

BATTLECORPS

FORGOTTEN WORLDS

Book One

The Hunt for Jardine

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BATTLECORPS

Chapter One

Dearest Tyler,

It's times like these that I really wish you weren't so deathly afraid of space travel. It's bad enough I have to miss having you with me on missions, or that I had to worry about you through all that shooting back home. But you just haven't seen a high-class party like the ones they throw on Skye.

Oh, sure, now that the war's over, I'm sure you can waltz up the mountain back home and find a friend willing to get you into the really big spectacles at the Triad, where everyone and their brother is just dying to catch our soon-to-be Archon's eye. But because of all that politicking and deal-making, you just see so many stuffed suits, royal seals, and over-inflated egos that you have to know, deep down, that you aren't seeing anything but masks.

On Skye, it's almost like those masks come off. Sure, Duke Robert and his pet Dundee are all smiles and pro-Alliance on the outside, but everyone knows they're up to something, and half the courtiers here aren't afraid to voice something positively scandalous about it.

Better still, they'll find almost any excuse to party, and this time around, yours truly happens to have made the Guests of Honor list...all for a little trinket!

Missing you deeply! (And, sorry; it seems Duchess Aten/Kelswa-Steiner is actually in your neck of the woods on some kind of business, so I won't be getting her autograph for you on this trip...)

Love!

—Brooke

**New Glasgow
Skye, Skye Province
Lyran Alliance
24 April 3067**

“...And so, without further ado, allow me to present our lady of the hour, Doctor Brooklyn Stevens.”

The Grand Ballroom in Duke Robert Kelswa-Steiner’s estate was maybe half the size of the Royal Court on Tharkad—at least as far as Brooke could recall at the moment—but it shared many of the same medieval European features as that far distant palace that served as the seat of all Lyran government. The smaller area, however, made for a more intimate feeling, a closeness with the audience, who gathered now beneath the soft, golden glow of almost a dozen crystal chandeliers. The crowd was a mix of men and women ranging from perhaps twenty years of age through the graying stages of the later sixties and seventies, Brooke guessed. Their collective attire featured far less Steiner blue than a Royal Court gathering. Instead, more colorful tartans (and the occasional matching kilt) blended with a darker selection of tuxedos and evening gowns. Incidental flickers of light came from wall sconces, designed to mimic ancient torches for more of the classic feel, while simultaneously drawing nearby eyes to the Scottish-style tapestries and beautifully executed holo-paintings of past members of Skye’s upper nobility—all of which lined the walls between large oaken doors and cathedral windows.

Thunderous applause virtually deafened Brooke as she stepped behind the tartan-draped podium before the gathered Skye elite. Duke Robert’s guest list claimed over three hundred of the province’s most illustrious men and women, both noble born and otherwise, and his house staff added perhaps another hundred to the attendance figures for this latest soiree in the ducal palace. How some of them made the trip so quickly, with the war only days over, completely eluded Brooke.

But now, with all of their eyes focused on her, she simply hoped she was projecting the image they expected—that of a tall woman with elegance and poise...and a confident stride that defied the dull ache of her eight-centimeter heels.

Even as she quickly crossed the small stage to embrace her host for the benefit of the audience and the media cameras, Brooke made a mental note to ask Marissa why these shoes were sup-

posed to be such a good idea when her feet were barely visible beneath the hem of her black satin evening dress.

Beside the podium, a black silk sheet—strangely enough, matching the color and sheen of Brooke's dress—was draped across a rectangular glass case. Within sat the Chalice of Uston DeKirk, restored to its full glory and awaiting the light of a thousand stares. Were it not for that hidden treasure, Brooke knew full well she would hardly have merited an invitation to a gathering like this—physical charms and Ph.D. in archaeology notwithstanding. Her eyes flicked nervously across the audience, and found those of Tibor Mitternacht. Watching her from the west bar, the rail-thin man with greasy black hair and eyes the color of emerald and jade tried to look as casual as possible in his black Nehru-style tuxedo. To Brooke, he looked more like a cat ready to pounce and run. She threw him a reassuring smile, gently pulled the long braid of her auburn hair back over her right shoulder, and mouthed a thank you to the audience as their applause finally began to die down.

Folding her hands on the podium, out of sight, Brooke absent-mindedly twisted the ring on her left hand and drew in a deep breath that filled her nostrils with the competing scents of a few dozen exotic perfumes, colognes and cigars.

