



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 14 – Passover

THREE WEEKS later Clan members who weren't permanent Lodge residents had moved into the living quarters on the second floor of the massive dome. During Passover, most Clan residents rode out the storm in their own quarters. Passage from one dome to another was done through three underground tunnels. The herds and flocks brought in during Roundup were confined to a series of corrals around and above the lake. The rest were kept in the sheltered ravines of Blue Talon Canyon.

Katherine was giving the children and Zack a tour of the Lodge's Command Center on the top floor of the dome above the cavern. Katherine and Corrine had flipped a coin to decide who would handle their official duties during the day and who would take over at night.

"This is our command center during the Passover Storms," Katherine explained to Zack and the children, showing a tier of virtual screens, each with a person monitoring it.

"It's a little old-fashioned compared to what you probably used in the military," she added to Zack, "But they still work." She moved to the first virtual screen. "This is Joyce; she handles our storm watch so we can know exactly when the leading edge of each storm will reach us."

A tall, light-haired woman glanced at them, nodding a greeting before returning her eyes to the screen in front of her. "I estimate we have about three hours before the first one hits," she told them, gesturing to an arc line with a ragged edge on the screen. "This one looks like about a Class seven. It will be rough."

"Thanks, Joyce," Katherine nodded and moved on to the next screen. "This is Karen. Karen looks out for our various animal sections, to make sure no trouble starts. How does it look, Karen?"

The woman with the short black hair and friendly smile turned to face them. "Well, the Ostamus are antsy, but everyone else seems calm. Your little Sand Dragon settled right into sleep, so I reckon she's down for the duration."

"That's a relief," Katherine grinned at her, remembering how difficult it had been to get Violet to agree to allow Jelli to take her place in the subterranean cavern. Then Violet had panicked when Jelli started to hibernate and it had taken the combined efforts of Katherine, Mistress Leona and Karen to reassure the child that Jelli's 'sleep' was normal. Karen touched a section of the virtual screen and it revealed Jelli snuggled into a rock alcove with a sandy floor, away from the warm underground lake that served the Lodge. Violet was leaning back against the rock wall next to Jelli with her study tablet in her lap. A closer look showed she too was asleep.

An older, woman was handling the next station which showed a view of

the busy medical center. Cora was apparently checking out a strain on the arm of a man whose feather spattered pants showed he had lately been in the bird section. "This is Myrna; she coordinates with Cora, our senior medic about injuries during Passover."

The woman looked up and smiled. "So far, nothing serious. Mason there pulled a muscle breaking up a squabble between two Ostamu groups. We've had injuries come in with some fishers, but nothing to worry about."

The next virtual station showed the sheltered cove below the Lodge and the marina docking area. The water had already risen to cover the wharf. Several fishing vessels were moored with masts fastened down and their decks sealed. The last one was still unloading men and hauling supplies up the steps toward the safe room. As the crew from the fisher entered, Zack noticed the room door looked very much like an airlock on a ship. "Does that seal?" he asked the young boy monitoring the viewer.

"Yes, sir," the boy, Joseph, replied. "It has a double seal in case the rising storm water breaks past the first one. The second door leads into a tunnel running down into the cavern. That way late arrivals won't have to risk traveling overland in the storms. Those storm winds can blow you away."

The crews passed swiftly through the room and headed down into the tunnel with their cargo. The Fleet Captain, Joel Margron, stopped at the room's console, tapping the screen. A close-up of his bearded face came onto the command center screen. "Greetings Milady," he addressed Katherine "On the way in we got a request from two Independent ships to take shelter in our harbor from the storm," he said. "I Okayed it, but I have a bad feeling about them."

Zack tapped the boy on the shoulder and gestured for him to move over. "Any reason for that feeling Captain?" he asked.

Margron looked at Katherine who nodded. "Captain, this is my new

husband Zack Jackson. He has taken over security for us and he has a lot of experience with hostile situations. Please give him your full cooperation.”

