, inducing her to forsake Himoti and the temple, and that they were now lovers. The very suggestion was outrageous. Imprinters were the chosen of the Goddess—the ones so gifted with the healer sense that they could not merely induce pregnancy in a woman, but also imprint new patterns on the embryo’s DNA. The Imprinters alone could create new, unique human beings. Surely the Goddess would not bestow this divine power on anyone susceptible to heresy.

The Chief Consultant clearly noticed Natasha’s response. “I know. It is...unbelievable. Of all the heretics’ crimes, the corruption of one of Celaeno’s chosen is surely the worst, and even more harmful than we at first realized, since initially, we were sure that the Goddess would withdraw her gift. But I’m afraid we have gathered evidence that Lynn is, rather than was, an Imprinter.”

“But ma’am”—Natasha could not help speaking—“don’t Imprinters have to be celibate in order to do their work?”

“Yes, they do, and I know what parts of the songs you’re referring to.” The Chief Consultant’s voice held a shadow of humor. “It’s a good lesson in not believing anything they say. It’s too easy for the faithful to get caught in the web of lies spread by the heretics. Believe me, I would be much happier if she and Ramon were lovers, for then we would not be faced with the problem of a second generation of heretics to defy the Goddess. This is why Lynn, more than anyone else, must be eliminated if we’re to see the end to this heresy.

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“The execution of the leaders at Westernfort is not just punishment for their past crimes. It’s to protect the future from the spread of their blasphemy. This is the sacred charge laid on you, for the glory of the Goddess.” The Chief Consultant placed her hands face down on the desk and looked toward the Commandant. “And I think that concludes all that must be said, unless you have anything to add.”

Commandant Jacobs stepped forward. “Only to say that I have been very pleased by your response, Guardswoman. However, I feel it would be wise for you to spend a little more time thinking things over. This will be our one chance to destroy the enemies of the Goddess. If you have the slightest doubt about your ability to carry out the mission, it would be far better to let someone else go in your place. Sleep on it, and come to see me first thing tomorrow morning.”

Natasha was about to reaffirm her willingness but settled for saying only, “Yes, ma’am.”

The Commandant nodded. “You are dismissed.”

Natasha brought herself to attention and then turned to the door, but as she opened it, the Commandant spoke again. “Guardswoman Ionadis.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You will be passing yourself off as a civilian. Don’t bother getting your hair cut.”



A Sister was waiting outside the room when Natasha left, possibly the same one who had guided her to the meeting, although the mask made it impossible to be sure. Again, Natasha was led through the sanctum. Unlike she had been upon her arrival, she was now so preoccupied that she was unaware of her surroundings until she returned to the great hall.

The light from the windows high in the dome was muted. The day was almost over, and the temple was closing for the night. Few people were in sight, just a gaggle of late worshippers being herded toward the doors and a pair of Sisters in white, tending the shrines. Natasha’s gaze slipped over the scene; it felt unreal, dreamlike.

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Her eyes fixed on the sacred fire burning on the main altar. The sight drew Natasha, half stumbling, to the steps. The dancing flame seemed to replicate the rapturous emotions swirling inside her.

Natasha knelt. She could not remember ever feeling quite so happy or so proud. She had joined the Guards to devote her life to Celaeno, but sometimes, over the previous three years, she had been tempted to question her decision. There was the jeering taunt thrown at anyone joining the Guards: *Not so much a soldier, more a laundress*. Frequently, it had seemed quite justified. But now, she had a chance to fight for her faith, to give her life to overthrow those who rejected the Goddess. She would truly be a soldier for Celaeno.

An inappropriate urge to giggle welled up inside her. Natasha clasped her hands together and closed her eyes. Then she bent her head in prayer:

I promise, Celaeno, I will destroy your enemies. My life is yours to do with as you will. Make me strong in your love that I may triumph for your sake, and if I turn aside from this task, may I be damned forever.