



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

Chapter 5 - Diplomatic Immunity

JAYNE WAS sitting in one of the patient compartments waiting for the Medic, and vainly attempting to amuse two cranky children when two voices from the next booth over attracted her attention. The cubicles in the Medical center were divided by thin plastia sheets to insure privacy. Their thin skins could be recycled into the sterilizer between patients, which helped cut down on the passing of infections. The plastia skins were supposed to be sound resistant too but often failed in this respect.

“Lister’s got her nose out of joint,” one of them reported gleefully.

“Serves her right,” the other agreed. “Bitch thinks she’s too good for the likes of us. I heard that Lieutenant she had her eye on turned her off and hooked up with that Diplomat from Vensoog.”

“She’s a looker that one. Can’t say as I blame him none,” the other replied.

“Well, I say she ought to watch her back. That Lister’s a mean one.

Why I hear she suckered some dumb corporal into sending that woman and the kids down to Ole Ben's Cyclomart."

"Shame," the other opined, "Grinders'll get 'em for sure down there. I hear they got a tie in with Ole Ben so's he tags them when he's got a rich fish come into the shop."

Jayne had sat frozen during the entire dialog. At first, it had only been idle curiosity that made her listen, but she soon realized they were gossiping about Lady Katherine and the children.

"Oh, No, what have I done," she whispered. After a brief, lip biting indecision, she got out her com and chimed Zack and Gideon and blurted out the whole story.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "But how could I know she meant bad?"

"It's alright, Jayne," Gideon responded soothingly. "We'll just commandeer a car and go escort them home. You just finish up with the boys at the center."

After an extended lunch as chaotic as the shopping had been, Katherine found she still hadn't gotten several of the items that had been on her list, so she gave the order to proceed to the shop Jayne's fellow soldier had recommended.

Unfortunately, when they arrived the street was being torn up for some type of maintenance and they had to park the robocar several blocks from the shop. Although somewhat disappointing in size, Ben's Cyclomart did prove to have some instructional art vids as well as several different types of games suitable for a child Violet's age. However, the displays were a disorganized mess and they spent some time wandering around in the shop.

When they left the store, Katherine was surprised to find it was late afternoon. Also, the car didn't respond when she summoned it.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to walk," she told the children. "Come

on, it isn't that far."

Just as they stepped onto the walkway, she heard the door of the shop close and the lock snick closed behind them. "Well!" she exclaimed, "I guess we interrupted his tea time or something."

Juliette grabbed her hand. "I don't think that's it. Look."

Three young, tough looking men were approaching them, followed at a distance by two older ones. Katherine had helped fight bandits in the hills above Corrine's estate as a teenager, and she recognized the type. "Well, Hell," she said, handing her packages to Jayla and unsnapping her force wand from her boot. She also handed Lucinda the controller for the car. Muttering curses under her breath at the storekeeper for locking the door, Katherine quickly told Jayla to lead the run for the car and get to safety, and for Lucas to bring up the rear.

She opened her Force Wand and moved out in front of the gang, extending the wand to its full fighting length and beginning to whirl it. A Vensoog Force Wand is made of reinforced titanium covered in hardwood. One of the ends would give forth a graduated electric stun, and a thin sharp blade would pop out of the other on command. Created as a control for the Water Dragons, at its maximum power the stunning end was lethal to humans. Katherine turned it on full. She intended to make sure none of these thugs hurt her children, and she didn't particularly care if it was fatal or not.

"Hey," the Rogers said, "I thought there were only five kids. I see seven."

"Let's take all of them. If we have an extra, we can always sell her to Van Doyle. He always wants fresh meat," Sanders commented.

"What about the big kid? He kind of looks military."

"He can go down with the woman." Sanders shoved the three members of the street gang they had hired as a diversion toward Katherine.

“Get going, you. I don’t want them running back into the shop.”

Behind her, Katherine heard the children racing for the car as the three muggers circled her looking for an opening. Knowing she couldn’t let them get behind her, Katherine jumped forward, bringing the Force Wand around in a swing designed knock the attacker on the right off his feet. He screamed and fell as she connected with the lethal end of the wand. Continuing the turn, she brought the wand up toward the middle foe’s chin. This time she didn’t connect cleanly, because the third man dived at her under the wand in attempt to take her off her feet. The blow on the middle attacker was too light, and she missed with the deadly end of the wand, clipping him on the shoulder. The hit stunned him, but he didn’t go completely out. The third man’s dive had succeeded in knocking her down and she hit the ground hard with a whoosh! of air blowing out of her lungs. As she fell, she retracted the wand back to half size. Even while she gasped for air, her newly acquired mother’s instinct made her aware of the other sounds of combat. Juliette and Jayla screamed and Lucas yelled. Desperate to go and help, she jabbed the lethal end of the wand into the eye of the man who had knocked her down and he slumped on her, a dead weight. She shoved him off and managed to stagger to her feet. In the meantime, Grouter’s man Rogers had managed to take out Lucas, and Sanders had succeeded in grabbing Jayla and Juliette.

