



EXCERPT – A YEAR & A DAY

The Handfasting Series – Book 1

About This Book

In the last interplanetary war a bio-weapon killed or sterilized all the males on Vensoog. To keep the colony alive, the Matchmaker Program found ex-soldiers like Zack, a hard-as-nails ex-recon soldier and his five super-smart kids, who no longer have a home planet and offered them a new home on Vensoog if they are willing to marry a Vensoog woman. In this case, Katherine O'Teague, heir to Veiled Isle, computer hacker and one tough lady. With his home world now pile of radioactive ash, Zack desperately needs a new home for himself and his kids, so he accepts the offer.

When the Matchmaker Program pairs him with Katherine, they both wonder if it is a match made in Heaven or Hell? They need to find out quick, because the ruthless Thieves Guild wants their kids who stole some valuable records escaping from them. And they will kill anyone who gets in their way.

Plus, Katherine is falling for her new husband and hasn't a clue if he feels the same about her...

A Preview of A Year & A Day
Handfasting Series 1

Options Of Survival

*Spring 250 A.C. (After Colonization)
Clan Meeting – Glass Castle*

THE EXECUTIVE ruling body of Clan O'Teague occupied the council chamber of the Clan's main seat, known as the Glass Castle, on the Southern coast of Glass Isle in the Dragon Sea. There should have been four women and two men, but the two male members had joined the military forces drafted by the Confederation and killed in action on a distant planet. Their heirs were both too young to serve, and no one had yet been elected to take their places.

Lady Genevieve, the Laird of Clan O'Teague was young for the office. She was in her early thirties, with fiery red hair, large almond shaped grey eyes and a tall, slim build. Despite her age and appearance, during the attack Genevieve had showed both the leadership and strength required to be the Laird.

It could be seen by their coloring that the women seated around the table were related. The three varied in age from sixteen to around forty-five. Lady Corinne was the oldest of the three, and her red hair was showing white amid the auburn. Her short, clipped nails drummed a tattoo on the table as she considered the solution her First Daughter, Lady Katherine, was proposing. Lady Corinne was Katherine's aunt, and as the designated heir to her property, Katherine had taken her place as the Clan Representative on the National Parliament when Corinne retired to pursue her interest in writing a planetary history. Katherine's hair was not so fiery a color as

Genevieve's and her eyes had more green than grey, but she shared the same slim build although she was shorter than her sister. Sixteen-year-old Lady Drusilla had only just taken her seat on the Decision-making Council and she was clearly uncomfortable with her new duties. Her pixie cut hair, a much darker red than either of her sisters, gleamed dully in the muted light from the crystal powered wall sconces, and her eyes were so dark a grey they almost appeared black. Drusilla was tiny; she was half a head shorter than Katherine and only came up to Genevieve's shoulders. She cuddled her agitated Quirka and glanced nervously from one sister to the other.

The four women were attended by Quirkas, the small native pets adopted by most of the settlers. Quirkas most closely resembled an Old Earth Squirrel with the pricked ears and pointed muzzle of a fox; they were furred, with a large bushy tail and front paws that looked like human hands. Soft flexible quills that could be ejected for defense ran along the backbone up to the top of the head. When attacked the quills would stiffen, and sharp, acid-tipped retractable barbs appeared. The poison couldn't kill anything as large as a human, but it could make one sick. Quirkas were chameleons; their body colors could change with their environment, but their natural color seemed to be a soft mottled yellow. They were empathic and developed life-long friendships with some humans. Their small size (about the size of a human hand) made them ideal house pets and vermin hunters. They mostly hunted the variety of small rodents and insects prone to infest homes and businesses.

"You're going to put the cat-fox in the hen house with this one girl," Corinne remarked with just a hint of a laugh. "I think I'll come to the next Parliament just to watch the fur fly!"

"I think it's a horrible idea," Drusilla announced. "It's so cold, letting a—a-program pick your husband! What about love? Don't you want that?"

"I know it sounds cold, Honey," Katherine said. "And yes, I want my husband to love me just as much as I want to love him, but this solves our problem. If we don't do something, this planet will be unpopulated in just three generations. If we want to preserve our way of life, we need fresh DNA sources. What works in our favor is there will be many male soldiers left homeless because their worlds were burnt off in the War. We have to make difficult decisions—"

"Don't make a campaign speech for Heaven's sake!" Genevieve protested. "I agree we have to do something, and this sounds like a practicable solution, providing the issues I see can be worked out."

"What issues?" Drusilla finally found her voice.

"The most important one is that we are inviting grown men to become a part of our culture. Adult males who won't have been raised with our traditions. Issue two is these will be men who are used to fighting and may not readily accept our traditions—"

"That's why you've been working on that old emigration selection program," began Corinne.

"A program! For what, pray tell? Please don't say you're talking about that crap the Makers use to set up marriage matches?" demanded Genevieve. Her Quirka chattered anxiously and she stroked her back, growing visibly calmer as she did so.

Katherine put two fingers in her mouth and gave a loud whistle. "Time!"

Everyone turned to look at her. "If I could be allowed to finish? As far as your first two objections go, yes, there is still a program for selecting emigrants. We haven't used it since the first ships, but I do have a copy. The program analyzed genetic data and personality traits to weed out anyone unsuitable for our culture. We use a part of it in our Matchmaking system. Once we received the results of the bio-weapon used on us, I realized what would need to be done. I have spent the last year working on

combining the two programs and I plan to offer them to any clan that wants them. Who knows Genevieve? Since I did make improvements to give more weight to personal compatibility, maybe we'll get lucky and our dream man will be waiting for us on Fenris."

