



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 the Final Chapter, 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.

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

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Chapter 4 - Repercussions

A FEW DAYS later, Katherine looked at her new family over the breakfast table and realized the children were on edge. She and Zack were sharing breakfast with Gideon, Vernal and Corinne as well as the children this morning. It had been almost a week since she and Zack had brought the children back with them to the base, and they were beginning to relax out of their oh-so polite behavior and act naturally. Not that they hadn't lapsed now and then, but for the most part they had been too careful not to annoy her or Corrine or to act up the way children normally would without a clear play area. Violet and Rupert continued to have nightmares but they weren't

confident enough with her to confide the true basis for their night fears. Lucinda had withdrawn into drawing and painting but Katherine suspected she also was afraid. Only Juliette and Roderick seemed to be suffering no ill effects from their time at Grouters. However, she sensed watchfulness from them and they were quick to stop the others from showing any disputes.

Katherine clicked her spoon against her juice glass several times to attract attention. It gave off a crystal chime that drew all eyes to her. "Kids," she said, "today Zack and I have an interview with the Base Commander. It seems Grouter has made a complaint about your removal from his compound."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Juliette grow pale and heard her draw a sharp breath. Violet sat still as a mouse as if afraid to move and the others had similar reactions. Only Roderick met her eyes with a challenge in his own.

Zack reached out and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "We'll handle it," he said calmly. "The papers have gone in and were signed by the City Mayor himself. Grouter doesn't have a leg to stand on."

Deliberately, Katherine caught the eyes of each of the children in turn. "Zack is correct. This was not entirely unexpected, and we do have a plan in place to handle it. I told you about it because I want there to always be honesty between us. You children don't really know either Zack or me very well yet and we are barely making your acquaintance as well. However, just in case Grouter has any plans to take any illegal actions to reacquire you, I am going to ask you to stay in our quarters today until after he has left the base. Corrine and Vernal will be with you. Can you do that for us?"

Juliette and Roderick exchanged glances, and then Roderick said, "We can do that. But since you want honesty, I should tell you that we have a plan too," he finished defiantly.

"Hey!" Juliette snapped at him.

"Alternate contingency plans are always good things to have," Zack remarked. "But I hope you won't feel the need to run away until we decide the situation is hopeless."

"Can I have your word to wait, Roderick?" Katherine asked.

Juliette and Roderick exchanged glances and seemed to come to an agreement. She nodded, "Sure, we can wait."

Corinne gathered the children and she and Vernal shepherded them out the door towards their quarters.

"Wow," Katherine expelled a breath. "I know we said we would talk about it before we told them, but I could tell they knew something was up. They still don't quite trust us or any adult for that matter yet."

"I noticed that. Did Rupert have another nightmare last night?"

"Yes, I wish I knew why whatever went on at Grouters bothers him so much more than Roderick."

He shrugged, "Maybe they didn't share the experience. Roderick's ready to fight though," he added with self-conscious pride.

Katherine made a rude noise. "Men!" she uttered. She checked her pad. "Okay, Commander Veratos just arrived; let's go meet her so we can all turn up at Base Commander Harris's office together."

Zack laughed. "I might have known you had an ace up your sleeve. This should be fun."

"I'll have you know I never hide cards in my sleeves," Katherine retorted haughtily. "They're too easy to spot there."

They were still laughing when they met Veratos outside Base Command. Their high spirits made a good impression on the harassed Admiral Harris.

Grouter and the other man already waiting there eyed them suspiciously.

"Admiral, this Commander Jolea Veratos from the Interplanetary Police

Human Trafficking Squad. The commander specializes in capturing those who traffic in children," Katherine said. "I know she's been anxious to get in touch with Grouter, so I invited her to join us."

"Please to meet you, Admiral Harris," Veratos shook his hand. She turned to look at Grouter and his companion. "And who might this be?"

Harris coughed uncomfortably. "Ah, this is Master Grouter, the administrator of the children's placement center, and this," he gestured to the other man, "is Master Straus. I believe he is an attorney."

