



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)**

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

Chapter 12 - Roundup Vensoog Style

THE NEXT several weeks were busy, but eventually everyone settled into a routine. After a family breakfast, the children went to the schoolrooms and worked on regular school tasks, overseen by Jayne and the two teachers. The schoolrooms held a mixed age group, with each student using their own teaching module with lessons assigned to by their age and ability.

Early afternoons the children either spent with their mentors or with Zack learning self-defense and combat strategies, or with Katherine teaching a political strategy. Sometimes the family used this time to engage in a mock combat/hide and seek session down in the empty caverns. During the day, Zack and Katherine were coordinating efforts to get the new arrivals settled in amid preparing for the Passover Swarm and Storm season. Corrine and

Vernal took advantage of the time to take an extended camping trip around the Isle. Late afternoons were free time for the children to engage in activities with their new friends or private projects, and evenings were family time. At dinner, everyone discussed his or her day's activities and the next day's plans.

Most of the children at Veiled Beach Lodge had been born during the war before the bioweapon hit Vensoog and were much older than Zack and Katherine's five. Despite the disparity in age, Katherine observed the children were making friends, although they seemed to still cling to each other. Jelli was a wonderful icebreaker because none of the others had met a tame Sand Dragon. Jayne hadn't raised an eyebrow when Violet brought her pet to class, but the other two teachers protested that if she continued to attend the Sand Dragon would grow to take up too much room. Katherine looked them over, and then at Violet's tense face, and said, "I fail to see a problem here. It's a big room and you're on the ground floor."

Her daughter's beaming smile had been reward enough.

The morning Roundup started, Katherine and Zack were roused out of sleep in the early dawn by the pealing of a crystal bell. "What the Hell is that?" Zack demanded.

Katherine rubbed sleep from her eyes. "It means the first of the Swarms has been spotted out to sea. We have about three weeks to get the livestock down from the hills before they arrive. It will be all hands on deck for Roundup."

The children burst through Katherine and Zack's bedroom door with excited or anxious demands about the cause of the noise. Katherine yawned and reached for her bedrobe. "Hush, now, it's nothing to worry about. It means we start Roundup today."

"What's going to happen?" asked Roderick.

"It means that after breakfast you will have time to use those riding

lessons. We'll be heading up into the high meadows to bring down the stock. We'll be gone several days."

"What about Jelli?" asked Violet, "I can't leave her behind—"

"Jelli will have to ride in the newborn animal cart with the other baby animals who can't keep up with the moving herds," Katherine said firmly.

"Everyone needs to go back to their rooms and dress in your riding clothes. Pack a small carryall with a jacket and two changes of clothes."

Roundup was quite an undertaking. Zack counted forty riders including children of various ages, the supply wagon carrying food, bedding and extra clothing, and portable domes, and two more empty wagons. Katherine explained that one of them would carry baby animals too young to keep up with the moving herds. This wagon was partitioned into four separate sections and already held a somewhat grumpy Jelli.

Just as they were starting out, Katherine's com chimed. She projected the vid-com in front of her so everyone could see and hear it. Images of Genevieve and Gideon appeared.

"We received a message on the crystal net from the Clan Patrol at Horned Cove," Genevieve said. "There's a band of Wilders moving into your territory. The word from Karnelon Height is that they're armed with laser weapons. Apparently, some Wilders have taken over one of DeMedici's outposts on the edge of N'Sicily Isle and are using it as a base. They landed on Stranger's Cove and went up the hill to take out Karnelon Station. They were under attack when they called Horned Bay Patrol. I know Roundup is taking place, so you don't have spare manpower, but I suggest that you arm your riders and work in trios in case they make it around the coast to your side."

Katherine and Zack exchanged glances. "We have to do Roundup," she said.

"We could leave the children here," he suggested.

She shook her head. "The families at the Stations will have their children with them; a few more won't make any difference to our situation."

He nodded. "Okay, then. Listen up everyone! I need volunteers. I want two armed outriders at both ends of this caravan and two along each side. If we're attacked, we make a triangle of the wagons and put the riding animals and the children inside the triangle. Older children will be in charge of taking care of them. The rest of us will be divided up into two groups, one to defend the triangle and the other outside it to attack the Wilders. The strategy is to catch them between us. Any questions?"

He turned to Katherine, "Do you have any heavy weapons we can bring along?"

