



The Handfasting is an epic tale of a family's struggle to survive on an alien planet. In Book 1 – A Year And A Day, A witch from the right side of the tracks finds herself paired with a hard-bitten soldier handpicked by a computer program. In Book 2 – Forever And A Day, a marriage of convenience between two determined, strong-willed people sparks a planetary war and puts at risk everyone they love. In book 3 - All Our Tomorrows, A warrior/priestess teams up with a Bard from another world and genetically created children to defeat a deadly enemy and save their planet from

destruction. From This Day Forward, Book 4 – When she finds the body of a retired shopkeeper on the beach, a series of mysterious events draw the new owner into a web of passion, terror and murder. She must find the killer and discover what he wants before he gets her too. **(still in production. Expected release date April 2017)**

Serial Chapters are posted on Fridays

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Check in next Friday for the next chapter of A Year And A Day – book 1 of The Handfasting

Chapter 10 - Riverboat Travel

ON THE THIRD day after the Handfasting Ceremonies, the entire clan except for Glass Manor's permanent staff of caretakers, packed up onto five paddlewheel barges and floated down the river toward Glass Isle. The paddlewheel boats had three decks, two above water and one below to hold cargo. The top deck was the ships control center. On the Second deck were crew and passenger cabins. To the front of the boat was a raised platform used as the Dragon Talker station. An outside rail ran the entire length and width of the boat, with a gate opening on the Port side to let down a ramp for loading cargo and passengers.

Katherine and her family sat on the second deck of the lead boat, the Riverwitch. The large paddle wheel boats laden with a burden of cargo and people, moved ponderously through the crowded waterway between the chain of islands. On the banks of the channel, an occasional family of

Nessies could be seen feeding on the lush reeds and grasses growing along the banks of the channel.

“Why do they call them Nessies?” Rupert asked. “I thought they were Water Dragons.”

“Well, when the colonists first saw them, they named them Water Dragons because someone thought they looked like a dragon. A little later, someone else thought they looked like the Loch Ness Monster and called them Nessies. They couldn’t agree, so now we use both names,” Katherine responded. The creatures in question did look like a cross between the two mythical beasts. They were huge, each of them at least the size of the boat and had a long neck to allow them to reach down into the water for food. The head might have resembled that of a horse with backwards facing ears if not for the oversized mouth. They were also covered in what looked like scales, but was actually a hard, tough, semi glossy substance that resembled a very thick fingernail. Like several other Vensoog animals, they could change color to adapt to their surroundings. As they watched, a young male slid off the bank and into the water, his rippling hide changing to a mottled green. Feeling full of himself, he floated toward the larger boats whistling a challenge and intent on showing off for the females watching from shore. In the prow, Drusilla and the other Dragon Talker focused their talent on the intruder and *pushed*, causing him to veer off to the side of the boats. Drusilla remained in the prow, watching the others while the second Talker paced alongside the Dragon until she could hand him off to the next boat.

“Now that’s interesting,” Gideon remarked. “Why did he turn aside?”

“That’s what a Dragon Talker does,” Genevieve answered. “Drusilla used her talent to *push* at his emotions to make him not want to get too close to us.”

"Is this part of the Vensoog psychic abilities I've heard so much about?" Zack inquired.

"Well, it's a part of it," Katherine responded. "We don't have telepathy but most of us can *push* a little bit to encourage animals to obey us. It takes a lot of power to affect the Dragons though, especially if a Talker is trying to move a whole herd."

"Can people be—what did you call it—*pushed* in the same way?" Gideon asked.

"Sometimes," Genevieve admitted. "If the person doing the *pushing* is very powerful it can affect humans, but most Vensoogers can feel when it happens. Largely humans seem to have a natural ability to resist a *push*, especially if you know its happening."

Down in the front of the boat, Lucas was asking very much the same thing. "How did you do that?"

Remembering the conversation at the first meeting at Glass Castle, Drusilla told him the truth. "It's called a *Push*," she said. "In our Clan, all children are tested and those with the highest EMPH rating are sent for training at the Dragon Talker Center."

