



EXCERPT - ALL OUR TOMORROWS

The Handfasting Series – Book 3

A warrior/priestess teams up with a Bard from another world and genetic "designer" children to defeat a dangerous foe and keep their planet from an off planet takeover.

Lady Drusilla O'Teague, 3rd daughter of a powerful line of psychically gifted women, was trained from birth as warrior and Dragon Talker. She distrusts her own feelings because as child she was unable to shield herself from the seesaw emotions of others.

Lucas Lewellyn is an off-world survivor of the Karamine Wars. He is the hereditary Bard of his people with the ability to compel with his voice, but he is untrained in using his powers. He knows when he meets Drusilla that their destinies are linked, but will she admit it?

Their world of Vensoog is in danger. A prince of the Thieves Guild wants the deposits of Azorite—mighty crystals used to power spaceships and found in large quantities on Vensoog. To save their world, Drusilla and Lucas will need the help of "designer" children built by that same Thieves Guild.

Juliette Jones—created in the Guild's Geno-Lab to be super smart, ruthless, wily and conniving: the perfect spy. But the Guild never realized they had also given her a loving heart.

Lucinda Karns—daughter of a Thieves Guild Lieutenant, she was given enhanced genes to make her the perfect icy thinker and planner, but those genes sparked a need for balance and gave her a moral compass at odds with her masters' goals.

Violet Ishimara—constructed with a high degree of empathy to be a tool for the Guild, Her alliance with the Vensoog Sand Dragon Jelli gave her the courage to stand up to her masters.

Rupert, the intuitive chemist, and Roderick, the electronic genius—orphaned twins seen by the Guild as tools to turn into weapons, turned out to be a lot tougher than the Guild expected.

All Our Tomorrows

The Handfasting – Book 3

Gail Daley

Opening Gambit

SOMETHING was wrong on Talkers Isle. Drusilla had known it almost as soon as she stepped off the shuttle yesterday. This Isle had always been one of her favorite places on Vensoog. It's aura of peace and tranquility had provided solace to her angst-ridden spirit when she first set foot on it as a child. Now, someone or *something*, had poisoned that aura and Drusilla was going to make them pay for it.

The acute contrast between the atmosphere today and the feeling when she came here years ago as a traumatized child had been just nasty. When she had come as a child, it had been for further training in controlling the impact of the emotions she picked up from the people around her.

Today when Drusilla had come back to Talker's Isle to bring some of the clan's security forces here to take the Dragon Talker training, she had looked forward to immersing herself into the Isle's peaceful aura for a few days. Apparently, that wasn't going to happen.

"Alright," Genevieve said, her voice jerking Drusilla out of her brown study. "Enough brooding. Are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"Can't you feel it?" Drusilla questioned. "This whole place *reeks* of despair, dissatisfaction and anger."

"I'm not a Dragon Talker," her sister reminded her.

"Trust me, something is very wrong here."

"Have you discussed this bad feeling with Mother Superior?" Genevieve asked.

Drusilla shook her head. "I don't think she's well, Genevieve. I don't want to distress her. I know something is not right though. When I asked for a volunteer to go out to Veiled Isle, it was almost as if the Talkers were hostile to the idea. When I was training here, teachers used to trip over each other to volunteer for a sweet assignment like that."

Her sister made a face. "Well I don't think that sour-mouthed old bat who volunteered will be an asset. Why on earth did you choose her?"

"She was the only one to come forward, Genevieve," Drusilla reminded her. "I can't force anyone to come out to the Isle, you know that."

"So, what are you going to do?" Genevieve inquired. She and Gideon were expecting their first child during the Planting Festival, and Drusilla had noticed she had developed a habit of patting her belly protectively. She did it now.

"Someone needs to find out what is going on, but I can't stay here and root it out. I promised Katherine I would go back to Veiled Isle and help with tutoring Violet and some of the other children while Mistress Leona is laid up. I think I need to talk to Lucas," Drusilla said thoughtfully. "He's going to be here for at least eight weeks and he is a trained investigator. Once we know what is wrong, we can decide what steps to take."

"That sounds like a good idea," Genevieve remarked, reflecting with hidden amusement that over the past year Drusilla seemed to have developed a lot of confidence in Lucas. I do hope he's on her List because I think they might make a good match after all, she thought. I'll have to ask Katherine to check when we go back to Veiled Isle.

Drusilla had met Lucas, who was here to take the training, the first day he had arrived on Vensoog with Genevieve's husband Gideon. Lucas was Gideon's foster son and he had emigrated with him when Gideon married Genevieve. Gideon's marriage to Genevieve, as well as that of many of Gideon's unit who had chosen to take part in the Handfasting, had been necessary to restore a healthy genetic balance to Vensoog.

