

BATTLECORPS

FORGOTTEN WORLDS

Book One

The Hunt for Jardine

Herbert A. Beas II

BATTLECORPS

Chapter Three

Dearest Tyler,

I almost forgot how much easier exploring dead worlds could be compared to live ones.

Our entire journey to Shasta was spent in arguments, mostly between us and the Shastan authorities over the extent of our access to the Mesozonia. They may have bought the cover story T and M worked up (when those two weren't fighting), but they insisted on a local guide.

I'm not sure if I'd have been more or less suspicious if they hadn't, to tell the truth. Holyfield's work wasn't too long ago, meaning anyone who'd be out to silence her would likely be on guard for any follow-ups like us. Marie worked up our own excuse for being here, of course: an exo-biology expedition, examining the hazards facing rare Terran-exported species. (She somehow found that an obscure, recently-noted decline in an introduced rat population is endangering a special form of Amazonian rainforest tree the Shastans have cultivated here, and thinks that the culprits may be a certain scavenger species newly introduced, like our furry firecat friends. So, our goal is to act like we're examining the ecological imbalance without any ideas as to the culprit. Clever, but maybe too abstract to convince the paranoids.)

Anyway, so we have a guide assigned to us, Esok. He seems knowledgeable and provincial, and he's even helped us out of a few uncomfortable (and embarrassing) jams since we've been here over the past week. But, I don't know. Could be I'm the one being too paranoid...

At any rate, the real problem isn't the guide these days, but Marie. It seemed like such a good idea to have her along, but now I just can't be sure. Since coming into the field, she's become like a temperamental eichhornchen—moody one day, excited the next, and downright pissy the day after that. I hate to admit it, but maybe Trouble was right.

(But please don't tell him I said that!)

Love!

—Brooke

North Mesozonia Rain Forest

Shasta

Free Worlds League

14 September 3067

Brooke could tell just by glancing at her it was going to be one of those days again. Marissa's lips were drawn into a tight, thin line, neither smiling nor frowning. Her eyes had a predatory look to them that lased through her glasses, and her hair had been tied into a tight bun, pinned beneath a dusty green, wide-brimmed bush hat.

After more than a week in the rainforest, battling all manner of insects, setting and resetting sensor probes, flinching at every unfamiliar noise, and facing at least one close encounter with some six-armed thing that Esok had called a "skatha ape," Marissa was in her ever-more-popular "let's just get this damned mission over with" mode again. Seated behind Esok, she turned away from her brooding stare out the clouded windows of the Ibex and caught Brooke's gaze for a moment. She flashed a weak smile as the RV lurched again before resuming her angry staring contest with the greenery beyond.

She almost looks like I feel, Brooke told herself, trying to ignore the irritating throbbing that had plagued her legs for the last few days.

Brooke turned a little further in her harness and gave a slight nod to Lawrence, who met her eyes with a smile and a shrug. He also knew the signs of Marissa's foul moods by now—and had long since become an old hat at reading Brooke's own discomfort.

She hated this time of the month.

Settling back in her seat, Brooke adjusted the brim of her simple cap and drew in another long, deep breath of damp forest air, catching only the faintest whiff of gasoline from the modified RV's grumbling engine. The two-ton, muddy-tan Ibex lurched violently as it drove on through the dense forest, shocking her spine with every bump and adding to the irritation she tried so hard to bottle up. Anything resembling a beaten path had vanished days ago. But the Shastans prided themselves on accurate maps of the "unmarked trails," one of which the dark-haired, dark-skinned Esok claimed this was. A clearing, he said, lay just ahead...somewhere.

Thank Bast for small favors! she told herself.

"You should find many more samples here, Doctor Stevens," he promised once more, breaking the semi-silence. His Shastan accent had a distinctly Asian style to it, and reminded Brooke of something she'd expect to hear a Kurita character say on some holovid picture.

"Yes, you mentioned that," she replied, fighting back a sarcastic snap. The man could still be someone's plant, and giving in to her own annoyance could only put him more on edge if he was waiting for a sign to do something rash.

"According to the map," she added, "this was one of the original groves, wasn't it?"

"Certainly was," Esok said proudly. "The first settlers dreamed of recreating the Amazon in this unspoiled wilderness. They succeeded beyond their wildest expectations with these woods."