They weren’t having it all their own way however. Roderick tucked into a ball and rolled towards Rogers’s feet, and Rupert leapt onto his back, pulling hair and biting. Lucinda succeeded in getting the car doors open and pushed the alarm for the city police. She also shoved Violet into the car, yelling at her to talk to the police dispatcher.

Lucinda grabbed a metal torch and returned to attack the man struggling to hold Jayla and Juliette, hitting him as hard as she could in the back of the knees.

The last remaining gang member saw the murderous stare on Katherine's face as she rose, and ran like a rabbit from the scene. Katherine turned and rushed toward the fight still going on. As she ran, she heard the muted hum of a combat air car coming in low and fast. She knew an instant of heart-stopping fear before she recognized Vernal at the controls.

As the car slowed to pass over the men fighting the children, Zack and Gideon dropped from the open door in a smoothly practiced maneuver. Each of them landed feet first just behind the two remaining thugs. Grouter's men were street fighters. They were no match for two combat-trained veterans. Both of the children's would-be kidnappers were dead with their necks snapped before Katherine reached them.

Seeing her children safe, she stopped to check on Lucas and was relieved to find him attempting to sit up. "I'll take him ma'am," said Vernal who had finally managed to land the "borrowed" combat car and knelt beside Lucas with a first aid kit.

Gideon comforted a weeping Jayla as he went over to check on Lucas.

Zack simply grabbed all of his children and Katherine in a stifling hug, holding them still for a moment. "Everyone ok?" he asked tightly. Muffled replies answered him.

"Okay," he said. "Kids, get your packages and wait in the car. I hear the sirens from the patrol and they will want to talk to all of us."

"Will they arrest us?" asked Roderick fearfully.

"What about you?" asked Rupert. "You killed them. Will they arrest you?"

"Even here, they don't arrest you for defending yourself," Zack assured them. "Get in the car boys. I think there are a few restorative drinks in the dispenser." He dug out a credit chip and handed it to Roderick. "Here, use this and get something for all of us."

He then turned on Katherine, gripping her shoulders and giving her a

small shake. "Woman don't you know better than to come down to this part of town? You could have been hurt, killed or—"

Katherine gave a weak laugh. "I hope you aren't going to be the kind of husband who yells a lot, because it can be quite tiresome. Anyway, how was I supposed to know what this part of town was like?"

"Husband?" Zack uttered, not even hearing the last part of her statement. She held up a crystal. "Yes, the matches came back today. I'm afraid you and I are stuck with each other—"

Zack simply grabbed her and kissed her the way he had wanted to do for weeks. Katherine's arms came up around his neck as she sank into the kiss.

They were interrupted by a cough from one of the two police officers who had belatedly appeared. "Excuse me, Sir, Ma'am, but I need to find out what happened here."

It had been very late before they had been able to return to the base since everyone had to make a trip down to the local precinct to make statements. The detective in charge had obviously had too many encounters with misbehaving soldiers on leave; he badly wanted to arrest Zack and Gideon for the theft of the flight car which base command had reported as stolen. Katherine had been forced to invoke her diplomatic immunity in order to prevent this. The local police had also been less than thrilled to discover that no one was left alive on the scene to dispute Katherine's account of the attack and subsequent defense or the death of Grouters men and that of the Grinders. The remaining Grinder who had escaped had gone to ground and none of his mates seemed willing to talk about where he could be found.

It had been after midnight when they arrived back at base to be greeted by a tense Corrine and an almost hysterical Jayne who wept copiously on Katherine's shoulder while apologizing for sending her and the children into harm's way. Katherine had been forced to add a mild sleeping

draught to Jayne's tea as well the children's bedtime drinks before she could get them settled into bed. She briefly considered taking one herself but didn't since she expected either Rupert or Violet to have one of the recurring nightmares that afflicted them, and she would need to be awake to soothe them back to sleep. Her talent required a mind unsullied by sleeping drugs.

It was a good thing they all had the upcoming Governor's ball and packing for the coming journey to distract everyone, Katherine thought. They would be leaving for the base on Selene the day after the ball and she was able to keep everyone busy sorting what they would need for the trip and packing everything else for storage.

The Governor's ball was the last event before their departure for Vensoog and everyone was in a bustle to get ready. Katherine had decreed that her new family who attended should wear the Vensoog formal dress. Really, the dress clothes were little more than ordinary dress made with finer fabrics and more jewelry but everyone seemed pleased with their outfits.