She nodded. "Anyone who can handle a Plasma Rifle, go to the armory and check one out. Pick up extra plasma bolts for the rifles, your side arms and for the Force Wands. We'll store them in the second supply wagon. Bring along one of the light Plasma Cannons in case we need one."

Vernal and Corrine who planned on staying behind because they claimed they were too old to do Round Up, agreed to step up patrols along the coast and to warn Fisher Ships affiliated with O'Teague to watch out for Wilders along the coasts.

Katherine had always loved Roundup. She took a deep breath smelling the sweet scent of dried grasses mixed with the sharp odors of the wet crystal rocks off the ocean. The familiar feel of her horse moving under her and the creak of leather all said this was home. She had only been away three months, but it had seemed longer.

Since they didn't need to ride herd, Katherine, Zack, and the children rode together a family group next to the Babe wagon because Violet insisted Jelli would feel left out if they didn't. Katherine took advantage of the time to show points of interest to everyone.

"It's a well-marked trail", Zack remarked. "Will we stick to it?"

"Yes," she answered. "When we reach Alpine Meadows Station, we'll help Jordan and Mia with their gather and then swing around the mountains and pick up the families and stock from the other four stations. Some of the outposts like Seven Trees will join us at each of the camps with anyone they want to send down."

"You leave the outposts unguarded?" Zack asked disapprovingly.

She shrugged. "The storms make it hard for anyone to move around enough to attack anything. Wait until you've been through a season here, you'll see. But we leave a skeleton crew manning the outpost in case someone camps close enough to attack while the outpost is under-manned."

He grunted. "Depending on weather as a defense isn't always reliable. Maybe after the season passes, Vernal and I can take a little trip out to the outposts to see if we can improve security. That's for later though. We have other fish to fry. You know this area better than I do. If you were planning an ambush where would you do it?"

Always so business-like, Katherine thought ruefully. Their union had been more than satisfying but she couldn't help wonder what his reaction would be if she proposed to make it permanent.

"Hey!" he snapped his fingers under her nose. "Zack to Katherine. I asked you where you think the best ambush place will be."

Abruptly jerked back from her nostalgic dreaming, Katherine replied. "There's Blue Talon Canyon at the base of the hills. We usually hold most of the herds there for a few days before we move them down into the low meadows near the Lodge. The ground gets hilly as we approach it and they could pick us off from concealment."

"Okay, then we need to get there ahead of the herds and scout it out to make sure we aren't walking into a trap when we arrive. I'll take a small team of fighters and scouts with me and cut across to it. We have six fighters from my old unit with us, I'll take three of them and I need you to

pick three more of your people who can guide us there. We'll leave as soon as we arrive in Alpine Meadows Station."

Camp was the usual first night muddle with everyone running around trying to get organized. Chores had to be assigned, the animals fed and camping domes set up.

Never having slept in the outdoors before the children were excited, Katherine decided they would all share a porta-dome. She had left Sooka behind with Corrine because her pups had just been born. Besides her and Zack Violet insisted that Jelli sleep in the pop-up with them. This meant everyone had to step over or around her if they needed to get up in the middle of the night, and when Zack rose quietly to check on the night guards, he accidentally stepped on her tail. Jelli's squeal of outrage woke up not only their dome, but those on either side of them.

The next afternoon they arrived at Alpine Meadows, and the next morning Zack left with his fighters on the scouting trip.

Zack and his scouts could cover more ground than the slow moving herds. He told Katherine and the children he would meet them before they arrived at Blue Talon Canyon. Watching Zack and the seven fighters ride off into the pre-dawn chill was hard. Katherine had smiled at Zack as she kissed him goodbye, swallowing a knot of fear for him. When she saw some of the distress disappear from her children's' faces, she was glad she had made the effort. She remembered one of Corrine's teaching mantras—confidence was contagious. When he left, Zack got a hard hug from all three girls and at Violet's insistence a goodbye whuffle from Jelli. From Rupert and Roderick he got a manly handshake as he instructed them to "look after the girls while I'm gone."

"We'll look after each other," Katherine had retorted. She then made sure that all her children were too busy with morning camp chores to have time to fret. Unlike herself at that age, her new children acutely knew of the idea

a parent could be taken away from them. She and Zack were their security, she reminded herself; she couldn't afford to for them to see her fear for Zack unless she wanted them to take matters into their own hands.

