



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. In Book 4 ***From This Day Forward*** – 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 11 - Taming A Sand Dragon

THE NEXT morning, Katherine, Zack and the children set off for Veiled Isle on a Fisher. Corrine's great grandfather had named it Veiled Isle because of the translucent half crescent of Glasslike stone hanging partway over most of the largest cove that served as a seaport for the small fleet of fishers attached to the Lodge. He called the port Hooded Beach because two-thirds of the bay was underneath a shelf that rose high above sea level. The water in the cove was deep enough below the hood to accept a four-masted sailing ship at its wharf.

Corrine's main seat was a large island a half days journey from Glass Isle. Corrine and Vernal expected to follow Katherine, Zack and the children

with the rest of the new immigrants and the Lodge's share of the imported goods and building materials. The Clan used the open areas of golden sand to the west of the docks for recreation. The left side of the wharf was used to process the catch from some of the fishing fleet affiliated with O'Teague. A series of steps led from the dock to the top of the cliffs and the family landing where a small dome held carts for transporting people or goods to the main house and barns, about a half mile inland. In the back of the dome were three rooms set into the cliff itself. These led into the access to the tunnel to a heated underground lake and caves. The lake and caves were used for shelter during the Swarm and Storm seasons.

Further along the recreational side of the wharf was a wide-open space the clans used for recreation. This area occasionally drew Sand Dragons in the birthing season. Sand Dragons were a smaller variety of Vemsoog Dragons and spent a larger portion of their time upon land than did the Nessies.

Katherine had just directed the waiting retainers to take their luggage on up to the house, when she noticed that Violet had taken off toward the open side of the beach.

"Wow, what's that?" asked Rupert, pointing towards what Katherine unmistakably identified as a Sand Dragon. The creature was about the size of a large horse. It had a thick round body and four short legs. It stood upon webbed feet, the talons on its five toes digging into the sand. Rudimentary webbed flippers that might once have served as wings appeared about midway up its shoulders. Large wide set eyes appeared above a short, blunt snout and small flaps covered its ears. The neck and shoulders, shorter than the Nessies, fit smoothly together. The dragon was covered from head to toe with shinny scales. The scales looked hard, but were actually quite smooth like the tops of fingernails.

"A Sand Dragon", Katherine said. Touching her crystal pendant, she reached out with her talent and felt both hope/pain/fear from the beast.

"It's all right," she murmured, stopping Zack from reaching for his weapon. "Everyone, that is a cow Sand Dragon, and she wants our help. We're going to all walk slowly towards her, Okay?"

The dragon was a pretty creature, and in spite of the obvious signs of exhaustion, she watched them carefully. Like the Quirkas, Sand Dragons were chameleons and usually appeared the same color as the sand or water around them. Each iridescent scale grew out over the top of the one under it. Just now, the cow turned her side to them and made a hopeful purring noise.

"Why did she do that?" asked Zack, puzzled.

"I think she's been infested with sand ticks," Katherine answered, "and she wants us to get rid of them for her."

"Er—sand ticks?" he asked. "I hope that's not similar to the blood sucking ticks found at home—"

"Probably pretty close," Katherine remarked. "Every planet seems to have something similar. Watch closely, children. I about to show you how to make friends with a Sand Dragon."

She unhooked her Force Wand and held it out so the children could see it. "To remove the tick and kill it, you need to set your wand at about a five. This will make the tick uncomfortable enough to back out of the dragon. If it dies with the head still attached, the wound can become infected." Carefully, she lifted a hard skin plate that wasn't resting flat on the one below it. A red looking lump showed. Katherine put the end of the wand on the highest part of the bump. After a few minutes, it shivered and fell out onto the ground on its back, revealing a pointed head with nasty sharp teeth.

"Once it hits the ground, you up the setting to about eight, and kill it," Katherine directed, touching the wand to its rear, watching as the tick

shriveled up into a black smoking block about the size of a fist on the ground. She turned the wand to off.

"Boys, there's a jar of salve in that blue jar in my pack, can you get it for me?"

