



***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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### ***Chapter 13 - Battle of Blue Talon Canyon***

THE NIGHT before they reached Blue Talon Canyon, Zack and his crew filtered silently back into the camp. Katherine was engaged in applying salve and bandaging gouges from bird talons on Jelli's nose and face when she looked up and suddenly he was there. He looked tired, and he smelled; it was apparent he hadn't had a bath since they left. She set down the jar and flung her arms around his neck anyway, enjoying the solid feel of him against her. "Where have you been?" she exclaimed. "I've been worried about you—"

"Sssh!" he said. "We don't want anyone watching the camp to know we're here." He kissed her soundly anyway. "Miss me?"

"Yes."

He touched the circles under her eyes. "I don't think I like these."

She made a face. "Well, I haven't been sleeping well, and I'm not the only one. All the new wives have been having trouble. I wonder why that is."

Zack laughed, dropping his hand and squeezing her buttocks playfully and pulling her firmly against his body. He was hard and ready. "Good. I missed you too. If I'm losing sleep, so should you."

"Did you find anyone? I've still got an itch on the back of my neck," she said, recovering.

"Yes, they're out there all right but they're scattered. As near as I can tell, there are between fifteen and twenty of them. We need them to bunch together so we can catch them. I'll take a crew up and around to the canyon so we can catch them between us. Leave late tomorrow morning and keep everyone in close. I want everything to look normal, so pass the word along quietly. Make sure everyone has a full load of ammunition."

Katherine nodded. "Are you staying the night?"

"No, I can't. There's too much chance we might be spotted leaving in the morning so we'll be heading back out late tonight. We came in to get more food and weapons and to let you know what is planned for tomorrow."

"Can I tell the others you're here?" asked Violet, who had been helping to tend Jelli.

"As long as you do it quietly, Hon," he said. "What happened to Jelli?"

"Ostamus and Sand Dragons are mortal enemies. Our dominant hen Ostamu tried to bully Jelli out of her way, and they had an altercation," Katherine said drily. "Jelli lost," she added, "or at least she's the most marked up—the lead hen knew just what to aim for," she said, applying more ointment to Jelli's nose and ears. "Though I did think we might end up having roast Ostamu for dinner before we broke it up. Jelli can be formidable despite her age."

The rest of the children came up quietly. Zack gave each a quick hug and slipped away into the night after he refilled his ration pack.

Blue Talon Canyon from the air looked like the print of a giant bird's claw sunk deep into blue rock. Steep, almost straight walls of azure crystal glared brightly in the sun at the top and faded into deep shadows at the base. Katherine's party had almost reached the opening of the canyon mouth when she ordered a break, ostensibly to discuss what order they would use when sending the individual herds and flocks into the canyon. The stop enabled the group to move the wagons to the outside of the herds and put most of the herding crew inside with them where they could easily take cover from attack.

Katherine was making a final swing around their defenses when word came back that riders were approaching. She kicked her horse into a lope and came to the front of the caravan.

The three men and two women approaching looked in bad shape. One woman was holding a man up in the saddle and another had a bloody bandage wrapped around his head. The lead rider trotted forward. "Can you help us? Please?" she asked.

Katherine made a sharp gesture, stopping the two healing women who had started forward.

"What happened to you?" she asked.

"We were attacked by a large group of Wilders. My husband has been wounded."

"I am Katherine O'Teague. These are my lands and I don't know you. What is your Clan name and how do you come to be here?" Katherine asked.

"We were sailing along the coast and our boat started leaking. We barely made it to shore before it went down. We started inland to get help. We are DeMedici. By clan treaty you must give aid to shipwrecks."

"You are at least twenty miles inland from the shore and mounted.

Where did you get the horses?"

"There was a deserted farm. The horses were running loose. Our need gave us the right to borrow them."

Katherine regarded them dispassionately, remembering Zack's warning. The story might be true. It also might be the opening gun in the ambush he had expected.

"You said you were attacked by Wilders, when did this happen?"

As she spoke with the leader, Katherine was also sending out her third eye, seeking for hostile emanations from those who might creep up on them while the leader held her attention. She couldn't pinpoint any one area where danger would come from. Whoever was out there was excellent at shielding their intent. Unfortunately, if they really were shipwrecked, she was duty bound to offer aid.

"Very well," she said. "Dismount and disarm yourselves. We will tend your wounded."

"Disarm?" the leader appeared insulted. "I was not aware a state of war existed between our clans."

"It doesn't," she retorted coolly. "However, we are expecting an assault from those same Wilders you say you encountered. I have no way of knowing you are who you say you are. If you want our help, you will do as I tell you."

With some muttering and grumbling, the five dismounted, leaving their weapons by the horses. Two women from the Clan went forward and helped with the wounded man. Katherine did not dismount. She signaled her fighters to keep watching outside the wagons for the ambush as the supposed DeMedicis limped into the circle.

