



FORGOTTEN WORLDS

Book One

The Hunt for Jardine

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Chapter Two

BATTLECORPS

My dearest Tyler,

Think of it, Ty: Jardine! The Atlantis of our time!

And of all people to hire me for the hunt, it had to be IE, huh? Yeah, they have their own resources—vast ones, as you know—but in this case, it looks like they want to avoid too much attention. Fact is, ever since that Starling book came out, IE has become the hot ticket; their name pops up everywhere on the holovids and planetary net searches, like some new out-of-the-blue fad. I can see why Croft and the others would want to try and outsource a job like this, even why they'd come looking for me to do it, considering our last encounters.

Of course, I'm no fool, either. Croft said someone took out the biologist who found a link to that world, then did their best to deny her work. So someone else is on this hunt. Could mean Ghosts, but I doubt it. Someone's always been messing with IE business when they sniff around a big mystery like this. House governments are more likely than Ghosts.

Whoever it is, it's someone that IE wants to keep off their scent, so they came to me, and for missions like this you know I like to pack a little heavier. (Don't you just love it when the only person you can trust in the universe is an ex?)

Unfortunately, the offer had a short shelf life, and the mission had to start ASAP. The pay is enough to cover the entire crew and I for a year and we'll still be able to cover expenses. I won't blame you for being upset, but I promise when it's over and done, I'll spend every waking minute of that time with you, my love!

Forever thinking of you!

—Brooke

Explorer-class JumpShip Sacajawea
Zenith Jump Point
Shasta, Free Worlds League
29 July 3067

As soon as she entered the *Sacajawea*'s launch bay, Brooke could feel the tension in the air almost as surely as she could the chamber's ambient chill.

The first thing she noticed in the half-lit bay was the sound, or rather the relative lack of it. Instead of their customary chatter as they loaded up the three-meter racks of equipment parked just outside the squat ovoid hull of a modified K-1 DropShuttle, Tibor and Marissa seemed silently lost in their work. Their magnetized boots tapped lightly on the deck, sending echoes across the bay. Punctuating these footsteps every few seconds came the harsher metal-on-metal clang that announced another sensor tripod locking firmly into place. As the pair worked to load up two such racks—separately—Brooke caught the deliberate manner in which Marissa, her expression studiously blank, grabbed another collapsed tripod from the neat pile arranged on the deck, made sure its legs were secured, and brushed right past Tibor as though he were not even in the room, her gray jumpsuit fluttering the folds along his own. Tibor responded in kind, barely acknowledging the action.

Brooke sighed and fixed her face into a scowl. *I swear*, she told herself, *sometimes, these two are no better than children...*

As she finally strode into the room, her own boots tapping loudly on the polished steel, they both looked up. She caught each of their gazes in turn, folding her arms across her chest.

"I know a tiff when I see one, you two," she said, forcing a slight edge into her tone. "Don't you think this trip's going to be long enough without it?"

Tibor was the first to break. With a scoff and a shrug, he muttered, "It's nothing we haven't discussed before."

That figures...

"Indeed we have," Marissa added, deep brown eyes flashing at Tibor through her bifocals, "but you *need* me down there, damn it."

"Down there, yes," Tibor shot back, "but not in the field! The Mesozonia may be a natural preserve for the Shastans, but it's not a zoo. There won't be any carefully laid-out paths and fences. I know you're itching for field work, Marie, but—"

"Wow," Marissa said coldly, "you've been preparing for *this* one, haven't you?"

Brooke sighed again, "It isn't like Trouble hasn't got a point here, Marie..."

Marissa looked crestfallen, and her delicate cheeks flushed red as she turned on her. "Oh, you're not going to take *his* side now, are you? I told you, I'm ready! I can handle a gun, and I've studied the—!"

Brooke held up a hand. "I said he had a point," she said. "I didn't say you couldn't go."

Tibor scoffed again and rolled his eyes.

"Now, look, Trouble. You're right. We *have* been through it. I need someone in the field with me, and someone to back us up who can monitor the readings and fly the shuttle. Marie has studied the local flora and fauna. She knows what we're looking for and the best chance we have of finding it is with her eyes on the scene, rather than filtered through vid links.

"But," Brooke quickly added, leveling her gaze on Marissa, "you have to realize that Trouble's got a real solid reason to be concerned, Marie. We've both shown you how to fire a pistol, but if there's a cause to do it for real, you have to know it's not going to be like shooting holograms and paper targets. I'll be counting on you to watch my back down there."

"Then why not have me along, too?" Tibor asked. "We have Lawrence; he can watch the shuttle."

