



EXCERPT – FOREVER & A DAY

THE HANDFASTING – BOOK 2

A marriage of convenience between two determined, strong-willed people sparks a planetary war and puts at risk everyone they love.

Laird Genevieve O'Teague, beautiful, and strong-willed became leader of her people at seventeen. Colonel Gideon Michaels had been a soldier who controlled thousands of fighters in the war. When it was over he needed a new home for his orphan niece and his adopted son. Genevieve's offer would provide both, but could he follow his heart and learn to trust and love his new wife? Vensoog is under attack by pirates and when Genevieve and his niece are kidnapped by an agent of the Thieves Guild, Genevieve and Gideon must learn to rely on each other and their newfound love to defeat their enemies. Welcome to the far future.

The Handfasting is an epic tale of a family's struggle to survive. Meet the courageous women and dangerous men who carve a home on the alien world of Vensoog.

Past Imperfect

GENEVIEVE, Laird of the O'Teague Clan, stood on the terrace of her room in the original O'Teague Manor and looked towards the spaceport. It couldn't be seen from here yet she knew it was there and felt its presence like a lead weight on her heart. She grimaced. Today was her last day as an unmarried woman. Tomorrow, the ship *Dancing Gryphon* would begin unloading its passengers and cargo. Her younger sister Katherine would be bringing down the man who was going to be sharing her life and her bed for the next year. Although she knew and accepted the necessity for the coming Handfasting, she had hidden her inner reluctance from Katherine, whose plan it had been, and from her clan who were depending on her for leadership.

When the Karamine biogenetic weapon struck Vensoog in the final three years of the war killing or sterilizing all the male humans, it had been a devastating blow to the two-hundred-year-old colony. Since the Karaminetes only used the bio-bomb on planets they planned to resettle, the virus had a very short life span and soon dissipated.

Two years later, the treaty declaring peace was signed and the Confederated Worlds began the slow road to recovery. It did not take the Vensoog Clans long to realize they were in deep trouble. The additional loss of most of the men and woman on the five ships supplied to the war effort by the Vensoog Clans had only worsened the problem created by the bioweapon. With no additional children being born, the colony population would die out within three to four generations.

Genevieve's younger sister Katherine had come up with a solution to the dilemma. The planet needed a fresh supply of healthy sperm to maintain a good genetic balance. Since the Vensoog people shunned the cloning of humans, Katherine had concluded they needed a fresh batch of male colonists. Vensoog had been lucky in that they still had a viable planetary ecosystem; a few planets had simply been burned off, leaving thousands of souls homeless. Since the weapon seemed to have had a very short shelf life, bringing in a fresh supply of genetic material should solve the problem. In accordance with Katherine's plan, she and her Aunt Corrine had gone to Fenris, where most of the returning soldiers from this area were being decommissioned and offered them a new home, providing they were willing to join one of the Vensoog Clans by entering a 'Year And A Day' Handfasting rite with a suitable Vensoog woman. Or if the new immigrant didn't want to be matched for some

reason they could choose to supply sperm or ova (if the soldier happened to be female) for the planetary genetic banks. These Donations would be later developed into embryos and implanted in living volunteers. Tomorrow Katherine and representatives from the other Clans would be returning home with the first round of new immigrants.

To persuade their fellow clanswomen to participate, both Katherine and Genevieve had signed up to be Handfasted. Showing the strength of their confidence and belief in the program by signing up for it inspired the young women of the Clan to participate. Katherine's Handfasting program, unlike the previous Match program used by the Makers was designed to pair couples not just for genetic diversity, but the personality and lifestyles of the women with their prospective husbands, thus ensuring a happy joining. The couples would be joined for a Year And A Day, after which they could dissolve the union or opt for the 'Forever And A Day' Handfasting Ceremony, which was a lifetime commitment. Not all the new immigrants were male, some of the returning soldiers had been women and they too were offered Clan membership. Those immigrants already in committed relationships had been offered full clan membership for their families as well, but they were expected to Donate to the planetary banks. The sperm or ova would later be combined, as the Maker Program deemed suitable to create children. The donors could raise the children if they chose, but the most common situation was for the children to be adopted by childless clan members.

Genevieve had a great deal of faith in her sister's programming skills, but she knew the kind of bad boy traits she had been attracted to in the past would not make a suitable husband in the long run, and probably not in the short term either. To rule wisely, she needed the kind of man who would prove a good counterbalance for her. She needed and wanted the kind of partnership she had seen in her parents before their deaths. She didn't need another handsome, selfish charmer in her life. Don't be such a wuss she chastised herself. This man won't be like Gregor. You're older and wiser now and Katherine's program would have taken into account what she needed wouldn't it? Genevieve studied the image of Gideon Michaels on her personal com. He certainly didn't look like a man who depended on his charm or looks to get by. He wasn't bad looking, but his blunt features held both strength and determination. His face showed none of the wild recklessness that had characterized Gregor Ivanov.