Katherine smiled reassuringly at her younger sister. "It isn't really that much different than the match lists given out by the Makers when we turn of age you know, and we already do that during the Spring and Fall Festivals each year. The couples just won't have met each other beforehand. I think we can sell it to our young women if we put it out to them as being romantic instead of a cold business proposition."

Genevieve pointed a finger at her sister. "All right Politician, write this up in a speech I can present to the Clan for acceptance."

Drusilla hadn't given up. "Why would any of these ex-military types come here? And where will you find them?" Drusilla asked.

"They'll come because we will offer them a home to come back to. We were hit with a bio weapon but our world is still intact. Many planets weren't so fortunate. Soldiers from those planets will need to find a new home. As to where they can be found, I intend to present this plan for accepting immigrants to the base commander on Fenris. Fenris was the staging area where most of the troop ships from this area departed. I'm sure he will cooperate in presenting our proposal, because he will appreciate that he can get rid of some loose cannons by sending them home with us. You see Fenris is where they are going to turn loose most of the military units who no longer have a planet to return to. Even if the base commander is reluctant, the planetary government won't be. Housing thousands of ex-soldiers and finding work for them if they stay on Fenris will mean a big drain on planetary resources."

"You will need money to operate. We used to do a lot of trade with Fenris," Corinne said thoughtfully. "Might be a good idea to take along some trade goods to build up capital and rebuild relations. I think I'll go with you."

Genevieve jumped to her feet. "Go with her? Then who will sit in Parliament?"

"You are," Katherine retorted.

"You are talking at least six weeks to get there and the same to get back! Not including the time spent on the planet setting this up. I can't be away from our lands that long."

"Sure you can. Parliament only sits three times a year. You name Drusilla as your deputy—"

"Me!" squeaked Drusilla.

"Yes, you," Katherine replied. "Genevieve will be reachable for advice by message crystal. It has to be you in Parliament Genevieve. Drusilla is too inexperienced to deal with that den of vixens."

Genevieve sat back down heavily. "Oh, God. I hate politics!"

Katherine nodded briskly. "Now here is what I propose we offer our new Handfasting partners; full clan rights, that is they can hold property for any daughters until the daughter reaches majority. If no daughter is born, they will have lifetime privileges on the property they occupy. Sons will automatically be full clan members; the women those sons marry will become holders. We will guarantee pension and dowry rights if they marry into another clan after the Handfasting period. Because we need to develop a viable population base as soon as possible, I would prefer to approach a unit from the same area; I think it will be easier to integrate them into the clan as a group. That way if there are older men in the group who don't find a match or unit members who don't want to be matched, they would receive the same benefits as those who do, and they would be available to supply sperm for the planetary banks. The other Clans will design their appeal as

they see fit. The only thing I plan to bring up before the Parliament next week is that the program is available and that we intend to offer the Year and A Day Handfasting to these men."

"What if your matching programs works so well the couples want to change the Handfasting to the Forever and A Day?" inquired Corinne.

"Then that will be up to each couple," Katherine said firmly. "Not our business."

Drusilla took a deep breath and then asked, "Okay, but what are we going to tell them about us?"

Her sisters and aunt just looked at her. "What are you talking about?" Genevieve asked.

"You know well what I'm talking about," Drusilla said doggedly.

"I don't see why that would be an issue," Katherine said. "There have been rumors about Vensoog people and our 'special abilities' for years. It has always been up to each person what or how much she or he wants to tell spouses who come from off planet."

"Most visitors to Vensoog conclude that some of us have psychic abilities and let it go at that," Corrine reminded her.

"She has a point," Genevieve observed. "These men won't be visitors. They will live here with us. Sooner or later they're bound to get our talents rubbed in their face. You will have to be careful not to let any religious fanatics who might want to burn witches past your screening."

"Are you seriously suggesting I go to Fenris and invite battle hardened troops to come back with me to marry a witch?" inquired Katherine. "That is not the approach I plan to make and I doubt I will be alone in that. Can you see Clan Yang or Clan Caldwell or DeMedici doing that?"

"Are you going to lie if they ask you about it?" Drusilla insisted.

Katherine sighed. Sometimes her little sister reminded her of a Quirka at a vermin hole. "No. While I won't advertise our abilities, if I am asked directly

I will tell them the truth. However, since time will be so short before we leave for home, our new clan members will need to do a lot of sleep learning to familiarize themselves with our customs and the dangers of the planet itself. I included acceptance of our ways into the subliminal programs about the planet, so I hope the issue won't arise."

Once assured that Katherine and Genevieve would be in the list of marriageable women to be handfasted, about a hundred unmarried women of Clan O'Teague between the ages of twenty and thirty-five volunteered for the plan and started to enter the answers to questions that would determine personality compatibilities for matchmaking into Katherine's database.

Since no better solution could be found, the Vensoog Parliament adopted Katherine's proposal. Several of the Clans were adamant about making their own decisions for dealing with the immigrants, but they all accepted Katherine's computer matching program. It was finally agreed that each of the Clans would send their own representative to Fenris and the other planets hosting displaced Terrans.