"I'm delighted to make your acquaintance, Master Grouter," Veratos gave him a predatory smile. "Especially since I have been attempting to locate you for a week to ask you some questions. We have some unfinished business in connection with Jerrod van Doyle regarding certain transactions that took place at the placement center. Perhaps after this interview is finished, Admiral Harris will let us use a one of his conference rooms to do just that."

Admiral Harris appeared to be amused. "Oh, I think we can accommodate our colleagues in IPP," he too smiled like a predator.

Katherine glanced at Grouter. "I understand you have some questions regarding the children, Master Grouter?"

He glared at her; whatever he had planned to say was now out of the question since he didn't dare bring up van Doyle's name in front of Veratos. He looked at his mouthpiece for help.

Straus stood up. He recognized an untenable position when he saw it. "We merely wished to make sure the children were happy with their placement," he said smoothly. "If there is nothing else, Admiral, we are at your service Commander Veratos, to answer any questions you might have."

Reluctantly, Grouter stood up also. "Sure," he said. "Anytime. I have nothing to hide."

"Certainly," Harris said. He touched a spot on the desk and his aide

came in. "Please show Commander Veratos and these gentlemen to an empty conference room so they can conclude their business."

"Certainly, if you will follow me," the aide replied.

Once the door had closed behind them, Admiral Harris favored Zack and Katherine with a fumulating look. "Well that was certainly a change in his tune! I'm not sure just what went on here, and I don't think I want to know. How soon will your ship be leaving Lady Katherine?"

"Captain Heidelberg tells us the Dancing Gryphon will be ready to depart in about three weeks. That will give him time to get the cargo loaded and us time to take care of the remainder of our business here."

Harris grunted. "I do trust," he said frostily, "that I will hear no more of this incident?"

Katherine smiled, "We will certainly try to stay out of your hair for the rest of our stay, Admiral. I'm very sorry this got brought into your office."

He nodded. "You're awfully quiet Lieutenant. Nothing to say?"

Zack smiled at him. "Oh, I think we can handle anything else that comes up sir. It's been a pleasure dealing with you."

Harris snorted and flapped a hand at them. "Get out of here and take her with you. Civilians!"

The next day Katherine went with Lord Gideon to meet the ship bringing in his wards. Surprisingly, the spaceport was crowded. Waiting in the arrival lounge, she was pleased to see the number of new arrivals had increased just in the short time since her own arrival. More tourists arriving meant that the Fenris was economy was beginning to recover, which in turn meant that they would need more of the luxury goods Vensoog exported. Part of their business here was to set up trade contracts so as soon as they returned; Corrine would leave to attend the trade meeting with the city leaders.

"How well do you know your niece?" she asked Gideon.

He shrugged. "Not well, actually, she was mostly away at school when I visited my brother and his wife. My brother was a solicitor. I'm afraid their lifestyle was very different from that of a soldier on active duty. I do have current vids though, so I will recognize her."

"Do Jayla and Lucas know about your plans to emigrate to Vensoog?"

"No. I informed the school she has been attending when I sent for her, but I don't know if they told her or not. I told Lucas when I contacted him."

"You said you rescued him and then assumed guardianship. How did that come to pass?"

"Owen Lewellyn and I had gotten to know each other before the war started when I was in a black ops unit. When the old man knew Gwynedd was about to be overrun he asked me to come and take Lucas off planet. Lucas was pretty young st the time. He's been with me for some years. He has been attending the military academy on Selene, Fenris's second moon, so he and Jayla didn't travel out together. They will both be coming in on the same shuttle from there though."

Just then, both their coms chimed with a message the shuttle had landed and for everyone waiting for a passenger to arrive should go to the customs area to meet them.

Jayla was golden-haired child with crystal blue eyes and although young, she gave the promise of great beauty to come. Unfortunately, at the moment, her pretty face was marred by a sulky pout. Lucas on the other hand still showed the discipline from his time at the military academy. He stood almost at attention as he watched the crowd for Lord Gideon. His plain, square-jawed face, just losing the roundness of childhood, lit up when he saw him and he rushed to meet him. They met with the one-armed hug typical of males with a close bond. Surprisingly, Lucas could have stood for a blood relative to Gideon although he lacked the older man's heavy trained muscle he had the same lanky height and pale hair contrasting with sun-

darkened skin.