"And the sensors?" Brooke asked, sweetly. They'd been through *that* before as well. In the final analysis, Tibor was always the master of sensors, electronics, and other technologies in this crew. With the shuttle parked at the nearest spaceport, he could easily monitor the situation, analyze the data, and help guide the expedition while also being ready to pilot the craft in and out of the vast Mesozonia rainforest should the need arise.

The problem, of course, was that everyone *expected* the need to arise. The Shastan government initially denied permission for

Brooke and her “ecological survey” to set foot near the Mesozonia. It was Marissa and her research on Shastan customs and laws that finally got them in (with a healthy dose of Tibor’s computer savvy and the relatively poor public security of the Shastan interweb). It was also Marissa’s practiced familiarity with the ecology of the Mesozonia—where Doctor Holyfield’s Jardinian firecats were found—that forced Brooke to concede that Marissa *had* to be in the field with her this time.

But whoever silenced Holyfield would naturally be interested in anyone wandering into those jungles again. And that meant going in without back-up was tantamount to suicide. Marissa *could* handle a firearm, but Brooke knew she’d be lying to herself if she thought her number one research assistant could handle a true firefight.

That left the third member of her shuttle crew for this expedition to accompany her in the field as an extra precaution: the *Sacajawea*’s captain, Lawrence Pohl. A spacer with combat training as part of the ComStar Explorer Corps (before that, even he rarely discussed), Lawrence preferred to get his “land legs” every few field missions or so. Keeping with tradition, he prescribed the same to all his crewmen, for health reasons. But knowing that this expedition threatened combat action—even hypothetically—he had *insisted* that he would take the normal crewman’s rotation for the Shasta landing, saying he refused to put “his” people in any danger he wouldn’t take on himself.

Brave words, of course, but Brooke also saw the wisdom in them; few of the chronically shorthanded *Sac*’s crew had the military training she preferred when she expected gunplay.

Tibor scowled.

“Exactly,” Brooke said. There was no need for further discussion. “So, now that that’s settled...again...how are we looking on the equipment?”

Marissa sighed. “We already loaded up most of the basics. Three field tents, six medkits, compads, discs, enough rechargeable packs to power a house, and the heavy comm-sets, so T can track us even through the growth...”

“I also stocked up on emergency rations,” Tibor jumped in. “Just in case the local fare isn’t to our liking. You’ll have enough to cover a few weeks in the field after we make landfall.”

"Cute," Brooke said as she started to study the racks. Swallowing dryly, she mentally tallied the sensor pods herself. "Coffee, too?"

"Enough to keep *you* awake," Tibor grinned. "Even after another one of your own lectures."

Brooke rolled her eyes. "Weapons?" she asked.

"A couple knives for each of you," he said, his tone suddenly serious, "plus one vibroblade for you and Lawrence. Each of us—myself included—also gets a Python and a tranq gun, with a few clips each. Add to that the two G-150s, Lawrence's MP-20, and a couple sawed-offs, and we should be fine down there."

Brooke's eyes widened slightly. "They only assigned us one chaperone, Trouble!"

"Not a petting zoo, remember?" he came back with a smirk. "Besides, you were the one who said, 'pack heavy'. If I could, I would've put Digger One or Forty-Niner in there with you."

"Somehow I imagine the Shastans would've looked rather unkindly on seeing an armed WorkMech in our inventory."

"Well, all the same, I may throw in a couple lasers. The dampness in that jungle may not be best for them, but I'd feel better if I knew you ladies had something with more penetration to work with."

Brooke stifled a chuckle, and Tibor shook his head.

"That's *not* what I meant, you perv!"

"The sensor pods were the last of it," Marissa joined in again. Though she acted like she hadn't heard the comment, Brooke saw the slight flush in her cheeks as she fought to maintain her composure. "We only came up with forty-eight reliable ones, though. It's enough for two racks and we shouldn't have any trouble getting a local ATV big enough to carry them, but it's still rather low for my liking."

"Don't look at me," Tibor muttered. "A certain Doctor Stevens promised me we'd have more before we needed to handle another wildlife op."

Brooke turned and grasped the cool metal of the tripods on the rack. Giving the rack a slight shake, she tested its security against bumps in transit. The delicate pods themselves would be stored in the well-padded central portion on the rolling frame, ringed by the tripods upon which they would be fixed when used, but a

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hard collision—in whatever vehicle transported them—could be enough to send dozens of unsecured metal shafts flying. Even if they didn't harm any of her expedition, the game of "pick-up sticks" they would face after such an accident (not to mention the potential loss of multiple pods) would likely make a bad day ten times worse.

"We'll have to make do," Brooke told them. "Four dozen should be enough to cover a few kilometer stretches at a time, even in all that foliage. Well enough before we have to start leapfrogging them, anyway. Unless we'll need to daisy-chain them?"

