

The Temple at Landfall

by

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PART ONE

From Fairfield
to Landfall

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CHAPTER ONE—THE CHOSEN OF THE GODDESS

From the steps of the temple at Fairfield, you could look out over the bowed heads of the assembled pilgrims and supplicants, over the thatched roofs of the houses and shops, over the broad meadow where they held the twice-yearly fair that gave the town its name, and see the distant mountains far to the north. The boundary of the known world. The line of high peaks glistened, a white so pure as to catch the breath in your throat, even under the sullen gray March sky. Looking at them, you could almost hear the rustle of the fir trees, smell the clean mountain air.

The corner of Lynn's lips twitched. Well, maybe that was straining the imagination too much, especially with the winds that day coming from the cattle market on the east of town, and she did not really have the time to enjoy the view. All eyes were on her. The constant flow of women up and down the temple steps was halted, held expectantly behind the line of red-and-gold-clad Guards. A few steps away stood the senior Sister, looking at her quizzically. Not much of the Sister's expression was visible, just her eyes showing in the gap between the bottom of her cowl and the top of the thin gauze mask covering her lower face, but the faint furrowing of her forehead managed to convey the first hint of impatience. There were prayers to be sung.

Lynn turned her back on the mountains. Between the open twin doors of the temple stood the tall statue of Himoti, the carved stone face staring down blindly on all those who would come in to entreat with her divine mistress, seeking consolation, a blessing, or a child. But today, as always on the first day of the month, the prayers were for Himoti herself, greatest of the Elder-Ones, Celaeno's favorite, the patron of Imprinters. Lynn lifted her voice in the song of praise.

JANE FLETCHER

*Blessed Himoti,
Favored of Celaeno,
Life bringer, law giver,
Heed our prayers...*

The pure notes were clear and strong, but even if Lynn had crooned tunelessly, she would have been listened to with entranced awe. The Guards stood impassive in their bright uniforms. The rows of Sisters lined the sides of the steps, hidden beneath their masks and white robes. The statue of Himoti towered over everyone, yet the crowds spared hardly a glance for any of them. Wide-eyed, they watched the young singer dressed in a simple suit of blue, a plain-cut tunic reaching to mid-thigh and loose leggings, no gold braid, ornament or mask. Just brilliant blue. Imprinter blue.

But for all their attention, it is likely that few really noted the details of Lynn's appearance, that she was a little below average height, in early to mid-twenties, fine-boned. Like all Imprinters, her uncut hair was plaited straight down her back, but a few stray wisps revealed a natural tendency to waves. Her mouth was wide, which combined with large eyes, had earned her the nickname "Frog" as a child, though none would presume to call her so now, even if the name had truly been deserved. For she was an Imprinter, the chosen of Celaeno, and it would surely be verging on a sin to think of her so disrespectfully. She was the living embodiment of Himoti's gift to the world. Which was why it was fitting that once a month an Imprinter should step outside the temple, into the view of all, and lead the prayer of thanks in her patron's honor.

The rituals were slightly longer than usual, with a few extra prayers added in recognition of the fact that March was the month of the festival of Landfall, the month Himoti had first set foot on the world Celaeno had chosen for her daughters. Lynn's clear singing filled the forecourt of the temple. The Sisters and crowd joined in at the appropriate places, incense was burned on cue, and the senior Sister read extracts from the book of the Elder-Ones, but all too soon the ceremony was over and the last note faded.

For a moment, the silence held, and then a faint rustling began at the rear of the crowd, the first murmurs and whispers, although still subdued and respectful. Lynn let her head fall back so that she looked

The Temple at Landfall

up into the sky at the circling black specks of birds wheeling under the rolling blanket of gray. She knew she was fortunate in her singing ability. It meant she was nearly always the Imprinter chosen to lead the prayers to Himoti, the one who got the chance to stand outside for a few minutes each month, in the open air under Celaeno's wide skies.

Lynn's thoughts shifted briefly to the other five Imprinters in the temple at Fairfield. Did they get as much enjoyment from this brief excursion as she did, or were they more content in the confines of the temple? They certainly did not appear to show any signs of resentment or disappointment when they were not selected for the ceremony. Lynn was not sure if she could survive without it. Her eyes returned to the statue and she offered her own silent prayer. *Please, Himoti, help me grow to like this life you have chosen for me.* Lynn's lips tightened in a line as she fought back a sigh. Maybe someday it would work itself out.