"What is EMPH?"

"It's a shortening of the word empathy."

"Is it hard? What you did, I mean?"

"Well, it can be. If you get too close to the Dragons it can overwhelm you."

He looked at her curiously "You mean too close physically?"

Drusilla laughed. "No, not that. When I reach out to *push*, I need to tune into the Dragon's mind and emotions. If I'm reaching out to a lot of Dragons, their minds and emotions can overwhelm me, especially if they are angry or excited. Most Talkers who work with herds use a second Talker as an anchor. If the first Talker gets too emotionally involved, the second one

can pull her back. It's not so much of a danger if there is only one of them, like today."

The trip to Glass Isle took almost ten days. Even though each boat was crowded, there was a carnival atmosphere among the passengers. Many of the couples enjoyed the journey as a honeymoon period. Since privacy was at a minimum due to the crowded conditions, there was a lot of talking, laughing and singing. Impromptu games were encouraged.

The long line of boats had been gradually decreasing as various Clans separated off to land at their home islands and by now, only Clan O'Teague was left to make the final leg of their journey to Glass Isle. They had rounded the final narrow turn in the channel and were heading in a straight line toward the Port city of Glass where the channel fed out into the open sea. Zack, Gideon and Vernal were all standing by the rail talking when there was a disruption.

Clan O'Teagues large paddle boats slowed to make a turn in the channel and to wait for a small family of Nessies swimming in the middle of the channel to clear. The peaceful mood of the day was shattered by the roaring of the small watercrafts closing in on the riverboats. The noise was accompanied by the howl of River Patrol sirens.

The first watersleds who rounded the turn carried several riders. They were traveling too fast to make the turn smoothly. They kissed the side of the lead paddleboat, causing it to rock wildly. While everyone scrambled not to fall over, or for those next to the rail to fall in, more watersleds catapulted into the turn, narrowly missing their careening companions. They were followed by the River Patrol who took the turn fast but in control. Unfortunately, it was too late to prevent disaster.

One of the wildly driven watersleds smacked into the rump of a swimming Nessie calf, eliciting a bellow of pain and fright. Several of the infuriated adults turned on the boats, intent on avenging the injury to the

calf. A stream of hot sticky green goo shot from one's opened mouth, covering the watersled and passengers. Screams came from the sleds riders as the goo literally burned them alive. A second Nessie sent a large wave of water, which swamped not only the sleds, but caused the paddleboats to rock wildly as a wave of water sloshed over the decks.

In the Prow, Drusilla and the other Talker staggered and clung frantically to their station when the wave swamped them. Lucas had been standing behind Drusilla and he stepped up into the area and steadied her with an arm around her back, gripping the rail with his free hand. As he did so, he felt Drusilla reaching to the herd of infuriated Dragons. Instinctively his mind melded with hers. The anger and deadly intent being broadcast by the Nessies nearly sent him to his knees as Drusilla's mind connected with his own.

Suddenly he realized that he could feel the Dragons, more than her and instinctively *pushed* Drusilla! as he desperately tried to find HER in the massive outpouring of Nessie feelings swamping him.

Suddenly, he could see her in his mind holding out her hand. He reached for her and was flooded by her mind blending with his own.

A sharp pinch on his hand jerked him back to awareness of his surroundings. "Hold her," Katherine said, "Or you will both be lost! You must stay in this plane."

"I've got you," he gasped to Drusilla. "Stay with me."

She didn't answer, but he could feel her clinging to him as she turned her focus onto the angry Dragons, *pushing* them away from the boats.

Katherine let go of Lucas and gripped the back of Roderick's shirt before he slid over the rail just as another wave of water washed over the deck. She could see that Zack had one of Jayne's boys while the nanny dog had the other by the strap on the back of his shirt. Genevieve was hanging onto Violet and Rupert who clutched the basket holding a heavily pregnant

Sooka and Divit. Juliette and Lucinda clung to each other and Vernal as they slid around the slippery deck. Gideon was gripping the rail with one hand and Jayla with the other.