Katherine, Corrine and delegates from DeMedici and Yang took ship for the planet Fenris on a recently decommissioned freighter. Now that the war had ended, spaceships and crews commandeered from civilian sources were being returned to their original owners. The Spaceman's Dream had been a free trader and was glad to take on cargo and passengers in return for a percentage of the profit on the sale of the luxury goods stored on Vensoog for the duration of the war. Only three of the clans decided to approach the homeless soldiers on neighboring Fenris. Of the others, four would reach out to civilian refugees on the planets of N'Jamacia and Camelot, and the remaining three had agreed to take new applications from the Federated Worlds immigration services.

Making A Proposition

Planet Fenris A Month Later

Once the decision to use Katherine's program was started, they lost no time. Clan representatives from O'Teague, Yang and DeMedici arrived on Fenris. The next day they met the base commandant, Admiral Noel Harris, who had been handed the unrewarding job of finding placements for thousands of returning soldiers whose planets had been burned off.

Fenris had set up re-location depots for the returning soldiers in the old military bases where combat ready warriors had departed for the war. A base met all the basic needs of anyone who stayed there; food dispensers and housing, which although utilitarian were clean and functional. The planetary government planned to convert these bases into low-level hostelrys to attract tourists as soon as they could rid themselves of all the returning ex-military. Some of the Clan leaders preferred to stay in the resort hotels for which Fenris had once been famous. However, Katherine and Corrine had taken up residence in the main base so they could have easy access to the bases' computers, which were an essential part of Katherine's plan. She would need to set up her program to accept the chosen men's information so it could match them with the Vensoog women.

Clan O'Teague had decided it would be best to find a unit or two willing to re-locate and met their requirements. Today Katherine would start her interviews with the officers in command of the various groups who had asked about finding a new home as a unit.

"Are you ready for this?" Corrine inquired.

Katherine blew out a breath. "I have to be, don't I?" She treasured a private hope that among the soldiers she would find the soul mate she had

almost given up hope of finding. Now that the end was in sight, she was a bundle of nerves.

For maximum impact, she had dressed carefully in the full outfit a Clan Lady of Vensoog would wear for an important meeting. A semi-transparent loose linen blouse and pants in bright colors, topped with a tight-fitting leather vest rounded to cup her full breasts and cinched at the waist with bright colored ribbons. The long sleeves and pant cuffs were gathered at the wrist and ankles. Her low-heeled shoes were meshed on top with crisscross ties running up the outside of her calves and tied off under the knees. A tall, flat crowned, wide-brimmed hat with a veil that could be brought down to cover her face completed the outfit. Although normally she would have taken the hat off indoors, she wore it now for the full impact. Sooka, her pet Quirka, leaped to her shoulder and clung to the straps on the padded shoulders of the vest. Katherine reached up and stroked her absently.

Corrine studied her and then made a twirling motion with her finger. Obediently, Katherine turned in a circle so Corrine could see the full effect.

"Well?" she asked impatiently.

Corrine chuckled, "Oh, Honey, they're sure not going to have any trouble deciding marriage would be no hardship with you."

Katherine frowned. "Too much?" she asked.

Corrine shook her head. "No, I don't think so. Remember we are asking them to make quite a few concessions about their way of life. They need a place to go, but it may be hard for them to discount the rumors about Vensoog women and to change how they view their rights under our laws. They need to see an attractive package to make that change more palatable."

Katherine grimaced. "Especially when I inform them about the re-education and sleep learning you mean?"

By noon, Katherine had interviewed five Majors and one Colonel and she was thinking she would not find what she was looking for here. As yet, she had only one possibility, and that one was doubtful. She had yet to explain the full program to any of the potential candidates because her little inner voice kept saying "no".

Smiling graciously at Colonel Tomas Lewiston, she thanked him for his interest in the proposal and sent him on his way. She couldn't put a name to her reluctance, but she had absolutely no intention of considering him or any unit he commanded. On the surface, he was an impressive enough specimen. He was tall, with almost perfectly chiseled features, he had a well-built body, and a decided air of command. He also had a smooth manner verging on oily she found put her on edge. If she hadn't had the underlying feeling he had another agenda, she might have given him more consideration. Besides, Sooka, whose judgment of character was usually excellent, had hissed at him and he couldn't quite conceal his distaste of her pet.

Katherine was using one of the auxiliary conference rooms on the base. After he left, she rose and went to the wall of windows looking out over the city. The view was spectacular. To the left was a magnificent view of high snow-capped peaks, the tall spires of the city and a white strip of beach next to an azure ocean. The beach was sparsely populated compared to the thousands of tourists who had clustered there before the war made interplanetary travel dangerous. The empty beach was testament to Fenris' urgency in getting their planet back to becoming a "destination" for tourists.

Fenris was named before explorers had set foot there and discovered how inappropriate it was to name the planet after the devouring wolf of Ragganok. The name didn't call up an image of pristine, snow-capped peaks excellent for winter sports, bucolic countryside ideal for gentle activities or the white-sandy beaches with just enough waves for surfing or sport fishing.

Fenris was woefully short of heavy metals, but the Fenriki had quickly overcome this disadvantage by developing the world into a vacation destination for the rich and famous of the Confederated Worlds. Fenris' strategic location made it an ideal staging area for the military to collect and send out their forces for the war. Now that the war was over, The Fenriki were scrambling to return their world to its old status as the foremost resort planet and trade center in the depleted Confederated Worlds.

