



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 6 - Captains Mast

UPON RECEIVING the summons to the Captain's Mast, Katherine had taken care to dress herself, Juliette and Zack formally. She had explained to an uneasy Juliette that the Captain was going to make an inquiry in the circumstances that had led to her being locked into an unheated, storage closet. The summons had requested only Katherine, Juliette and Zack attend, however Rodrick and Rupert had insisted on coming with them. Suspecting the boys were fully capable of sneaking out and following them anyway, Katherine had reluctantly acquiesced.

When the Dancing Gryphon had been used primarily as a troop transport during the war, the military had made several changes to her inside decks to accommodate both officers and troops. Captain Hidelberg had converted one of the re-conditioned officer's lounge areas into an outsized office that also served as a meeting room for himself and his crew.

To hold court, the Captain presided behind a sizable table. To the left

of the table stood a large flight cage occupied by a beautifully plumed Screecher. Although considerably bigger, the Screechers loosely resembled the parrots of Old Earth, with their colorful, brightly hued, jewel-toned feathers. Screechers were highly prized for their ability to mimic any sounds they heard and could be trained to repeat it back if called upon to do so. Unfortunately, their beauty was offset by their irascible dispositions; when disturbed or irritated which was frequently, they had a tendency to shriek profanities at very high decibels.

Two husky crewmembers directed Katherine's party to one side of the front row. She was unsurprised to note that Donna Sabina DeMedici had also been invited to attend as well as Lieutenant Lister. Donna DeMedici was accompanied by Colonel Lewiston who had been Lister's commanding officer. Since Donna DeMedici had accepted Colonel Lewiston's application for his unit to become members of Clan DeMedici her presence was required by custom. Perhaps Sabina DeMedici had not objected to his patronizing manner during the interview Katherine speculated, or perhaps he had learned something when she had thanked him and then dismissed him from consideration. He had certainly not been pleased with her rejection.

Captain Hidelberg rapped the table lightly with a large crystal. "Be seated, please," he said. "This formal hearing will be recorded into the ship's log. Captain's Mast, Star Date 3841, Dancing Gryphon, Captain Hidelberg Presiding, concerning the endangerment of the minor Lady Juliette O'Teague'ni Jones. Please step forward Lady Juliette."

He gestured to the chair set sideways between the audience and his table. "Lady Juliette, do you know who I am?"

"Yes, sir," Juliette glanced apprehensively at Katherine and received a reassuring smile and nod. She turned back to the Captain.

"Do you know the difference between a truth and a lie?" he asked

"Yes, sir," she gulped.

"Good. I expect you to truthfully answer all my questions."

"Yes sir," she said again.

"What were you doing in that particular corridor, young lady?"

Juliette straightened in her chair. "It's a game sir, to learn about the ship."

The captain's eyebrows rose. "Tell me about this game."

"Grouter, that's the administrator at the Placement Center where we were put during the war after our parents died, used to send us kids out in the city to—well to do errands and carry messages, I guess. He wanted us to learn how to get around and not get lost, so he taught us this game. A couple of us would go around the city, spot landmarks, and come back and draw our own map. It's kind of boring shut in the cabin all day so we started the game up again. We didn't mean to cause a problem, sir. And we didn't go anywhere that wasn't marked okay for passengers. The idea was to find the places we weren't supposed to go and not go there."

"You said we, who was with you?"

"My cousin Violet, sir. Violet is pretty young and still learning the game, so I was with her."

"You said you didn't go anyplace that wasn't open, so how did you get into the locked storage closet?"

Juliette jerked her chin at Corporal Lister. "She put me in there. She tried for Violet too, but I kicked and bit her and Violet got away."

Darla Lister jumped to her feet. "That's a lie!"

Juliette flinched but glared back at her defiantly.

"Sit down, Miss Lister," the Captain ordered sternly, and she reluctantly resumed her seat, whispering angrily to the Colonel.

"That action seems a little extreme Milady", the Captain commented. "Do you know why Miss Lister, wanted to put you in that closet?"

"She said we were following her and spying on her," Juliette replied.

"She said—"

Darla jumped to her feet again and this time she sprang at Juliette, "You lying little Bitch, I'll teach you to lie about—"

She broke off with a squeak. Katherine had blocked her lunge at Juliette, and spun her away from the child, dealing Darla a backhanded blow with her fist as she did so. Reeling backward, Darla's extended arm slapped the Screecher's cage, setting it swinging violently. Darla then tripped over the crewman who was rushing in from behind to restrain her, and the two of them went down in a pile in front of the desk. The Screecher let forth with a stream of vituperative complaint in five languages. Colonel Lewiston and Donna DeMedici were also on their feet. Out of the corner of her eye, Katherine noted Zack had come up beside her, and that the two boys had protectively flanked Juliette.