Without any real warning, the thick walls of green and blue-green leaves parted ahead of the blocky snout of the Ibex. As another pass of the vehicle's wiper blades cleared off the misty fog on the windshield, an irregular clearing of thick grass and patches of dark brown earth sprang into being before Brooke's eyes.

Esok practically slammed the brakes, bringing the 2-ton RV to a sudden halt that rattled both the delicate equipment racks and the rest of Brooke's team.

"Here we are," Esok almost sang. "Your 'Point Charlie,' I believe."

And not a moment too soon!

With a more genuine smile, Brooke half-turned to the others while her fingers worked to release her four-point harness. Marissa was already out of hers, brushing off the straps and scowling slightly. The younger woman had one hand on her door handle, ready to leap out, and another on the holster of her Nashan Subjugator tranquilizer pistol, as if she half expected to drop into battle.

"All right, kids," Brooke called out. "We'll be camping here tonight and there's maybe six good hours of daylight left, give or take the next bout of heavy rain. So the sooner we make ourselves at home here, the sooner we can start setting up the pods. Lawrence, want to give me a hand with the tent?"

Hearing the veteran spacer's grumbling "yes," Brooke caught Marissa's eyes. The scowl on her face had softened; for the last two days, Brooke had put her to work on pitching the tents, a task she clearly hated.

"Sensor perimeter," Brooke told her. "Esok's going to stand guard."

Marissa nodded silently and hopped out. As the others also climbed out, Brooke closed her eyes and steeled herself. Moving her body—let alone jumping out of a vehicle—had lately become a major chore. Her legs and feet felt like they weighed a half-ton each, and had lately started to ache far more than usual. Of course, the normal pains were something she'd naturally grown used to decades ago, but something about the rainforest was really starting to enhance the effect.

That, she told herself, or it's just the company.

As soon as her hiking boots hit the soft, green earth, she reached for the communicator hooked into to her upper-left cargo vest pocket. Tied into the antenna she'd mounted on the Ibex, the signal was just strong enough to tap into the local satellite nets and reach Tibor and their DropShuttle.

"*Guten tag, Chief!*" his voice crackled. "How's it going?"

Brooke closed her eyes and again took in the musty odor of wet soil and alien vegetation. The aromas felt somehow soothing, but also chilling—despite the sweat-inducing 28 Celsius (and 80 percent humidity) that the locals called the "Mesozonian Winter." Opening her eyes again, she scanned the small clearing and made sure everyone was busy and out of earshot, pulling equipment from RV's rear hatch.

"We're at Point Charlie now, Trouble," she reported, then grumbled, "Just remind me to watch my cycles before trekking into the woods next time."

Tibor made a funny noise the communicator transmitted as static. For a moment, Brooke got the image of him spitting a mouthful of coffee across the sensor boards, and the thought almost made her laugh.

"Unrequested Info Surplus, woman!" Tibor snapped. "You know they have pills for that, right?"

"They make me bloat," Brooke said with an evil smirk. "And if you think it's bad *hearing* about it, try *living* with it. How're things over there?"

"Well," Tibor said, "this may darken your mood some more, but I've been watching the Able and Baker Point sweeps for the last two days, and I have to say, I'm not getting anything beyond the indigenous species. The rat populations seem lower than expected, but not extinct."

"Damn."

"Yup, and no direct sign of our feline friends, either. Just the local bugs, bees, rats, and skathas."

Brooke sighed, feeling the surge of unfocused anger again, but pushed it aside. After six days and a mere fifty-seven kilometers from civilization, could she really expect an easy hunt?

"Still wouldn't hurt to at least have a *clue* we're on the right track," she mumbled to herself.

"Say again?" Tibor's voice came back.

"Nothing, Trouble," Brooke told him. "Just grousing is all."

"Marie giving grief again?"

Brooke narrowed her eyes. "I take it Lawrence is still feeding you the inside scoop?"

Tibor chuckled slightly. "He fills me in on whatever the cameras miss," he admitted. "Can't say I didn't try to talk you out of it."