Although Drusilla and Lucas had been considered too young to participate, the two of them had spent a lot of time together. Lucas had been the first young man to pay her the kind of attention a man gives an attractive woman, and Drusilla had found herself immediately attracted to Lucas as well. His quirky sense of humor and sturdy common sense had appealed to her. He wasn't bad looking either. Lucas was tall, with a born rider's broad shouldered, narrow hipped build, but his body showed the promise of the heavy muscles that would come as he aged. Like his foster father Gideon, he had light hair that he kept short soldier fashion, sharp green eyes and clean cut features.

To Drusilla's bewilderment and secret delight, Lucas had seemed to be charmed by her person and had spent as much of his time with her as he could manage. Lucas hadn't been annoying but he had made it obvious he wanted her. She sensed he wasn't going to be patient with her waffling about deciding forever.

For the past several months he had shown all the signs of a man who wanted more than just friendship, and Drusilla knew she was going to have to decide about her relationship with Lucas soon because the Makers were going to give them their Match Lists at the next Planting Festival.

Behind them, she could hear Genevieve's two foster daughters, Ceridwen and Bronwen playing with a new litter of Quirka pups. Drusilla's own Quirka, Toula, nuzzled her ear gently in sympathy with her unease. Quirkas were native to Vensoog. They were about the size of a human fist, with thick, mottled yellow fur that changed color to match their environment. Originally making their homes in the trees and living on nuts, berries and insects, Quirkas had become avid hunters of the pests and creepy-crawlies who invaded human dwellings. Their main protection against predators was their retractable, venom tipped quills running down the backbone. They had a large bushy tail used for ballast when leaping from tree to tree. One of their chief attractions to humans though was the life bond they developed with certain men and women.

Leaving Genevieve and the children playing with the Quirka pups, she headed for the student dormitory area. Drusilla spotted Lucas's tall form in one of the dormitory sections kept for temporary training classes. Tomorrow, she knew the incoming class would begin the rigorous conditioning designed to give them the mental and physical stamina needed to turn them into Dragon Talkers. Tonight however they were given free time to settle in.

When she appeared in the doorway, Lucas immediately came toward her. "I need to speak to you," she said softly, "Outside."

This caused some good-natured teasing as he ushered her outside.

"Sorry about that," he said smiling. "Most of them know I've got a special feeling for you. They don't mean anything by it."

She waved it away. "Look, there's something funny going on here on the Isle. I can't stay and root it out, but since you have to be here anyway, I thought maybe you could look around some."

If he was disappointed at her reason for seeking him out, it didn't show in his face. "Sure," he said, putting an arm around her shoulders and giving her a one-armed hug. "I'll keep an eye on things for you, but I want a real date when we get to the Festival."

Drusilla almost stamped her foot in exasperation. "Honestly, is that all you can think about? I tell you there might be trouble brewing and you want to talk about our Match Lists?"

"Well, what is going on here on the Isle is important, but then I think we are too."

"Oh, alright!" she exclaimed. "We can go to the Introductory Ball together, okay?"

"You got it Darling," he said, managing to plant a quick kiss on her mouth before walking away. "Oh, by the way" he said over his shoulder, "I was going to keep an eye on things anyway; Gideon already gave me a watching brief on it."

This time she did stamp her foot. How did he always manage to knock her off balance? No one else did that to her because she didn't allow it. Somehow though, Lucas always managed it.

Despite her irritation at falling for his trick, she watched him walk all the way back to the dormitory, unwillingly admiring the effortless way he moved. She couldn't help but appreciate his cleverness, despite her irritation because he had tricked her again. Somehow, Lucas roused a response in her physically and emotionally in a way she had never allowed another man to do, and darn it, he *had* managed to kiss her again. Drusilla sighed in exasperation. The problem wasn't with Lucas, she admitted. If she hadn't kissed him back every time, he wouldn't have reason to think she was falling in love with him. The real trouble, Drusilla acknowledged, was she was afraid he was right. She wasn't exactly proud of her behavior; it wasn't fair of her to allow him to kiss her and then push him away. It wasn't Lucas's fault she was afraid of the emotion growing between them—she knew was leery of her own power and what a loss of control could mean to others around her.

Irritably, she kicked a pebble off the path back to the guest quarters. She had looked forward to the peace and tranquility she had always found here, but she hadn't found it on this trip. Yes, someone was going to pay for spoiling Talker's Isle. Drusilla intended to make sure of it.

