



EXERPT – ALIEN TRAILS

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Juliette receives an assignment from the Parliamentary Council that both excites and intrigues her. She and Saura join an expedition team searching for the Lost City of the Elder races. Accompanied by a diverse group of explorers Juliette soon realizes that there are many dangers on the virgin continent of Kitzingen. When the exploration team encounters refugees from a crashed life boat, she spots a Thieves Guild tattoo on one of the three and is immediately suspicious. But the dangers on the expedition are nothing compared to what awaits Juliette when she returns home. Her old enemy, the brutal and callous Van Doyle, intends to kidnap her loved ones. He has placed a bounty on the capture of her young siblings. It is one his men intend to collect even if they kill to do it. Does she have the courage and skill to foil his plans and save her family from him? Or will they disappear, never to be seen again?

Gail Daley

Explorers

JULIETTE sipped her Cafka with mixed feelings as her sister left for her first night as a Port Recovery Security Officer. One part of Juliette was happy for her. She knew Lucinda was realizing a dream to be on the side of justice. Under their father's tutelage Lucinda had worked hard to become a cop; learning hand-to-hand fighting, tracking, sled racing, marksmanship, crime scene analysis, and a variety of other skills. If Lucinda wanted to be in Security Lord Zack found out what she needed to learn and worked up a study program for her enabling her to take advantage of her innate abilities.

However stern a taskmaster he was, his training methods were a walk in the park compared to what Juliette and her sisters had endured at the Thieves Guild run Placement Center on Fenris. Grouter's trainers were harsh, and botching a task assigned wasn't acceptable. Punishment for failure had been both painful and severe.

The years between their birth at the embryo lab and those at Grouters Child Placement Center left no time for play or childish pursuits. Juliette remembered only constant training and discipline accompanied by a constant, low-level anxiety. Yet in the lab there had been love. Yoshi, the lab tech who stood as mother to them after their birth from the artificial womb, had helped create them, loved them and then died to protect them.

When they were moved to the Placement Center, all that sustained them was memories of Yoshi's warmth and love.

The government placement center ran by Grouter wasn't a safe haven. Van Doyle, the head of the Fenriki Prostitution arm often came to the Placement Center on Fenris looking for 'new meat' for his customers who preferred their sexual partners underage.

Grouter and Van Doyle had existed in an uneasy state of cold war over the children. However, Grouter's status had enabled him to provide protection for the three girls from Van Doyle.

For many years Grouter had cherished a dream of creating a team to plan and carry out assignments to steal valuable information as well as jewelry and art from the wealthy or from governments and private industry. Lucinda, Violet and Juliette were the culmination of that dream.

From birth the three of them had grown up as a unit and considered themselves sisters. They were 'designer children' created and raised together in a lab in accordance with the instructions from Hans Grouter. Grouter was responsible for some of the Thieves Guild's more lucrative branches: buying and selling information, fencing stolen art and jewelry and occasionally arranging for the odd assassination or two.

The girls received unique training from Guild specialists in using their genetically designed abilities. Lucinda was the planner, Juliette the infiltrator who actually entered the targeted buildings or ships, and Violet, the empath, studied the marks for weaknesses and served as lookout when Juliette was inside a residence or business.

Juliette petted Saura who cooed at her, shaking off the bad memories, reminding herself their lives were different now. Thanks to her parents, the world was now theirs to create their own destinies. She really was happy for

Lucinda, she reminded herself. Lucinda was taking her first steps into independence. Juliette still felt a touch of melancholy; their plans for this summer marked the end of a too short childhood.

A childhood begun five years ago when they left Fenris. When Lady Katherine and Lord Zack had come to Grouter's Child Placement Center on Fenris, they had been looking for the twin sons of Lord Zack's blood-brother Timon. Lady Katherine and Juliette had immediately felt a connection and when the couple left Fenris, the girls came with them as well as the two boys. Although Grouter protested the girl's removal, his subsequent arrest for involvement in Van Doyle's Child Prostitution ring negated any claim on them he might have pursued.

With Lady Katherine and Lord Zack Juliette had felt safe enough for the first time in her life to relax and react to situations as any normal child did.

However, as Lady Katherine's First Daughter, she was exposed to the shenanigans of off-planet diplomats who saw a relationship with her as a way of opening a wedge to Lady Katherine, whose immigration immersion program was badly needed by the other Confederation members. To ensure refugees of the Karamine wars sent to them by the Confederation would be able to adapt to the laws and mores of each colony, Lady Katherine tweaked her program for each planet. Impatient with their place in the program, a number of diplomats tried to move their planet up on the list by opening up a wedge through childhood friendships with Lady Katherine's First Daughter. As she neared marriageable age, a few encouraged male relatives near Juliette's age to court her. For the most part the attempts were unsuccessful; Juliette had an uncanny ability to judge a person's motives and what she considered a realistic opinion of her personal appearance.

Glancing in the mirror over the vid-case, Juliette found her looks very ordinary. She was unimpressed by her fine-boned, regular features, dark red eyebrows over large green eyes, her short, straight nose, her generous, pale-lipped mouth and pointed chin. Her porcelain skin never took a tan, and she usually wore her curly mane of long red hair tied back in a ponytail or a braid to keep it out of her way. Unlike Lucinda, who was tall, blond and voluptuous, Juliette's figure was slim rather than curvy and she was a pint-sized five one compared to Lucinda's statuesque five ten.

Despite her small size, she was aware that many men found her intimidating. Her position as third in line to rule Veiled Isle meant she had been trained to take command in a crisis, and make and sometimes enforce, both popular and unpopular decisions. Although not by nature aggressive, she was well able to take command when it was required. Many young men found such an underlying strong presence off-putting. Additional self-defense training with Lord Zack in weapons and tactics meant she could out shoot and out fight most boys her age. Juliette's programmed DNA designed her with an eidetic memory, high intelligence and the '*glamour*' ability to camouflage her body to blend into the background. The programming also made her naturally manipulative. Lady Katherine was Clan O'Teagues political representative in Parliament; manipulating situations and people for Clan O'Teague's advantage required precisely the skills Juliette had been created with. Those skills often made young men uncomfortable though.