Katherine took a deep breath and set up for the next interview. Some of the commanding officers Katherine had interviewed had come alone, some with support personnel. It was obvious the three men who entered this time were a unit, and a military one at that. There was only a superficial physical resemblance between them; the oldest was tall and wide, with a pleasant face topped with a shock of blond hair streaked with white. In fact, Master Sgt. Vernel Thomas resembled a kindly grandfather until you met his eyes directly and saw inside to the tough soldier he really was. Colonel Gideon Michaels was shorter than Thomas but his smooth-shaven, square-jawed face held strength and determination. Although his loose civilian clothing helped to disguise the real muscle in his lanky body, it didn't hide the smooth power with which he moved. His tanned face was in sharp contrast to his keen green eyes and pale blond hair and eyebrows set over a jutting beak of a nose. Lieutenant Zachary Jackson was around medium height and his brown eyes were on a level with Katharine's. He had the wiry, powerful build of a trained hand-to-hand warrior built for speed and maneuverability rather than bulk. His smooth olive complexion and thick shock of brown hair was worn a little long and showed his Black Irish Old Earth ancestry. He too moved with the effortless ease of a man used to physical activity. What marked the three men as a unit was a similarity of expression and attitude. These men were used to depending on each other.

Katherine's intuition, had given out a constant litany of No, or Never! at the other candidates. It suddenly shouted Yes! at her when she met Zackery Jackson's eyes. She looked them over more carefully.

All three men bowed as they entered.

Colonel Michaels said politely, "How do you do Lady Katherine. I am Colonel Gideon Michaels, of the 10th Infantry volunteers, Planet Moodon. This is my 2nd Officer, Lieutenant Zachary Jackson and my leading Master Sargent Vernel Thomas."

The window behind Katherine had put her face in shadow, but it gave her an excellent view of the three men's expressions as they got their first good look at her. Stunned relief would have been appropriate. She smiled a little to herself. Corrine had been correct; the over-the-top outfit had been worth it. Rumors of why the delegation from Vensoog had arrived were already rife, and by this time Katherine had endured some less than respectful attitudes from some of the men she had interviewed. This was the first group who had used her title without being prompted. She detected none of the leering postures caused by her "husband hunting" displayed by some of the previous candidates.

"Please be seated gentleman," she pointed to the chairs opposite her. "Allow me to present my condolences on the loss of your homeworld."

"Thank you," Michaels responded. "We offer our condolences on your losses as well, Mi'Lady."

Just then, Sooka, who had quietly gone unnoticed by most of the other candidates, hopped off Katherine's shoulder and bounced over to Lieutenant Jackson, springing up onto the arm of his chair. Startled, he jumped. "Well, now, who are you?" he inquired, with just the right note of amusement to please Katherine.

"That is Sooka," Katherine replied. "She is a Quirka. Many of us keep them as companions. They are empathic. Apparently, she approves of you. You can pet her as long as you stroke downward on her fur."

"Why she's changing color!" exclaimed Vernal.

"Yes, they have chameleon-like qualities," Katherine replied.

"You brought a pet along on an interstellar trip?" asked Zack incredulously.

"It was necessary," Katherine responded. "She is not exactly a pet. A Quirka's empathic attachment to their chosen human is very deep. A separation of so many months would have caused her to go into a depression and she would have starved herself to death in my absence. She was no real trouble on the journey; Quirkas are omnivores and with a box of sand in my quarters as a toilet, all I had to do was order the appropriate food from the dispenser."

She watched Sooka carefully as the small creature leaped from one man to the other investigating each one carefully before returning to Zack's lap.

"So tell me Colonel, what are your plans for the future?" she asked.

Gideon looked up from watching Zack play with Sooka. "Most of the men in my command are from Moodon, like me. As you know, Moodon was burned off by the enemy. I would like for us to find a new homeworld where we could all settle together."

"And why is that?"

"Well, most of my unit entered the service as a group and we've served together so long we have become each other's family. If we hadn't been together when we heard Moodon was destroyed, I don't think some of us would have made it."

"How do you feel about taking orders from women?"

He shrugged. "I don't see a problem. On Moodon we considered men and women to be equals; women as well as men give orders."

Katherine turned to Vernel. "And you, sir, how do you feel about that?"

"I do my job. I take my orders and carry them out. Doesn't make me any nevermind who gives them. I'm not a leader."

"Lieutenant Jackson?" she asked.

Zack rubbed his nose. "Everyone has a different idea of how folks should behave."

"I'm afraid that isn't good enough. I require a full answer. On Vensoog, our men only hold property through their wives and daughters and they can't hold an office except as a deputy for a wife or daughter. How do you feel about that?"

"To answer that question properly, I would need to see the text of the law so I can determine how fair it is," he replied.

"That," replied Katherine, rather pleased, "is a very good answer. I would have been disappointed if all of you had given me a flat yes. It would have shown duplicity."

"Are you saying we would be second class citizens?" Michaels asked, "Because that is not something I find acceptable."

"Not at all; you and your men would be full members of the Clan O'Teague. Traditionally most of our law enforcement and defensive offices have been held by men, but due to the war most of these offices are held by women, however Clan leadership, property and inheritance are held in the female line."