Unfortunately, Jelli took that moment to cause a ruckus with the same bird she had fought with the night before. The pair carried their dispute into the forefront of Katherine's retainers, and Violet came running up to

intercede, passing close to the interlopers who had remained in a tight group.

"Jelli, stop that!" Violet shouted at her pet, intent on reaching her before the much larger bird could cause more damage.

Suddenly, the wounded man sitting on the ground sprang up and grabbed Violet, pulling a hidden knife and holding it against her neck. He acted too fast for anyone to have stopped him.

"Well, now, here's the little Dragon Talker," the leader purred. "I think it is you who will now put down your weapons, Lady. I would hate for so valuable a commodity to be damaged."

"Beware, woman. If you are DeMedici, La Dona won't appreciate you starting a clan feud by harming my child," Katherine's voice was cold. While she was speaking, she *pushed* against Jelli's emotions, sparking fear for Violet and anger at the man holding her.

Jelli let out a low feral growl, forgetting her dispute with the squawking bird, began stalking toward Violet and her captor with her ears laid back. The Sand Dragon was still small, but she had sharp teeth and talons and with her hardened skin plates covering most of her body she was practically invulnerable.

Her captor shook Violet, turning to face the dragon. "Stop her! Stop her or I'll kill her!"

With everyone watching the drama, no one saw Katherine draw her pistol. Violet's captor had turned his back on Katherine to watch Jelli. Katherine fired without hesitation, taking off the top of his head. He slumped to the ground, taking Violet with him.

The camp exploded into a free-for-all of yelling, fighting men and women, excited birds slashing at anything that came too close to them, barking dogs, frightened goats and sheep jumping everywhere to escape, and the final insult, the horses and cattle stampeding through the fighters

toward the canyon mouth, knocking aside friend and foe alike.

The rest of the Wilders waiting outside the circle took advantage of the melee to fire into the convoy's protective ring. Seeing the stampede careening toward Violet's prone body, Katherine *pushed* at the oncoming animals, creating a wedge to detour the stampede around Violet and Jelli. She kicked her horse forward, leaping off as the mare was still moving when she reached Violet. The well-trained horse stood like a rock as the frightened animals raced around her. Shoving the body of the dead Wilder off Violet, Katherine turned her over, checking for wounds. Jelli snuffled in their faces.

"Ugh!" Violet pushed her pet's wet nose aside. "I'm all right, Jelli." She smiled when she looked up into her mother's face. "Wasn't Jelli great? I thought she was going to eat that guy."

"He thought so too," Katherine said grimly. "Come on; let's get you two under a wagon so we can take care of the rest of them."

Katherine hastily shoved Violet and Jelli under the closest wagon and turned back to the fight with her gun drawn and her back to it, but the precaution proved unnecessary.

Although the Wilders were hampered by fire from Zacks fighters, many of them got inside the circle of wagons. However, the panicking animals impeded their attack as much as it did the defense. The fight was already winding down. Thanks to Zacks skill at strategy and superior fighting experience, the Clan soon got the upper hand over the Wilders. The surviving Wilders were shackled and herded into the only secure dome inside the canyon to await Katherine's judgement

Katherine kept them waiting until the afternoon of the next day because she had more important things to concern her. Once the convoy moved into the protection of the canyon, the wounded had to be settled, camp set up and all the loose animals located and sorted. A meal prepared.

The bodies of the dead Wilders had been collected and searched. The

next afternoon, a makeshift dais was set up on a wagon seat so everyone could see Katherine as she passed judgement. As First Daughter, Juliette sat on the footrest below Katherine's seat. Zack leaned up against the wagon wheel with his arms folded. Several guards stood off to one side, fully armed. Their presence and Zacks were mute testimony to Katherine's authority. From youth to middle age the defeated Wilders were a sorry sight. Their wounds had been tended, and they had been fed but that was the only amenity that had been provided them.

"Your name and station," Katherine demanded of each prisoner. Only two of them were willing to provide that information. Her eyebrows rose. "Very well, If you prefer to be buried in an unmarked grave so your families will never know happened to you, I can arrange for that to happen," she told them. "If you provide me your name and station, I will see that your family is notified of your sentence."

"Does that mean you intend to kill us?" one of the youngest asked. Katherine shrugged. "You threatened my child," she reminded them. "You are charged with attempted kidnapping, murder, endangering children and raiding. The penalty for that ranges from death to work in a labor camp for 10 years. However, I am not without mercy. If you can show that you were forced to take part, I will consider mitigating circumstances."

She waited a few minutes and then turned to her people. "Is there anyone here who can speak for them?"

A hostile silence from her clan answered her. "Very well," she said, turning back to the prisoners. "You stand accused of acts of murder and piracy. The sentence is death. Make your peace with God. Tomorrow at dawn you will be executed."