Katherine opened the lid and using the applicator, carefully smeared it onto the irritated skin under the scale. The Dragon gave an almost human sigh of relief. She then made a chirring noise, and two baby dragons about the size of large dogs staggered out of hiding in the nearby rocks.

"Don't come between her and the babies," Katherine warned. "Let them come to us."

Both of the calves also showed signs of the ticks. Under the Mother Dragon's careful supervision, Katherine instructed Juliette and Roderick how to remove the ticks. Lucinda and Rupert applied the salve. After which, the Dragon and her calves slid off the beach and into the warm waters of the ocean almost disappearing as their scales changed to mimic the ocean colors.

As they turned to go back to the dock, Zack noticed Violet was still staring off into the rocks. "What is it, honey?" he asked her.

"There's another one there," she said definitely.

"Katherine," he called, "I think we still have a problem." He motioned towards Violet.

Just then, a much smaller Sand Dragon calf tottered out into the open towards Violet, who dropped to her knees beside it. "Why did she leave her behind?" Violet demanded.

Katherine and Zack inspected the new arrival, and then Zack went over to where the dragon had come from. "I don't think this one was hers," he said. "There's a dead one over here."

"Well, while they share nesting grounds, they're not especially herd oriented," Katherine observed. "If this calf isn't hers, I doubt if our Dragon

would have cared for it unless she and the mother were closely related, especially if the calf is weak for some reason. Remind me to send a crew down here to clean up the body and do a cleansing of the beach for ticks."

"Does she have ticks, Violet," asked Rupert, eager to denude another one.

Violet had been carefully running her hands over the scales, which were still fairly soft. "No, she's just hungry," Violet said, fishing out a part of her sandwich leftover from lunch and holding it out to the calf who took it delicately and then swallowed it whole.

"How do you know Violet?" Katherine asked quietly.

"I feel it when I touch her," Violet said absently. "I'm going to name her Jelli." She rose to her feet, picked up the dragon somewhat awkwardly as it was the size of a small dog, and started back towards the wharf.

Zack looked at Katherine. "Are we taking it home with us?"

She looked at him. "You have a better idea?"

He snorted, "You mean 'Hey Mom it followed me home, can I keep it?' How big do they get?"

"Uh-huh. The cow we saw earlier was about average size for a Sandie." She touched her com and contacted the house to request that Mistress Leona meet them in the hall when they arrived.

"Who's she?" Zack asked.

"Mistress Leona is a retired Dragon Talker who lives with us. She will know the best way to handle this. She was my teacher when I was smaller." Katherine added ruefully, "I guess we won't have to worry about a career path for Violet."

"What's a Dragon Talker?" asked Juliette.

"Well, you remember on the way down the river, when Drusilla kept the Nessie Channel Dragons from attacking the riverboat caravan?" Katherine responded. "That's what a Dragon Talker does. They have to have special

training with different types of Dragons to handle them. Sometimes, like now, if the Dragon is young enough, it imprints on a human and a special relationship develops between them. I think this one has done that with Violet."

On the way to the Lodge, they passed through a small village of domes for houses and shops with views of the sea. Within easy walking distance was an even larger dome for housing animals during the storms.

"How do you reach it during a storm?" Zack asked.

"It's connected to the house by an underground walkway," she replied. Pointing to several smaller domed residences, she continued, "Those belong to clan families who work on the estate."

The lodge itself was massive with several interconnected domes. Although Katherine explained that the Family had separate quarters, much of the huge house was given over to a dormitory for single clan members and a recreation/dining area open to visitors, all the staff and their families.

They were met in the Hall by Mistress Leona, a tall, well-built woman in her seventieth decade with iron-grey hair and blue eyes. She took one look at Violet, staggering under the weight of her new pet and told her sternly to put the calf on its own feet. "You will damage its dignity, carrying it around," she informed her.

Violet glared right back at her, clutching the calf. "She's too weak to do it by herself. She's starving."

Mistress Leona's eyebrows rose. "And how do you know that?"

"I can just tell. Mother says you know about Dragons. Do you know what she's supposed to eat?"