Parliament met quarterly, so Juliette only had to be in Port Recovery when it was in session. During recess, she would normally have returned to Veiled Isle to study crop rotations, fishing rights, and Clan law so she could give judgement in civil or criminal cases when required. However this summer Lady Katherine had given in to Juliette's wish to spend some time with one of the exploration teams working on Kitzingen, the closest of the large continents.

When the Clans first came to Vensoog, they had settled on the Equator Islands. The Karamine War had interrupted plans to explore the rest of the planet. Now that it was over, the Clans returned to their plans to expand onto the continents. Kitzingen had been the first choice to explore because of its valuable Azorite power crystals. A joint Clan operation to mine them had been in force for years. Like all the joint Clan ventures, responsibility for its administration was rotated among the Clans on a yearly basis. Vensoog's founding mothers had taken steps to ensure that no one Clan was allowed to dominate the others by creating a monopoly in any area of government.

Lady Katherine did have an ulterior motive when she agreed to Juliette's request to join an exploration team for the summer: while many of the new settlements on Kitzingen would be worked as joint Clan efforts, the Clans had long-term plans to claim sections of each continent as a part of Individual Clan territory. Juliette was being sent out with the team to vet the areas explored for possible settlement sites. Although the stated purpose of Juliette's trip was to enjoy a vacation, her mother felt it was important for O'Teague to learn as much as possible about what assets could be found there before it became time to divvy up the territories.

Juliette knew when Lucinda returned after her shift the next morning, she herself would have already left for Kitzingen and subdued a pang of uneasiness. It would be a first time for both of them to not be under the same roof at the end of the day. Saura, her dactyl purred at her and rubbed her cheek consolingly on Juliette's.

Dactyls were empathic four-limbed mammals with wings. They were native to Vensoog and came in all sizes, some large enough to hunt the enormous water dragons living in the channels on Vensoog's Equator Islands, others like Saura were tiny. Most of the tiny Dactyls had a fine covering of short, down-covered fuzz on their body, leaving the front hands and back feet with their clawed talons bare of fur. Their hollow wing hair was longer and easily tangled. In flight, it closely resembled floating lint.

"It's her dream, Saura," Juliette told the sorrel colored dactyl. Saura made a small noise of commiseration.

"Hey!" Juliette told her, "Most of the time I love being a First Daughter, but it is nice to have a vacation occasionally. That's what this summer is going to be! We're going to have a good time with the exploration team, and make *lots* of new friends!"

Saura made a small noise, halfway between a snort and a laugh.

While Juliette was looking forward to her time with the exploration team, the same couldn't be said for Jorge Carmody, the expedition leader. When he heard about Juliette being added to his team he wasn't pleased. His team was sponsored by L'Roux clan so he lodged his protest with the woman in charge of funding for it. He scowled fiercely at the Duchesse Ilea St. Vyre who serenely sipped a cup of Cafka.

Carmody was a tall skinny carrot top with a long face and a deceptively blank expression leading the unwary to think he wasn't very smart. It wasn't true; he had a sharp mind, a love of adventure and wasn't afraid to take risks. His reputation for taking chances was why Lord Zack had sent one of his former re-con crew with Juliette as a bodyguard. Lord Zack had camouflaged the role as a working vacation for Mann and his wife Bridge, but Carmody hadn't been fooled.

"Dammit," he said, "I don't want to take a spoiled underage girl on this expedition. We have serious work to do!"

The Duchesse lifted one elegant shoulder negligently. "I was under the impression you wanted to travel out to those ruins you saw on the First-In Scout vid."

He glared at her. "You mean if I don't take her, I can't explore the direction I want?"

Ilea smiled. "It's very important to the Clans to get a report on what is available on Kitzingen from an unbiased source."

"You get that from the expedition reports," he protested.

"I'm not saying you leaders are biased, but you aren't looking at the land with a view to setting up cities, ranches, or farms. If it makes you feel better, all the teams are getting Clan observers this time."

"Does it have to be *her*?"

"I'm afraid so. We drew lots you see. What's the matter Jorge? Surely a bold explorer like yourself isn't afraid of her parents?"

Ignoring the taunt, he asked, "Will I get the supplies and the team I need to go to the city?"

When she nodded, he decided to push a little. "I also want a shuttle to drop us off close to this latitude and longitude." He named an area near the Quaking Mountains almost in the center of the continent.

"How close?"

"Within 60 klicks."

"You drive a hard bargain," the Duchesse said. "That will mean extra flying time for the shuttle, but it's a deal."

The situation wasn't all bad, he consoled himself. He was going to be able to find the ancient city, and Lady Juliette's bodyguards would be a valuable addition to the team. Lord Zack might have disguised their being there as a vacation, but he knew why they were going along.

The morning of Juliette's departure, Lord Zack and Lady Katherine arrived at her apartment at dawn to pick her up and take her to the shuttle's departure point, a shuttle port on Versailles Isle, L'Roux's Clan Embassy. Since all her other supplies and baggage had been packed and loaded yesterday, Juliette only had a satchel to carry.

Despite there being no blood tie, Juliette and Lady Katherine shared similar coloring. Both had green eyes and red hair, but Juliette's long curly mane was tied back in a pony tail today, whereas Lady Katherine's hair was cut in a shoulder length bob. She folded Juliette in a warm embrace, whispering, "Have a good time, but be careful."

Lord Zacks sauterne face was serious when he hugged her. "If you can't be good, be careful," he told her, causing Juliette to laugh at the similarity of the advice.

He went over to give some last-minute instructions to the couple Juliette had lightheartedly called her minders; Bridge, a tall, statuesque brunette, and her husband Terrance Mann, a chubby, dark-skinned individual with a happy-go-lucky grin, both nodded and smiled at her. Bridge winked.

"Zack!" Lady Katherine called. "They need to load the shuttle. We don't want our daughter to get the reputation of holding up the expedition!"