They probably would do something anyway, she thought resignedly as Juliette and Roderick caught up with her when the herds and flock moved toward the next station. "Are we going to be attacked?" Juliette asked.

Katherine studied her, judging how frank she ought to be about the situation. There was fear there, but resolution too. "Well, I hope not, but it's always possible," she replied.

"We want to learn to fire the plasma rifles," Juliette stated.

Katherine's eyebrows rose. "You've been learning the Force Wand so you can defend yourselves."

"Yes, but that's for close-in fighting. I think it will be better if I don't have to fight them close up, don't you?" Roderick insisted.

Katherine nodded. "All right. This evening we will hold a class for anyone who wants to learn how to load and fire them. I can't let you fire them, tho' because we might need the ammunition for actual fighting later, but you can practice aiming."

Two days later They reached the second Station on the route, Angel Hair Falls Station. The couple who ran it, Jordan and Mia, already had their wagon packed, and had made a gather of the long-haired sheep and goats being watched and kept bunched up by the herding dogs. Angel Hair Falls also had a large flock of the huge multi-colored flightless birds, which still needed to be gathered for the trip. The birds could be found making a colorful display in the trees above the camp. Ostamus were highly prized for their colorful feathers used for hats and clothing and their spicy meat. Their DNA had been adapted from several large breeds of birds from Old Earth and the first colonists had nicknamed them Otsamus. The birds were mean-tempered, territorial and notoriously hard to drive, thanks to the long razor

edged talons on their feet, which they weren't shy about using when they were displeased. Most bird wranglers used the stunning end of the Force Wand as an incentive to make the birds move in the direction wanted. It helped to have feeders filled with birdseed attached to the back of a cart. The cart traveled slowly enough for the birds to snatch a few bites as it moved. At night, a portable stinger fence would be erected around them to keep them from wandering away.

The herds of goats and sheep from both Stations were mostly handled by Mia the head wrangler with the aid of herding dogs. The flocks were accustomed to being moved from pasture to pasture.

As the day wore on, Katherine was bothered for some time with the feeling they were being watched. In the hustle and bustle of the day, it was hard to locate the source of her ill feeling. It was enough, however, to keep her moving around and check constantly on her kids.

That evening, Katherine set up an informal training session on how to load, aim and fire the Pulse rifles using the skill of one of Zack's unit he had left with them.

This wasn't enough to dispel her unease and the next morning just at the edge of dawn, she rose early and walked out above the camp to find a quiet spot where she could be undisturbed. Sitting down, she centered herself and opened her third eye, seeking for hostile watcher along their route. The ability to feel emotions at a distance was not a skill often needed, but Katherine had been trained in the technique at the Dragon Talker Center. At first, she only sensed the normal dawn emanations of wild hunters and their prey, but faintly, along the edge of her perception, she located Zack and his fighters. The feeling of being watched was stronger to the Northeast, but it was too faint for her to identify the source. However, since they would be moving South and West away from it as they traveled she wasn't particularly worried about it.

“What are you doing?”

She opened her eyes to find Juliette, Rupert and Lucinda watching her. “I’m using my third eye to check for a hostile presence,” she answered calmly.

“What’s a third eye?” asked Lucinda.

“A third eye is what sensitives use when we reach out with our psychic senses.”

“Can anyone use it?” Lucinda asked.

“Unless they’ve deadened it by refusing to believe in it, they can. Most humans have it to some extent, some more developed than others. It takes a little concentration and training to learn to use it. However, children can usually tap into it easier than adults.”

She patted the ground beside her. “Come, sit here and I’ll give you a quick lesson before we leave,” she said. Obediently, the three down sat facing her.

“I need you to relax and breathe as I tell you,” she instructed. “Close your eyes and try to concentrate on hearing and smelling everything around you.”

“Don’t open your eyes and tell me what you hear.”

“The camp,” said Lucinda.

“The horses, birds, the wind and—rustling in the rocks above us,” Juliette answered.

“There’s something—” Rupert began, “I don’t really hear it, it’s more I feel it over there,” she gestured off to the North.

Juliette concentrated, “Yes! I can feel it too. It’s not angry, just—watchful.”

“I can feel it now too,” cried Lucinda.

“Fantastic, children! For a first time, that is excellent,” Katherine exclaimed. “We’ll practice some more every morning. For now, though, let’s get mounted and head back down to camp.”