Maybe it would be all right, she thought hopefully. She needed a good, solid man who would come to care for the Clan as much as she did she reminded herself, and going by the steady set of Gideon's eyes and the firm set of his mouth under that beak of a nose, Katherine had provided that. Genevieve knew that many of the Clan thought she still

mourned the loss of the wild young man from the neighboring clan who had so nearly charmed her into marriage. Well, what they didn't know couldn't hurt them, she thought wryly.

The scent of the river and the soft breeze of the cooling summer night caused eleven years to drop away and she was again that seventeen-year-old girl facing the man she might have loved and refusing to elope with him and abandon her people and Vensoog to the mercies of the Karamites. It had been a shock to realize Gregor didn't care what happened to her or Clan O'Teague if he wasn't going to rule. She had stared at him in disbelief and horror when she recognized that he had fully intended to take over the Clan when they married, regulating her to an insignificant nothing. Gregor had apparently intended to use her status as Laird of O'Teague as a steppingstone to conquer the rest of Vensoog and overthrow the current Matriarchal Clan system. When the war disrupted his plans, he had decided to run rather than stay and defend Vensoog from the Karamines.

At the beginning of the war, the Parliamentary Council had announced that as a member of the Confederated Worlds, Vensoog was requested to supply both resources and staffing for five troop ships, which they had done. Genevieve's father had commanded one of them. The Blackhand, Gregor's ship in orbit, was not on the list of ships provided by Vensoog. In fact, Genevieve had begun to suspect that the Blackhands crew was responsible for the recent raiding of outlying O'Teague farms. What's more, she had discovered that Gregor knew something about the raids he wasn't sharing with his Grand Duke, but she had no proof of anything and she had been reluctant to admit she could have been so wrong about him. When Gregor had come back tonight to ask her to escape with him on the Blackhand, he told her that as first officer he could guarantee her a place aboard ship. She had refused and in the end, she had used her special *talent* against him to keep him from forcing her to go with him. When he realized she meant what she said, he had damned her as he went to join the crew of the shuttle waiting for him. As a final insult, he had shot into her airsled, trapping her ten miles from the nearest homestead and preventing her from warning anyone about the coming raid.

Her youngest sister Drusilla burst in abruptly jerking her thoughts back to the present.

"Aren't you getting ready yet? We have that banquet in Port Recovery tonight with the other Clan chiefs and we need to leave in about an hour."

Genevieve smiled at her. Drusilla was turning into a lovely young woman. Drusilla had very ably taken over the management of O'Teague lands while Genevieve had been attending Katherine's seat in Parliament. She had organized tomorrow's ceremony and the

journey back to Glass Isle. Much tinier than Genevieve, she still had the family red hair and grey eyes.

"I'll be ready when it's time. I was just thinking," Genevieve replied. "Is that what you're planning to wear?"

"Why not? I'm just the youngest sister, I don't have to intimidate or impress anyone tonight," Drusilla replied. At sixteen, her fresh face was bare of makeup, and she had yet to put her short dark red hair into the elaborate hairstyles favored by the elite of the Clans.

"Oh no, you don't," retorted her sister. "It's time you took your place among us as a woman of power. You planned and organized all of this. You should take credit for it. Come on, I think I have a gown that will become you and Mary will dress your hair."

As the sisters dressed, Genevieve reminded Drusilla she needed to speak privately to LaDoña DeMedici so she could pass on the message Katherine had sent.

"Do you think she will listen?" asked Drusilla doubtfully. "Isn't it kind of a criticism of Doña Sabina? I mean we'll be sort of implying she can't handle the job, aren't we?"

Genevieve smiled at her approvingly. "That's a very astute observation. For that reason, I intend to speak to her alone and be as tactful as I can. I intend to hand her the crystal Katherine sent and urge her to listen to it in private. I want everyone to have eyes on you and not notice when I do it."

Once dressed, the two sisters stood in front of the mirror in Genevieve's dressing room examining their appearance. For Drusilla's first public appearance as an adult, Genevieve had put her into brilliant white with a dragon silk, off the shoulder blouse and dressed her dark red hair with small white flowers. The fitted girdle cupping her full breasts was white as were the loose pants and filmy knee-length skirt split up each side to her hips. The only touches of color were the opalescent pendant of the Dragon Talkers, which she was entitled to wear, and a pair of red quartz drop earrings. Drusilla most certainly didn't look like a child tonight. Her Quirka, Toula who accompanied her everywhere, had been provided with a jeweled collar in matching stones.

Genevieve herself had dressed in her favorite dark green in the same style, and she had wound her fiery red hair into a neat chignon held in place by the golden diadem of her office as Laird. She had been amused when Gorla, her own Quirka had insisted on picking through her jewelry box for a suitable bracelet to wear as a collar.

Seeing the stunned look on her baby sister's face when she caught her first glimpse of her mirrored image, Genevieve chuckled. "You aren't a little girl anymore so get used to it, sweetie. Next Planting Festival the Makers will be giving you your Match List and I predict

you'll need to beat the young men off with a stick. I know there isn't much to choose from right now, but we will be getting some new families joining the clan this time as well as Katherine's soldiers; perhaps there will be some young men your age. Even if there are no one you like in this round of immigrants, there might be someone in the next wave. This won't be the last group of displaced colonists to take advantage of our offer you know. Katherine left the program running on Fenris." She frowned, thinking she still had to choose a suitable clanswoman to administer the program on Fenris as well as the other three planets where displaced refugees were being kept.