On either side, the Sisters began to file into the temple, but the senior Sister left her subordinates and came to stand beside Lynn while waiting for the Guards to advance up the stairs and form an escort around them. The eyes above the gauze mask regarded the younger woman with approval. "You sang well today, Imprinter."

"Thank you, Sister."

"Indeed, with your gift of imprinting and your singing, you have been doubly blessed by the Goddess."

"That was more or less what I was just telling myself." Lynn was adept at keeping any trace of irony from her voice. Over the years, she had found it a valuable skill.

The Guards surrounded them in a phalanx, fending off the waves of worshippers who, now that the ceremony had finished, were surging up the steps and into the temple. Although even without the soldiers' armed presence, it was doubtful that anyone would have dared barge into an Imprinter. Certainly not on purpose. The Guard captain surveyed the scene, making sure her troops were ready, then she snapped an order and the small entourage marched through the great doors. The crowds slipped aside around them. Lynn took one last deep breath of crisp air before the daylight was lost.

Inside the great hall of the temple, the mood was dim and oppressive. Mean shafts of watery light fell from slits high beneath the ceiling, lost in the thick pall of incense and candle smoke. The sweet smell of the fumes mingled with that of the bodies pressed around her.

JANE FLETCHER

The hall was high and wide, yet it seemed to close in about Lynn. She felt as if she were buried in the heavy, choking atmosphere of the public temple, sight and sound smothered by the constant murmur of voices in darkness dotted with flickering candles.

And despite the poor light, Lynn could still feel herself to be the focus of attention. She was aware of the eyes peering through the gloom, watching her progress across the hall, even though she was hidden between the ranks of her escort. She looked at the Guard walking beside her, a tall woman whose face, framed by her helmet, was set in a blank military stare. Light from candles rippled like flame over her red tunic and glinted off golden braid, buckles, and the long sword hanging from her belt. The effect was intimidating, which was the intention. The Guards demanded respect. *But are they to protect me or to stop me from running away?* The thought leaped unbidden into Lynn's mind, although neither case required such a strong display of force. Surely no one would dream of harming an Imprinter, and there was nowhere for her to run.

The entrance to the sanctum came into view, its mysteries concealed behind the heavy drapes hanging to one side of the main altar. Within was the private inner world of the temple where the Sisters and Imprinters lived out their daily lives, hidden from the gaze of the public. As they reached the curtains, the ranks of Guards parted, some taking their posts on either side, some returning to the main door, allowing Lynn and the senior Sister to enter alone.

The two women separated just inside the entrance, Lynn to rest in preparation for her next appointment in the imprinting chapel, the Sister no doubt to talk to someone about somebody else. The air inside the sanctum was far cleaner than in the main temple and the light brighter, sufficient to pick out details on the carved wooden panels with their inset illustrations of scenes from the book of the Elder-Ones, gilt-leaf giving a hint of luxury. Lynn spared a last, cynical look at the senior Sister as she disappeared from view. It was a fair bet that life in the sanctum was less austere than most of the outside world would guess, and it was a dead certainty that it was far less holy.

However, Lynn was not involved in the intrigue, backstabbing, and political maneuverings of the Sisters. An Imprinter was an Imprinter. There was no chance of promotion or power or any hope of leaving the temple. Lynn's shoulders slumped as she walked. She tried to tell

The Temple at Landfall

herself that it was wrong to think of the temple as a prison. She was privileged, gifted by Himoti. Perhaps she should try to be more grateful. But the only thought that rose in her mind was, *Well, that's my outing for the month over. Back to the grindstone.*



The swirling streams of DNA spun around Lynn as she worked. It was a dance with the essence of life, imprinting patterns on the strands, teaching them how to link, making something unique, creating a new soul. Like jewels on a necklace, she strung the sequences together and tucked them up neatly within cell walls. A spark of life that would bud, split, and grow. A new human being. A daughter.

For a while, Lynn considered her handiwork, content. But the task was over and it was time to retreat. Her focus expanded, stepping back from the spiraling double helix to the level of cells where she watched the small egg drifting toward its safe home on the walls of the womb, beginning its journey through life. Then she became aware of blood and warmth and the layers of flesh. Again she heard the pounding of two heartbeats, the constant background rhythm, forgotten while she worked. The two women. And another step back.