She nearly gagged.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she finally began with a nod toward Duke Robert Kelswa-Steiner. The words, picked up by wire-thin microphones that sprouted up almost invisibly from the sides of the podium, were amplified across the room, yet left no echo in their wake. "It is indeed an honor to be here today."

Just within her peripheral vision, the Duke of Skye (by grace of his marriage to Duchess Hermione Aten, only surviving member of Skye's Aten family), Tamar (by virtue of his own mother's claim to the now Clan-held world) and Porrima (by his own father's blood claim to that Steiner holding) nodded pleasantly back at her. His black, slicked-back hair caught the light like polished steel, and his easy smile seemed both confident and fatherly. Although he wore the uniform of the Lyran Alliance Armed Forces, it eschewed all Steiner insignia. Instead, a green and blue tartan sash with hints of white crossed his broad chest and ended in a knot at the left side of his trim waist.

Dressing down for the occasion, no doubt, Brooke told herself.

"Um, forgive me," she said to the audience with a sheepish smile. "I usually give these kinds of speeches for museum staff and university students, so if I start sounding like a teacher, just bear with me for a few moments and I'll try to make it all as painless as possible..."

Polite chuckles answered as she paused for breath, set her mind into neutral, surreptitiously licked some moisture back into her crimson-painted lips and finally began to describe the origins of the chalice that remained hidden beneath the black cloak beside her.

"As many of you know," she began, "the Cameron family—particularly its latter rulers in First Lord Simon Cameron and his son, Richard—put great stock in the heroic and chivalric ideals of those like the legendary King Arthur. But it was a host of so-called 'Modern Chivalrist' writers, such as Uston DeKirk and Bonnie Cracken, who many historians believe truly inspired these men—contemporaries who brought these images back to life in vivid new terms during the late twenty-seventh to middle twenty-eighth centuries..."

Brooke *hated* giving lectures. Not because of the large crowds, or the possibility of embarrassment and media misquotes. It was actually because of the *tedium* of it all, and the general apathy of her typical audience. Every time she stood before a group to explain her latest find, or to make her latest sale of recovered artifacts from some forgotten world, the knowledge that—deep down—few of the people listening *truly* cared about what she was saying simply robbed the find of its thrill. It was like a mythology professor trying to brag to a bunch of corporate executives about some interesting new combination of fables he'd discovered from long ago, or the proverbial fisherman's tale told to someone with no interest in the sport. The entire exercise was...anticlimactic.

That these thoughts crossed her mind at all annoyed Brooke, however. If there was one thing she couldn't stand, it was a snob, and here was her mind, underscoring how much she thought like those she hated. Still, none of that changed that fact that only a born and bred explorer—a problem solver of the most dedicated sort—could understand why talking about the discovery of such rare antiquities as this three-hundred-plus-year-old chalice would be so marvelous. And Brooke could see in this audience's eyes that any kindred spirits—as always—were few and far between.

Which was why, perhaps, she suddenly became aware of one pair of eyes—other than Tibor's—that hung on her every word, halfway

through her lecture. Matching the man's stare for a moment, she took in his features. Pastel-blue eyes, a broad (almost flat) face, fair skin, blond hair cut so short it almost disguised the fact that he was prematurely balding. Even before she finished explaining the origins of the chalice—how Uston DeKirk had personally received it from First Lord Simon Cameron during the waning years of the original Star League—Brooke found that she recognized the man who gazed so intently back at her. Seeing that recognition on her face, he smiled and nodded.

Henry Croft.

Brooke felt her stomach drop and a warm flush come to her face as she wrapped up her introduction. As "suggested" by her employer, she closed with a remark that the DeKirk family had carried on their famous luminary's commitment to honorable ideals ever since—seen today (of course) in the likes of Duke Robert's right-hand military aide, Colonel John Claverhouse Dundee. With that, she nodded slightly to the pageboy next to the stage. The young man pulled on a golden braided cord, lifting away the cloak at last so the assembled masses could ooh and ah over the jewel-encrusted, giant-sized goblet she had brought back from Rocky.

Applause again filled the room as Duke Kelswa-Steiner and Dundee himself stepped beside Brooke, thanked her and shook her hand, each in turn. The duke then reclaimed the limelight, as Brooke smiled and stepped back with a feeling of sudden relief.