The Captains face relaxed. “Glad to meet you sir. They’re Independents with no Clan affiliation and when the Captain who contacted me was speaking, she was nervous as Hell. I had the feeling maybe she wasn’t in command of her ship any longer.”

“Are all your people safe inside the tunnel?”

“Well, except for the three on each ship who volunteered to man them during the storm.”

Zack turned to Katherine. “Can we communicate with the ships directly from here?”

She nodded, and Zack turned back to the Captain. “Okay. Give us the frequency of the ships you spoke to and get yourself into the tunnel. I will seal it after you. Before we let these people inside the Lodge we need to find out a little more about them.”

The Captain nodded and headed into the tunnel. Behind him, the airlock door hissed as it slid into place.

Zack opened a channel to the two ships that had asked for refuge. The woman who answered after a short delay looked a little battered. The Captain's shirt was torn and blood showed around the edge of the sleeve. A bruise covered one whole side of her face. Zack was unfamiliar with ship type injuries, but he was very familiar with the wounds coming from combat, and the Captain’s wounds looked like fighting injuries to him.

“This is Lord Zackery Jackson, head of security for this Lodge. Captain, I understand you need to take refuge from the storm?”

The woman slid a nervous glance over to the left, outside the viewer. “Yes. We need to get under cover from the Storm. We also have injuries—”

“Very well. May I have your name and your ship’s name?”

She licked her lips, took a deep breath, and said formally, “I am Marga

Logan. This is the Ship Sea Runner and her sister ship, the Aphrodite. We are Independents and request shelter from the storm and care for our injured under the Sailors Covenant."

Zack nodded. "I understand. Have your ships arrived at our port?"

"We are making landfall now."

"As soon as your ships have been battened down for the storm, take the steps to your left. There is a safe room and a medic station there where your injured can be treated by our robo-doc with assistance from our Chief Medic." As he spoke, Zack had been doing a quick review of the plans for the Safe Rooms. "There is food and dry clothing in the room to the right. As soon as all your people are inside the Safe Rooms, the outer door will seal. We will send an escort to take you to a more comfortable area as soon as we can spare them. The Medic will contact you as soon as you enter the medic station."

He shut down the two-way viewing and motioned for the boy to take his place. "Keep an eye of them," he instructed. "I want eyes covering all corners and sound as well. If they contact you again, have them wait and send for me."

The boy nodded, his eyes as big as saucers.

The refugees entering the Safe Rooms seemed to be two groups. One group was in rough shape. This bloody and battered faction staggered into the Safe Rooms and headed into the Medic station. The other group looked tough, were carrying weapons did not try to help their wounded comrades. Several people passed by the door, but didn't enter the safe room. Katherine suddenly leaned in so she had a better view of the screen.

"Zack! Look who it is," she exclaimed.

He too leaned in and they he nodded. "Looks as if you did see her that day in the channel," he remarked.

"That was Lister!" exclaimed Juliette. "What's she doing here?"

"Up to no good, probably," Zack's voice was dispassionate. Lister handed a knapsack to a man in the doorway as she passed.

"Where does she think she's going?" wondered Katherine. Even as she voiced the question, the screen monitoring the Top Side Landing Room came on. They could see Lister and about twenty others settling into the dome as if preparing for a long stay.

"I would guess she doesn't intend to be trapped in the safe room," Zack thoughtfully stroked his chin. "If I was planning something, I sure wouldn't."

He turned to Lolli, the sub-security chief, "How secure from the storm is the Top Side Landing Room?"

She looked contemplative. "Well, it's fairly uncomfortable during a storm, but as long as the water doesn't come up into it, it's reasonably secure. There's a good foundation and minimal power so they'll have light and enough heat to keep from freezing, but that's about all."

"I don't like it. They're planning something. If I wanted to attack this place, I'd wait until there was a lull in the storm, and then try to break in through ground level doors at either the main house or the barns where it's easier to access."