In a sudden onslaught of light and sound, Lynn's ordinary senses returned. Her eyes watered at the attack, even in the dim imprinting chapel. It was followed by a second, even less pleasant burst of sensation as her legs and arms made their tingling cramps felt. She was back in the everyday world. A woman lay before her on the altar, the mother-to-be. One of Lynn's hands lay over her womb; her other rested on the head of a second woman kneeling beside her. The mother's partner, whose genes Lynn had mingled and imprinted on the embryo. Their child.

Still, Lynn was sensitized to their bodies, the blood in their veins, the air in their lungs, and the new spark of life inside the woman on the altar. But her own body's demands began to lever her away from the bond. From the shadows on the wall, Lynn knew she had taken less than two hours to complete her work. Even so, she could feel the cricks in her neck and joints, the stiff, exhausted ache in her back, and it was not yet time for her to rest.

Two Sisters had been watching from either end of the altar. Seeing

JANE FLETCHER

Lynn come out of the imprinting trance, they stepped forward, and at Lynn's tired nod that all was well, they prompted the woman to get off the altar and kneel beside her partner to join in with the formal prayer of thanks, their words echoed by the small family group who had been allowed to witness the imprinting. The prayer was short, but in Lynn's state of tiredness, it seemed, as always, to drag on and on.

*...Guide us in Celaeno's path.
Praised be the Goddess,
And keep us ever in her grace.
Praised be the Goddess.*

The last paired lines of the litany finished, and Lynn was finally free to leave the chapel. *Just as long as I can summon the energy to walk*, Lynn thought grimly. She turned around, intending to make her escape with as little fuss as possible, but halted abruptly at the sight of the couple's family.

An elderly woman knelt in the stalls, tears trickling down her smiling face. A soon-to-be grandmother, no doubt. The five or six other witnesses showed a similar, solemn depth of emotion, except for one woman whose face was split in a broad grin. Lynn followed the direction of her gaze and looked back to see the two women by the altar shyly, tentatively reach out to take each other's hand, wonder on their faces, their eyes locked together. A lump rose in Lynn's throat. *How long before I become immune to this?* she asked herself. Because surely one day the repetition and exhaustion would grind away the sense of awe, and she would become as deadened to the marvel of life as the other Imprinters in the temple who viewed creating each new child as a burdensome drudge to be gotten through with as little effort as possible.

However, Lynn could not stay to share the moment with the family. Her body was shaking with exhaustion as she left the chapel, moving as quickly as her leaden legs would allow and oblivious to the Guards who slipped into place around her, but she heard someone whisper, "That was quick."

And it was. Lynn knew that she was by far the most talented of the Imprinters at Fairfield. Then she thought of how tired she was, and wondered how the others coped. Elspeth frequently took up to

The Temple at Landfall

seven hours to create a new soul. *It will kill Elspeth in the end*, Lynn thought. Small wonder the elderly Imprinter could be so bitter about her calling.

Even now, the demands on Lynn's endurance were not finished. She must go to Himoti's oratory and give thanks again for the gift the Elder-One had bestowed upon her. Only then would she be free to rest until she was called to the imprinting chapel once more. She was the only Imprinter to regularly create three new embryos a day and had heard the Sisters wonder if four might be possible. A worthwhile question had it been inspired by the people's need for children rather than thoughts of extra imprinting fees for the temple. For all their talk of theology, some Sisters could be more materialistic and greedy than the sharpest market trader.

Lynn's expression grew bleak. *It will kill me too, in the end.*



The window was not much to get excited about, scarcely twenty centimeters square. Its purpose was to let a little light in, not to provide a view, but if Lynn pulled the small wooden altar over and stood on it, she could just rest her chin on the sill and peer out. The room was on the south side of the temple, so Lynn could not see the mountains. In fact, with the angle of sight, she could not even see the ground, but she had a fair expanse of evening sky to watch. The solid blanket of cloud that had hung over the morning's ceremony had started to break up, and streaks of washed blue showed through ragged gaps. A noisy flock of birds was coming home to roost. Lynn's eyes followed their flight until they slipped from view. There was certainly nothing in the room worth looking at. Its bare plaster walls were two meters wide by three meters long. The only items in it were the altar, two candles, a small statue of Himoti, and the thin blue prayer mat.

Lynn allowed her thoughts to drift idly, trying to recapture childhood memories of running under the open sky in the days before she had been taken to the temple. She had only been twelve years old at the time. At first, she had cried herself to sleep each night, wanting her parents. Now she could not even recall with certainty what they looked like. Neither could she remember saying goodbye to them for the last time the day she went to the temple to be tested. Her parents must have

JANE FLETCHER

been so worried when they left her at the door of the assessment room. They must have known she was exceptionally talented with the healer sense, but perhaps they had convinced themselves that their daughter would be a Cloner, able to do no more than induce the farm animals to replicate themselves. It was a good profession to have. Cloners were trained by the Sisters, but were then free to travel from farm to farm, bringing about new animals, each one identical to its mother.