Michaels nodded. "Okay, I think we all need to see the actual terms of the bargain you want us to agree to before we go any further."

"I agree," Katherine said. "But perhaps you would like to provide me with a text of what you desire for your new homeland, that way when we meet tomorrow, we can see if we want to take this any further?"

She stood and took three data crystals from her belt pouch and handed them to each man. "Here is the contract you and your men would be required

to sign to become members of Clan O'Teague, and a text of our laws and privileges. May I hope you will send me your requirements by this afternoon?"

All three men had risen when she did. "I brought that information with me," Michaels replied and offered her a data crystal in return.

Katherine took it, smiling. "I like a man who comes prepared," she remarked. "Why don't we agree to meet over lunch in the canteen tomorrow for further discussion? You can meet my chaperone and mentor, Lady Corrine then."

The next day at noon, Corrine and Katherine programmed their meals in the robo-chef on the side of the canteen away from the windows and then took their food trays to an unoccupied round table in an alcove. They were joined a few minutes later by the three men. The canteen was in a bulky plastacrete building designed to feed large groups of people. It had privacy alcoves with large windows for officers and others who needed to discuss matters they didn't wish broadcast wholesale. The portable chairs and tables could have (and had) served ten thousand diners at a sitting. Now it appeared to be only about a third full.

All three men were taken aback to realize the Quirkas were apparently dining with them. Katherine and Corrine had provided small bowls of finely chopped raw meats and vegetables for each pet and a small finger bowl of water. The two Quirkas perched on their haunches on the table beside the women and waited patiently for the meal to begin. Unselfconsciously, Corrine bowed her head and said a quick Grace. There was a trifle awkwardness in the beginning of the shared meal, but Corrine and Vernal soon provided an opening for normal table conversation.

"Lady Katherine said you keep these Quirkas as companions?" Vernal pointed with his chin at the two Quirkas.

"Oh, yes," Corrine replied, "but they are avid hunters of household vermin, and in fact prefer to hunt live prey. They are quite valued for their ability to keep homes and other buildings clear of pests."

The rest of the dinner conversation concerned the animals and plants native to Vensoog. At the end of the meal, Vernal smiled in delight when the Quirka fastidiously washed their paws and muzzles in the fingerbowls.

Once the dishes had been removed and sent to the recycler, Katherine raised the subject that had been foremost on all their minds.

"I looked over your requests for accommodation, and I see no issues we would have difficulty filling." She began, "as long as those of your unit who don't wish to be a part of the matchmaking program are comfortable in providing sperm or ova for the DNA banks, they would receive the same full Clan rights as those who are handfasted."

"From my viewing of the data you provided, I noticed you required everyone to take part in the compatibility testing even if they aren't planning on being matched. Why is that?" inquired Zack.

"We use compatibility and personality evaluations extensively on Vensoog to determine choices for training and professions. Having your unit evaluated will help to place them in a profession they are best suited for. The evaluations help to bring to notice issues that might require counseling or re-training. This will be a difficult undertaking for us all. I want to catch any problem areas early before they grow."

"If a problem shows up on someone's evaluation would that be cause for not accepting them as an immigrant? Some of our men suffered extreme losses, and a few have PTSD issues and won't show up as 'normal' on evaluations," Thomas stated.

Corrine reached across the table and patted his hand. "Vernal, that issue isn't what the evaluations are designed to weed out. It flags traits that would lead to pathological criminal behavior; you know serial killers, child

molesters, and stuff like that. I'm sure none of your men have personas with those markers."

"Soldiers are trained to kill," Gideon pointed out.

"Yes, but there is a difference between someone who has been trained to kill for a reason and those who just do it for their own gratification. The personality markers do look quite different. If I find anyone who shows up with those markers, you may speak for them and we will then decide. Will that be sufficient?" Katherine asked.

"Well there is one more thing that puzzles me, why are we all being required to do sleep learning about the planet? Soldiers are trained to learn to survive in different environments quickly with no extra crutches like sleep learning."

Katherine responded, "With all due respect Zack, we are attempting to integrate your men into our society smoothly and quickly. When you were dropped on strange planets to fight, you weren't learning to adapt to a new set of laws and customs and at the same time learning to recognize dangerous plants and animals. It's a lot to take on at once and we will only have about three months from the time I run the program until we arrive. I hope to have all the data entered so everyone who wants a spouse will know who their Handfasting partner will be before we take ship."

"Are you part of the program?" Zack inquired.

"Yes. My sister Drusilla is too young for Handfasting; she is only sixteen, but both our Laird Genevieve and I have entered our data for Handfasting," she responded. "My sisters and I feel it is important to show we believe in this program by taking part fully."

The three men exchanged looks, and finally Zack and Vernel nodded to Gideon who said, "If it is acceptable to you M'lady, we will bring this to our men and have an answer for you tomorrow."

"Thank you, Gentlemen. I hope you will join us for breakfast with good news." Katherine watched as the three left the canteen.

She looked over at her aunt. "Why do I feel as if I just stepped off the Glass Cliffs?"

"Cause we have," retorted Corrine. Absently she ran a finger down her Quirka's head. Divit responded by lifting up to meet her finger. "I'm pretty favorably impressed by those three. I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting, but if they indicate the quality of the new clan members we'll be getting, this will work. You did good, girl."