Grabbing the Screecher's rocking cage, Captain Hidelberg bellowed for order. The outer door burst open and several more crewmembers rushed in, lining the walls ready to restore order on instructions from their Captain. He gestured for the nearest crewman, a large muscular woman, to restrain Darla Lister and make sure she stayed in her seat.

"Thank you Milady," he said to Juliette. "You may return to your seat now. The rest of you sit down also, and you shut up!" he added to the Screecher, who ruffled his feathers indignantly but obeyed even though he continued to mutter rebelliously to himself.

"Now, Miss Lister, what were you doing in that corridor?"

"It's Lieutenant, Lister," she said sullenly, "and I was taking a walk. Those nosy brats were following me. I just wanted to scare them a little and teach them a lesson. I would have come back and let them out."

The Captain grunted and frowned. "I see," he said, obviously not really believing her.

Katherine stood up. "May I speak, Captain?"

He nodded, "Certainly Milady."

"Captain Healdsburg we are guests on your ship and subject to your laws and regulations so I will accept whatever judgment you make in regards to this matter. I will take no action unacceptable to you."

She looked first at Donna DeMedici, and then addressed Darla Lister coldly. "Woman, you have twice endangered my children, and could have caused bodily harm both times. Your patron, Donna Sabina DeMedici knows full well that were we on Vensoog, your actions could have meant a clan war."

She exchanged a look with Donna Sabina DeMedici and received a nod. "I will trust both her and the Captain to ensure you take no further actions against my family on board this ship. However, I make no promises for the future." She turned back to Captain Heidelberg. "Captain, I do request that this—person—be sequestered to her quarters or some other secure area for the remainder of our journey."

Captain Heidelberg scowled at Katherine. "You say this is a second attempt? When was the first one made?"

"On the planet before we left."

"Un-Huh. Very well, Lady O'Teague, since I am anxious to prevent any further incidents I will honor your request. I will also accept your assurance that you will not further disrupt my ship as I have always found that the word of a Lady of Vensoog to be absolutely trustworthy."

He stared angrily at Darla Lister. "One of the features left to us by our former military occupiers is a functioning Brig. Michelson, Moore, take Miss Lister down to the Brig and lock her in. Inform the cook to send her meals there."

"Donna DeMedici, I trust you have no objection?"

Donna DeMedici stood. "None Captain, and I wish to apologize to you for this incident and to Lady O'Teague also. I too am a guest on your vessel

and I will abide by your decisions and ensure that the members of my clan do also. I assure both you and the Lady O'Teague that I will investigate this matter within house and take whatever disciplinary action is needed."

Lewiston had also risen. "That's it? She's just condemned? Not even a trial?"

Captain Hidelberg eyed him. "I see you are unfamiliar with proceedings aboard ship, Mister Lewiston. A Captain's Mast is a form of trial, and I have just passed Judgment." He added, "If you wish to dispute my Judgment, I assure you there is an adjoining cell down in the Brig where you can be accommodated."

"Enough!" Donna DeMedici snapped. "Did you not hear me accept the Captain's judgment? Come, Lewiston, before I change my mind and ask Captain Hidelberg to put you there also." She swept out the door, her back stiff with anger and embarrassment.

Once Katherine had collected her new family back in their suite and they had all been fortified with a restorative drink, she looked around at them. "Well, we survived it," she remarked. "And I think we can relax about Lister. Clan DeMedici at least for the time being will make sure she behaves. So, Juliette," she continued, "now would be a good time to let me in on just exactly why you kids have been following Darla Lister around."

There was an uncomfortable silence. The children all exchanged guilty looks and most of the adults surprised ones. Katherine sipped her drink and fixed her gaze on Juliette, waiting for an answer.

Juliette finally put down her chocolate and rubbed her hands together. At last, she said, "I knew something was funny after she played that trick on us at the toy shop. Then we overheard her and Lewiston talking about a weapons drop at the ball. I wanted to find out why, so we planted one of these," she held up a small flat object that changed color to match her skin, "on their boots so we could listen in on who they talked to and what they

said."

"You have to be pretty close to be able to hear it though," Roderick put in. "That's why we were following them around," Rupert finished his twin's sentence.

Katherine held out her hand. "May I see it?"

Juliette handed it to her. Katherine held it up against her sleeve and it changed to blend in with the sleeve. "Ingenious. Where did you get them?"