"Trip out go okay?" Gideon asked.

"Yeah. We had a detour around some debris before we got to the shuttle, but they're working on repairing the port. I made myself known to your niece and offered to help out if she had questions, but she said no."

Katherine had noticed the brief flash of longing that passed over Jayla's face before the sulk came back.

"I think someone's feeling a little left out," she murmured to Gideon, indicating Jayla with a nod.

"Oh, yes. Lady Katherine, may I present my ward, Lucas Lewellyn?"

Lucas bowed to her. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, My Lady."

"Welcome to Clan O'Teague, young man. The Clan is delighted to have Lord Gideon's family joining him."

Gideon had drawn the girl over to them. "Lady Katherine, this is my niece Jayla. Jayla, this is Lady Katherine O'Teague. Since I'm bunking in the barracks with the unit, you will be staying with her until we leave for Vensoog."

"You mean you don't even have your own apartment?" Jayla's voice rose in protest. "I don't see why I had to come here anyway. I could have stayed at school—"

"Jayla." Gideon's voice was quiet, but something in it checked the incipient tantrum.

"Lady Katherine, I apologize for my niece's manners," he said stiffly. "We are very grateful to you for providing accommodation for her during this transition period."

"Sorry," resentment showed in Jayla's tone. "Thank you for having me."

Well, at least the child had some training in manners, Katherine reflected. She rapidly revised her plan for putting the girl in the same room

with Juliette, however. A brief estimate of the two girls characters, assured her that if Jayla exhibited that type of attitude toward Juliette, the other girl would eat her for lunch.

"It is no trouble," Katherine responded equally politely, none of her thoughts showing in her voice. "I've made arrangements for most of the luggage we'll be taking to Vensoog to be sent to the Dancing Gryphon for storage. Jayla, if you and Lucas could please pick out whatever items you will need for the next three weeks and on the trip, we will take it back with us. While we have ample room in our present apartment, the quarters on the ship will be much more cramped."

"Will we need dress clothes?" Lucas asked. "I only have my uniforms and couple of casual outfits."

"There is one formal affair planned on Fenris for which I will be providing formal Vensoog clothing for everyone who will need to attend. The tailor will be coming later today to take your and Jayla's measurements for that as well as the two casual Vensoog outfits."

Gideon frowned. "Is this the Planetary Governor's Ball, I've been hearing so much about?" he asked.

"Yes, I will expect yourself, Zack and Vernal, as well as your children to attend. Juliette as my First Daughter, and the two boys as well as Lucinda and Violet will be making an appearance also. Zack's youngsters are a little young for this, so they will be making just a brief appearance before returning to our quarters. Jayne has agreed to stay with them that night until we return."

"I'm sorry," Lucas interjected. "First Daughter, sounded like a title, what is it?"

"It is a title. On Vensoog, as you will learn, duties, properties and positions are passed through the female line. All women have the privilege of choosing a young girl, usually from their direct family, but not always, to

inherit. That young lady is referred to as 'First Daughter'".

The meeting between Zack's family and Gideon's unfortunately went just about as Katherine had feared. They boys had no objection to rooming with Lucas, and he assured Katherine that it wouldn't be much different from the Dorms at the military school where he had been living.

In the interest of peace, Katherine assigned Jayla her own room, keeping Juliette in the same room as Violet and Lucinda. She pretended not to hear Lucinda's snide aside of "well isn't she a real princess," to Juliette.

Surprisingly, Sooka appeared to like Jayla and the feeling seemed to be mutual. Of course, breeding Quirkas were known to be finicky. Katherine just hoped it would last until they got home to Vensoog.

She did take the precaution of taking the three younger girls aside and asking them to be tolerant of Jayla. "This is all very new to her," she remarked. "Not everyone reacts as well as you three to changes in environment and living conditions. I would appreciate it if you three wouldn't try and make her life miserable for the next few weeks."

"Sure," Juliette responded blandly. "We'll be just as nice as pie to her."