"But if they really are planning an attack, why did she let any of her men get trapped in the Safe rooms?" the security officer asked.

"I know!" Roderick exclaimed. "She handed off a knapsack to one of the men who stayed behind. I bet there are weapons in that knapsack!"

"I bet they're planning to blow the door into the tunnel!" Rupert finished excitedly.

Zack smiled proudly at the two boys. "If that's the case, what do you think we should do about it?" he asked, seeing a tactical teaching moment.

"That's a small room," Roderick said. "if they set off a bomb in there, the concussion will get them too. Maybe we should just let them try it and

hurt themselves.”

“If they set off that blast it might collapse the roof and they aren’t the only people in there,” Juliette protested. “Some of the fishers might get hurt too.”

“Look at those other doors, they’re thick. I bet they wouldn’t get hurt too bad if they lock themselves in one of the other rooms,” Rupert argued.

Zack had been examining the schematics of the tunnel just outside the Safe rooms. “Okay, that’s one strategy that might be tried, can you think of any others?” he asked.

Lucinda had been looking at the map too. “They only left about six of them. Why don’t we open the door?” she inquired.

“What?” squalled the boys. “You can’t do that! I bet they’ve got weapons and explosive charges! If we let them in, they can set them off in here. People will get hurt. Our people.”

Lucinda made a rude noise and pointed to two access tunnels beside the door. “You don’t listen! I didn’t say let them come down into the cavern. If we open the door pretending we’ve come to get them, they should let us in. If they don’t we can wait there for when they come out. Like we did that time Grouter sent us in to get—” she stopped and looked guiltily at her parents. “—Stuff. And we got trapped in that alley, remember?”

“We could ambush them!” Rupert and Roderick said in unison.

Zack looked over at Katherine and grinned. “Good little strategy session, huh?”

She punched him playfully in the arm. “They have a good teacher.”

“Do you think they’ll try anything right away, sir?” Lolli asked.

“No, my guess is they’ll want to coordinate any attack with Lister’s crew. Lister will need to wait for a lull in this storm before her crew can operate up top, so we have plenty of time to get our men in place.”

“Um, Zack?” Katherine asked. “I think that it would be just like Lister

to use those fishers as hostages when the fight starts. Most of the fishers are already in the infirmary, so when the attack starts, we could isolate them by closing the infirmary door from here."

"Can you handle that?" Zack asked the screen operator.

"Sure," the boy replied. "I have auxiliary control from here. I can override any command they input."

"How soon will there be a break in the weather," Zack asked the meteorologist.

Joyce frowned. "From the size of this one, I'd say we've got about twenty-four hours before the eye gets here."

Zack nodded. "Okay, Lolli assemble a security team to meet me in those tunnels just outside the safe room door. Do we have gas masks?"

"Yes," Lolli answered. "Do you think they are planning to gas us?"

"It's been done and we don't know for sure what is in that knapsack," he replied. "I'm thinking better safe than sorry. I also want two teams to guard the access tunnels to the Lodge and the animal shelter."

"While we have time," Vernal who had not yet gone to bed suggested, "I think we might cut down our casualties by setting a few traps inside the Lodge and at the tunnel entrances."

He looked over at the boys. "I think you can help with that. We will need pressure plates and some netting. And I think maybe a quick release trigger on some of the animal pens. Particularly those feisty birds."

Twenty-four hours later Corrine and Katherine sat tensely in the command center watching their men prepare to go to battle. On screens the two women could glimpse the various groups moving into positions of defense. For safety, everyone who had stayed in the Lodge had been temporarily moved into the dorm section of the Barn Dome. Vernal commanded the squad protecting the access from the Lodge and had already met with his team. Zack would join the clan fighters in the Tunnels

after he had given his final instructions. Lolli and more security were guarding the doors to the Barn Dome.