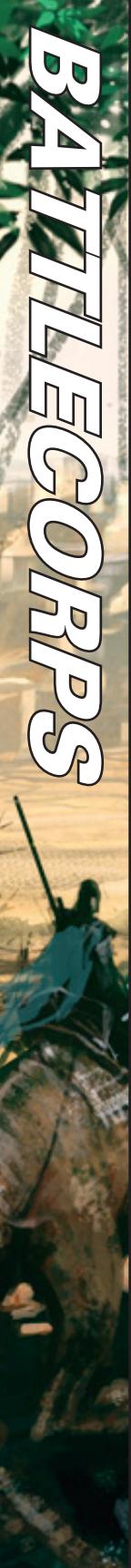
Looking out over the crowd, she found Croft again, still watching as she resumed her seat at the tables reserved behind the podium for Duke Robert's guests of honor.

And what brings you here, I wonder?



"Great speech," Tibor remarked with a dry smile as Brooke finally made her way to the bar for a fresh flute of Glengarry Rose. A slight batting of her lashes at the bartender guaranteed she did not wait long, and she gave him a grateful wink and a smile as payment for the courtesy.

"Horseshit," she muttered back, just loud enough for the two of them over the din of partygoers. "But thanks for the compliment."



"Well, I think it was that patented glazed look in your eyes that gave away your total disinterest," Tibor said, swirling the golden, foamy brew in his own glass. The stench of some cheap Skye-born knock-off of Timbiqui Light assailed Brooke's nostrils. "That is, of course, until you noticed your admirer."

"You saw him too, then?"

"These eyes don't miss much." Tibor nodded, giving Brooke a moment to draw a quick sip of bittersweet zinfandel while his eyes—one a natural jade and the other artificial emerald—roamed the crowd.

"He talk to you yet?" she asked.

Another nod, this one punctuated by a final sip from his mug that drained the ale, foam and all. His eyes darted back to hers, then resumed sweeping the ballroom.

"And?"

"And I told him *you* make the decisions, so he could save the pitch for you."

"So it *is* a pitch, then, eh?"

"Yup," Tibor said, as his eyes finally locked onto their invisible target. Pointing more with his blunt chin than anything else, he directed Brooke's gaze into the sea of humanity in fine eveningwear. "And he's eager as hell to make it, too. His thermals jumped when I stalled him... Here he comes now. Want me to scatter?"

"Hell, no," Brooke murmured as Croft finally emerged from the mob, paused for a moment to get his bearings and smiled right at them. "At least not yet."

Croft had a husky build that, while not *too* bad for a man approaching his mid-forties, seemed to stretch the fabric of his black silk tuxedo. He walked with a slight limp now, favoring his left leg in a way Brooke did not remember from the last time she'd seen him. But then, it *was* almost five years now, and Croft was still a dedicated field man when she knew him then...

"Why, if it isn't Doctor Brooklyn M. Stevens, as I live and breathe," he said as he came near.

His voice had the harsh rumble of a chain smoker who'd started far too early in life, but his smile was amiable and white enough, framed by a goatee almost as brutally short as his scalp hair (and

a few shades lighter). Brooke allowed him to come close enough for a friendly embrace, but noticed how Tibor shifted uneasily on his barstool.

"And if it isn't Doctor Henry J. Croft, as I do likewise," she replied in a carefully neutral tone. "I understand you've already encountered our good friend Mister Mitternacht here?"

Croft turned his semi-charming smile on Tibor and executed an abbreviated bow toward him. "Yes, indeed I have. And—stubborn as ever—he told me not to bother with my 'usual spiel' until you'd had the chance to join us. Polite chap, I must say."

"Why, thanks, Hank," Tibor drawled, flashing the man a casual grin.

Brooke chuckled. "What can I say, Croft? Trouble, the others and I all have our issues with you IE folks. When you don't exactly leave on the friendliest of terms and someone from the company comes a-calling, you don't just buy the first thing that comes out of his mouth."

Croft's expression darkened, but only for a moment. "Ancient history," he said, with a dismissive wave. "Since Doctor Wooden took the helm there's been a bit of a shake-up in the ranks. The upper echelons now realize that what happened on Vulture's Nest wasn't your fault."

"Small comfort, that," Brooke said, her expression hardening as she thought back on the disaster—and the outrageous treatment she and her crew had endured in its aftermath. "Tell me, at least, that Denderhoff finally took the fall for it."