"We'll take good care of her boss," Terrence assured him. "She's tough and smart, remember? Any twelve-year old who can take over a pirate ship all on her lonesome the way she did is the least helpless of all your daughters," he reminded him.

"C'mon kid, let's get loaded," he told Juliette, and followed her and his wife into the shuttle.

Inside, Juliette found the rest of the team waiting. She took a seat across from Isaac Jordan, the mapmaker. Isaac was a medium sized young man, with a brown complexion, dark curly hair and melting brown eyes behind absurdly long lashes.

"Wow!" he said, looking admiringly at Juliette. "Nobody told me you were so pretty. Welcome to the team, First Daughter."

Jorge Carmody, the expedition leader scowled at him. "Lay off, Jordan. Everyone, this is First Daughter Lady Juliette. Lady Juliette is here as an observer for the joint Clans to assess sites for potential colonization. Her father told me to make sure all the men on the team know she is underage. Lord Zack is one tough S.O.B. and I would prefer not to get on his bad side, so back off."

Inwardly Juliette rolled her eyes in exasperation. She wasn't sure who she wanted to kick the hardest; her father for intimidating Jorge into warning off her colleagues, or Jorge for insinuating she was a spoiled child so everyone should keep their distance. Obviously he wasn't happy to have her along. None of her justifiable ire showed in her face or voice however. Instead she laughed and said archly, "Don't be silly Jorge. Dad's a sweetheart. I'm sure he wouldn't really skin you if my teammates are friendly with me."

Beside her, Bridge turned a laugh into a cough and her husband rolled his eyes. Jorge scowled at her for making fun of his warning, and Carmen Soto the expedition's cook who was sitting beside him, patted his hand soothingly while giving Juliette an outraged glare. Carmen was a bronze-skinned woman with a lush figure and classic features. She appeared in her late twenties. It was fairly obvious from her protective attitude toward Jorge the pair were in a relationship of some kind.

Juliette filed the thought away for future reference. To break the tension, she suggested. "Why don't you show us the scout's vid. I'm sure everyone is as curious about it as I am."

"Yes, I'd love to see it," Isaac seconded. "I might be able to spot something. My dad was an archeologist on Saramon and he taught me a lot about recognizing buildings when the ground has been reclaimed by nature."

"Sure, why not," Carmody said. He went forward and asked the pilot if he could access the shuttle's interior screen.

When he returned, having gotten permission, he told them, "The entire vid would take about 10 hours since it covers the whole planet, so I'm going to forward it to the section on Kitingzen."

Juliette leaned forward in her seat as the vid progressed, mentally marking spots for possible settlement. The drone had first made a slow circle of the entire continent, and then crisscrossed back and forth trying to cover as much territory as possible. The segment on Kitingzen took almost three hours but since the trip was around eight hours no one was bored.

Juliette, whose mind had been trained to analyze multiple subjects at the same time, paid close attention to the vid while covertly watching how the expedition leader and the team interacted. His resentful attitude could create problems. She needed to decide what tactic to take to convince Jorge she was an asset instead of a liability.

The Outlaws

THERE WAS camp in the Quaking Mountains closer to the ancient City than the one set up by Jorge's exploration team. In sharp contrast with the well-appointed encampment Jorge's explorers set up, this camp was a hardscrabble affair. There were no neat, pop-up domes, only a few roughly built shelters out of branches.

Unlike the Clan sponsored explorers, this group was not made up of highly-skilled technicians this group was in this situation because their Life Boat crashed on Kitingzen after being dumped off a ship nearing Vensoog two years ago. They had no food left from the LB and since their combined hunting skills were mediocre they often went hungry.

The ship who dumped them had been registered as The Free Trader Star Reacher and captained by Miles Turcotte. It was rumored you could book passage on the Star Reacher even if you had been Patrol Posted and some of his passengers had done just that. Turcotte disguised his ships relationship with the notorious Thieves Guild by pretending to engage in the trade of luxury goods whenever he made port carrying a few passengers. The ship did in fact engage in trading on various planets, but the Star Reacher's real business was smuggling.

Two years ago, the Star Reacher had been just outside the Vensoog solar system when they had aroused the notice of a Patrol cruiser. Knowing escape from the faster cruiser was impossible, Turcotte had dumped his illegal cargo. Not knowing for sure if his passengers had been Patrol posted, he took no chances on having his ship confiscated for aiding an escapee. He shoved his passengers into a lifeboat programmed to reach Vensoog, the nearest planet.

May of the passengers had come aboard in singly or in small groups. Tovarish, a human/Lupin cross and his woman Sirrah, had run a confidence game in New London on Camelot until they were found out by a private cop investigating on behalf of complaining citizens. The pair had got aboard the Star Reacher one jump ahead of the planetary security forces.

Dobbon Greenleaf, the bastard son of an Aphrodite noble and a Fae slave, and Starlmon a Selkie/human cross had been muscle employed by the local drug lord as collectors until they accidentally killed the wrong person. They too discovered an urgent need to get off Camelot.

Ladru and his two wives, Droari and Eloyoni were Trellians who had already been aboard the Star Reacher when it reached Camelot. They were now a group of three, but Ladru and Droari had been crew on another Jack Ship. Eloyoni, the second wife had been taken in a raid by Ladru. She had accepted marriage in preference to being sold into a Guild run brothel. Droari Ladru's Chief Wife had not been happy with the addition to the family and constantly made life unpleasant for the younger, prettier and better born girl. Their ship had come to grief when it tangled with a tougher Free Trader. Escaping on a lifeboat and rescued, Ladru had taken passage for his family to Vensoog where he thought there was a Guild base and they would have a chance to sign on with another ship.

The final member of the group was Marc Trevellyan, who had booked passage to Fenris. It was rumored he was the son of Jerrod Van Doyle, the Lieutenant who ran prostitution on Fenris and several other worlds. He too had needed to get off planet in a hurry; he had stabbed the son of a highly placed noble in a dispute over a card game (Trevellyan had been cheating) and a warrant was posted on him.