Rupert and Roderick had put up a fuss at not being able to accompany Zack and his fighters.

"No," Zack had said quietly. "Much as I would enjoy your company everyone has an important part to play, including you two. I want you boys in the second defense. Report to Security Spec Nigel and he will give you instructions. Lucinda, I need you to take a weapon, go down and wait with Violet and Jelli. You're in charge of you and Violet. Report to Master Drover Brinna who is in command down there for orders."

"Take a weapon for Violet, also," Katherine instructed. "Juliette, Corrine and I will need you up here. Go to the armory and draw weapons for everyone here, including yourself and bring them back here. Joseph, go with her."

"The eye of the storm is making landfall," Joyce warned quietly. "We've got about twenty minutes left."

As the group disbursed, Katherine reached for Corrine's hand, squeezing it for comfort.

Juliette and Joseph had barely arrived back with weapons for the command center crew when Norrine, the tech monitoring the Top Side Landing Room exclaimed. "My screen's dark!"

"They've found the console. I wondered if they would," Katherine said. "Do you still have audio Norrine?"

At the woman's nod, she instructed, "keep monitoring it. We may get some inkling as to their immediate intentions."

"Mia," she said to the Clanswoman who was acting as com coordinator for the entire dome area defense, "notify everyone about losing the visual on the screen in the Top Side Landing Room."

"I can't see how attacking us can be a part of Lewiston's plot," she

murmured to Corrine. "She has to be doing this on her own."

"I wonder," Corrine said thoughtfully. "I wonder if Lewiston expected us to recognize her and refuse to give her group refuge. He could claim we violated maritime law by our refusal. It would be a lever to use against us in Parliament."

"Lewiston has no voice in Parliament. The complaint would have to come from the DeMedicis and Donna DeMedici wouldn't start something like that unless she was ready to go to war," Katherine objected.

"They've opened the tunnel door, Mi'Ladies," Mia informed them, diverting Katherine's attention from Parliamentary plotting to more immediate concerns. She covered her mouth with her fist to keep from crying out as she watched Zack approach the open doorway. At least no one shot at him right away. His fighters were lined up on either side of the door so they couldn't be seen by the rooms' occupants.

"We've got an open door in the Lodge," Joseph said. "I read ten heat signatures."

"I'll notify Lord Vernal," Mia replied.

When Zack joined the fighters waiting at the tunnel mouth, he signaled for the door to be opened.

"Sorry for the delay, folks," Zack said, attempting to look as harmless as possible. "If you'll gather up your stuff, we'll get you into more comfortable quarters as soon as we can."

As he spoke, he moved slowly toward the infirmary door. The six men gathered on the other side of the room eyed him suspiciously before one of them spoke.

"Hey!" he exclaimed, "I know you. You were on Loki with the unit that saved our butts when the weasels had us pinned down. Jackson, isn't it?"

"Yes, I was on Loki. Weren't you with Lewiston's unit?"

"Yeah, that's right. I'm Thompson." He swapped looks with the others

and a decision seemed to pass between them. "This here wasn't our idea, sir. When we took service with the DeMedici's we thought we were mustering out and becoming civilians. Then we hear Lewiston's taking over and suddenly we're back in service again, only there's no uniforms and we're attacking civilians. We don't like it. Do you know what's going on, sir?"

"Yeah, I do soldier. If you six will give me your word not to take any further action, I will explain it to you."

They swapped looks again. "You've got it sir," Thompson, who seemed to have made himself spokesman, replied.

Zack nodded. "Okay, give me a minute." At the other's nod, he spoke into his com. "Stand down guys, we're okay here. You can come in and move out the fishers in the infirmary." He touched his com again. "Katherine, Vernal, we have a truce here, but it's only for these six. I have to settle a few things here, and then I'll join Vernal. In the meantime, tell Cora to get beds ready for some of the injured fishers."