Pawn To Kings Four

LUCAS'S FIRST morning on Talker's Isle started with being roused out at dawn to run along the rocky shoreline. The beaches on Talker's Isle were not made of smooth sand but of crushed pebbles intersected with up-thrust outcroppings of rocks, ranging from fist-sized stones to boulders. That made running the beach course set up by their instructor something of a hazard. The calisthenics teacher, Senior Talker Marian, plainly expected her new

students to have difficulty with the course. To her surprise, Lucas and the rest of Gideon's people not only ran the course without stumbling, none of them was out of breath when they finished. Some of the ex-military trainees even had energy left afterwards for a little horseplay.

Marian frowned at them when they ended the run. "You are in remarkably good shape," she said to Tim Morgan, the leader of the group.

He smiled at her. "That little stretch? The courses we ran in training were twice as long and we carried eighty pound packs and weapons when we did it."

"I see," she said. "In that case, let's start with the run most of our classes finish with. Follow me," and she took off, running up the cliff trail from the shore. For the next hour, she led them up into the rocky hills above the Talker Compound, and then across the Isle and back down to the beach, ending up just outside the complex, where she stopped and ran in place while she took stock of her new class. They were all in wonderful shape, she admitted, admiring Tim Morgan's physique as he jogged in place. This group might not be exhausted at the end of this run, but at least they now knew they'd had a workout.

"Okay," she called, "cool down and then go in and have breakfast. Your first class in how to *push and pull* will begin in an hour in classroom four. Your teacher will be Senior Talker Terella."

After breakfast, Lucas was a little surprised when he entered the room for the next class to find no chairs or desks. The teacher, Senior Talker Terella, must have been in her eighties. She was a wizened figure of a woman with thinning white hair twisted into a knot on the top of her head. However, her bright blue eyes were clear and sharp. For this class, they had each been issued a pair loose pants and a sleeveless pullover top. When he entered the room, Lucas was instructed to take off his shoes and stack them over by a row of woven mats piled against one wall. After everyone had taken a mat, they all lined up in rows with the mats at their feet. Terella walked around the class and shifted some of the trainees to different spots, sorting them (apparently) by the amount of room they might take up lying full length. Once she had the class arranged to her satisfaction, the students were told to step onto the mats. Terella began to lead them in some of the weirdest bending and stretching exercises Lucas had ever seen, let alone tried to perform.

When Terella decided it was time for them to start breathing exercises, Lucas was bent over backwards with his hands flat on the floor. Along with several others, he started to straighten up, and was told to stay in the bent backward position.

With his head hanging upside down, Lucas looked across at Morgan who had ended up in the same position across from him, and made a grimace, getting an eye roll in return. Terella laughed.

"You all are wondering why now we do meditation, yes? Well, to become a talker, you must learn to ignore your body's sensations and work your mind. For the next ten minutes, I will count and you will breathe in and out. One, breathe in, two, breathe in, three, breathe in, one breathe out...."

When she finished this torture, she had them all sit cross-legged on the mat and repeat the same exercise.

Finally, she told them to sit and listen to the sounds around them, identifying each one silently and then to try to locate where it was coming from without opening their eyes. As he did this exercise, Taid's crystal began to feel uncomfortably warm against Lucas's skin. So much so that he finally pulled it out and let it lie against the shirt material instead of his bare skin. Terella noticed his discomfort and came by his station on the mat. She bopped him on the back of the head with the back of her hand. "Focus!" she said sharply. "Ignore the pain!"

When she finally allowed them to open their eyes, she explained to them that they had just undergone their first lesson in finding a *pull*. A *pull*, she explained is when you use your third eye to locate things close to you. "Later, we will work on doing a *pull* at a distance," she said smiling.

Just before the class broke up, she let each of them feel her touch at the edge of their senses. Again, Lucas could feel the crystal heating up. This time he realized he was seeing Terella's push as a ray of light yellow color that softly touched each student in the class.

When she dismissed the class to go to lunch, she stopped Lucas as he was about to leave. "Are you alright, My Lord?" she asked.

He nodded, hesitating and then he asked, "Has anyone ever reported *seeing* a *push*?"

"No," she replied, "but I can sense you are unusually gifted in some ways. Could you see something when I *pushed* the class just now?"

"Yes. A very soft yellow stream of light touched everyone. This heated up too," he added, indicating the crystal.

"May I touch it?"

When he nodded consent, she touched the crystal with the tip of a finger and then drew back quickly. "There is a great deal of power locked up in this. Where did you get it?"