Katherine grimaced. "I wish I could say that about my trip to the orphanage. They have unclaimed children, but don't seem to want them to be adopted. And something smelled off, you know? Juliette, one of the children I met seemed to be afraid, and she tried to tell me something bad was going down but we were interrupted before I could find out what. I managed to find out the Administrator's schedule while I was there, so I think I'll make a return trip when he is out of the office."

"Humm," Corrine considered. "Well, just be careful. On a brighter note, I contacted Captain Heidelberg of the Dancing Gryphon. You may remember him; his family runs a free trade line out of N'Jamacia. His ship was commandeered as a troop transport during the war, but he is getting it back as soon as the military removes the weapons, and he is anxious to resume trade. He agreed to give us transport home at a reduced rate in return for a favorable trade contract with the Clan to supply power stones and Dragon Nest silks for the next five years."

"And long term? What will he be bringing to trade for those items?"

Corrine shrugged a shoulder. "He has seeds, tools, techy items like computer quartz grinders, all kinds of stuff. The real profit is he agreed to give Clan O'Teague first crack at any items he brings in for trade for the next five years."

Katherine looked in awe at her aunt. "Wow. How did you manage that?" She eyed Corrine suspiciously. "I remember Heidelberg as being a tough customer at the trade table. You didn't *push* to get him to agree, did you?"

"Of course not," Corrine retorted. "He knows too much about Vensoog for me to try something like that with him. Besides, I didn't need to. I did a little research on the way here and discovered that N'Jamacia suffered from a lack of trade during the Wars. Remember, they export mostly luxury and high-tech goods. The military commandeered or paid low-ball prices for the tech stuff during the Wars, and since most of the trade ships were converted to troop transports, the luxury goods sat in the warehouses. They need us."

Sunrise on Fenris was certainly beautiful, Katherine reflected. Several days had passed since she had accepted Gideon's unit for the program. The unit was busy entering and playing the shooter/treasure hunter game she provided. The game was an essential part of the program because it recorded each player's reactions and decision making responses and integrated them into the personality profiles.

She and Sooka had cleared out of the apartment given to them by base command because Corrine was a late sleeper and complained they woke her moving around, no matter how quiet they tried to be. Since she and Sooka virtually had the dining hall to themselves this early, they had commandeered a table in an alcove that gave a view of the city and the pristine beaches. The rising sun turned the unspoiled beach to a ribbon of white edged by sparkling aqua waters. It made the multi-colored city buildings look as if they had been stained by a child's bright crayon.

"May I join you?"

She looked up to smile at Zack. He was an early riser as well apparently, and had started joining them for breakfast.

She made a welcoming gesture to the chair opposite. "Of course."

"Well, that's a relief. After you turned down my dinner invitation last night—"

"Well, breakfast is much more informal and less likely to cause talk."

He cocked his head at her. "Why are you worried about causing talk?"

"Lieutenant—how shall I say this? When we arrive on Vensoog, you will be handfasted with someone and so will I. This program is very important to my people; I need to show I believe it will work to convince them to try it. I would prefer there be no gossip about our relationship on Fenris if we are matched with other people when we arrive home. It will make everything much smoother."

"I see. But breakfast is okay? How about lunch? I'm not giving up, you know."

Katherine smiled in spite of herself. "Breakfast is fine. At lunch, we probably will have the others joining us." She was surprised to find herself a little flustered by the obvious masculine approval she read in Zack's eyes. When the war had started, she had been too young for any serious relationships, and later when she was old enough, most of the young men who would have courted her were off planet.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Zack remarked, nodding to the view out the windows.

"Oh, yes. It almost reminds me of home, except this doesn't look quite real."

Just then, Zack's com chimed softly. He frowned at the telltale on the indicator and said, "I'm sorry, I have to take this," and invoked the privacy mode. A shielding cocoon formed around him, making it impossible to see or hear to whom he was talking.

Katherine looked over at Sooka, industriously finishing a large helping of breakfast. The Quirka seemed to sparkle in the sunlight that was edging in the window. Katherine sniffed experimentally and immediately noticed a faint musky odor.

"Uh-Oh," she grimaced. "It does come inconveniently for us girls doesn't it Sweetie? I hope you and Divit like each other because I'm afraid you won't have much choice when the time comes."

Sooka made a whuffling noise as if she agreed. Katherine was never sure how much the little creature actually understood of her conversation. They were empathic but not telepathic. Quirka's rarely made permanent bonds with their choice when mating unless their human partners were involved. However, both sexes cared equally for the pups until they were old enough to bond with a human.

Zack finished his conversation and shut down the privacy cone, but he continued to scowl fiercely and drummed his fingers on the table.

"Is something the matter My Lord?" Katherine automatically gave him the courtesy title he would be accorded on Vensoog.

"What? No. Yes, by the Void, there is. In the last battle, my best friend, Timon was killed. He died saving my life. He left behind two boys, twins, here on Fenris. Their mother is dead, and I promised him I would take care of them. I've been trying to gain custody, but I am running into roadblocks put up by the Placement Center. I just heard back from the Child Placement Center where they sent them. Now they're claiming that another relative has come forward to demand custody of them. Damn it, Timon didn't have any relatives! That's why he asked me to take his boys."

"Are you certain he didn't have any relatives? What about the mother?"