"Okay. Stay safe, love," she responded. His com beeped Vernal's acknowledgement.

Zack turned to the waiting ex-soldiers. "Well boys you were right to suspect a rat in the woodpile. First, the DeMedici's really were looking for immigrants to replace the males who were lost or sterilized during the war. I don't know what kind of deal they offered you, but whatever it was may not be what Lewiston told you, because he has a different agenda. From what we learned, he apparently has a worldwide coup planned. I suspect it's like that failed coup on Janus just as the war ended. Michaels, our Colonel told me he suspected Lewiston was a part of that. We also discovered that Lewiston is using some kind of drug on Donna Sabina to make her compliant. When this is over, you have my word I will ask O'Teague to speak for you to your Dona."

"What if she won't take us back?" Thompson asked.

"Then I'll speak for you to the O'Teague about switching clans," Zack promised. "You understand I can't guarantee anything, because it isn't really my decision, but the Laird's a reasonable woman. In the meantime though, I will have to ask you to leave your weapons behind and we need to put you under guard until this is finished."

The men exchanged looks again and then removed weapons. "Thank you, sir," Thompson said.

In the command center, Katherine breathed a sigh of relief.

"I do like a man who can talk his way out of a fight," Corrine said approvingly. "Now, if only Vernal can be as successful..."

"That may depend on which group Lister is in," Katherine reminded her. "Somehow I don't see her as being willing to give up world dominance."

"We've got more heat signatures, this time on the front and back doors to the barn dome," Mia reported. "I've notified Lolli and Lord Vernal."

"Do we have any visuals yet?" Katherine asked.

"No. No audio either. They seem to have been able to jam the vid signals," Mia reported.

Corrine nodded. "I'm afraid we will have to send out some scouts and have them report back. Mia, while we still have internal communications, notify Lord Zack, Lord Vernal, Master Drover Brinna and Security Spec Nigel that the coms will probably go down as soon as the attackers enter an area. They'll need scouts and messengers. We will need a few messengers here too."

"Yes, Mi'Lady," Mia responded and began give low-voiced instructions on her com and shortly thereafter, Rupert, Roderick and two other teenagers appeared in the Command Center.

"Reporting for messenger duty ma'am," the oldest of the girls told Mia who nodded acknowledgement.

Corrine turned to Juliette. "First Daughter Juliette," she said. Juliette

jumped and looked at her. "You will be giving instructions to our messengers. Please see they have a place to wait until we need them. You can also make sure that everyone here has food and something to drink. The robochef is over there," she said pointing to the back wall.

Zack saw to the disposal of the six DeMedici soldiers before touching bases with Vernal, who reported that before they lost touch in the Lodge, he heard two of the traps set in the doorways go off. Since the net traps were designed to be non-lethal, there was no way to know if those they had caught had been released when their comrades had entered behind them.

"Whatever group Lister is in probably won't stand down," Zack told Vernal grimly. "She seemed to be high up in Lewiston's plans, but maybe the others will. Take no chances though. If you have to shoot, use deadly force. We've got heat signatures at the other doorways in this dome, so I'll be handling the other side. We'll coordinate through Katherine in Command since she's in the central position. Remember, the only easy day was yesterday," they repeated together.

Darla Lister had instigated a quick but thorough search of the Lodge, which to her surprise had turned up no people but had sprung several of Vernal's traps. However, they had discovered the three tunnels to the Barn Dome. "Bitch must be over there," she muttered to herself, before splitting up her team into three groups. After rescuing the four men who had as she told them 'been stupid enough to fall into a trap', she elected to take one of the end tunnels herself.

Unfortunately, the tunnel Lister chose opened out onto the lowest level. She was in no mood to admire the beautiful warm lake with its blue sand beach. To her disgust one of her ex-soldiers tripped a net trap as they exited the tunnel. Lister left her hanging there in the net to cut herself free. She headed for the screened door leading up a lighted stairway. The

pressure plate that triggered the net trap also unlocked the Ostamu pen and a loud bang startled the birds into charging into the area where they attacked anything that got in the way. Two of Lister's men were taken out of the fight by the birds' talons and beaks. A third only saved himself by running back into the tunnel toward the Lodge. The one she left in the net wisely decided not to free herself.