"It's a family heirloom. My grandfather left it with a friend to be passed on to me when I was old enough. It's supposed to help me assume my family legacy," he said, tucking the now cool crystal back inside his shirt.

"I suggest you be very careful when you open it up," she warned him. "As I said, it's very powerful. However, it seems to be tuned to you in some fashion so that should provide some measure of safety. Yellow did you say? Hummm..."

Lucas left, determined to do some research about his grandfather's gift in his first spare minute. As it happened though, he didn't have many spare minutes for the rest of the day.

The afternoon teacher was a man named Gerard Colson who insisted they address him as Senior Talker Colson, a formality none of the other teachers had bothered with. Colson was a tall, thin man with a narrow, long-jawed face. A plume of shiny black hair fell romantically over his forehead. It was obvious within the first few minutes of class that the Senior Talker didn't believe this class had any worthy students.

"To be a Dragon Talker," Colson stated arrogantly, "you must be able to focus your mind on the dragon's emotions and tune out distractions. I doubt many of you will be able to do this, especially coming from a military background, but we'll see."

The next thing he did was slam a hard *push* of embarrassment and unworthiness straight at Lucas whom he apparently thought would be the weakest of the group. Lucas could see a wide black band push outward from Colson, and he could feel the pressure of the *push* like a physical blow. Taid's gift flashed white hot, and when Lucas instinctively grabbed the front of his shirt to pull the crystal away from his skin, he found he could shove back at the negative feelings. As he *pushed* back, he could see the black wave beginning to turn grey. Gradually, the grey grew lighter and then began to creep back along the wave toward Colson. Colson staggered, catching himself on the edge of the teacher's desk in the front of the room.

Giving Lucas a shocked look, Colson abruptly cut off *push* before the counter wave of light Lucas was generating reached him. He was very careful after that first attempt not to try to overpower Lucas when he *pushed* at him during the rest of the class. He said nothing about it however. No one had bothered to tell Colson that all the men and women taking this class had first been vetted by Drusilla to make sure they could handle the training. He became visibly more irate as the class progressed.

Lucas found the last class of the day self-defense and weapon handling, in particular, the Force Wand, a relief. Having seen one in action on Fenris, he already knew that a Vensoog Force Wand was made of titanium/steel, covered in the Rainbow tree hardwood.

"This is a standard Force Wand," the teacher, a tough, wiry woman with a shock of short cut brown hair, informed them. "You will keep this one as long as you are here on Talker's Isle. Once you graduate, you may want to have one made especially for you."

"Watch this and do as I show you." She held hers out with her right hand gripping the center handle, and pressed a raised crystal in the center with her thumb. "Most wands will extend to around four feet, which is the optimum length for close in fighting. Tap the same button twice and it will retract."

She held one of the ends up so they could see it. "This end carries a knife which can be used for thrusting. I do not recommend using it unless your life is threatened; however, it is useful for cutting free a Dragon caught in rope or sea strands." She touched another of the raised crystals and a four-inch blade snapped out. She walked up and down the line, making them repeat her actions until she was satisfied they could extend and retract the wand and the blade.

Holding up the wand, which she held by the handle in the middle, she showed them how to move the power dial. "If a Dragon is particularly ornery, or stubborn, we sometimes find it necessary to provide an incentive, so the other end of your wand, is a shock stick. Before we are through, each of you will touch himself with it set on the mildest setting. The maximum setting, designed for use on the larger water dragons, is fatal to humans."

The class spent the next few minutes playing with the adjustments on that end of the wand. Lucas found even the mild setting unpleasant. He remembered that Lady Katherine had in fact killed two of the thugs attacking her children with her wand, so he was very careful with his. Unfortunately, a couple of the others were seized with the urge to show off, and ended up burned by their own wands. Afterwards, when Lucas asked Senior Talker Loretta why she hadn't stopped the two students, she smiled. "Some are more hard-headed than others and must learn by doing."

The class wasn't just physical. Loretta assigned the students to spend the last half of the class Reading up on the history of the Talkers. Here, Lucas found the Wands had been developed after it had been realized that unscrupulous clansmen would sometimes attempt to strong-arm Dragon Talkers to *push* both people and dragons into committing illegal or sometimes even dangerous acts. If the Talker could fend off most physical attacks, it discouraged this type of coercion.

That evening, Lucas realized he wasn't going to be able to find any privacy to really open up Taid's crystal and study its properties; the constant movement and talk of his bunkmates was too distracting and he did *not* want an audience when he explored it.

However, he felt what Drusilla had termed the 'miasma of discontent' that seemed to pervade the entire island. Even Gideon's Talker unit had been affected; everyone was short-tempered and seemed to take offense much easier than they had before they came here. Both he and Tim Morgan reported it to Lord Zack on their nightly after hour's reports.