Mistress Leona looked over at Katherine. "You're sure she's not related by blood? I could swear that's you standing there."

Katherine grinned back at her. "That's my girl."

"I was planning on all the children having rooms on the second story with us, but I think Violet and Jelli had better have a room with ground access so Jelli can go outside to use the bathroom," Katherine told Mrs. Grayson, the housekeeper who was watching the show along with several other upper servants.

"I'll prepare the blue room next to Mistress Leona's," the housekeeper replied.

"Have someone bring ground bean curd, meat and milk mixed with about a quarter pound of butterfat to the room, also," ordered Leona, "so we can feed this calf. We will also need several old blankets and a bale of hay for bedding. Well, come on girl, bring her along." Leona turned and went down the hall toward her rooms, followed by Violet, still lugging the calf.

As soon as everyone had settled into their rooms, Katherine had summoned all clan members who worked the estate and formally presented Zack and the children to the Clan.

Resting her hand on Zack's shoulder, she announced, "We now have an experienced military commander to handle our security. When the rest of our new members arrive, we will also gain several experienced soldiers to assist during raids by the Wilders up in the hills. Since Zack will accompany me when I travel to Parliament, he will name a deputy to work in his place." She beckoned a short older woman forward. "Zack, this is Lally who has been handling security until now. I'm sure she will be glad to explain what has worked in the past."

Zack nodded to Lally. "I hope we can get together tomorrow to go over what steps have already been taken. I need not tell you I will be depending heavily on your expertise while I learn the ropes."

The woman nodded. "I usually take night reports after breakfast. Will that work for you, Lord Zack?"

"Yes, that will be fine."

Katherine had then shown her new family around the living spaces; even Violet who had reluctantly left her sleeping pet to join them for dinner. Afterwards all the children went upstairs or into the recreation rooms. Katherine and Zack had a meeting with Leona in the family parlor about Violet and Jelli. The argument began as soon as the door closed on the children. Leona wanted Violet and Jelli to go to the training center for Dragon Talkers as soon as possible but she ran into opposition from Katherine.

"No, not until she is at least twelve," Katherine stated flatly.

"She has to begin the training as soon as possible," Leona countered. "The child has enormous potential; she must learn to discipline her gift or the consequences might be dangerous to her and everyone around her!"

"How fortunate that you are here to begin that training," Katherine retorted. "Look, Leona, she hasn't had the kind of secure upbringing that most clan children have had. Violet lost her parents very young, and quite frankly, that Grouter's was not the best place for a child with her sensitivity. She must have time to recover her sense of security and learn she is loved before I will allow her to be subjected to the rigid discipline imposed on trainees at the Dragon training center."

Leona snorted. "From what I saw just now, I don't think you have anything to worry about. That child seems quite strong willed to me."

"Yes, and I intend to see she retains it—"

Zack, who had been listening in silence while the argument raged, finally spoke. "Katherine is right. Violet may appear strong, but she is still having nightmares from her experiences with Grouter. She stays with us."

"You always were a stubborn, willful child Katherine," Leona remarked. "So tell me are you planning to drag the child and the dragon back and forth to town with you when you serve in Parliament?"

If she thought she was presenting them with a problem, she was mistaken. Katherine just smiled, recognizing defeat but not rubbing it in. "I will use the family estate outside of town since it will be better for all the children, not just Violet."

Leona made a rude noise and said, "If you will excuse me then, I foresee a long day tomorrow and I need my rest. Good Night."

When Katherine checked on Violet and Jelli the next morning, she was appalled at the amount of vegetable mash, ground meat, bits of butter and spilled milk covering the child's torso and clothing.

"I'm making Jelli some breakfast," Violet announced proudly. She had both arms up to the elbow in a large bowl mixing the ground bean curd, meat, butterfat and milk for Jelli's meal.

"Good morning, Violet, Jelli", Katherine said, casting an indignant look at Leona, who shrugged.

"The child needs to learn how to care for her pet," Leona said in answer to the implied criticism.