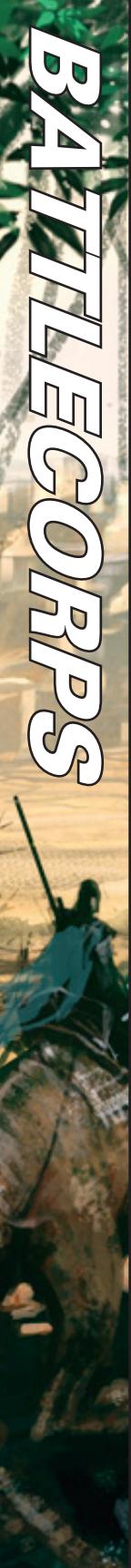
Had to get your digs in again, didn't you?

"Very funny, Trouble," Brooke said flatly. "Listen, we're about to set up camp now, and then we'll start deploying sensors in the area. I'll check in at the usual intervals. Okay?"

"As you say, boss," Tibor came back, serious once more. "Just watch yourselves out there."

"Always do," Brooke said and closed the connection.

Taking another deep breath of heavy, earthy rainforest air, she surveyed her surroundings again. Not really so much a clearing as a patch of lower vegetation compared to the towering rainforest around it, the area was perhaps no more than forty meters



across at its widest, and covered in long wild grasses. Blue-green shrubs and several large rocks spattered with a brackish moss broke through the surface in several locations, each one a hiding space for who knew how many insects and small animals. Esok had managed to tear up some of the looser earth with his braking, and—Brooke noticed on closer inspection—had narrowly missed crushing the rotting, slim corpse of a long-dead tree.

Had it been a vacation, and not a mission site, Brooke momentarily wondered how much she would be able to enjoy the view, rather than be wary of it.

Already, she could see Marissa stalking the rim of the pseudo-clearing, driving sensor stakes into the ground while Esok, hefting some locally produced hunting rifle, stood half a meter behind her, eyes probing the wilderness. Brooke studied the guide once more, focusing on his body language and—once more—finding nothing amiss. Even with his weapon at the ready and his three “charges” too obviously busy to notice his action, he remained on guard against the natural dangers of the forest, not preparing an attack of his own.

“Doesn’t prove anything,” Brooke whispered to herself. “Stay on your guard, girl.”

Just behind the Ibex, Lawrence had already pulled out two of the sleeping tents and had started to erect the first on the closest patch of relatively level ground he could find. Swatting away a close-buzzing insect, Brooke made her way over to him on legs that already felt heavier than lead.

Lawrence looked up, gracing Brooke with another good look at his face full of days-old gray stubble. The tips of his hair, now exposed to the forest’s heat and a few minutes of labor, were already plastered to his forehead. Still, he smiled warmly.

“Hope Trouble’s enjoying *his* vacation,” he joked.

“Having such a great time, he wishes he were here,” Brooke answered. “Once we get these set up, I think we’ll break into two pairs. Each of us will take a pack and start laying the sensors in opposite directions.”

Lawrence nodded as he turned to stake another corner of the field tent into place. His breathing was slightly more labored than Brooke liked, but she also knew he was still having trouble with Shasta’s 0.96 gees. For spacers his age, Brooke suspected that

getting one's "land legs" back could take almost a month—often just in time to go back to the relative comfort of microgravity.

"Fair enough," he said. "We should pack ponchos, too; feels like rain."

Brooke shook her head as she started to stake the second tent beside the first one. "Damn," she muttered. "I knew I forgot to ask Trouble something."

Lawrence sighed as he locked his tent's uprights into place with a loud click. The slate gray waterproof polymer that rose along with the support already glistened with the ambient moisture and random drops of rainwater that fell from the leaf canopy above. After six days in the field, none of them even noticed the constant dripping that made everything not covered in plastics sopping wet by the end of the day.

"So, who're the pairs?" he asked. "Or do I even need to guess?"

Brooke smiled. "You know me too well, old man," she said. "I'm giving you Marissa. The way I'm feeling today, I just don't think I could deal with her mood."

"So you'll expose poor Esok to *your* mood, then?" Lawrence said as he finished his tent and came over to help Brooke.

"*Mine* is under control," Brooke snapped back. "I just prefer to keep an eye on our guide a bit more."

Lawrence's ice-blue eyes flicked over to where Marissa and Esok were now talking over another sensor stake. Almost thirty meters away, and half-hidden by the Ibex, they both knew there was no way the two could hear them. Lawrence still lowered his voice and spoke bluntly. "If he were going to try something, hon, I imagine he'd already have done it. We're over fifty kilometers from nowhere as it is."