When Captain Turcotte ordered them to grab their gear and get into the lifeboat, the three women and five men were looking down the barrel of a pulse pistol held in the steady hands of the first mate. Wisely, they did as they were told.

Captain Turcotte informed them the Star Reacher was just outside the orbit of the planet Vensoog. There was a rumor of a Guild base on the unclaimed continent of Brisai and he suggested his passengers try to land there.

Turcotte was aware the LB was programmed to aim for the nearest inhabitable land mass, but to gain their cooperation, he told them to try for Brisai anyway. Despite stringent efforts from Tovariss, the only one with piloting skills, to reprogram their destination, they smacked down on Kitingzen in the midst of the Quaking Mountains. That had been two years ago. Named for the unstable fault lines causing numerous quakes, the mountain range was near the center of the largely unsettled continent. When they escaped the LB, they were in sad shape. No one had been injured, but the group had no weapons to use in hunting food except knives (Captain Turcotte didn't permit passengers to carry firearms) and only the emergency rations carried by the LB. Knowing the food would soon run out, Tovariss suggested they make some old-fashioned hunting weapons—bows and arrows and set snares.

Again at Tovariss' suggestion, they opted to stick together as a group for mutual protection and try to make their way to the coast where they might find a town or a city. As Tovariss was the only one with any kind of a plan to get back to civilization, the others began to accept his suggestions and he became the defacto leader of the group. But it was a precarious leadership and he knew it.

Each morning and evening, Ladru's second wife Eloyoni presided over a smoking fire where she would cook whatever the foraging party found. If they returned with nothing, no one ate that night.

Being the only person who knew anything about preparing food, Eloyoni had been elected as camp cook, a chore she didn't really mind as she could taste the food as she cooked it.

For Eloyoni each day since they had landed on Kitingzen blended so seamlessly into the next they were virtually indistinguishable. Hunger became a way of life. Each morning she rose from a restless sleep and spent what free time she had gathering any plants she remembered from her other life as being edible. At night she prayed Ladru would be too tired to want to use her; once the novelty of having a high caste woman in his bed wore off, sex with him had become less frequent. He generally preferred Droari as a bed partner, which was a relief to both women. Slowly, the refugees had been moving toward the east, hoping to reach the coast. The journey was slow because a part of each day had to be spent in hunting and setting up the snares. Starlmon and Ladru proved to have some skill at this, but game was scant and they often went without food except for the wild plants Eloyoni garnered.

A New Land

JORGE'S EXPEDITION had flown non-stop across the sea for six hours and then roughly a third of the way into the interior of the continent before landing at the edge of the Quaking Mountains. Earlier shuttles had brought in the team's baggage,

supplies and the horses they would use to reach the ruins. It had been late afternoon when Juliette's shuttle landed. The journey to the Ancient City was estimated to take about six weeks once they reached what Jorge hoped was an overgrown road left by those same Ancient Ones. Jorge started from this point because the road appeared to be easier to reach from here than other spots nearer the city.

Upon arrival everyone had erected their individual pop-up domes while Carmen set out a hasty meal of sandwiches. Thanks to practice during the yearly roundups on Veiled Isle, Juliette had got hers up quickly. When she was done, she took pity on Isaac and helped him put his together. She had time before Carmen was ready to serve dinner to put in a hasty call to Lucinda, who had just woke up.

After dinner and the short meeting Jorge had just held, Juliette sat in front of her canvas dome relaxing. The meeting had been short, mostly because he had simply assigned camp duties on the trail and laid down a series of safety procedures he wanted followed. He hadn't allowed any discussion or questions. Since none of the requests had been unreasonable, she hadn't been bothered by the arbitrary orders.

Saura was sleeping in her lap. She stroked the fine hair on Saura's back with her fingers. Saura's wings, with their long, fine hair were doubled up against her sides. Her hand-like front paws were folded under her pointed nose, and her large ears rested on her downy cheeks. She had acquired a grip on Juliette's belt with her back talons. This behavior, a holdover from the wild, would keep her from falling if her mistress forgot she was there and stood up. The small flying mammals were much admired as pets, but very rare. They were shy in the wild and usually needed to bond with a human when they were young. Juliette had acquired Saura when the dactyl was barely a few weeks old; her mother had died, and she and her three littermates would have perished in their nest if Lucinda and Rupert hadn't found them while on a plant foraging expedition. They had brought the four orphan kits home with them and Juliette, Lucinda, Rupert and Rupert's twin Roderick had adopted them. Her other sister Violet hadn't been forgotten, but she already had a bond with a half-grown sand dragon named Jelli. Like Dactyls, Sand Dragons were native to Vensoog and could grow to be as big as draft horses or mastiff dogs. As their father had remarked, one pet that size per family was enough.

The first settlers had named them Sand Dragons because the hard, shiny, scale-like skin plates covering their upper body resembled dragon scales. Sand Dragons were omnivorous mammals, swimming from island to island to find fresh food.

When Juliette had called Lucinda before dinner, Violet had called at the same time. Lucinda had accepted both calls so they could talk together the way they had at home. The call had made Juliette feel a little less lonely. This was going to be her first night without either of her sisters under the same roof. That was going to be strange enough, but Kitzingen felt different from Veiled Isle, Juliette thought, continuing to stroke Saura in an unconscious need for reassurance. The dactyl was asleep, but her mistress picked up her pet's contentment and was comforted. A faint breeze brought in the smell of wild plants and flowers to Juliette as she sat sipping her Cafka. A cup of it before bedtime was a little ritual Lady Katherine had taught her children. Juliette usually used it to settle her mind and put the day's events in order. She smiled, remembering what Lady Katherine had said when she told her she wanted to spend the summer with an exploration team. "Yes. It's time for you to come out of your cocoon and spread your wings."

"I expected you to have a problem with my going," Juliette admitted.

Her mother laughed wryly. "Oh, I do, but that's my problem, not yours. You need to learn you can stand on your own feet without my hovering over you like a mama dragon."