That night, Katherine lay in the darkness waiting for sleep to come, listening to the night and to the sounds of her children as they drifted off to sleep. Her children. So much had happened to her in the last few months. She had a new husband; she was now the mother of five half-grown children. Most wonderful of all she had tumbled into love with Zack. While he gave every evidence of returning her love, he had yet to say so. She hadn't either told him either, she reminded herself. Maybe he was as unsure of her feelings as she was of his?

The night wasn't freezing and the heating crystals kept the tent warm, but she missed Zack's solid warmth beside her in the sleeping bag. Zack was passionate in bed. The memory brought an uncomfortable ache in her groin causing her to move restlessly. Outside the dome, she could hear the soft voices of the night guards as they exchanged greetings on their patrols. Over by door, Jelli whuffed in her sleep. Jelli probably would have grown so much by next year's Roundup, she and Violet would need a separate portadome, Katherine reflected.

She turned over, exasperated. She was still wide-awake, and it didn't look as if sleep was coming anytime soon. Quietly, so she wouldn't wake the sleeping children, she rose and dressed. Stepping over the snoring Jelli, she slipped out of the dome, securing the door flap behind her. Somehow, she was unsurprised to find the new wives of the fighters who had gone with Zack sitting around the dying fire.

Katherine poured a cup of the Cafka kept hot for the night guards and joined them. Her childhood friend Caro, who now managed the medical needs of the Lodge, looked at her and laughed ruefully. "You couldn't sleep either, huh?"

Katherine laughed, "You caught me," she admitted.

One of the other women snorted. "What's wrong with us? I only met that man six weeks ago. I can't be in love this soon but I sure miss him in my

bed."

The women exchanged half-rueful half-guilty looks before they all started giggling.

"Why not?" Another asked. "Didn't you think the matchmaker program worked?"

"Well, it's pretty obvious it did, or we wouldn't all be out here losing sleep," Caro replied.

"I'm so glad it worked," Katherine said. "The math said it should, but I worried I had made an error somewhere, you know?"

"I think you can relax about that." Marta, a brunette who had moved to the Lodge with her new husband, remarked as she swallowed the last of her Cafka. "I guess I'd better try to get some sleep,".

"Me too," Joan another of the new wives replied, rising with her, and prompting a general exodus.

Left alone with Katherine, Caro gave her childhood friend a straight look. "Are we going to be attacked?" She asked.

Katherine nodded soberly. "Zack was pretty sure of it. And I can feel someone watching, I just can't locate them. I always was better at *Push* than *Pull*," she added wryly.

"Wonderful. Well at least planning how to set up triage out here will take my mind of missing Rex. I must make sure the medical supplies are in the front of the supply cat and carry my portable bag on me."

Just then, Juliette opened the tent flap, looking for Katherine. She came over to the fire.

"Mother, I think Rupert's starting a nightmare," she said.

"Duty calls," Katherine said to Caro as she rose to follow her daughter back.

"Good night, little mother," Caro replied.

Rupert was starting the muttering, tossing and turning that foreshadowed

one of his nightmares. Katherine knelt by his bedroll and gathered him to her.

"Sssh," she said, *pushing* comfort and security at him. As she did so, she cast a worried look at Violet. In the past, the two of them had seemed to transfer their nightmares to each other, but tonight Violet slept peacefully. Jelli raised her head and regarded Katherine and Rupert almost thoughtfully. No one knew just exactly how intelligent Sand Dragons really were; they were empathic and sometimes formed bonds with humans but their intelligence was of a different order and the two didn't always seem to have the same goals. It occurred to Katherine that Violet hadn't had a nightmare since Jelli had come to live with her. Perhaps the Dragon's empathy was helping Violet feel more secure. It was just as possible Jelli was strengthening Violet's EMPH shield. Being a strong empath had its liabilities; sensitivity to emotions that others broadcast could cause a child to retreat into catatonia unless they were taught to shield themselves. Well, she couldn't arrange for another Dragon calf to appear, but perhaps one of Sooka's pups might prove an adequate substitute for Rupert. She would ask Leona to include Rupert in Violet's shielding classes. He hadn't rated out as high on the EMPH scale as Violet, but his abilities seemed to be increasing.

Rupert finally settled back into normal sleep. Katherine *pushed* more comfort and security at him before she crawled back into her bedroll. Once there, she dropped immediately into sleep.

Although she and the children continued to try each morning to locate the source of her unease, she could not locate the watchers.