"Are you nervous Genevieve? I mean about meeting—ah—Gideon, wasn't it?" Drusilla asked.

Genevieve's smile turned wry. "Yes, I am, I suppose. I have a lot of faith in Katherine's programming skills, but you may not remember that I don't have a very good track record in choosing men."

Drusilla glanced at her speculatively, "That wasn't your fault. I know what he did."

"I knew what he was doing too," her sister said grimly. "I just couldn't seem to break free of him until the last, and I had help to do that, didn't I?"

Drusilla looked a little self-conscious. "You would have done it on your own eventually. You were fighting it."

"Yes, but maybe not before he managed to drag me aboard that ship."

"That wasn't going to happen," Drusilla said firmly.

"Well, it's in the past. Better to forget it and move on," Genevieve agreed.

The next day, Genevieve and Drusilla waited in the arrival dome in Port Recovery for the first set of the new colonists to arrive. Because she had wanted a look at Lewiston, Genevieve had arranged for them to be there in time to see the DeMedici party arrive.

"He looks like a vid hero," Drusilla whispered to her as they watched him escort Doña Sabina through the doors.

"Yes," Genevieve replied dryly, "all flash and no substance." Just as Gregor had proved to be, she added mentally. If Katherine's information about Lewiston's plans was correct though he might prove a much more formidable opponent than Gregor ever was. While they waited, she continued to watch him out of the corner of her eye to see if she could learn more of his intentions.

Their small party watched the first wave of the DeMedici's leave the dome and the Yang's arrive. Lewiston and Doña Sabina however, stayed around, obviously waiting on something.

"They look like tough customers," Drusilla remarked to her after seeing the contingent of men, women and families arriving with Nü-Huang Toshi Ishimara.

"Well, they are soldiers," Genevieve retorted, "not really surprising they'd look like it. I'm glad Toshi Ishimara recruited families the way we did. Did you happen to notice that there weren't any children with Lewiston's group?"

"I wonder, is that because Doña Sabina refused to bring them or because Lewiston didn't want them?"

"I doubt if she would have refused. It's more likely Lewiston thought families would be a liability to his plans."

About a half hour later, Katherine and Zack walked through the doors with the first party of their new clan members.

Genevieve was only a second behind Drusilla in swamping their sister in a welcoming hug.

"We made it," Katherine declared unnecessarily.

"So I see," Genevieve retorted. "How was the trip out?"

Katherine made a face. "Space sick as usual for the first three days but it's gone now." She gestured a tall bronze-skinned woman holding two toddlers forward. "Jayne, this is my sister Genevieve, your new Laird. Genevieve this is Jayne, who has agreed to take over as governess for my new family."

Genevieve nodded graciously. "Welcome to Vensoog, Mistress Jayne. I hope you and your children will be happy here."

"Thank you, ma'am," the woman replied.

While Katherine was introducing Jayne to the kennel mistress Margie and her new nanny dogs, Genevieve had time to take stock of the men who had followed Katherine off the shuttle. She was uncomfortably aware of Gideon Michaels studying her as well. She was about to take matters into her own hands and introduce herself when Katherine turned back to her.

"Genevieve, may I present Colonel Gideon Michaels, his son Lucas and his niece Jayla?"

Genevieve held out her hand and Gideon bowed over it, brushing it with a kiss. "Lady Genevieve, I am honored to meet you," he said, retaining his grip on her hand when he rose.

She smiled back at him. "Just Genevieve, please. Since we are to be Handfasted, I suggest we start with first names instead of titles." She turned to Lucas and Jayla. "These are your wards?"

"Yes, this is Lucas Llewelyn and Jayla Michaels." He kicked Lucas in the ankle to get his attention since the boy had apparently not heard the introduction; he had been staring dumbstruck at Drusilla ever since he'd seen her.

"What? Oh, pleased to meet you ma'am," Lucas said, bowing, but his eyes went straight back to Drusilla.

Seeing what had drawn his gaze, Genevieve's lips twitched, but she turned her attention to Jayla. "Welcome to Vensoog, Lady Jayla," she said as the girl, having been coached by Katherine on the trip out, dropped a curtsey. "Lord Lucas, I am pleased to meet you. I can see you will be a welcome addition to the Clan."

She gestured Drusilla forward. "Gideon, this is my youngest sister, Lady Drusilla. Drusilla has been largely responsible for organizing the ceremony this afternoon and the journey back to Glass City we will take later this week."

"Pleased to meet you," Drusilla said shyly, blushing when she met Lucas' openly admiring eyes.

"Excuse me," Genevieve murmured to Gideon, gently freeing her hand. "Protocol," as she moved back over to Katherine.