Exploring a new territory was going to be exciting. She wondered what new kinds of animals and plants they might find here. Kitingzen was largely unexplored. Maybe that was the difference between it and Veiled Isle. It wasn't as if she hadn't camped out before; the family did it on a yearly basis during Roundup. But Veiled Isle, even in unsettled areas, had been pretty well explored since man had settled on Vensoog. Kitzingen wasn't. Except for the southern coastal area where the Azorite mine was located, the continent was largely terra incognita. Of course, there were the aerial vids like the one they had watched on the shuttle trip, and topographical maps made by the first-in scouts, but these gave only a quick overview.

"What did you think about the meeting?" inquired Isaac Jordon, their map maker. Juliette jumped. She had been so lost in her thoughts she hadn't seen him approaching. This was Isaac's first expedition too.

Unlike the other two men on the team, Isaac apparently wasn't intimidated by Jorge's warning to stay away from Juliette. In the short time since she met him, he had made it plain he found her attractive. This was a novel experience for her and a pleasant one, since unlike some of the previous young men who had courted her, she was sure he had no ulterior motives since he had no political ax to grind.

"About what?" she asked.

He grinned at her, showing white, even teeth. He sat down in the empty chair opposite her. "I thought I would pick your brain about the way our boss set up chores and trail procedures. I guess it's plain I've never been out like this."

Juliette laughed. "I did notice," she admitted. "The camp chore assignments seem to be fair, and he is planning to rotate us all so if there is a chore someone really hates or is terrible at, I imagine they can be switched around. I would have thought with your specialty, you would have spent time out in the wild though."

"The places we went for training were all reachable in a day or a few hours, so we never camped out," he admitted.

"You said you were a twin. Is your brother a map maker too?"

"No, Isiah finds what I do interesting, but he prefers to spend his time researching in the archives. He managed to land a job there this summer."

"Are you guys identical, mirror or fraternal?"

Isaac looked a little startled. "Mirror twins, I think. You seem to know a lot about twins."

"My foster brothers, Rupert and Roderick are fraternal twins," she explained. There is a family resemblance, but their features aren't identical and they aren't really interested in the same stuff; Roderick's into computer coding and Rupert is a botanist."

He grinned at her. "Isiah and I have similar looks, but my mother always said I was better looking. If you don't mind my asking, why is a First Daughter out here on this trip? I thought Firsts had to spend most of their time learning their duties from their Mom. Isn't your mother hereditary ruler of some Isle? I also heard she's famous for that immersion program she wrote for immigration."

Juliette giggled. "Oh, my, wait till I tell her that! Actually, she *is* O'Teague's Parliamentary Rep and I do spend time shadowing her when it's in session, but it will be a long time before I will need to take over ruling Veiled Isle. Mom is still young, and Aunt Corrine is only in her fifties. When I wanted to take time off to come out here they said the experience of being on my own would do me good."

"You didn't come by yourself though," he said shrewdly, nodding toward the dome shared by Bridge and Terrance Mann. It was a thinly veiled reference to the Mann's being her bodyguards. Everyone knew they were along because Lord Zack had wanted her to have reliable Clan backup.

"My parents are a little over protective," she admitted, smiling. "Dad thinks Jorge is a risktaker. The team won't lose by having them accompany me; Terrence used to be in his old re-con unit, so he's a good man to have with us, and Bridge is partially trained as a healer."

"Your parents hovering doesn't bother you?" he asked, studying her curiously.

She looked at him in surprise. "No, why should it?"

He shrugged. "I've noticed that most girls your age are straining to break away from their parent's influence."

"Maybe so," she replied indifferently. "My sisters and I were on our own before Mom and Dad adopted us. It's nice knowing someone bigger and stronger than you has your back." She said nothing else. She and her sisters didn't discuss their time in the Thieves' Guild placement center with outsiders, any more than she went about telling them she and the others were 'designer kids' who had been born in a lab using an artificial uterus. She had learned through hard experience that not everyone reacted positively to learning the three of them had been designed and created in a lab instead of born normally.

"The way you got your dome up so quick, I bet your family does a lot of camping," he said, changing the subject when he saw it made her uncomfortable.

"Every year during Roundup," she agreed with a smile.

"What's Roundup?"

"Veiled Isle has a lot of farms and ranches," she explained. "Every year before the swarms start, we all go up into the hills and help bring the herds and flocks down into Blue Talon Canyon, so they'll be sheltered from the bug swarms and the wind."

"Did you get your stuff set up, Juliette?" inquired Bridge Mann as she and her husband strolled up holding hands. Bridge was a tall brunette with vivid blue eyes. Her husband Terrance had dark skin, tightly curled hair like wires, twinkling eyes and a merry smile. The jolly appearance was deceptive; he had been a skilled man-hunter as well as a bomb disposal expert on Lord Zack's Re-con team.

"Yes, I'm all set," she replied. "It will only take about 20 minutes to get it packed back up when we leave. I sure wouldn't want to cause a delay on the first leg of our trip up into the mountains."

"How about you Jordan?" Mann asked him. "I notice you had quite a time setting up your dome this evening. Still looks like it needs some work."

Mann, like her father, still retained a faint aura of the deadly fighter he could become if pushed. She had noticed that the younger men in the expedition walked wary around him. Isaac Jordan appeared to be the exception. He made no move to respond to Mann's thinly veiled hint that he should return to his own quarters. "I'm all set too, thanks to Juliette's help," he said. "Other than a bed and my clothes, I don't have a lot of equipment. Just this," he gestured to the tablet in his lap. "and an aerial drone for mapping. Most of my work will go directly into the archives. I'll upload it whenever we get in sat-com range."

"I'd love to hear more about your Roundups at your home." He said, settling more comfortably in his chair.

Bridge and Juliette both giggled while Mann eyed him with exasperation not unmixed with amusement.

"Tomorrow is going to start early," Bridge said firmly. "I think all of us should retire to our domes for the night."

Juliette grinned at her. "Sure," she said, scooping up the sleeping dactyl and standing up. "Good night everyone. We'll have plenty of time to talk about our Roundup's on the trail Isaac."