Tibor shook his head. "Nope. No need to chain; Shasta has a good enough satellite network that I can bounce signals and get a fix. Leapfrogging will be your only option to max out coverage, but it'll slow you down a bit with all that backtracking. I made sure all of the shafts have working pop-up flares, too. Fire one through the forest canopy, and I'll pick you guys up on thermals. Try not to get jumpy with them, though. I don't think I want to test the Shastans' air-patrol forces while running to your rescue."

"They won't be a problem," Marissa chimed in. "I already reviewed local air security."

"The *official* security rolls, Marie," Brooke cautioned, finally turning around to face them. "Leaguers like to understate their air patrols, even if they're only using a conventional aircraft force."

"Nothing *you* can't handle, though, Trouble!" came a new voice, deep yet almost fatherly. Lawrence Pohl was already halfway across the deck from the bay entrance, having chosen to float into the room, rather than walk. Smiling, the gray-haired spacer executed a graceful mid-air half-flip that placed his mag boots firmly on the deck with barely a tap. He threw them all a lopsided grin that twisted his salt-and-pepper goatee into a strange shape, but kept his ice-blue eyes focused mostly on Tibor.

"Uh, Cap?" Tibor began. "You *do* remember you'll be in the field, too, right?"

"Course I do," Lawrence beamed. "You sayin' you can't fly *and* handle guns at the same time?"

"Not nearly as well as you, old-timer," Tibor grinned back, and turned to Brooke with one eyebrow arched.

"Ah-ah," she said quickly. "It's settled already."

"Trouble is what Trouble does, Doc." Lawrence shrugged. "I'm sure we can look forward to a whole week of this guy trying to talk you out of it."

"At the very least," Brooke agreed. "Do I gather by your presence here that you're about ready to shove off with us, then?"

"All set, Ma'am," Lawrence said with another smile. "I gave the helm to Juan and he'll beam us any signals he don't like from the local nets. He'll keep us apprised in the daily check-ins while the *Sac* recharges."

"Okay, then," Brooke said with a nod. "Looks like we're all done here. We have the sensor racks to load up, and then everyone can grab their bags and we'll hit space in one hour. The sooner we can get dirtside, the sooner this mission can begin. Sound fair, people?"

All three nodded. Brooke drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. She could feel the pre-mission jitters settling in even now, putting her nerves on edge even though landfall would still be six long and hopefully monotonous days away.

And beyond that, she knew, things could get *very* dangerous, *very* fast.

Leopard-class DropShip Kaylin
Nadir Jump Point, Alterf
Marik Commonwealth, Free Worlds League

The intercom gave only the shortest of bleats, its sudden noise in the total silence virtually guaranteeing that the cabin's sole occupant would tense within his restraints. Nearly dropping the compad reports he'd been reviewing, Anton Hara turned to face the small speaker beside his cot.

"Captain," it said in the voice of Lenard Bryce, his exec aboard the *Leopard-class DropShip Kaylin*, "we got a signal."

Hara's eyes narrowed. *A signal?* he wondered, *or the signal?*

"General broadcast?" he asked aloud.

"No, sir. Targeted transmission. Scramble codes match."

About damned time! "Put it through."

"Aye, sir."

The intercom clicked off, and with a simple beep, the small video terminal bolted to Hara's cabin desk automatically sprang to life, even while he forced his own tired muscles into action. Undoing the restraints he'd strapped into only minutes before, anticipating another night of uneventful null-gravity sleep, he felt almost grateful for the intrusion.

Boredom, the perennial danger of modern space travel, had taken its toll not only on the crew, but on him as well. He heard the eager edge in Bryce's tone, and knew with absolute certainty that the still-unknown contents of the incoming message would be the focus of gossip across the ship—perhaps even before he landed in his chair.

"Finally!" they would all be saying. "Orders!"

Hauling himself out of bed, he swam through the air to his desk, landing in the floor-anchored swivel chair with the grace of a seasoned spacer. A simple prompt awaited his code phrase. Hara typed quickly; voice codes could be recorded by any number of hidden bugs.

Not surprisingly, the accompanying video was little more than a local star map, a few lines of printed text, and coordinates.

Nodding to himself, Hara committed the lot to memory. Upon wiping the message off his screen, he tapped the intercom's stud and punched in Bryce's personal code.

"Bryce."

"Tallyho, Lenard," Hara said. "Tell the JumpShip skipper to lay in coordinates for Shasta zenith, by way of Escobas nadir."

Bryce's tone was almost exuberant. "At once, Captain," he said, and closed the link.

Hara sat back in his chair and steepled his fingers. His eyes never left the now-blank monitor before him, even when the klaxons for jump stations sounded, mere minutes later.

The hunt is on...