Croft frowned. "In a manner of speaking," he said flatly. "They put him back in the field as an assistant dig director and sent him out to do a follow up on the Nest..."

"That was the last we heard of him, or the rest of his team."

Brooke blinked, and caught a glimpse of the same shock in Tibor's face. Denderhoff was the lone wolf type, a rugged mercenary just one step removed from piracy—especially after Interstellar Expeditions promoted him to Project Director and gave him a couple of dig crews to supervise. His main problem, as Brooke remembered it, was his inability to listen to anyone else when he thought he knew the situation. When in doubt, he fought, and fought hard; he wasn't the kind who simply vanished in the void.

"Ghosts?" she asked. It was the first possibility that crossed her mind.

Croft nodded and sighed. "What evidence we found—eventually—suggested as much."

The three lapsed into silence. The Green Ghosts were a mystery, even to the likes of Interstellar Expeditions, while at the same time being the biggest threat to the organization. Their attack forces, including sophisticated BattleMechs—some even of Clan manufacture—had first appeared roughly seven years ago, and seemed to have a knack for showing up at IE-sponsored digs as if summoned there by the same sources. Naturally, a leak was suspected, but to Brooke's knowledge none were ever found. Since then, the bandits had only grown stronger, their plague of piracy appearing mostly along the Lyran periphery, but sometimes in other sectors, shadowing IE like a wolf pack stalking a herd of prey.

Brooke suddenly became aware again of their surroundings, the background noise of conversation and laughter from Skye's gathered elite set to the quiet harmony of a live string quartet whose music had resumed—at Duke Robert's command—just as soon as the unveiling ceremonies ended. The masses gathered, forming their cliques, mingling, networking, perhaps even courting.

She also realized that her mouth was dry. Almost absently, she finished off the zinfandel, barely noticing the taste this time. As she quickly placed the crystal flute back on the bar, her motion snapped the others out of their own silent musings.

"At any rate," Croft blurted, "the point I was going for was this: IE wants to pass along its assurances that—should you desire it—there is a home for you and your crew again within our organization."

"Generous!" Tibor said. "Of course, there's a catch, *ja?*"

Croft raised a finger and his lopsided smile returned. "More of an *opportunity* than a catch, my distrustful friend."

Brooke arched an eyebrow expectantly. Croft's smile turned her way.

"A mission," he said, practically beaming. "Your usual freelance work on your usual freelance terms. Consider it something of an audition...if you're interested."

Brooke scoffed. "That's how you boys suckered me into your organization the last time, Hank," she said. "What if we don't want to go back?"

Croft shrugged and briefly glanced out over the crowd. "Well," he said, "I could play hardball with you, Doctor Stevens. After all, you and your people *did* abscond with almost three hundred *million* kroner's worth of IE property and equipment—"

"Empty threat and you know it," Tibor grumbled.

"Still actionable," Croft snapped back, "but—as I said—while I *could* play that card, I know better than that. If you don't wish to return, then so be it. But the mission offer still stands, and IE *is* willing to pay well for this one."

Brooke glanced at Tibor, and caught the same curiosity in his jade eye that she knew showed in her own. Folding her arms across her chest, she gave Croft another arched eyebrow look. Croft's smile broadened.

"If you want to hear more, I'm going to have to suggest we find someplace a bit more...intimate, Doctor Stevens. Some details of the mission are not for other ears."

"*Intimate*, is it?" Brooke countered with a playful smirk. "Why, Doctor Croft, you *do* recall that I'm a married woman, don't you?"

Croft chuckled. "How could I ever forget?"



As it happened, Croft's desire for "someplace intimate" proved nearly as scandalous as Brooke had teased. When she asked one of Duke Robert's house servants for a private room for herself and a friend, the young man's eyes flicked between her and Croft and—with a grin that bordered on lecherous—led them both from the ballroom. Two corridors and one conspiratorial wink later, Brooke and Croft found themselves in a guest room that was most noteworthy for having what Brooke believed to be the largest canopy bed she had ever seen.

With bookshelves lining the east wall, dark green drapes (closed by the servant as an added "courtesy"), fine cherry wood trim that both matched the furnishings and nicely complemented the walls of off-white stucco, the room was elegant enough. But the presence of that bed, two strategically placed mirrors, and the

unmistakable scent of sandalwood incense combined in Brooke's mind for an image that just screamed "royal rumpus room."