Lynn's eyes were no longer focused on the scene outside the window as she wondered about her parents. Surely they must have known that there was a good chance she exceeded the level of ability needed to induce cloning? That rather than simply transplant a complete cell nucleus, she would be able to step inside and manipulate the strings of DNA. That she would be an Imprinter. Someone able to imprint genetic information and thereby create a human being with a unique soul.

Lynn's face was grim. Her parents must have worked so hard to hide their fears from her, so as not to alarm her. Lynn wished that they had not. She wished they had sobbed and shouted and that she had been dragged from their arms. Then at least the parting might have made a strong enough impression for her to remember it. But she did remember the Sister telling her that she would not be going home. Lynn could still hear the Sister's syrupy voice as she explained how lucky Lynn was to be able to live in the temple. That Himoti was the greatest of Celaeno's disciples and that the Goddess only chose the best little girls to receive Himoti's gift. That Celaeno's chosen should not cry.

Lynn was so lost in the old memories that when the door to the meditation room opened without warning, she jumped and almost fell. Two of the altar's stubby legs lurched into the air, waved around drunkenly, and thumped back on the ground. Lynn's arms flailed for balance, then one hand managed to catch hold of the window, and she twisted around, half hanging, to meet the surprised eyes of the Sister standing in the doorway. For a confused moment, the two regarded each other in silence, wondering who was the more out of place. Surely the Sister had no business to interrupt her? Lynn was supposed to be meditating, and it was completely against temple rules to disturb an Imprinter at this task. But equally, she was supposed to be meditating, not looking out the window.

It would be awkward to explain, even though temple discipline had become somewhat lax under the administration of Consultant Hoy.

The Temple at Landfall

Lynn looked at the woman in the doorway, noting the absence of lines around the eyes staring over the mask. She was one of the new batch of novices whom Lynn had not yet learned to distinguish by outline, and maybe just young and inexperienced enough not to challenge the actions of an Imprinter, particularly if she had entered the meditation room by mistake. It was certainly worth an attempt to bluff it out.

Lynn tried to look as confidently serene as her position allowed and asked, "Can I help you, Sister?"

"Er...yes. I think so. You are the Imprinter called Lynn, aren't you?"

Damn, she isn't in the wrong place, Lynn thought, although out loud she restrained herself to a simple, "Yes."

The silence returned for a few more seconds, but then the junior Sister apparently decided it would be easiest if she pretended that nothing untoward had happened. Her eyes dropped to her feet and she cleared her throat while Lynn got down from her precarious balance. When Lynn was standing before her the Sister spoke again. "You must come to Consultant Hoy's rooms at once. You have permission to conclude your...um...meditation."

"Yes, Sister."

Lynn slipped past the white-clad woman, breathing a faint sigh of relief, but while she hurried through the corridors of the sanctum, her mind whirled as fresh fears surfaced. She searched her conscience for any misdemeanor that might have come to light, but could think of nothing even remotely serious enough to justify interrupting her meditation. By the time she reached her destination, Lynn's stomach was a sick knot and her palms felt sticky.

The consultant's study was large and very well appointed. The room had been designed for comfort, and it was clear from the rich furnishings where a fair slice of the imprinting fees went. The only thing marring its usual air of serenity was the consultant herself, who sat beside the fire, hands clasped tightly in her lap and eyebrows drawn together in a furious scowl. The sight of the consultant brought Lynn to a halt, wondering what could have so provoked the normally complacent Hoy. To her relief, though, it was immediately apparent that the force of Hoy's anger was directed toward three Sisters standing at the other side of the fireplace. The atmosphere in the room was crackling with tension. Lynn was so confused that a few seconds passed before she

JANE FLETCHER

realized that the three were strangers to Fairfield. After an awkward pause, she managed to gather her wits enough to say demurely, “You wished to see me, Consultant?”

“Yes, Imprinter. Please come in and shut the door.”

Lynn complied and then stood uncertainly while Hoy and the oldest of the three strange Sisters engaged in some sort of glaring competition. Just as Lynn was starting to think she would not be getting any explanations, Consultant Hoy drew in a deep breath so that her gauze mask was sucked back against her nostrils, and then turned away from her opponent.