Corrine had stepped up behind the other Talker to anchor her, as Lucas was doing for Drusilla. As the side of the boat dipped dangerously toward the water, Katherine got a close-up view of the three-way battle raging between the Patrol, the Dragons and the fleeing watersleds. Wild shots were fired. One of the fleeing watersleds came close enough to the Riverwitch for Katherine to recognize the driver's eyes. Darla Lister!

Three of the sleds escaped by slipping around the infuriated Dragon herd and headed out to sea. The remaining riders in the residual sled were still shooting at the Nessies although their wildly rocking craft made aiming practically impossible. Just then, the Patrol shot a net over the last sled, trapping it.

In the meantime, the cows had moved the Nessie calves over to the safety of a small island. One of them let out a mournful bellow, calling the defenders back to them. Drusilla and Macon, the other Talker, could finally *push* hard enough at the two remaining Bull Nessies that they slowly shifted back toward their herd, still hissing.

Once it was over, Drusilla and the other Talker both collapsed, falling ungracefully back on their anchors who sat down hard on the deck, trying to keep either one from hitting her head on the hardwood railing. When Lucas rose from the deck with Drusilla in his arms, he asked Katherine curtly to clear a path to the Wheelhouse. Once inside, he laid his fair burden down on a wide padded bench and ordered the boat captain to bring a glass of water.

Katherine exchanged a bemused glance with Corrine. She nodded at the previously almost painfully polite boy. "Well," she remarked to Zack, "he's certainly taking charge."

Zack snorted. "Uh-huh. It's wonderful what love will do for a guy."

"What? When? They've known each other less than a week—"

He grinned at her. "Doesn't matter. When it's the right one you go down like a Mech Tank hit you. I ought to know."

Overhearing, Genevieve protested, "She's only sixteen!"

"So is he," Gideon, the voice of reason, said. "Maybe we shouldn't get ourselves all het up over what may prove to be a case of puppy love? She could do a lot worse though."

In the meantime, the Captain had brought restoratives for both Talkers. She was answering questions from the Patrol leader who boarded the boat as cleanup and rescue squads restored order to all five ships. Riverwitch, as the lead boat, had taken the brunt of the damage, but the others had all had to contend falls and bruising due to the waves of water making their decks slippery.

The Patrol Captain informed Genevieve that the watersleds had been stolen in Port Recovery two days ago and the thieves had been creating trouble all along the channel. The Patrol had been chasing them since the sleds had been reported stolen. He had fewer officers than when he started because he had left officers behind to render aid and take reports whenever they found a place where the thieves had raided.

"They don't have any clan affiliation, I can find, My Lady," Patrol leader Esther informed Genevieve. "Perhaps lord Gideon or Lord Zack could take a look at the ones we caught to see if they recognize them?"

"I don't remember seeing any of them before," Zack told Gideon. "Do you know them?"

"No, I'm pretty sure they didn't come out on the Dancing Gryphon."

"I thought I saw Darla Lister on one of the sleds that escaped," Katherine offered.

Two days later, the boats reached Glass Harbor. The first O'Teague had called it that in honor of the enormous glass-like boulder stretching almost

three quarters along the outside edge of bay that sheltered the harbor from the ocean.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” asked Genevieve proudly, turning to Gideon as they coasted gently through the mouth of the port into the natural bay and caught their first sight of Glass Castle.

The great stone had been worn smooth by years of erosion from the fierce winds coming in off the sea during the storms. Today, under the brilliant sunlight it glowed green and blue reflecting the sea and sky. The harbor itself was shaped almost in a complete circle with a narrow opening at its mouth that provided a gateway into a cove probably twenty miles across. Dockyards and marinas lined the waterfronts in front of the Glass rock, which had been hollowed out on the side away from the ocean to provide living quarters for the Laird and immediate retainers. Colorful Domes for warehouses and shops crowded each other along the shore. Others that were obviously residences led away from the docks back into the town proper. Behind the town, farmlands could be seen rising up into the hills. In the misty distance rose high snowcapped peaks.