"Lady Genevieve, Lady Drusilla," Katherine said formally. "This is my fiancée Zackery Jackson," she said gesturing to the dark, wiry man standing next to her, "and his wards, the Ladies Violet and Lucinda, and his nephews Lord Rupert and Lord Roderick. And this," she added going to stand behind a young redheaded girl with sharp green eyes, and putting her hands on both the girl's shoulders, "is my First Daughter, Lady Juliette O'Teague *Ni* Jones. Everyone, this is my sister, your new Laird, the Lady Genevieve O'Teague, and my younger sister Lady Drusilla."

Genevieve's eyebrows rose in surprise because somehow in all the communications Katherine hadn't yet informed her that she had chosen a First. She held out both hands to Juliette and said, "Welcome to our family, First Daughter. I am so pleased to meet all of you."

Katherine nodded her thanks. "If you will come with me M'Lady, I'll present you to some of the other families who landed with us. We can do the formal presentation after everyone has arrived at the Manor house."

"Didn't Aunt Corrine come down with you?" asked Drusilla.

"Corrine and Vernal will come down with the last group. I hope you don't mind, Genevieve, but I invited Captain Heidelberg and his officers to the wedding feast this afternoon, so I hope they will accompany the last landing party," Katherine added.

Largely thanks to Drusilla's organization and Katherine's efficiency, the first group of new O'Teague clansmen went aboard the paddleboat Saucy Salsa, and headed down the channel towards the outer islands less than an hour after they arrived.

Genevieve had been absurdly conscious of Gideon's presence while she performed her duties as hostess. Finally, to her relief the family was settled in chairs on the deck as the boat made its ponderous way through the traffic. Gorla, her Quirka, had inspected Gideon earlier from Genevieve's shoulder and seemed to accept him.

"She's a cute little thing," he remarked as Gorla preened visibly under his regard.

"Yes, and vain too, I'm afraid. Behave yourself, Gorla!" she scolded. "I'm sorry, I didn't have much time to make you welcome earlier."

A deep rumble of masculine laughter answered her. "Not to worry," he said. "I'm just enjoying the sights. It's been a long time since I had leisure just to look around and not worry about where the next attack was going to come from."

"You were career military?" Genevieve asked.

"Yes I was, but now I have Lucas and Jayla to care for. I was ready for something different after the war in any case."

"Well, I can't promise you no more fighting as we do have the occasional raid from the Wilders in the hills and from a few from Outlaw space ships, but on the whole, we're a pretty peaceful bunch," Genevieve said.

Gideon nodded. "I understand from Katherine, that handling those types of incursions will be my primary responsibility?" he asked.

"Yes. Traditionally, the Laird's spouse does handle security for both the Clan and in Glass Harbor City," Genevieve responded. "If you are comfortable with the duty, in the O'Teague Clan the Laird's husband also coordinates Planetary Security, that of Port Recovery and the waterways used for travel with his opposites in the other Clans."

"At least I won't be bored," he said smiling.

"It kept my father pretty busy," she acknowledged. "I don't know what types of things interest you yet though but if you want to take on other pursuits, there will be time for them."

"Perhaps there are some things we can do together?" he asked, reaching for her hand again.

Genevieve put hers into it, enjoying the feel of strength carefully controlled as he clasped hers. "I'm sure we can find something. We will have to return to Port Recovery in a couple of weeks though. There is a Security Council meeting scheduled for six weeks from now. By

then all the Clans should have been able to assimilate their new members and we can introduce our new Heads of Security to each other. I probably should warn you that this year it is our clan's responsibility to chair the meeting of the Security Council."

"Always?" he asked curiously.

"No, just for this year. The Security Chair position rotates every year. When we first settled here, a rotating schedule was set up so no one clan would be able to establish dominance over the others. The Founders were very concerned about not giving any Clan an excuse to set up a power monopoly. Usually we don't have so many new members to introduce in a session, but so many of the ten Security Council members went off to war that this time we probably will have at least six new members. I thought if I went with you it would give us some time without the entire clan watching us."

"Did you say ten members?" he asked curiously. "I thought there were only eight clans."

"There are, but the Talker's Guild has a member and so do the Independent Fishers."

Gideon nodded approvingly. "How long will it take for us to travel back and forth?"

"We have air sleds available which make Port Recovery only about a day's travel from home. We'll use one of them," she said. "I think we should spend the time until the meeting traveling around the Clan territories so you can get to know those of us who didn't come to meet you," she added.

He nodded in agreement. "Thank you for arranging some time for us to get to know each other out of the limelight, Genevieve. Seeing the territory is a good idea too. It will give me some idea of what defenses are available and what areas would be likely targets of any Jacks. To design a proper defense against an attack, I really need to see the topography of the area."

"Jacks?" she asked curiously.

He shrugged. "In the forces, we nicknamed the planetary raiders Jacks because they so often ah—hi-jacked items that didn't belong to them."

She grinned at him. "Was that a joke?"

He grinned back at her. "Well, it is a bad pun, I admit, but that's what we called them."

She felt herself relax as their mutual laughter broke some of the tension she had been feeling. It was nice to realize her new husband had a sense of humor matching her own. Bless Katherine's programming, she thought. "Well," she continued, "after we return from the meeting, we still won't be totally tied to the Clan territory. We will be returning to Port Recovery each quarter when the Security Council meets. We will be returning for the Planting and Harvest Solstice Celebrations. Those are mainly social functions. Traditionally

all the young men and women who have come of age are given a Match List of genetically suitable mates and the celebration provides a time and a place for them to meet young people from other clans. Attending the festivals helps me to keep up with who is who and who is doing what in the other clans."