Juliette blew out her breath. "I stole a bunch of them from Grouter when we left. I thought—I wanted—well I was pretty sure we could trust you, but we didn't really know you and everyone was depending on me to decide so I—well I used them to listen to you without you knowing so I could be sure you were okay," she finished defiantly.

"Ah, and what did you decide?" Katherine inquired mildly.

The five younger children exchanged looks. "If you want us then we'd like to stay with you, if that's alright," Juliette said.

Katherine laughed delightedly. "Oh, I want you, all of you." She turned to Corrine, "What did I tell you? A daughter after my own heart! Welcome, daughters and sons, Forever And A Day!"

"Forever And A Day," Corrine agreed, echoing the promise. Unexpectedly, Katherine found herself with an armful of children. She hugged them all fiercely, and then wiped her eyes.

"Glad as I am that is settled," Gideon remarked, "I would like to know what the children actually found out about Lewiston's plans."

Zack frowned at him. "Why do you think he has plans? Other than finding a new home that is."

"I heard some rumors. At the end of the action on Janus, there was chitchat going around that some of the displaced soldiers had tried a coup. I know he was investigated along with some other officers."

"I didn't like him," Katherine admitted. "Did you kids hear anything we

should know Juliette?"

Again, the children exchanged glances. Finally Rupert said, "Before we left we heard them talking about a weapons drop, and we've heard them talking about 'the plan', but we didn't hear any details."

"He's giving that woman Submit," Lucinda reminded him.

Katherine's eyebrows rose. "Submit?"

"It's a drug. Grouter kept some around to give to the kids van Doyle took. It's supposed to make you not fight it when they—uh—"

"Okay, we get the picture," Zack intervened grimly. "He's probably using it to control her. I bet he's going to need it after this morning. She was pretty steamed."

"Rupert let me have one of your receivers. I think we can modify it so we can hear what goes on if Lewiston visits Lister in the brig," Gideon said.

"You can do that?" Roderick asked eagerly. "Can I watch you do it?"

"Sure, I'll even show you how to do it," Gideon promised.

Katherine brought them back to what she considered was the more important subject.

"Well, I certainly think a forewarning about the Submit is worth passing on to my sister; she can pass it on to the DeMedici's. However, I definitely don't want any of you children doing any more unauthorized surveillance, okay?"

"Okay," Juliette agreed. After a hesitation, the boys did also.

A few days before their arrival at their new home, Zack and Roderick took a walk down to the Brig after Lewiston went to visit Darla Lister. While Zack engaged the crewman on duty ostensibly about the time of her release, claiming he wanted to make sure they wouldn't be on the same shuttle, Roderick retrieved the button and recorder they had placed there.

Katherine frowned when they brought it to the family planning meeting after dinner that evening. "I thought you promised not to engage in any

more spying?" she said.

"Actually," Zack replied, "I believe the word was 'unauthorized' surveillance. Gideon and I asked the boys to furnish us with a button and a receiver. We added a recorder as well so we know who visited her and what was said. Want to hear it?"

"Don't be silly, Katherine," Corrine said. "Of course we want to hear it."

Zack set up the playback on the vid screen. They could see that Lister and Lewiston were alone in the brig, the duty crewman having gone to fetch Lister's meal.

"I kind of figured you might be joining me here," Darla remarked. "She looked pretty mad to me after the hearing. What did you do, dose her up with Submit again?"

He glared at her. "This is the second time you've gone off half-cocked about those kids. Even if they were following you, what harm could it do?"

"And, yes, I did have to slip a little into our after dinner drinks. I only got a limited supply from Grouter you know, and as I may need to use it on her mother too, I would appreciate it if you would quit making me waste it to cover up your mistakes!"

"I don't like kids," Darla said sullenly, "You think they're no danger to us just because they're kids but you're wrong. And that Juliette—she gives me the willies."

He snorted. "Never mind that. Once we get to the ground, I want you and Georgios to steal some transport and get out to the coordinates where the ammo is going to come down. I was going to send someone else with him, but I've decided to get you away from the O'Teague until we're ready to move. I need time to win over Mama DeMedici to our plan," he reminded her, "and I can't do that if you keep stirring the pot."

When the vid finished, everyone sat and looked at each other in

speculative silence.

"It almost sounds as if he's still planning some type of coup," Vernal remarked.

"Maybe he's just planning on running the DeMedici Clan," suggested Corrine.

"Would he need weapons to do that?" asked Juliette.

"I don't know, hon, but then I don't know what their clan set up is like," Zack responded. "In any case, I'm against allowing him access to additional weapons on general principals."

"Well, I think our best bet will be to send Genevieve a copy of that vid and ask her to pass along the warning about Lewiston's ammo drop to Clan DeMedici," stated Katherine.