As Isaac walked away, Mann asked pointedly, "Does he know you are underage?"

"You heard Jorge tell him so on the way out here," she reminded him. "And if he doesn't, I'm sure Dad's instructions involve telling him, don't they?"

Mann eyed her a little warily. Despite her tiny size and fragile looks, Mann knew Juliette was tough and smart. He had been a member of the re-con team who followed a twelve year old girl up to the Jack Ship that had kidnapped Clan children during the Kitingzen Incident. She had not only infiltrated the ship on her own, she had rigged the auxiliary controls so that their shuttle could come aboard without the bridge sensors noticing it. She had locked down those controls so tight a trained com-tech had needed to physically unlock each one.

"You aren't going to give me trouble about this are you?"

She grinned at him. "I'll be good. I promised Dad I would. But I am going to make friends on this trip and not all of them are going to be women. Get used to it."

Tucked in her bedroll for the night with Saura snuggled up under her chin, she was conscious of a faint uneasiness. It didn't take much to identify the cause; this was the first night of her life that she was too far away to feel the reassuring auras of Lucinda and Violet. Saura chuffed comfortingly against her neck and snuggled deeper. "It's strange for you too, isn't it?" Juliette said. "This is going to be your first night without your littermates too. Guess we'll just have to make do with each other."

Saura purred in agreement, and Juliette dropped to sleep, comforted by the familiar feel of the dactyl's mind.

Dapple

BRIDGE HAD been correct about Jorge rousting the team out before the sun came up the next morning. After breakfast, he had a short meeting. "Today, I'm taking a team to find a path to the road we saw on the vid. It looked old, but it should make traveling easier. We may be gone overnight. Mann, Sommers and Jordon will accompany me. I suggest those of you who stay in camp spend your time checking the gear and supplies to make sure we have everything we need because once we leave this camp, it will be difficult for the Clans to drop supplies to us. As I told you on the way out here, we will be out of com range once we start out because the communication array only passes over this area of Kitzingen every two or three weeks."

When she and Bridge had finished cleaning up after breakfast, Juliette wandered over to the rope corral where Cecily Nguyn and Terrella Morse, the horse wranglers, were sorting the horses into pack animals and riding mounts. Both women were tall and strongly built, aptly suited to their profession. Terrella had cut her brown hair short, presumably so it wouldn't be in her way, and Cecily kept hers in a long braid.

The horses had been obtained from a new immigrant named Simon Franz, who owned a small ranch outside the Azorite village. Unlike Mann and most of Lord Zacks old unit, he hadn't been a part of Lady Katherine's original Matching program offering homeless soldiers a place if they agreed to marry a Vensoog woman. He and his family were some of the refugees forced on Vensoog by the Confederation as a part of the war reparations. As soon as he had been released from the refugee village on a nearby island, Franz had immediately began building up a horse herd and now ran a lucrative business selling animals to the exploration teams. The wranglers who had accompanied the animals had departed with the shuttle bringing in the team.

"How do they look to you?" Juliette asked Terrella, who was watching her partner attempt to rope a large dapple gelding.

"They're a pretty good bunch," Terrella replied. "Franz always has good animals. We've used him before." She eyed the big dapple-gray Cicely was trying to rope. "Although that one might be troublesome. He's got the size but he's a little jumpy for a pack animal."

Juliette studied the big gray horse thoughtfully. He stood sixteen hands with a sleek coat in dappled shades of gray, dark socks and a black mane and tail. She shared a small ripple of amusement with Saura as he ducked out of the frustrated Cecily's loop of rope for the third time.

"He might make a good riding horse," she suggested. "Mind if I try my luck?"

"Sure, why not? Cece! Let him go. Juliette wants to see if he'll respond to her."

Cecily walked over to the edge of the corral, wiping her brow. "Here," she thrust the rope she carried at Juliette. "Hope you have better luck with him than I've been having."

Juliette ducked under the corral rope and walked out towards the horse. The other horses moved restlessly away from her, but the gray stood still, eyeing her alertly. The two women watched in silence when Juliette stopped about ten paces from him. She reached out with the same sense she used to contact Saura and sensed the dapple was only high-spirited, not mean. At Grouters she had been given training on how to deal with the animals some wealthy citizens of Fenris kept as a part of their security. Some of the guardians had been skittish, alerting when intruders were spotted, but a few others had been vicious, attack-trained animals. Refusal to enter and burglarize a target wasn't allowed. She had been forced to learn to deal with both animal and humanoid protectors as well as the electronic ones. She utilized that training now.

"Well now," she murmured to the horse. "What's all this?"

Dapple turned bright eyes to her, his ears pricked forward. He was listening. Slowly she reached into her pocket and took out a cube of sweetener she had saved from breakfast, holding it out toward him, palm flat. She waited while he debated coming closer to take it from her. He snorted, tossing his head and dancing a few steps toward her. One of the other horses also saw the treat and recognizing it, headed for Juliette. Dapple gave a territorial whinny and rushed forward with his ears laid back to claim his prize. When the other horse backed off, he gently lipped the sugar off her open palm.

Juliette chuckled, rubbing his jaw with her free hand and running the other down his nose as she blew gently into one nostril. He blew back at her, generously sharing a spray of horse snot on her shirt. She slipped the free end of the loop over his neck, slipping the loose end through the noose and looping that end over his nose.

"There now," she told him, "that isn't so bad now is it? I don't think you're a bad guy, I think you've just got a lot of energy. Want to go for a run?"

He docilely allowed her to lead him to the gate where Bridge and the wranglers were waiting. Bridge handed Juliette her own hackamore she had brought from their supplies, and Juliette changed Cicely's rope for it.

Terrella handed Juliette a brush, and she began to brush him down, allowing him to become used to her hands and voice.

Saura, who had obeyed Juliette's wish that she not distract the gelding, now fluttered up to stop at his eye level. Juliette turned over the brush and began to comb out his mane. The horse eyed Saura suspiciously, snorting a little when she dropped to sniff his nose. He sniffed her in return and then blew out. Saura returned the gesture and fluttered up to sit between his ears. He tossed his head, snorting, and Saura rode the toss, hanging on to his mane with her tiny hand-like paws.