The night of the Ball, everyone gathered in Katherine and Corrine's quarters so she could check their ensembles.

"Now remember," Katherine admonished the children, "I expect you all to be on your best behavior during dinner. If you don't like something served you, just push it aside. I don't want to hear any gagging or puking noises, understand?"

She got "who me?" expressions from all five of them.

Jayla sniffed. "Only babies and ill-bred brats do that stuff."

Lucinda and Juliette both glared at her and Rupert smiled in a way that boded trouble.

"I don't see why we have to come anyway," Roderick complained. "There won't be anything to do there."

"You won't have to stay very long," Katherine reminded him. Jayne

will send the car to pick you up after dinner, and then you can play games until we get back."

"I guess," Roderick said morosely.

Zack laughed, but reinforced Katherine's warning. It was a tight fit with all of them in the car as Katherine had been unable to secure her usual transport due to the heavy usage of the cars for this event. Corrine and Vernal had come separately, and watching them alight from the vehicle Corrine remarked in an aside to Vernal "reminds me of the time at Planting Festival when a bunch of us tried to see how many of us we could fit into an airboat."

Vernal choked trying not to laugh. "Woman you'll be the death of me yet!"

"Hush! Here comes the Governor's aide to present us," Katherine hissed.

The dinner went off without any overt gagging or puking noises from the children, although Katherine noticed that a considerable amount of food seemed to disappear from the children's plates without being eaten. Wisely, she said nothing about it.

There was a dance after dinner and the Governor honored each of the Ladies of the three Clans with a dance in the order of their seniority so Katherine was first. Knowing this ahead of time, she had arranged for Zack to dance the first dance with Juliette and for Gideon to do the same with Jayla. Lucas drew Lucinda, and Rupert danced with Violet. Corrine got the Mayor. Roderick and Vernal were able to sit on the sidelines, but they would have to take a turn later.

Katherine was unsurprised to see Colonel Lewiston appear with Donna Sabina of Clan DeMedici, having heard that the other clan had accepted his unit in much the same way she had accepted Gideon's. She was taken aback to see Darla Lister accompanying them, not having realized that Lister was

so high ranking. Nü-Huang Ishmara of Clan Yang was accompanied by a tall oriental looking man who despite owning the name Captain Mike Mullins was of obvious Asian ancestry.

This wasn't unusual as once men immigrated into space, names and ethnic backgrounds soon had little in common with their early origins. Before this trip, Katherine had not previously had any dealings with Nü-Huang Toshi of the Yang Clan. Since Yang clan holdings were on the Northern side of Port Recovery where the capital city of Vensoog was located and Glass Isle was in the south, they had never had cause to negotiate against each other in Parliament.

Five dances later, she was finally able to get away from protocol partners and dance with Zack. The dance was an old-fashioned waltz and their steps matched perfectly. It was also the first real chance they had to be alone since returning from the police station. With seven children underfoot and everyone packing for the journey, privacy had been a scarce commodity.

"Are we having fun yet?" she asked.

"Well, I am now," he retorted. "Actually, dancing with the girls was fun if a little awkward. I don't think any of them have been taught how to dance with a man."

"Humn, dancing is quite popular at home. I guess we will have to employ a dancing master. For the boys also, I suppose?"

"Well I didn't get a good look at Roderick and Violet, but Vernal told me it was quite funny watching them step all over each other."

While Katherine and Zac were preoccupied with each other, the children in question had finally managed to escape adult supervision long enough to slip into an alcove decorated with enormous potted plants for a private conference.

"Well, at least that's over!" Rupert exclaimed.

"Oh, I don't know, it was kind of nice dancing with Uncle Zack," Lucinda replied.

"Shhh!" hissed Juliette. "There's that Darla Lister. I want to hear what she's saying because I'm almost sure it was her that sent us to Ole Ben's Cyclomart."

"Those were Grouter's men who jumped us," protested Roderick. "I saw them once when they were reporting from a collection job."

"Yeah, but they were hanging out around the base watching us," pointed out Lucinda. "I saw them. They couldn't get inside the buildings but they were skulking over by the gate a lot."

"If we saw them maybe Lister did too," suggested Juliette. "Everyone knew about Grouter meeting with the base command to try and get us back after we stole his files," Rupert pointed out.

"You're thinking she saw them and told them where we were going just make trouble, aren't you?" suggested Lucinda.

"Sssh! Here they come," Juliette warned again.

Darla and Colonel Lewiston had paused just in front of the alcove in the midst of a heated argument.

"I'm telling you to lay off Lady Katherine. What if those thugs you sicced on her had lived? They might have queered our deal with the DeMedici's if they talked."

"They didn't know who I was," she retorted.

Lewiston snorted. "Don't bet your life on it. And I'm telling you, if you queer this for us you will be betting your life."