Not wanting to draw attention to herself, Lister slashed out with her knife cutting off the heads on a couple of too-aggressive birds causing them to run all over with blood spurting from their necks. While this was distracting the other birds and the Drovers, she slipped over to the wall behind the pens where she hid in the shadows. From her vantage point, she could see a lighted doorway leading up to the next level. As she watched, the Master Drover and her crew drove the angry birds away from the base of the stairs and the wounded attackers and took the woman caught in the net prisoner.

"Is this all of them?" she asked.

"Brinna, I think I saw one of them running back down the tunnel," a boy about sixteen told her.

"Well, tie up these guys and lock them in the veterinary compound. Joel, I need you to run upstairs and report our catch. Be careful, there may be more bad guys on that floor too. This isn't the only access tunnel."

Lister smiled to herself as she watched the young messenger key in the code to unlock the gate before heading up the stairs to report.

Once the fierce birds had calmed down they ignored the dead birds and wandered around their new space. Brinna ordered a couple of her crew to keep an eye on the live ones, clean up the dead birds, and sent most of the rest to search for any escapees. She left one boy to keep an eye on the tunnel.

The guard securing the tunnel access could also see the door to the

upper level. Lister waited until everyone else had left before slipping around behind him. Lister had been a trained recon soldier during the war. The young guard was alternately watching the tunnel mouth and the birds and didn't hear her behind him until her knife drove into his back, piercing his heart. She hauled him back into the tunnel mouth and casually cleaned it on his clothes before shoving it back into the sheath.

Peering around the door, she could hear the noise of fighting on the floor above her. Silently she coded the gate to open and slipped up the stairs. Luck was with her. Only one man was guarding the top entrance, and he was looking off towards where the noise of the fight was coming from. Like the man below, he never knew Lister was near until she stabbed him.

Vernal was exchanging pulse blasts with the invaders pinned down in the tunnel entrance. Briefly, Lister debated helping out the attackers by taking a shot at Vernal's crew from the rear, but changed her mind. She had her own reasons for leading this raid. She had convinced Lewiston the primary purpose of this raid was to take out Katherine and Corrine. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him; he didn't need to know she also wanted Juliette. Murdering the child would look bad with the other clans, but it was necessary. With Katherine and Corrine gone, the rest of the clan would have no clear leader on the Island. They should surrender and then Lewiston would have a base to from which to attack Glass City. Then they would have two clans under their sway.

Upstairs in the command room, Katherine reminded herself not to show outwardly how tense she was. She repeated the mantra silently 'A good leader must seem calm and in control or her fear could infect her people'. She looked over at Juliette, who met her eyes and gave her a tight smile, as she made sure that everyone had food and drinks. Katherine nodded back at her and turned back to the screens.

"Hey," Joseph exclaimed, "we've got visual back in the Lodge. Look

there's someone coming back down the tunnel from the Animal pens."

"Not one of us," Corrine said, after looking at the screen. "We need to warn Brinna and the others. Juliette how many messengers do we have left?"

"We have three—and me," she replied. "Uncle Vernal is closest. If I take the one to him, the others can go to Papa, Brinna and Lolli since they know the barn better."

Katherine frowned. She would have to let her go. Juliette had cleverly cut off her objection about not being familiar enough with the Barn to sneak around.

"All right, but take this with you along with your Force Wand." Katherine pulled a short knife out of her boot and showed her how to attach the sheath to her belt. Juliette nodded and slipped down the stairs with the other messengers.

"You have to let her go, Katherine," Corrine commiserated. "I know it's hard but she can handle it."