He nodded in agreement. "It should help me keep up with things."

"Your Lucas seemed really taken with my little sister," Genevieve remarked, changing the subject. She was watching the two of them leaning over the rail as Drusilla pointed out a family of Water Dragons feeding in the shallows on the shore.

"I did notice that," Gideon agreed. "I would have said he was struck dumb when he saw her. I'm afraid he hasn't had much experience around girls his age outside of those in the military academy. I was fortunate to get him a placement there while I was serving, but since he was due to graduate this year, he elected to come with me when I decided to emigrate."

"Well, Drusilla hasn't had much experience with young men her age either," Genevieve remarked. "We lost so many from the fever when the bio-bomb hit us. I reminded her just this week, that next Planting she would be getting her Match List from the Makers—"

"The Makers? What or who is that? You mentioned Match Lists earlier, but I didn't really understand what it meant," Gideon said.

"The Makers oversee the genetic tracking program that keeps our colony gene pool healthy," Genevieve replied. "Every year during the Planting and Harvest Festivals, all men and women who are of age are given a Match List of acceptable breeding partners."

"Ah—Breeding partners?" he asked incredulously.

"Well, the Makers don't put it that crudely, but that is what it amounts to. The two Festivals are traditionally the time when the eligible candidates from all the clans gather in Port Recovery City. The social aspects ensure the mixing of the population and the lists help to prevent inbreeding within a clan. A lot of myths and misinformation about the Maker program are widely held and many engagements are arranged for couples who meet during Planting and Harvest Festivals simply because of the widespread acceptance that your list has your ideal match somewhere on it."

Hearing the irony in her voice, he looked at her sharply. "Not true?" he inquired.

Genevieve made a face. "I suppose that is a matter of opinion. I found it to be not true at all when I got my list. And when Katherine was reworking the program to take to Fenris, I learned the Maker program was designed to ensure genetic diversity. It barely gives lip service to the emotional harmony of the couples involved. To give equal weight to each

partner's needs, social status and personal likes and dislikes, Katherine had to re-write that part of the program completely. In my opinion, That misbegotten program has probably created more unhappy marriages than happy ones," she snorted.

"As I understand it then, you were given such a list the year you turned seventeen?" Gideon pursued, obviously interested in her reasoning. "Do I take it you didn't like the results?"

"Well, let's just say I caught one of the men on my list raiding O'Teague land right before the war was declared," Genevieve replied grimly. "Gregor was from the Ivanov Clan across the channel and anytime he was caught in O'Teague territory, he used the excuse that he was there to court me to be where he wasn't supposed to be. And he—well let's just say that I found him to be less than honorable in his treatment of women. Before she left for Fenris I asked Katherine to ensure that her changes were implemented into the Maker program that will be used from now on."

Gideon looked thoughtful. "They just let you do that?"

"I didn't ask permission," Genevieve told him.

Overhearing this last, Zack attempted to turn a laugh into a cough, gave up and howled. Gideon stared at him, puzzled. "What is so funny?"

Still laughing, Zack replied, "Not asking permission for stuff like that must run in the family. Remind me to tell you a story about how I ended up with so many nephews and cousins living on Fenris sometime. I bet your Makers won't notice any changes to the program either—Katherine's good."

Genevieve had seen the outdoor pavilion and other preparations Drusilla had arranged for the arrival and Handfasting ceremony for the new couples, but she felt she was seeing it through new eyes when she showed it to Gideon. Several smaller colorful dome roofs had been fastened together to form a larger area for the Handfasting ceremony and wedding feast. The cupolas were held up with poles wrapped in colorful ribbons. To take advantage of the breeze coming in off the water, no sidewalls had been put up so the entire area was open to the beach. Decorated tables of food with stasis shielding were already laid out for the afternoon and evening meals. Folding chairs had been placed around other tables set up for dining. A leaf-covered arbor for the Handfasting ceremonies itself had been erected off to the side. Behind and a little to the right of the arbor were two smaller tables holding a stack of red and silver braided ribbons, glasses and clear decanters filled with a golden syrup.

Up the hill from the pavilion were a series of larger connected domes enfolding the main house and dormitories. Extensive and fragrant gardens marked with stone paths led up from the rotunda toward the main house. Twenty or thirty smaller, colorful porta domes had been set up to provide privacy for the newlywed couples at secluded spots in the gardens as well. Behind the flower gardens were the acres of fruit trees and a large vegetable garden that supplied the manor with food.

One of the acolytes struck a crystal gong and a single clear note pealed. Everyone quieted, directing their eyes towards the tiny woman who would be officiating at the Handfasting ceremony. She stood under a canopy of green, sunlight filtering down through the leaves. The woman was wearing what Gideon had learned was traditional dress for women on Vensoog, a loose blouse with a vest laced in under her breasts, soft pants and a knee-length split skirt in rainbow shades. The colors made her eyes seem an even more vivid green than the arbor. Her white hair was braided in a coronet around her face. A large multi-colored crystal pendant rested on her breast, and large drops of the same stones were braided into her hair and hung from her ears; she was attended by two slim teenagers similarly dressed but in paler tones.