Lord Zack had been put in charge of security on Veiled Isle, the closest of the Laird's territories to Talker's Isle. The rest of the team knew Lucas and Morgan were going out after the trainees' curfew check, but they knew the pair had been chased with a task to look for something so the class ignored it.

When Gideon had asked him to keep an eye out for anything suspicious on Talker's Isle, he had been glad to do it. Getting Drusilla to promise him a real date on their first official function during the Festival had just been a bonus. She had kissed him back too; although it was plain her own response bothered her for some reason.

During their third week on the Isle, Colson suddenly began bringing the unit a special morning drink that he said contained unique vitamins and minerals to help them survive the training. When Lucas took his first sip of it, the crystal Taid had given him got very hot against his skin and he was hit by a wave of nausea and a blinding headache. He barely made it to the bathroom and immediately threw up what he had swallowed. Not wanting to make a big deal of it, he hid the nearly full bottle in his footlocker.

His nausea and headache subsided during the usual grueling morning workout. He ate the high-protein breakfast provided for the trainees with a good appetite, suffered through Terella's meditation exercises, and then went to the second class.

Of the two, he preferred Terella's teachings to that of Senior Talker Colson. This morning Colson opened class with a discussion about the Clan system of government. Colson's usual method of teaching them had been to start controversial discussions to distract them while he poked at them with a *push*. This morning, he kept urging the trainees to agree that it was unfair to exclude certain segments of the population from inheriting property or titles. Lucas could feel the man using an intense *push* to generate feelings of resentment and anger. A *Push*, Lucas had learned in training, was what the Clans of Vensoog called this method used to influence others. Looking around, he could see that most of the class seemed to be allowing themselves to yield to the unpleasant emotions Colson's *push* generated. Since he knew Gideon's people to be both stubborn and hard to influence, Lucas suspected some outside factor had to be involved in their too easy transition to resentment. It had to have been the drink. Taid's crystal had caused him to throw up, he decided. Obviously, the crystal had the ability to detect harmful materials he ate or drank.

As Colson's *push* grew stronger, Taid's crystal began heating up again and Lucas could see the negative emotions being *pushed* by Colson as dark rays of color that touched everyone and everything. Instinctively, Lucas touched the crystal under his shirt and felt a surge of power lessening the influence behind Colson's *push*. Not liking the angry feelings around him, Lucas instinctively *pushed* back against them hard enough to block it for himself and the others. As he did so, he could see his own *push* shifting the dark colored rays to a lighter hue.

Colson glared around, attempting to locate who was causing the change in the atmosphere he had been creating. He finally fixed on Lucas. "What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, advancing on Lucas with a scowl.

Lucas shrugged and did his best to look innocent. "I don't know what you mean. I think that the clan system seems to be working just fine, is all." As he spoke, he again *pushed* a positive feeling out into the room spreading an even lighter wave of color that touched everyone but Colson. To his astonishment, several of the class who voiced agreement with Colson, now spoke up to disagree with him. Tight-lipped with anger, Colson abruptly ended the lesson.

He was going to have to find out exactly what Taid's crystal was and how to use it, Lucas decided grimly. Gideon had said it was some kind of psychic teaching tool, but after Terella's warning, he had been reluctant to explore it without someone to watch his back while he did so. Drusilla was the most experienced psychic he knew and she had asked him to look into things here on the Isle. If he asked her to make an excuse to return they could discuss a time and place for him to really open up the crystal and find out what he needed to learn. At last, he had something to report to Lord Zack. Because of Veiled Isle's proximity to Talker's Isle, Gideon had asked Zack to receive any communications about what was wrong on Talker's Isle.

At least Lucas now had a concrete suspicion to report about what was causing the disaffection on the Isle. Zack could pass the information on to Warlord Gideon.

The next morning before Colson had a chance to bring in any more of his special drink, Lucas told Morgan that he thought there had been something in the 'vitamin' cocktail that had helped Colson manipulate the class's emotions. Morgan frowned, but he had been one of the few in the class Colson hadn't been able to influence easily and he agreed to tell everyone not to drink it. Morgan had been a staff Sargent in the unit during the war so it was natural for the rest of Gideon's trainees to obey him.

This time when Colson started a critical discussion of the clan system, the entire class had been forewarned and most of them were able to recognize the *push* for an attempt to influence them and successfully resisted. Those that had difficulty withstanding it were assisted by their companions. Colson left the class after a few biting comments concerning their inability to use what he was attempting to teach them.