Zack made a rude noise. "The mother's dead. Some wasting disease I think. She only had one sister, and she was killed a few months before the war ended and no grandparents. That's why the boys ended up in that Center. Timom was raised by the State."

"Humnn. What is the name of the relative that came forward?"

"Jerrod van Doyle."

Katherine looked sharply at him. "Are you sure that's the name?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because I do think you have a problem. I had reason to check out the name of Jerrod van Doyle regarding three other children at that Placement Center I tried to adopt. He's listed as their next of kin too. Juliette, one of the girls, told me she is afraid of him so I checked with a friend in the interplanetary police and I discovered he's on a watch list for trafficking in children."

Something cold rose up and died behind his eyes. "Well, he's not getting Timons boys."

"No. I agree with you and I think you and I might just be able to help each other out with this. Come up to my office where we can talk privately. There won't be anyone around this early."

As they left, neither of them noticed the expression of the tall woman who had started toward their table. She wore a Lieutenant's uniform. Her white-blond hair, cut short in a style favored by the military, framed striking, well-cut features. Just now, her red, bow shaped lips set in an angry scowl.

Once in her office, Katherine pulled up the virtual screen and pointed to a line of code. "You see this? This shows where the children's records were altered to show van Doyle as a relative. It's not the only time he's done it either. There's a record of alterations of children's records going back to before the wars. The only recent changes though are to these five records. Timon's two boys and these three girls. I spoke to the oldest girl the last time I went out there. Her name is Juliette. When I congratulated her on finding a relative, she was the one who clued me in on what was about to happen. She is a very clever little girl. I promised her I would help her."

"Help her? How?" Zack questioned.

"There are only two ways to remove a child from that Placement Center. They can be adopted, which we already tried and were turned down, or they

can be claimed by a relative. It doesn't have to be a close relative either. How would you feel about gaining two nephews and three girl cousins?"

"And when they find out you've altered the coding to show I'm related to them? I assume that's what you are talking about."

Katherine laughed. "Well, it is, but nothing as crude as what I just showed you. I assure you that I am a much better programmer than whoever designed this package. What's more I can make *their* changes so obvious no one could miss them."

He sat frowning at her. "Are you that good?"

"Yes, I'm that good. I may as well confess to you I was planning to do this anyway, but I planned to use the name of a clan member killed in action. The program has already been dropped in the database. All I need to do is substitute your name for his and activate the code."

"Lady, you are piece of work," he said, half admiringly, half horrified. "Let's go for it."

"Wonderful! Meet me in front of the gate at 1400 hours. We have a meeting with the City Mayor to discuss this issue this afternoon. Wear your uniform so you look heroic, and leave the talking to me. A live hero showing up in person is always harder to ignore than a dead one anyway," she added.

Zack shook his head. "I hope I won't regret this," he remarked.

Gestuv Yance, The City Mayor, was short, round, and already going bald. He was overwhelmed to be rubbing shoulders with a member of the royal family of another planet, and thrilled to be invited to the Planetary Governor's Ball given in honor of the exalted visitors from Vensoog and numerous other visiting dignitaries. It was obvious dreams of advancement and influence danced in his head. Zack watched with hidden amusement as Katherine not quite flirted with the Mayor. Today, she had dressed to impress; the outfit clung lovingly to her, and Mayor Yance was so busy trying

to see through her transparent blouse and not get caught doing it, he signed and sealed the custody papers without even reading them.

The robocar that met them outside the Mayor's office was built to carry at least ten passengers. Somehow, Zack was unsurprised to hear Katherine give the address of the Child Placement Center. Obviously, she had been prepared to move quickly.

"You had this plan already ready to go," didn't you," he remarked. "I'm impressed".

"The administrator is gone this afternoon," she explained, "It's his regular mid-week appointment in the city. That assistant of his is too used to rolling over for authority figures. I plan for us to have those children safe with us before he returns from his afternoon sex appointment."

"And just how, may I ask, do you know he will be gone?" Zack inquired skeptically.

She shrugged. "Juliette seems to know everything that goes on in that place. I had quite a conversation with her when I saw her last week."

She took out her com. "There is one more call we need to make. I want to let Commander Veratos know we are going to remove the children. She's in charge of the IPP task force on human trafficking here on Fenris. She contacted me when I put through a query about van Doyle."

Zack was gaining considerable respect for Katherine's preparations. The entire operation was handled like a military campaign. Grouter's Administrative assistant sputtered in distress when they collected the children, but Zack and Katherine were in and out of the facility, accompanied by five children, luggage and personal possessions inside of fifteen minutes.

As their car pulled away, Zack noticed that a bright red robocar pulled into the compound they had just left. "That's van Doyle's bus," Juliette warned. "He'll be having a fit when he finds us gone."

Her voice was quiet, but Zack could read the underlying tension in it. She was a thin child, with bright green eyes and a shock of brilliantly red hair. Zack judged her age to be around twelve years old. Katherine patted her hand. "Don't worry about that." She handed Juliette a copy of the papers signed by the mayor, which Juliette scanned with every appearance of comprehension. Maybe she was older than twelve. It was hard for him to judge girl children's ages unless they had entered puberty.