"If I were in different company," she said, "this would be hysterical."

Croft gave her a cock-eyed smirk and reached into his jacket pocket. Producing a device no bigger than his palm, he activated it, scanned its display, then showed it to her with a polite smile. In the absence of sound, the white noise generator would remain silent, but the annoying effects of its counter-frequencies once they began talking would force Brooke to get closer to Croft than she otherwise preferred. Still, she nodded and stepped closer, catching a hint of the man's musky aftershave.

"Perhaps," Croft said, his voice clear enough, but rendered more alien by the strange non-echo the generator added to it. "But I'll try to make this as diverting as possible."

"All right, Doctor," Brooke said, "fire away."

"In this case, my dear, a file is worth a million words," Croft said as he reached into an inner pocket this time. "And it can do more justice than any sales pitch I might make."

His hand emerged with a compad so small it could have passed for a simple calculator, and his thumb switched it on as he handed it off to Brooke. "Have a look at the latest zoological find from the Free Worlds League."

With a momentary glance at his eager expression, she took the device. Her eyes locked onto the heading: *Panteras Ignus Jardinalis*—A New Link?"

With a sudden surge of curiosity, she devoured the first few paragraphs before she had to ask, "Is this for real?"

Croft nodded. "If not, it's a hell of a hoax. That file includes a detailed gene map of this 'new' species—one that hasn't been seen by human eyes in oh, two hundred years or so?"

Brooke nodded numbly and kept reading. *Panteras Ignus Jardinalis* was the Latin nomenclature given to an alien feline species known for its scarlet coat and golden eyes that seemed to glow even in daylight. Capable of spitting a toxic venom that included enough acid to sear flesh and dissolve vegetation in seconds, it was little wonder that its more traditional name so closely matched that of the Latin: the Jardinian fire cat.

"Are they positive it has all the right markers?" Brooke asked, her eyes still glued to the display. "This beast really shares the same native ecosystem as the tabiranth?"

"Well," Croft said, "we're sure about that, anyway. And the credentials of the discoverer, Doctor Amanda Holyfield, are unimpeachable. There's no motive for a hoax here, and the images you see there were analyzed by the best in the business. No forgery there, either. We even matched the sample given with a mummified carcass at the Regulan Historical Zoology Museum. The species is the same, even if the progeny indicates a distinctly different bloodline."

Brooke stared in awe at the miniaturized images as they scrolled up: a fire cat and her cubs, lying and playing in what looked like a small rainforest clearing. The cranial features evident in the mother bore the closest obvious similarities to the tabiranth, a feline riding beast known across the Inner Sphere. For centuries, the "tabi's" hardiness, adaptability and almost regal grace had made the species a favorite among the more sophisticated nobles and professional animal trainers in the Successor States. Thriving exports and breeding enterprises perpetuated the species' existence on dozens of worlds, assuring that the species itself survived even as its native world was lost to the nuclear fires of the First Succession War. They were the only surviving link to a lost, dead planet, as far as anyone knew.

Until now.

Then the full weight of the implication hit. The world of Jardine did not simply die in the First Succession War; it *vanished*. Even archival maps dating back to the original Star League showed no such world in Free Worlds space, where all accounts placed it. Nor did it appear in any of the neighboring states. If a "new" species from the planet's ecosystem had been discovered, then that meant, just maybe...

"Someone's found Jardine?" she asked.

Croft smiled again.

"That's what we had thought, at first, before a curious thing happened."

Brooke threw him a quizzical look.

"Less than one week after this report was published, it was yanked from every scientific journal in the League, and dismissed



as a hoax by several prominent xenobiologists—including, apparently, Holyfield's own benefactors."

"What did Holyfield say about that?"

"Absolutely nothing," Croft said flatly. "She was killed in a freak laboratory explosion three days earlier."

"Sounds fishy."

"League authorities use the term 'accident,' but I like your assessment better."

"Are you asking me to follow up, then? Go to this world where the species was found?"

"If you like," Croft nodded. "As part of the greater mission, perhaps."

"Greater mission?"

"Why, my dear Doctor Stevens, surely you can see what we're asking here! Someone may have found Jardine recently enough to have brought a species thought long extinct back from there..."

"And if someone managed to accomplish *that*, then surely someone like you and your crew might just be able to do so again."