"How did you do it? You didn't have you to say it was time to let go."

"Sometimes I didn't," Corrine retorted, "when I should have, I suppose. You will too."

Suddenly all the screens came back to life, and a cheer went up from those watching them. "Somebody's found the jammer!" cried Mia and everyone's attention became riveted on the various battles going on.

Lolli and Zack were trussing up the attackers that had come in at the ground level barn entrances. Vernal and his group were chasing the invaders back down the tunnel to the Lodge.

Katherine was watching Juliette move toward the tunnel after Vernal when she unexpectedly spotted the dead guard by the door to the living quarters and watched in horror as a shadow flitted after Juliette.

"It's Lister!" she said. "She's going for Juliette! Corrine I'm going down."

She's tried twice before. I told her there wouldn't be a third time."

"Katherine!" Corrine called, tossing her own knife to her. "Take her down girl."

By the time Katherine reached the tunnel, both Lister and Juliette had disappeared. She forced herself to take a deep breath to calm down, and sent her third eye outward. There! She could feel both of them ahead of her. Juliette's anger and fear and Lister's hate and contempt as they faced each other were clear.

Katherine came around a corner and saw them exactly as her third eye had shown her.

"You think you can take me?" Lister gloated at the child. "I will enjoy cutting your throat, kid. You're history."

"No, she isn't," Katherine said from behind her. "But you are. I warned you there would be no third time. Stand away from my daughter and face me."

Slowly Lister turned to face her. "You? You're nothing but a soft piece of tail. I'll cut you to ribbons," she said, drawing her knife.

"Juliette," Katherine didn't take her eyes off Lister, "go down the tunnel to Vernal and stay with him."

Juliette hesitated and Katherine said firmly, "Go Daughter."

She calmly drew her own knife and waited for Lister to come to her. Something in Katherine's expression caused Lister to hesitate, and then she laughed and lunged at Katherine, taking a wide swipe with her knife.

The air from the swipe whooshed as Katherine jumped back, slashing out with her own blade. She caught Lister's knife on the backswing with her own, sparking steel as the knife-edges met.

Both women kicked out hoping to knock the other off her feet. Lister dodged and Katherine caught her with a glancing blow on her calf, but took a full kick to her thigh. It hurt, but she struck out with her left fist hitting

Lister hard enough in the stomach to make her gasp.

While bent over from the blow, Lister still lunged wildly and cut a gash in Katherine's upper thigh.

Knowing she would soon be over-matched by the woman's combat training, Katherine stepped inside Lister's reach, and thrust up with her knife into the other woman's body. Blood spurted as she pulled the knife out when stepped back and looked into Lister's surprised eyes.

Lister looked down at the blood in astonishment and then at Katherine. "You killed me, you bitch," she said as she sank to the ground.

Katherine stood over her watching her die. "I told you there would be no third time. You should have listened."

"Mother you're bleeding!" cried Juliette, the knife Katherine had given her clutched in her hand ready for use. She had disobeyed her and not gone down the tunnel to safety.

Katherine slid down the wall and looked up at her anxious daughter. "I'm afraid so, sweetie. Since you already have your knife out, cut a piece of my sleeve..."

"Unnecessary," said Zack, having run down the tunnel in time to see Katherine sink down. "I've got a medic field pack here. Katherine, I swear, if you ever risk your neck like that again, I'll—"

"Don't let her die," whispered Juliette.

"Oh, honey I won't die—Oww!" Katherine gasped. She sucked in a deep breath as Zack sprayed the wound with disinfectant and then used the flesh sealer. Despite his angry tone, his hands were gentle as he finished bandaging the long slash on her leg and went to work on her arm.

As soon as he finished, he grabbed her in a bone-crushing hug. Katherine extended her uninjured arm to Juliette and pulled her into the embrace.

Coming back down the tunnel with his prisoners, Vernal found the

three of them sitting next to Lister's body holding each other.