"Meet your new Uncle, "Katherine nodded to the boys, "and your third cousin girls, Zack Jackson. He now has custody of you five and as an accepted immigrant to Vensoog, he may take his family with him. I don't think there will be difficulties; unless I miss my guess, Grouter and van Doyle are about to be up to their ears in trouble with IPP."

"The program!" Zack exclaimed. "Will the changes you made stand up to a police inquiry?"

Katherine shrugged. "All I did was make their alterations more obvious. My changes will look like new information written into the database because of records entered after the war."

She smiled at the children. "Juliette and I have met, but since the rest of you don't know me, I am Lady Katherine of Clan O'Teague. Why don't you introduce yourselves to your new Uncle and tell him a bit about how you came to be at the center?"

The twin boys, age twelve, looked at Zack with identical measuring stares. "Are you really our father's brother, sir?"

"In a manner speaking. Timon was my blood brother and best friend from the time we were children. We were raised in a placement center after both of us were orphaned. We adopted each other, entered the service together and served together. I was with him when he died. I gave him my word to look after you and teach you how to become men."

He looked at the bigger twin, "Rodrick, right? And you would be Rupert? Welcome home boys."

They nodded silently. Katherine decided that the boys' dark skin, eyes and hair from their mixed-race heritage would pass as a family resemblance.

The girls didn't resemble Zack at all. Violet was the youngest, and she plainly showed her mixed Asian ancestry. Lucinda the next oldest of the girls, had a pale complexion, ash blond hair and grey eyes. All the children looked underweight a trifle but none of them looked malnourished, and they wore clean if worn clothing. Mentally, she judged their sizes. A visit from the tailor would be in order, she decided.

"Where are we going?" inquired Juliette.

"We are going back to the base. We have quarters there until the Dancing Gryphon is ready to leave. Since Zack is billeted with his unit, you five will stay in my quarters with my Aunt Corrine and me. We were allotted a General's accommodations so we have extra bedrooms and a recreation room."

"I'm hungry," Violet announced.

Katherine smiled at her. "As soon as we get your gear dropped off in our quarters, we'll head down to the commissary for a snack," she promised. "What kind of foods do you like to eat?"

The dinner table that night was quite crowded. Corrine had suggested that the three men join them for meals shortly after choosing their unit. With the addition of the children, it made the meal almost feel like home, Katherine realized. At Glass Castle, as well as a table for the Laird's family, the dining room was often crowded with visitors to the clan and students of various ages.

By the time she could finally sit down at the table, Katherine had settled two wrangles over who got to sit by Sooka, showed Roderick and Juliette how to use the selection buttons on the robochef and persuaded Rupert that

a few vegetables wouldn't poison him. She hoped it would grow easier once she and the children learned each other's food preferences.

Once everyone was occupied with filling their bellies, Katherine could address her own needs. Becoming the mother of five children all at once was a new and worrisome experience. She knew she had a long way to go to win the children's trust. Juliette, while grateful for the rescue from van Doyle's clutches, was still wary of her intentions and she had a powerful influence on the others.

Gideon cleared his throat, "Um—Lady Katherine, I have a favor to ask."

"Yes of course if I can. What can I do for you, Lord Gideon?"

He looked a little self-conscious at the title. "I too have two wards I want to take with me to Vensoog. Lucas is sixteen. His grandfather sent him to me when Gwynedd was overrun. He is old enough to stay with me in the barracks, but my niece Jayla is only thirteen and for obvious reasons, I would rather she not be quartered with the unit. My brother and his wife had sent her off planet when they learned Moodon had become a target. After Moodon was destroyed and they were killed, she became my ward. She and Lucas will arrive on the nineteenth. Would it be possible to make room for Jayla in your quarters?"

"Of course. We've been given a General's lodgings and have plenty of bedrooms. If we need more rooms, there are always those handy portable walls! It might be possible for Lucas to stay with Corrine and me too. We'll figure something out."

They were cleaning up the table from the meal when a tall, athletic blond woman approached and greeted Zack with enthusiasm. Hastily disengaging himself from her attempted embrace, he introduced her as Lieutenant Darla Lister from Colonel Lewiston's command.

"Don't be so formal Zack," Lieutenant Lister said. "I'm sure your new friends can spare you long enough to spend the evening with an old friend."

Zack sent Katherine a harassed look. She responded immediately, "It is nice to have time to visit with old friends, isn't it Lieutenant? I'm afraid though, that Zack has other duties this evening. This is a new place Zack and I'm sure your new wards would appreciate your being on hand to help them get settled in for the night."

Zack smiled quite naturally at Darla. "Yes, I'm sure they would. Perhaps some other time?"

A spark of red anger showed in her eyes at his rejection, but she was too well trained to let it be noticed. "Why Zack, you didn't tell me you had gotten married. And to a woman with so many children too!"

"Although I will get married shortly, I don't have the name of my bride yet," he responded coolly. "These are my nephews and cousins. I've just taken custody of them from the Placement Center. They will accompany me to Vensoog."

Darla watched the group leave with narrowed eyes.

"Trouble in paradise?" inquired Colonel Lewiston's smooth voice from behind her.

"O'Teague, that's the clan you applied for first, isn't it?" she retorted with just the right touch of mockery. "I hear she didn't like you."

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, Lister." He shrugged. "Clan DeMedici will suit us, and I'm finding Donna Sabina easy to control. She finds me very attractive. And that will get us free passage to Vensoog where we can implement the rest of the plan

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