"Good afternoon," her voice had a deep bell-like quality. "For those who do not know me, I am High Priestess Arella of Clan O'Teague. I will be performing the Handfasting ceremonies today. Since we have quite a few couples to unite this afternoon, each ritual will be brief. I will ask each couple to come forward and join me under the Greenleaf, we will perform the service, and then you will be free to enjoy the arranged festivities until it is time for the brides to leave for the wedding bower. If there are any here who wish for the Forever and A Day Handfasting, please let me know when you come forward." Arella consulted the infopad next to her.

"Genevieve and Gideon, please join me."

When the Laird and her betrothed had joined her, Arella said, "Please turn and face one another. Each of you cross your arms and take the others hands."

She picked up a thin, braided red and silver cord and laid it over their wrists, allowing the ends to dangle.

"Genevieve, Gideon, your crossed arms and joined hands create the symbol for Infinity. Today, we ask that the Light Of The Divine shine upon this union for a year and a day. In that spirit, I offer a blessing to this Handfasting."

"Blessed be this Handfasting with the offerings from the East — new beginnings that come each day with the dawn, junction of the heart, soul, body and mind."

"Blessed be this Handfasting with the offerings of the South — the untroubled heart, the heat of passion, and the tenderness of a loving home."

"Blessed be this Handfasting with the offerings of the West — the hastening eagerness of a raging river, the softness and pure cleansing of a rainstorm, and faithfulness as deep as the ocean."

"Blessed be this Handfasting with the offerings of the North — a solid footing on which to build your lives, richness and growth of your home, and the strength to be found by embracing one another at the end of the day."

Arella wrapped the dangling ends of the cord around the wrists of the bride and groom, binding them together loosely and tying a knot.

"The bonds of this Handfasting are not formed by these ribbons, or even by the knots connecting them. They are formed instead by your vows, by your pledge, to love and honor each other for a year and a day, at which time these vows may be renewed or dissolved by each according to their lights. Genevieve, Gideon, do you agree with the terms of this Handfasting?"

"We agree," they said in unison, and then Genevieve and Gideon stepped forward, hands still clasped, and kissed. Arella touched the cord and it slid off their hands, still tied. The acolyte a slim teenager in a pale robe stepped forward with a tray holding one of the glass boxes. Arella placed the cord inside the box and gestured for Gideon and Genevieve to each hold opposite ends of the box. The acolyte stepped back returning the tray to the table, where the second acolyte placed another empty box on it.

"By blood this oath is taken, on this day and in this hour," Arella intoned, touching the box with a small gold wand. Everyone felt the small surge of power. He had been warned to expect it so Gideon held firmly onto his end when the sharp stab of pain in his palm caused a drop of blood to form on his end of the box. Blood from a similar prick on Genevieve's hand met his in the center. The edges disappeared as the box sealed and their names and the date scrolled across the top in red. Examining his hand later, he found only a small pink scar had formed on his palm.

"This Knot is a symbol of your union. Hold it fast and give it an honored place in your home."

Genevieve slipped the box into a pocket of her wedding dress and Arella gestured the acolyte to step forward again, this time holding a tray with a clear decanter and two glasses. "For love and fertility," Arella said, pouring a small amount of golden syrup into the glasses. The two spouts of the decanter enabled both glasses to be filled at once with the same

amount of liquid. Genevieve and Gideon each held the glass to the other's lips as they drank, and then set the glasses back on the tray for the acolyte to take back to the table.

"Thank you Arella." Genevieve motioned for Lucas and Jayla to come forward. Holding Gideon's hand, she stepped up beside them.

"The O'Teague presents her new family, my husband Lord Gideon *ni* Warlord of Clan O'Teague, his son Lucas and niece Jayla." She made the announcement and led the way from the arbor to make room for the next couple.

Jayla looked at her. "Why didn't you say I was your First Daughter, the way Katherine did with Juliette when she introduced her to you," she demanded.

Genevieve took a deep breath. She would have much preferred not to have this conversation at this time. "I didn't announce it, because it isn't true," she said mildly. "The position of First Daughter is not one that is automatically given by birth or family position. It isn't just a title either; it requires a lot of hard work and dedication. You and I don't know each other well enough for either of us to make the decision if you will be cut out for the duties, or even if you want it once you understand the responsibility. I hope that we can become friends as we get to know one another. Perhaps this decision can be brought up later when we know more about each other."

"You don't like me," Jayla declared, a hint of tears in her voice as well as anger.

"Jayla—" Gideon began in annoyance just as Genevieve spoke.

"That isn't true," Genevieve said quietly. "I just don't know you. I hope we will get to like each other very much—"

Jayla dashed tears from her eyes and said stiffly, "May I be excused? I'm tired. I would like to go take a nap."