That night after lights out, Lucas and Morgan slipped out of the dormitory to contact Zack. They had been giving nightly reports, but until now, there had been nothing but vague feelings of disquiet to report.

"Well, now," Zack observed when they had reported their suspicions. "I certainly think that stuff needs to be tested. Did you keep any of it?"

"Yes," Lucas answered. "We both have the bottle that was given out this morning and I have part of yesterdays. How do you want us to get the sample to you?"

"Neither of you can interrupt your training to bring it here without alerting Colson so I think it will be best if I send someone over to you to test it instead," Zack responded. A thought occurred to him and he grinned. "I'm going to send someone this guy Colson won't suspect."

Morgan's eyebrows rose. "Who did you have in mind?"

Zack's smile turned feral. "It's time Lucas got a visit from his girl. Drusilla was just saying that the new Sand Dragon calves should be appearing with their mothers. She was talking about taking the kids on a field trip over there to see them. If she arranges for the trip to happen on your rest day, Lucas can go with her to help 'supervise' the kids. Rupert can test the stuff in the bottle while you're away from the area. No one will suspect a thing."

"Who is Rupert?" inquired Morgan.

"Rupert is my nephew," Zack explained. "Katherine had all the kids' skills and aptitudes tested back on Fenris and I understand he tested out over level three hundred in chemistry. The kid's good, trust me. He'll be able to tell if Colson added something like Submit to the drink."

"A *kid* tested out over three hundred?" Morgan asked. "That's master level."

"It sure is," Zack said proudly.

"Wow. Well, our next rest day is the day after tomorrow," responded Morgan. "Having Lady Drusilla come over with the children is a good idea; that way everyone will just think Lucas is getting a booty call."

"Just don't do anything I wouldn't do, Lucas," Zack said grinning. "Business first—courting later."

"That covers quite a lot of territory," Lucas retorted smartly.

The Bard Of Lewellyn

WHEN DRUSILLA and the children arrived to visit Lucas, it did cause some good-natured envy and teasing comments among the trainees, but most members of the unit were fond of Lucas and glad to think his courtship of Drusilla was prospering.

Drusilla had come prepared for the children to learn something from this field trip as well as enjoying a fun picnic outdoors. Besides the large picnic basket, the floater Lucas was pulling held several study tablets, a portable pop up canopy, as well as a folding table and chairs. Rupert had hidden his portable testing gear in with the picnic supplies.

It was unfortunate that they ran into Senior Talker Colson as they were leaving the Talker compound for the rocky beaches where the Dragons nested. An ugly expression crossed his face as he spotted them. Lucas had been proving an obstacle to his plans and he badly wanted to take that young man down a peg or two. After his first attempt to dominate Lucas had failed however, a strong sense of self-preservation had prevented him from trying it again. Pure spite made him decide to take his spleen out on what he thought of as a weak target.

"How dare you bring that monster here," he shouted, pointing at Violet's Sand Dragon Jelli in her accustomed place at Violet's heels. "What if she escapes and attacks someone?"

Violet drew herself up disdainfully and looked him over from his head to his heels. "She isn't a monster. Jelli won't attack anyone unless I tell her to do so," she informed him very much in Katherine's manner.

"Who taught you manners, girl?" Colson demanded. "How dare you speak to me in that fashion?" He sent an angry *push* at the child, trying to frighten her.

Lucas and Drusilla both felt the *push*, and he stepped forward to intervene, but was checked by Drusilla's hand on his arm. "Watch," she said softly and they waited, both of them enjoying Colson's shock when Violet easily deflected his *push*.

"Are you responsible for this—this foul mannered child?" Colson asked turning furiously on Drusilla when his attempt to overawe Violet failed.

Drusilla's eyebrows rose. "Indeed I am, and I can't agree with you about her manners. Senior Talker Colson, if Lady Violet was truly ill mannered, she would have returned your use of an illicit *push* on her quite painfully, but she did not. Shall I convey your apologies to

my sister Katherine on your behalf for your attempt to use coercion on one of her children? An action, I might add, that you know very well is against our protocols. Children," Drusilla's voice was cool, "this is Senior Talker Colson. He is a teacher here and I am sure he wishes to express his regret for ignoring Talker etiquette by setting such a bad example. I am afraid you will have to excuse us Senior Talker. We are taking a field trip out to see the Sand Dragons. Come along kids."

She slipped her hand into the one Lucas was holding out to her and turned toward the sounds of the waves crashing onto the rocks, followed obediently by the children. Glancing back, Lucas observed Colson glowering after them in angry impotence. Using some of his new lessons, he scanned Colson's emotions, reading the man's powerless rage and hate. He said nothing to Drusilla in front of the children, but he did file it away for future reference.