She nodded to the guards. "Turn them to face the Clan." After they had done so, Katherine addressed her people. "You have heard the sentence and seen the prisoners. Is there anyone here who claims Blood Right?"

Beside her, she felt Zack stiffen. An uneasy silence covered the waiting Clan, then a girl about fifteen stepped forward. "I claim Blood Right!" she cried, pointing to one of the women. "She killed my aunt two years ago."

"Give us your name and state the circumstances," Katherine spoke the formal words.

The girl drew a deep breath. "My name is Zora niMcClellan and my aunt was Bethany niMillier. She was killed in a raid on Seven Trees Station two years ago."

"How old are you?"

"I am old enough to claim Blood Right. I am fifteen."

Katherine nodded. "Very well, you have the right. Be ready at dawn tomorrow." She turned back to the crowd. "Anyone else?"

Three more of the clan stepped forward, each claiming a family member slain.

Katherine gestured to the leading guard. "Take them back to the sealed dome until tomorrow morning. See they have food and water."

As the prisoners were led away, Katherine looked down at Juliette's white face. "Sentencing someone to die is never an easy decision, Daughter. Do you understand why this was necessary?"

"I think so," Juliette said soberly. "They would have killed us, and they tried to kill Violet." Juliette hesitated. "What did those people mean when they claimed Blood Right?"

"Claiming Blood Right means they have the right to administer whatever punishment has been handed down by the Lady. Here it means they will do the execution themselves."

Juliette looked back at her. "What happens to the ones no one claimed the right for?"

"I will have to carry out the sentence because I cannot ask anyone else to do something I am unwilling to do myself. I passed the sentence, it is my



duty to see it carried out. Those outlaws killed and wounded several of our people and would have killed or injured Violet. As leader here, it is my duty to protect my people from harm and to see that those who harm them are punished. In Lady Corrine's absence, it became my duty to protect and enforce our laws. Someday, as First Daughter if you are acting in my place, you may have to do the same."

She looked into Juliette's big eyes and smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. This is not a burden I will place on you before you are ready. Why don't you check on how Roderick and Rupert are doing preparing dinner?"

Juliette hopped down and ran toward the encampment. When Zack lifted Katherine down off the wagon, she leaned into him for comfort. "I hate this part of my duties."

He said nothing, just held her and stroked her hair.

After a few minutes, Katherine stood back. "I'm a little worried about Rupert and Violet's reaction to the execution tomorrow. Do you think you could take them and Jelli up to the rim in the morning? They seem to have the most empathy, and the further away from it they are, the better I think."

"Shall I take all of them?"

Katherine took a deep breath. "Well, Juliette is First Daughter so she will have to stay, but maybe it would be best if you took the others too."

"That is a heavy burden to put on a child, Katherine," he said.

"I know," she said, "but I wasn't much older when I had to witness a sentencing and execution myself, and I survived it."

They stayed at Blue Talon Canyon for a week, gradually moving different herds of animals across the valley and into the underground shelter next to the Lodge. They were almost finished when the first Swarms of small stinging insects made landfall just as the last of the herds and flocks were being moved into the underground animal shelter. The swarms arrived in

dark waves of insects, sometimes two or three thousand each and they covered an area like a blanket. It was miserable work. To keep from being stung, everyone simply pulled their hats netting down to cover their heads. The herding dogs and horses wore mesh bags over their heads and ears to help protect them from the stings and burrowing insects.

As each animal in the herd passed through the entrance to the shelter, there was a hissing buzzing sound and dead insects fell in heaps by the doors. "If we let the little buggers in with the stock, it would defeat the purpose of coming down here for shelter," a clanswoman staffing the entrance explained to Zack and the children as they followed the last herd up to the opening.

"You don't leave the door open after we're all inside do you?" Zack questioned as he dismounted. He handed off his pony to Roderick to take down to the stable area.

"We close the main roll-up doors, but the bug screen stays on," the woman responded. "Just in case some poor soul was caught outside, they can get inside the screen and then contact us on the com. We decide then if we want to let them inside or not."

Previously the underground catacomb had echoed with emptiness but now it resounded with the noise of complaining animals and yelling wranglers. The wagons used by the Roundup were shunted over to the side. Once he knew everyone was inside the shelter, Zack stayed to watch as the doors slid down, sealing it off from the bugs and winds. The early Vensoog colonists had learned the hard way that a dome's rounded edges caused the winds to slide around round structures where they would have torn apart structures built in other shapes.

"How long will we need to hide in here from the bugs?" Zack asked Katherine.

"Well, those itty-bitty ones are just the beginning. They're lunch for the

larger bugs that follow them. We are usually down her for about three weeks. Then the storms will come in, and they usually last about the same. A lot of the larger native Vensoog animals like the Sandie's and Nessies and some of the birds hibernate during this season."