"Well, find her an apron to protect her clothes. I expect Morgana still has those her own children used," Katherine said, referring to the woman in charge of butchering meat for the Lodge. "And make sure Violet takes a bath and soaks those clothes in cold water to get out the blood before she comes down to breakfast."

The next day was a busy one. The Lodge's nursery had not been in use since the new babies born just as the war started had grown out of the need for it. The nursery was the primary day care center for clan members living and working in and around the lodge. Before they left Glass Harbor, Katherine and Corrine had met with several childcare specialists to staff the center. Since Jayne's young boys would spend a lot of time there, Katherine asked her to take a look at it and make a list of what would be needed to bring it back into use.

Unlike Katherine's new family who she had given aptitude tests on Fenris, most children on Vensoog were given many tests to check EMPH ratings. They had also been tested on their native aptitudes to steer them toward a course of study enabling them to choose a career to make the best of their natural talents. Katherine had tested her new children on Fenris. As a part of schooling, children were also given "hands on" work with mentors in different areas.

Since Violet had more or less chosen her own career path by bonding with Jelli, she would be working with Mistress Leona for the foreseeable future.

After some discussion, Roderick elected to intern in the Lodge's communications and electronics center as his first choice.

Rupert who tested very high in chemistry, chose to work in the distillery where the herbs and other items grown by the Clan were compounded into medicines and food supplements. These were used by the Clan and to be sold in the open market at Glass Harbor and Port recovery.

Lucinda opted to work with security where her skill at drawing would be an asset in identifying suspects from witnesses' descriptions.

Juliette would be understudying Katherine so she would follow her around while either Katherine or Corrine explained how to make Veiled Isle a viable working community.

After introducing each of the children to their various mentors, Katherine took everyone down through the underground passage to the barn dome where a crew was assembling equipment to head up into the hills for the annual roundup due to start soon.

It was almost time for the Passover swarms and storms to start, and the entire populace of the Lodge was gearing up for it. During Roundup, most of the cattle, sheep, goats and Ostumus would be brought down from the hills to the low meadows inside Blue Talon Canyon so they would be close enough

to the Lodge to take shelter during the swarms and storms. Food for humans and animals was being prepared and put in stasis to last them through the long season.

Veiled Isle was large, but it was divided by a range of low mountains. The Horned Cove Station was almost as large as the Lodge Station itself and catered to several Independent Fishers and the seacoast village. To reach the Lodge from Horned Cove it was necessary to either travel along the coast or go over the low mountain pass.

Traditionally during Roundup, the Lodge assisted those farms closest to it in the western hills. Extra drovers were leaving this morning to travel out to the outlying Stations on the other side of the low range of mountains splitting Veiled Isle. The Roundup crew leaving from the Lodge traveled on horseback and pulled wagons up into the hills once it began. Since neither Zack nor the children had ever ridden a horse, Katherine asked the head stableman to assign them mounts and begin riding lessons.

Leaving them to enjoy their lesson, Katherine went up to operations where she pulled up a map of Veiled Isle. About ten new couples and several single men and women, some with families, would arrive this afternoon. She looked down at her list of the new arrivals, checking the aptitudes and skill levels of the new arrivals. Zack had also given her a list of the new personnel he wanted assigned as security. Four stations abandoned during the war because the former inhabitants had been killed could be re-inhabited, but the new settlers going to those stations needed to be men and women with some knowledge of agriculture. A few of the new couples would join an existing family and would only need basic supplies to set up small domes to be attached to established homes. About half of the singles would take rooms or suites in the Lodge, the others she marked to be assigned to several existing farms. She sighed and rubbed her eyes. All of these plans would need to be discussed individually with the new arrivals,

who might or might not be amenable to her suggestions. Perhaps some of them might even be interested in starting those Bed and Breakfast places Corrine kept talking about. Well, that was for tomorrow and Corrine would be here to help. In the afternoon after regular schooling, Juliette would also be there. Not that she would make decisions, but she needed to learn how these things were done.

The fishing ship bringing Corrine and Vernal also brought construction materials to refurbish several existing structures and build starter domes for some of the new arrivals. Transportation had to be arranged for materials and people out to the outlying farms.