"Of course, dear," Genevieve said calmly, "As soon as dinner is over. You wouldn't want the other girls to think you are upset about anything, and they will if you leave so early."

Gideon had opened his mouth again but closed it at a slight shake of Genevieve's head. They watched Jayla as she stalked off to the table where Zacks children were sitting.

"I beg your pardon," he said, frustrated. "That was out of line. She just isn't happy and I don't know what to do about it."

Genevieve found herself patting his arm in reassurance. "It's alright. I expect these last few months have been a lot for her to handle. Didn't she lose her parents just a few months before you pulled her out of school? Her whole life has been turned upside down. Her parents are gone and so are her friends from school, she has a new father and a new home with new customs. It's actually reassuring she feels safe enough with you to lash out a little."

He gave her an odd look. "You're very understanding," he said.

"I lost my parents at a young age too and I remember what that was like," she said. "Oh, I was not as young as Jayla, but a lot of responsibility got dropped on me before I felt I was ready. When mother died in childbirth, suddenly I was Laird with the entire weight of the Clan riding on every decision I made. Unlike Jayla, I didn't have anyone it was safe to lash out at, but I sure wanted to. Give her time. I'm sure she'll regain her balance eventually."

"I hope so," Gideon returned, looking thoughtful. He didn't say so, but his memories of his late sister-in-law Celia, made him doubt Jayla would feel any need to change her behavior. He loved his brother's daughter, but he found her attitude frustrating. Genevieve's responses to things like Jayla's behavior had caught him by surprise several times since meeting her. The Vensoog ladies certainly seemed to have gotten different training, perhaps, he thought hopefully, they would be able to pass some of that onto Jayla.

When Zack and Katherine had returned to their table to watch the rest of the ceremonies, Gideon took the opportunity to ask Zack what had been in the syrup they drank during the ceremony.

Zack shrugged. "Payome, I think Katherine called it. She tells me it's traditional during the ceremony. It's supposed to make the first night a little easier. Apparently, it's a mild aphrodisiac with a touch of soother. She says the effects usually last a couple of hours so it won't wear off before the couple goes to bed." He grinned, "Since Katherine and I are pretty well at ease with each other, I don't think we're going to need it—Vernal and Corrine either, but you might," he teased Gideon, who snorted and cuffed him affectionately on the shoulder.

Corrine and Vernal chose to become handfasted, opting for the more involved Forever and A Day ceremony. Several couples of the same sex chose to announce their Handfasting at that time as well. As expected, the individual Handfasting ceremonies had taken most of the afternoon and part of the evening, and then any new single members were presented to the Clan.

The wedding feast turned into quite a party. Genevieve and Gideon as hosts presided over the head table attended by Katherine and Zack and Corrine and Vernal. As special witnesses, the Captain and his officers from the Dancing Gryphon had been seated with them. Drusilla had a place there as well, but she was seldom to be found sitting down. She kept jumping up to attend to many small problems that seemed require her attention. She

had provided music so the couples could dance with each other as well as games for the children.

To Genevieve's silent amusement, Lucas seemed to have been designated as Drusilla's dinner partner instead of sitting with the other children. It's started already she thought. I'm going to need a big stick to beat them off with before she comes of age. He had been following her around ever since they had been introduced. If Lucas persisted, she would have to ask Drusilla if his attentions were welcome or not.

In a rare quiet moment, Genevieve directed Gideon's attention to the children's table because she had noticed tension between Jayla and Zack's wards.

Gideon sighed. "I'm afraid they didn't hit it off well," he admitted. "Jayla has had such a different upbringing, and there were several incidents—just childish nonsense really, but I'm afraid I don't know much about handling young girls so I expect I wasn't as sympathetic as she thought I should be."

"Well, when we arrive at Glass Castle, I'm sure we can find some young ladies who share more of her interests," she said reassuringly. "In the meantime, perhaps she can accompany Drusilla into city when she is checking on the riverboat loads. Drusilla is older than Jayla, but it might serve."

He smiled at her. "Thank you. I confess I am getting to my wits end in dealing with her."

About an hour after the ceremonies had been concluded and the children sent to their rooms, a soft chime sounded. All the brides rose, each handing their groom a small crystal projecting a map to their quarters.

"Give us about twenty minutes or so to prepare before you gentlemen start for the house," Genevieve told Gideon. "Our efficient Drusilla has seen to it that each crystal will take you to the right room," she added as she followed Katherine and Corrine out of the pavilion.

New Beginnings

AS GENEVIEVE undressed slowly, she could feel the Payome kicking in causing slow warmth to build between her legs and her nipples felt swollen and sensitive. She picked up the negligee laid out on the bed. The gift of the gowns to all the brides had been her idea, but Drusilla had declared that there was nothing suitable in stores so she had designed them.

Genevieve had been busy with Parliament, so other than approving the material and expense of sewing, and knowing Drusilla was a skilled designer she had left the creation of the gowns in her baby sister's hands. Now Genevieve picked up hers and her mouth dropped open. Great Goddess! Her sixteen-year-old baby sister had designed *this*?