“We have been graced to receive a delegation of our beloved Sisters from the temple at Landfall.” Despite her words, Hoy’s clipped tones held very little in the way of love. “These are Sister Smith”—the oldest of the visitors gave a faint nod—“and her colleagues, Sisters Quento and Ubbi. It would appear that reports of your talent have reached as far as Landfall.”

Lynn’s bewilderment grew. Especially since reports had gone both ways and, even at Fairfield, they had heard the name of Smith. The Sister’s career had been controversial, but her rise through the temple hierarchy had been unstoppable, if not always steady. Word now was that she had her rivals in retreat, and it was predicted she would take the Chief Consultant’s chair within the decade. From what she had heard, Lynn could say with certainty that the Sister’s visit to Fairfield would be for political rather than religious purposes. Although if it had been hoped to gain Hoy’s support for some venture, it had obviously badly misfired. However, Lynn’s main thought was, *What does she want with me?*

Hoy looked as if she was gathering herself to say more, but Sister Smith stepped in first. She faced Lynn while, as if coincidentally, turning her back on Hoy. “Indeed. Even at Landfall we have rejoiced in the good news that you have been gifted to an unprecedented degree. And we have considered how to best show our appreciation of the blessing the Goddess has given to the world. And given through you. For while we are all daughters of the Goddess and equal in her sight, it cannot be denied that some are called to a higher destiny than others.” There was something in her tone that implied Sister Smith included herself among these fortunate individuals. “When someone has been favored by Celaeno, as you have been, it would be an affront to her beneficence to leave her to languish in a minor temple.”

The Temple at Landfall

Lynn could almost hear the sound of Consultant Hoy biting her tongue at the words, but Smith went on smoothly. “The temple at Landfall is where the Elder-Ones first set foot in the world, where the blessed Himoti first instructed Celaeno’s children in the mysteries of life, where her mortal remains are buried. And surely it is clear to all, your place is there. In this, the Chief Consultant has agreed with me, and I come with her full authorization to escort you to Landfall with all possible speed.”

Consultant Hoy could keep silent no longer. Her voice snapped out, “But it has always been the custom that Imprinters do not leave a temple once they have been taken into its sanctuary.”

“Customary, true. But precedents exist,” Smith countered. “In the words of Himoti herself...”

Lynn fixed her eyes on the fire and switched out of the argument. Whatever she might want was irrelevant, as it had been since the day she had been declared an Imprinter and taken away from her parents’ farm. Now she belonged to the temple, and it was no comfort to know that, in this matter, Consultant Hoy was as powerless as Lynn. No doubt Hoy would draw on the finer points of scripture to support her argument, but it would all be wasted against the supremacy of the Chief Consultant’s warrant.

Of course money would not be mentioned, but it would be of prime importance, at least as far as Consultant Hoy was concerned. Lynn’s work contributed a quarter of all the imprinting fees taken at Fairfield. But Sister Smith’s motives might be more complicated. While waiting for the inevitable conclusion, Lynn did a quick calculation. Landfall was fourteen to fifteen day’s journey, which would give plenty of time to reach there for the big festival on the twenty-third of March. Celebrating Landfall at Landfall, and Smith’s chance to present her new acquisition for the temple. It would be a few plus points for Sister Smith’s tally. Her name would get mentioned in the right places; the Chief Consultant would be pleased. All of which could be turned into a step up onto the next rung in the ladder for Smith.

The sudden onset of silence recalled Lynn from her reflection as the heated debate spluttered to a halt. Even had the outcome been in doubt, Lynn could have deduced her fate from the body language before her. The visiting Sisters were triumphant and Consultant Hoy was disgusted. It was a serious matter for the consultant, Lynn thought wryly. With the

JANE FLETCHER

loss of income, Hoy might be forced to limit her appreciation of the heavy southern wines to the less expensive vintages.

But Lynn did not have long to consider Hoy's misfortune. Sister Smith came to stand in front of Lynn, claiming her attention and placing a hand upon her head. Smith raised her eyes to the ceiling and spoke in a voice resonate with the fire of piety. "May the love of Celaeno bring an end to contention and guide us all in the wisdom of her will." Smith's gaze dropped to rest on Lynn's forehead. "Truly, my child, you are the chosen of the Goddess."

With effort, Lynn kept her face blank. But had it not been blasphemy to think it, she might have wished that the Goddess had chosen someone else.