"Easy now," Juliette projected reassurance at him and he quieted down.

"Going to take this one as a personal mount?" Terrella asked.

"Yes, if that's okay. I'm calling him Dapple."

Terrella shrugged. "It's alright by us. I'll make sure Severance puts it in the records."

"If you're planning on riding him this morning, I must come along," Bridge reminded her.

Terrella handed Bridge a rope. "Then you need to pick out a mount too. How does that little bay mare look to you?"

"She'll be fine," Bridge said, taking the lasso and ducking under the rope.

Juliette waited until Bridge had also brushed out the mare before Terrella opened the rope corral so they could exit.

The two women led the horses over to the domes. Even though his withers were over her head, Juliette saddled the gray horse with the ease of long practice. She slid her new pulse rifle into the saddle scabbard. The gun had been a gift especially for the trip from her father, who made her practice aiming and firing under a variety of conditions until he was satisfied she could handle it. At her parent's insistence she already wore her Force Wand and pulse pistol constantly. She checked her saddlebags to make sure the equipment she needed to test soil, water and plants was safely stashed there. She left her vid-binocs in the bag too since she didn't want them bouncing around her neck when she let the gray run.

Bridge rode up while Juliette was checking the saddle bags. She watched in approval as Juliette did a flying mount from the ground without using the stirrups.

"Very fancy," remarked Carmen Sandoval, the camp cook and Jorge's second in command. "Where are you planning to go?"

Juliette ignored the first part of her remark, suspecting Carmen, who had picked up on Jorge's irritation with her presence, of attempting to antagonize her by implying she was showing off. "To the west. I saw a stand of trees over there this morning with my vid-binocs. I need to see if it might make a good settlement. I plan on testing the soil and plants and to check for water."

"I assume you recorded your destination with Severance?"

"Yes, I did that this morning before I walked over to the horses," Juliette told her.

Carmen nodded. "Jorge likes a visual record of where ever we go." She handed Juliette and Bridge a couple of shirt-collar vid-cams and then brought out an even smaller one. "Do you think you could persuade your dactyl to wear this? It would give us an air visual as well."

"Sure," Juliette told her. "Saura! Come here sweetie."

When the dactyl landed on her saddle horn, she affixed the tiny vid-cam to her collar next to one of the gems adorning it.

Saura twisted her head trying to see the new addition. Bridge chuckled and dug in her saddlebag for a small folding mirror which she opened so Saura could see herself. "Vanity, thy name is female," she said, grinning. "I told Terrence this was for old style signaling. I didn't tell him it was useful for other stuff."

Juliette laughed, "I'm sure he'll figure it out."

"Are your weapons charged?" Carmen demanded, interrupting the laughter.

"Yes, both my rifle and pistol have full charges," Juliette assured her.

"Mine as well," Bridge added.

"Well, we'll see you later then," Carmen told her. "Be sure and return before dusk tonight. I don't want to have to hunt for you in the dark if you get lost."

As soon as they had ridden out of hearing of the camp, Bridge remarked. "Wow, she sure doesn't have much of an opinion of us, does she?"

Juliette shrugged. "I assume she's just picking up on Jorge's antagonism. They seem close."

"Close as in sharing a cot or just extra friendly?"

Juliette had opened her mouth to answer when they heard a horse coming up behind them. It was Maribelle Heyer, the team xenobiologist. Maribelle was in her early thirties. She was only a few inches taller than Juliette with sun-streaked light brown hair and laugh lines around her eyes.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked, slowing her horse to keep pace with them. "Jorge doesn't like us riding out alone and you guys are the only ones leaving the camp today."

"Sure. We're only riding over to that stand of trees I saw this morning though," Juliette replied. "I'm going to test the soil and water if there is any. The Clans want me to identify a few areas where they can put a settlement."

"Wonderful! If there is a waterhole, I might find evidence of a new species. At the least, I'll be able to identify the animals who use it."

Smiling at the woman's single-minded enthusiasm, Juliette nudged Dapple into a brisk trot. He had a smooth gait that ate up the distance easily.

The ground between the camp and the stand of trees was covered with a yellow, long-bladed grass that came up to a horse's knees. The grass was broken up by scrub bushes scattered through it. The bushes had pale yellow, triangle shaped leaves. Beyond the trees, the prairie disappeared into the horizon in an endless sea of yellowed grass.

The sameness of the terrain made distances deceptive. It took them nearly two hours to reach the stand of trees. As they got closer to their destination, the spindly shrubberies changed to thick, low-lying maroon flowering shrubs loaded with pale blue berries. A family of large rodents were feasting on the berries. The rodents were about the size of Border Collie dogs. They had an abundance of red and brown striped plush fur, long flexible ears and a short cottony tail. As the horses drew near, one of them sat up on its haunches to look at the approaching women, revealing a set of powerful looking claws on its front feet.

"Don't get too close yet," Maribelle whispered. "I want to get a few good vids of them first and they might run when we close in."

Suddenly the watcher gave a loud, shrill whistle and the entire group turned and ran, vanishing into the tall grass.

"Did you get what you needed?" Juliette asked.

"I think so, I just need to collect some scat and if I'm lucky some fur that got rubbed off."

"Who gets to name any new species you find?" Bridge asked.

Maribelle looked a little blank. "The first person to find it, I guess. Would you like to suggest a name for them?"

"What kind of animal is it?" Juliette asked.

"Judging by the teeth I saw, a rodent of some kind. Since they ran off into the grass, I'm betting they are ground burrowers."

"That one whistled to give an alarm. How about Whistlers?" Bridge suggested.

Maribelle glanced at Juliette, who gave an affirming nod.

"Whistlers it is," Maribelle said. "I'll put it into my log that way."

Juliette dismounted and taking out her test kit approached the bushes. She scanned the vines for noxious substances and took soil samples. Saura flitted around overhead curiously watching as Juliette scooped a sample of the soil into the tester.