Once free of the compound, the children raced ahead of them up the hill.

"Why does Colson hate you so much?" Lucas asked her.

Drusilla made a face. "It isn't just me, it's all of us. Colson has always had a reputation for—well for developing hero worshipers among some of the students. I was always too close to Mother Liana for him to try it with me, but when Katherine studied here, she discovered that hero worship happened because he was influencing some of the students' emotions. One of her friends developed such a case on him that she killed herself when he rejected her for another student. Katherine never forgave him and she raised such a stink about it that Mother Liana sent him away to work with the teams exploring Kitzingen. I suppose when he was wounded in the war she had to let him come here."

The sandy path to the beach where the dragons nested was covered with boulders and small rocks, but a flat area above the cliffs gave a good view of the beach where the dragon cows were teaching their calves to swim. This was important because in the wild the Sand Dragons would swim from Island to Island to find food. Sand Dragons were omnivores, eating a variety of fish, small game, roots and grasses. Hard skin plates resembling scales covered much of their body except their head and underbelly. It had been discovered that like the Quirka the sand dragons were empathetic. If they were exposed to humans as calves they usually developed life-long bonds with them. Like many of the animals native to Vensoog, they could match the color of their coat to their environment.

After setting up the tables and chairs under the portable canopy, Drusilla directed the children to the best place for observation. Jelli lay down sadly beside Violet and put her head in Violet's lap with a deep sigh. Violet stroked her face and ears consolingly. "I know," she said softly. "You miss your own mother, don't you?"

Drusilla knelt beside them. "Does she want to join them?"

Violet shook her head. "She's just missing her own Mom, but she wouldn't be welcome down there and she knows it. They aren't her herd."

Drusilla patted Violet consolingly on the shoulder. "You are her herd now."

"Why is that one not swimming?" inquired Roderick, pointing at a Sand Dragon who seemed to be on watch.

"A Sand Dragon herd always has at least one sentinel," Drusilla explained. "Like the Water Dragons, they need to watch out for the really large Dactyls that hunt them from the air."

"Are those Dactyls dangerous to humans as well?" Lucas asked.

"Well they can be if they are hungry enough. However, a good hard *push* can drive them away. That's why Dragon Talkers are in such demand."

Watched by the curious Dactyls, Rupert had set up his portable testing kit and was explaining to an interested Lucinda how he was going to test the drink in the bottles Lucas handed to him. Both their Dactyls leaned forward to see better as he scanned the water bottles, spreading their hairy wings for balance and cocking their heads to the side in identical gestures of fascination. Dactyls were four legged mammals but they had an additional set of skin covered wings. Unlike Quirka who had short plush coats, the Dactyls fur was long, more like human hair. It was unknown just how intelligent the Vensoog animals were. Although the four Dactyls accompanying the children were small, Dactyls had a wide variety of sizes. Generally, Sand Dragons, Quirka and Dactyls seemed to understand a great deal of human conversation, and were intensely curious about the world around them.

Juliette and Roderick had settled down at the cliff edge beside Violet and Jelli to watch the calves play in the water.

Seeing that the children were now well occupied, Lucas drew Drusilla to the back of the canopy and took out the crystal to show her. "I really need to find out how this works," he told her, "but I want someone with experience standing by when I open it up."

She took the green gem in her hands, sending a surface probe into it.

"There is something here," she admitted, "but it isn't tuned to me. Here," she held out the hand holding the gem, "grab onto it with me and try. I'll anchor you while you do it."

As soon as his hand touched the gem, a surge of power swept Drusilla up and flung her into a maelstrom of rainbow colored lights. It felt as if the light was actually touching her naked body, leaving her flesh exposed and incredibly sensitive. Frantically she tried to put

on the brakes, but only succeeded in slowing down what was happening. *Lucas!* Her mind screamed reaching for him.

I'm here, his mental voice sounded amazingly calm and he appeared beside her, catching her hand with his own. *It's alright. There's someone here I want you to meet.*

Are you okay? She asked.

He gave a gentle pull and they moved into the heart of the light, where a tall, whitehaired man waited for them.

Taid, this is Drusilla. Drusilla, this is my grandfather, Owen Lewellyn.

The old man he had called Taid peered searchingly into her face. *You chose well,* he said. *Welcome Granddaughter.*

What? Who are you? She asked.