The material slid sensuously through her hands and along her body as she slipped it on. The loose gown was so thin it felt and looked like a green film and it clung to her skin showing every curve she had. The back started just above her buttocks, the deep vee in front went all the way to her navel and the split on both sides went more than halfway up her thighs. Hastily she picked up the matching robe and donned it. Looking in the mirror, she realized ruefully that the robe's translucent material didn't really make much of an improvement towards modesty.

As the door opened and Gideon entered, she caught a brief glimpse of Vernal passing with his head averted. The door slid closed behind Gideon, but he just stood transfixed, running his eyes over her. She could see him swallow and as his heated gaze rose to meet hers and she could feel herself blushing.

"Drusilla designed the gown and robe. All the brides got one. I'm going to have to ask her where she got the idea for the design—"I'm babbling, she thought. What is wrong with me?

Gideon moved forward slowly, raising a hand to thread his fingers through her unbound hair. "You look beautiful. Your hair is like fire," he said.

"Umm, you like red hair?" she asked inanely. Her prior experience with a man under the influence of Payome led her to expect their first encounter was going to be fast and a little rough.

Gideon surprised her. "Yes, I like your hair," he said, sliding his hands softly down her arms and bringing her fingers up to his mouth, pressing a kiss on them before laying them on the front of his shirt.

"Why don't you help me undress," he suggested, moving his hands back up to her shoulders and neck so he could cup her face for a kiss. The kiss was gentle and soft, giving her plenty of time to accustom herself to his mouth.

Obediently, Genevieve found herself sliding the buttons open on his shirt and pushing it off his shoulders even as she felt her lips parting for him. As Gideon continued his slow, gentle assault on her senses, she felt a deep, powerful need began to build. Subliminally she knew part of the sexual heat she was feeling was due to the Payome, but it had been

years since she had been with a man, and her body was waking up and remembering feelings she thought she had put away forever.

Gideon's skin was slightly rough under her hands, and a light sprinkling of blond hair on his chest made its way down his stomach, disappearing into his trousers. She felt the urge to see and feel more of him, but hesitated to begin to unfasten his pants, so instead she moved closer to him, sliding her arms around his neck and returning his kiss.

As their bodies touched, she could feel the iron control he was exercising to keep from moving too fast for her. When her hips touched his, she felt his arousal and he made a deep guttural sound of pleasure. For just an instant his control slipped, the kiss deepened and his hand tightened on her buttocks, pressing her harder against his swollen shaft.

Not completely in control after all, Genevieve thought naughtily, reaching for the fastening of his trousers.

The climax of their lovemaking was series of fierce and intense waves of pleasure. Afterward, when he collapsed atop her she could still feel faint tremors of pleasure running through her. Absently, she ran her hand through his thick waves blond hair and he turned to look at her anxiously. His expression relaxed when he saw she was smiling faintly at him.

"I think I saw some wine and finger foods on the terrace under a stasis field if you're hungry," Genevieve said.

"Not for food," Gideon said.

"Me neither," Genevieve admitted, reaching for him, wondering if the second time could possibly be as good as the first.

Gorla, her Quirka, woke her just as the sun was rising by bouncing off the balcony rail onto her pillow. Her quills rose as she discovered Gideon sprawled in sleep next to her mistress, but after sniffing his hair, she appeared to accept his presence in Genevieve's bed. The small foxlike pet had disliked Gregor intensely, Genevieve remembered, and the feeling had been mutual.

Carefully so as not to waken her new husband, Genevieve slid out of bed and opened the stasis field long enough to take out a couple of Gorla's favorite finger sandwiches before she made her way to the bathroom. Gorla's fur rippled with pleasure as it changed color to match the food set out.

Putting her hair up to keep it dry, Genevieve eyed her reflection in the mirror. She certainly looked like a woman who had enjoyed her wedding night, she reflected ruefully. Her body was sore in a couple of unaccustomed places too. Strange that Gorla had accepted Gideon so readily, she mused. Comparing the two men was useless because they were so

different, Genevieve thought. She was going to have to remember to thank her sister privately for ensuring this relationship was so much better than her last one. Everything about Gideon was different from Gregor not just Gorla's response to him and his to her. Gideon had seemed determined that she should enjoy their sexual encounters as much as he had. Had they really made love four or five times? She couldn't remember Gregor being particularly interested in her reactions to sex at all other than to make sure she was available for it.

Genevieve was so lost in thought she jumped in surprise nearly slipping and falling on the slippery floor when the shower door opened and Gideon stepped in. He caught her against his body, easily keeping her from falling.

"Didn't mean to scare you to death," he said laughing. "I thought we could wash each other's backs."

Genevieve was laughing too. "I'm not used to having company in the shower. I thought you were still asleep and I was trying not to wake you."

"Well, your Quirka wasn't so thoughtful; she wanted more food out of the stasis cube, so she tickled me until I woke up and got it for her. I hope you don't mind. Katherine told us they pretty much eat anything."

"Little glutton; I fed her too," Genevieve said indulgently. She handed him a soapy sponge as he talked, and he began running it over her body.

"Oh, no you don't," Genevieve grabbed a second sponge and began doing the same to him. "You don't get it all your own way this time. I get to play too."