"How does it look?" Bridge asked.

"Good quality soil. It has the right nutrients to grow plants," Juliette replied, shaking the soil out of the tester.

Maribelle also dismounted to take vid stills of the rodent's tracks. She pinched off a few samples of hair caught in the vines and put them in a specimen box. "Oh, look!" the xenobiologist exclaimed happily, pulling out another box. "Here's some scat! This is a real find. I'll be able to tell their diet from this."

Bridge, who had remained on horseback to watch for danger, rolled her eyes exchanging a look of amusement with Juliette. She couldn't imagine anyone getting so excited about animal poop.

Juliette's scanner beeped when she ran it over the vines. "The berries are edible. Let's take some back to camp."

"Better try a few first," Maribelle suggested. "Just because something isn't harmful to humans doesn't mean it will taste good."

"Good idea," Juliette said, reaching out to pull a few berries off the vine, not noticing the small red viper whose body blended with the red stems of the bushes. When it struck at her, Saura screeched a warning and dove. She caught the viper just behind its head, biting down hard and jerking it upward away from Juliette before it could fasten its fangs in her hand. Her wings whirled madly, keeping them aloft despite the vipers twisting and struggling. Its fangs dripped venom, but it couldn't get leverage to attack the dactyl while they were airborne. The dactyl's powerful back talons ripped at the snake, shredding the twisting body. Finally, Saura tore it apart, dropping the two halves in the dirt in front of the vines. She spat irritably, attempting to get the taste out of her mouth. The tail half of the reptile continued to writhe and twist for a few minutes before the creature died.

"Did it get you?" demanded Bridge.

"No, I'm fine thanks to my brave little dragon here." Juliette took one of the canteens off her saddle and spilled a small amount of water into her cupped hand which she offered to the dactyl. Saura stuck her muzzle into it, opening her mouth to rinse it and then spat again. Juliette refilled her hand, and this time the dactyl drank from it.

"Clever, clever Saura," Juliette cooed at the dactyl, projecting gratitude and pride at her pet. Saura preened, giving a mid-air wiggle of pleasure at the praise.

Smelling the water, Dapple nudged Juliette. She pulled a fold-up bowl out of her saddle bag and poured water into it so the horse could have a drink as well.

In the meantime, Maribelle had put on a pair of heavy gloves and was transferring the dead viper to another specimen box with a pair of tongs.

"That is two new species in one day. Anyone want to name this one? It's a viper of some kind. It had venom dripping off its fangs when it tried to fight Saura."

"Yuck!" Juliette said, shuddering. "Not me. Are there any more of them in there?"

Maribelle ran a scanner over the vine. "I don't see a sign of any more. Vipers are usually solitary unless they are mating."

"I think we can skip collecting any berries," Bridge said. "I couldn't eat them without seeing that damn snake."

"Yeah," Juliette said, stowing the fold-up bowl and her test kit back in her saddle bags before re-mounting. "Let's head into the trees, shall we? I want to see if there are any signs of habitation and look for water."

The grove of trees proved something of a puzzle. The trees themselves were ordinary rainbow wood trees, common on Vensoog, but there was no bushy underbrush. Instead, the ground under them was covered by a mossy vegetation stopping just at the edge of the trees where the prairie grass grew. The ground in the glade was very level as if it had been graded. However, they could see several places where the moss seemed to rise into the air. Approaching the mounds, they discovered them to look man-made as if the moss had overgrown a structure of some kind.

"Look how straight the edges on the mounds are," Juliette remarked, taking vid stills. "These can't be natural formations."

"This is weird too," Bridge remarked. "Our tracks are disappearing. Look." She pointed at the path they had followed entering the grove. As they watched, the indents left by the horses' hooves in the moss sprang back as if no one had ever passed through.

Juliette pulled her scanner out of her kit and dismounted, holding it over the moss. "Very weird," she agreed, looking at the reading. "I think this stuff is artificial." She sighed in exasperation. "I don't know enough. The Clans need to send a real botanist like Rupert out here to study this—whatever it is."

"Why do you think it's artificial?" Bridge asked.

"Before we left, I had a crash course in plant DNA. In a field of flowers, the growth of each flower is irregular because they don't all grow at the same rate. The DNA on this moss is too even." She moved over to the fallen structure and scanned it.

"What does it say about those things?" Maribelle asked, indicating the mounds.

"Well, the top layer is moss, but the under layer seems to be wood."

"So the moss grew over whatever was here?"

Juliette nodded. "Looks that way, and that isn't a natural shape." She stuffed the scanner back into her saddle bag and remounted.

"Let's check for a water source."

On the other side of the grove they found a stream bubbling out of the ground, and flowing off into the prairie ending at a fair sized pond. The edges of it were churned with mud where large herds of animals had apparently come to drink. Beyond the waterhole, a yellow sea of grass opened up in another breath-taking panorama stretching as far as the eye could see. The prairie seemed to be populated with herds of grazing animals.

"Look!" Maribelle exclaimed, pointing at the herds. "There must be thousands of them."

Juliette pulled out her vid-binocs, adjusting them to view the herds. The animals' golden brown bodies blended into the yellowed grass, but Juliette could see that some of them seemed to have four flat antlers. The hair on their necks and backs was long and shaggy. The face and head was wrinkled and bare of hair. Some animals appeared to be nursing calves. Mixed in with the golden brown beasts were

lighter bodied grazers. These had sharp, pointed horns and striped bodies. "Yes I think you are right about the numbers. I see two different types at least. Do you recognize either species?"

"No," admitted Mirabelle, "but they are grazing, so I'd guess both types are herbivores. Possibly some type of ruminants. It looks like mixed herds of cows and bulls, but I can't be sure without a more detailed study." She glanced around. "There should be some predators big enough to take down the grazers around as well."

"Oh wonderful," Bridge said. "Are we in danger of being attacked?"

"Probably not, most predators who hunt grazers like these will go for the most vulnerable first; calves or animals who stray away from the protection of the herds." Mirabelle replied.