She glared at him. "Don't threaten me Major. You mess with me and I might just let it slip to that DeMedici bitch about the stuff you've been feeding her."

"Go ahead. Submit won't show up on a tox screen even if she believed you. Besides, I haven't given her much of it. As long as I perform in bed

she's pretty pleased with me."

"Did you meet with Niche about the weapons? I want them loaded onto the ship tonight," he continued without a pause.

She shrugged. "Already done. He's got them listed on the manifest as some kind of ore they want on the planet. I'm more interested to know how you plan to sneak them onto Vensoog. Distance weapons like those are on the banned import list and I hear they're pretty strict about screening for it on Vensoog."

"Oh, that's going to be easy. Once we approach orbit, they're going to be dropped out the airlock during an emergency drill. Everyone will think a meteor clipped us and the stuff will just fall into orbit. We give the right signal and go to meet it at our landing coordinates. All we have to do is pick them up."

They moved off still talking in low voices.

The five children exchanged glances. "I smell a rat," said Lucinda.

"They're planning something really bad," Violet's voice was shaking.

"Oh, yeah," Rupert responded. "I think we need to find out more about this. Maybe we can stop it."

"Should we tell Katherine?" Lucinda asked.

"Not yet," Juliette responded. "Let's wait until we have more information. Maybe we can find out what those weapons are going to be used for."

"How many of Grouter's spy buttons did you filch when we left?" Roderick asked.

"About thirty," Juliette said. "The real trick will be getting close enough to Lister to plant one on her."

"Yeah, but it's got to be on something she always has with her, like her boots or something," Lucinda said.

"We need to plant one on him too," Rupert interjected.

"I heard the Clan heads and their families are all going to be on the same shuttle up to the moon where the ships dock, maybe we can try to do it then," suggested Roderick. "We should all carry one so if any one of us gets the chance we plant it."

"Hey, I think she's leaving," Rupert reported.

"Let's see where she goes," suggested Lucinda.

Ignorant of the children's plotting, Zack looked down at Katherine as they spun gracefully around the room, "Are you finished with your duty dances?" Zack asked.

"Yes, thank goodness," she replied and then gasped as he executed a whirling spin and danced her out of the ballroom and onto the heated terrace.

Once outside he took led her down into the moonlit gardens. "I thought we could do with some time alone," he said. "Every time I try to get you alone we get interrupted..."

He tilted her chin up and fastened his mouth on hers. Katherine yielded eagerly. She had wanted this too. After a few minutes however, it became apparent that Zack had more in mind than a few kisses.

Katherine caught his hand as he was attempting to untie the lacing on the front of her dress one-handed. "We can't do this here," she protested.

He sighed, his hand on her rump tightening, making her acutely aware of his arousal.

"If we don't, we won't have another chance before we make planetfall," he said, sliding his lips down her neck. His other hand left the stays and cupped her breast, sliding his thumb over her aroused nipple.

"I know," she breathed, wanting to give in, but just then, there was a giggle from the bushes behind them, followed by a man's laugh.

"I don't think we're alone here either," she said, sobering.

He made a growling noise and dropped his hand, looking around for

the other couple. He didn't find them, but he did spot Darla Lister striding through the gardens. Unfortunately, he also saw the child sized shadows following her.

"Dammit!" he exclaimed, grabbing Katherine's hand and moving to intercept the shadows. He caught Rupert by the shoulder and pulled him out into the moonlight.

"Alright, everyone, out where I can see you," he ordered. Five very sheepish children stepped out of the shadows and regarded him with identical defiant gazes.

"I know, this might seem like a good place to play hide and seek," Katherine remarked, "but it really isn't. I think it's time for us to take leave of the Governor and return to base, don't you Zack?"

Remembering what they had almost interrupted, and what else they might encounter out here with the adults also taking advantage of the moonlight and darkness to play sexual games, he agreed.

The next morning on the shuttle trip, it was Violet who managed to plant the bug on Darla Lister. By "accidentally" tripping on the way back to the bathroom, she managed to drop hers onto Darla's boot.

Bending over to help Violet back to her feet, Rupert was able to do the same to Lewiston who was sitting next to Lister.

Once settled in their quarters aboard ship, the children found it relatively easy to take turns sneaking out to follow Lister and Lewiston because Katherine as well as one of Jayne's toddlers was suffering from a bout of space sickness and it was almost two weeks before she was back to normal. Since the spy buttons had a limited range, the receiver had to be fairly close in order to hear and record the conversations.

Although generously proportioned for a free trader, The Dancing Gryphon wasn't an especially large ship and they had been in space for several weeks before the inevitable happened. Lister spotted them hanging

around and suspected she was being followed. Her angry response and the resulting hullabaloo caused a stink that ended with them all up before the Captain.