The image of Owen Lewellyn laughed. *Ah, I see you're still circling each other. Don't be afraid of your feelings child.*

I cannot stay long Lucas. It is time for you to take my place as the Bard of Lewellyn. The ceremony I performed when you left Gwynedd transferred your heritage to you. It is a powerful one and you were still a child, so I placed a barrier against the power and the teachings until you were old enough to handle them. It is time to release that barrier. He gestured to a wall that had suddenly appeared. It looked as if it was made of river rocks. Taid pointed to a stone in the center. *That one, that is the keystone. Touch it and say '[meddwl agored](#)', and the wall will come down.*

Keeping hold of Drusilla's hand, Lucas stepped forward, touched the stone and repeated the words. Slowly at first, the stones began to melt and dissolve. A whirlwind of rainbow colored light began to swirl around Lucas, faster and faster, enclosing him. The lights began to look like words, and then sentences written in a foreign language. Lucas stumbled as if he was going to fall and Drusilla stepped into the whirlwind and caught him to steady him. She wobbled too but as she was only being hit by the edge of that storm of knowledge, she could keep them both on their feet. Lucas was receiving the entire load and he sagged against her. Even the edge of it stripped her bare, leaving her whole being raw and sensitized. Her mind and body felt as if their naked bodies were being melded together. She could feel his bare skin pressed against hers and his emotional and sexual arousal just as he felt hers. When his mouth found hers, she answered the need they both felt, opening her lips for his kiss and flinging her arms around his neck. An exquisite tension built between her legs and when he lifted her up against him, she wrapped her legs around his hips. She could feel his swollen shaft against her nether mouth and tightened her legs to bring more

pressure. Lucas groaned and rocked her against his engorged manhood, increasing the pleasure they both felt through the psychic link that bound them together. The release came in an intense groundswell of delight that was almost pain, and tiny waves of pleasure echoed through her body for minutes afterward.

When she came back to herself, Drusilla realized Lucas was kneeling, with her on his lap and her legs dangling limply on either side of his. She felt his hand stroking her hair and he pressed a soft kiss on her temple. She buried her face in his neck so she wouldn't have to look him in the face, but Lucas wasn't going to allow that. He tilted her chin up so she had to meet his eyes. He was smiling down at her. *Hello Darling*, he said.

A rush of consternation as well as embarrassment hit Drusilla all at once. *Your grandfather—the children—did we just broadcast all that? Are we inside the crystal?*

Well, we are sort of inside it, but we're still sitting under the tree too. He stood and pulled her to her feet. *Much as I enjoyed this last part, I think it's time we got back to the real world.*

How?

Close your eyes and concentrate on seeing the crystal.

Obediently Drusilla pictured seeing the crystal in their clasped hands. When she opened her eyes, she was back in the real world and Violet was standing beside them.

Lucas glanced down at himself and then stood up, letting go of her hand as he did. "Ah—I'll be right back. I need to go and clean up. Or something." He grabbed a package of hand wipes out of the picnic basket and disappeared around behind a large boulder.

"Are you alright?" Violet asked.

Guiltily Drusilla looked up at the girl. "Oh, Goddess Violet, did you feel all of that? I'm so sorry. It must have been awful—"

Violet shrugged. "Don't worry about it. As soon as I realized what was happening, Jelli and I shielded all of us."

"It shouldn't have happened where you kids could be exposed to it though," Drusilla said. "I'm so sorry. Katherine is going to kill me—"

"Why is your sister going to kill us?" Lucas had returned.

Drusilla glared at him. "Don't you realize we *pushed* everything that happened out to everyone around us? If Violet hadn't been able to raise a shield, the children would have lived it right along with us!"

"All of it?"

"Yes!"

Violet eyed Drusilla critically. "Geeze, don't be such a drama queen. Jelli helped me shield us so we really didn't feel anything we shouldn't."

"Thank you for your help Violet," Drusilla said wryly. "You're quite a kid. Katherine is lucky to have you as a daughter."

"I'm hungry," announced Rupert coming up to them. "Can we eat now?"

"That's a good idea," Lucas hastily agreed. "While we eat, you can tell me what you found in the bottle."

"It isn't pure," Rupert announced around a mouthful of cold Ostamu, the huge flightless birds raised on Veiled Isle, "But it's got a lot of the same stuff Submit has in it, so it probably does something similar. I looked up the formula on the City Patrol's website before we came," he explained.

Lucas looked over at Drusilla. "I'm going to call Zack. And then I guess we need to talk to Mother Superior when we get back. Colson can't be allowed to keep drugging trainees."

She nodded soberly.

Lucas pulled out the com Gideon had given him and contacted the Veiled Isle com center who promised to notify Zack.

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