"I know," Brooke said with a wink. "But a little paranoia never hurt anyone. We are, after all, ethnic Lyrans in Free Worlds space."

Lawrence's grin returned. "Touché!"



Brooke's legs burned and her mouth watered with the memory of her last cup of coffee. Her skin crawled with the feeling of her



own sweat and the rain that had picked up in the last fifteen minutes and found its way inexorably through the gaps in her light green poncho. Traversing the broken, uneven rainforest terrain—in almost twilight-level darkness thanks to the forest canopy and the rain clouds beyond it—while hefting a bulky pack of five sensor shafts hardly made the journey any more miserable.

But what concerned her most was that she felt as though she were being watched—and this time, not by Esok. In fact, Esok was sloughing through the forest ahead of her, his rifle at the ready as ever. They had encountered almost no creatures of any kind since leaving the campsite, which Brooke had found a welcome surprise, considering the abundance of snakes, rats, and the occasional skatha they had run across at the other sites. But the initial relief soon faded as she started to wonder *why*.

It also occurred to her that Esok's tour guide banter had started to taper off as well in the last few minutes. When they first set out, he had begun a proud tale about Shasta's first colonists—mainly peoples from Terra's Argentina and Colombia regions—and their efforts to recreate the lost glories of the Amazon region here. Brooke was only half-listening then, giving noncommittal or bland replies as Esok went into how, if one looked *really* close, one could almost see the orderly rows to these trees here, a hallmark of their origins as an artificial grove and natural preserve.

But now he was silent, and his eyes were sweeping the woods as he went onward. His pace had also slowed. Instinctively, Brooke tucked one hand under her poncho and released the catch of the Sternsnacht Python at her right hip.

"Something wrong?" she finally dared to ask, keeping her voice low.

"Oh," Esok said with a slight start, his tone still light. "Maybe nothing, Doctor. The forest just *feels* unusual to me here."

"*Feels*' unusual?"

Esok stopped finally and glanced back at her, but kept his rifle pointed away. Then, suddenly, he started sniffing the air. Brooke did so too, and immediately picked up a stench she was surprised she had not noticed before.

The smell of something dead, something close.

Her eyes darted around as she sniffed the air again, her tongue curling in her mouth as she fought back the nausea. Whatever it was, it was *very* close.



Then she saw it, just as Esok started to take a few steps toward a clump of rocks. The carcass lay in the opposite direction, and a swarm of red flies scattered as Brooke drew near it. Struggling against her urge to gag, Brooke removed her backpack and knelt down.

Whatever the creature was, it didn't look like the agouti rats Marissa had been telling her about. In fact, with its six bony arms, covered—partially, anyway—in gray-brown fur, it looked to Brooke like a juvenile skatha ape. Only its head had been ripped off, and what remained of its torso cavity had been obviously scorched by something, with fur and flesh burned almost to blackness.

So close to the carcass, amid the smell of rotting flesh and something else strange and chemical, Brooke struggled against her gag reflex, coughing once.

"You see something?" Esok asked.

Turning slightly away, Brooke nodded and coughed again.

And that was when she saw the claw, lodged in a hunk of fallen bark. Curled sharply and blood red, she knew it didn't come from the skatha. She picked it up as Esok cautiously drew near. His sharp, hazel eyes kept probing the trees around them, but finally settled on Brooke's when she rose.

"Wha—?"

"Skatha, I think," she explained. "Any idea what kind of claw this is?"

Esok stared blankly at the red hook, and shook his head dumbly. "Maybe a lute shrike," he guessed, naming what Brooke presumed was a local avian, "but they never venture this deep into the forests and their claws are never quite so red."

He glanced around again, and this time Brooke's gaze also swept the area. *Something* was making the man nervous, and she began to suspect that it was something close by. Her right hand once again disappeared beneath her poncho to hover near the Python.

"What about acid?" she asked, her voice low.

Esok turned a questioning look to her.

"The creature looks like it's been burned by some kind of acid," she told him. "Does anything in this forest secrete an acid?"

"Acid?" he sputtered, his rich voice suddenly unsure. He looked over the remains with a slight choking sound. "N-No," he said. "Nothing here. Nothing that burns like that."

Keeping one hand close to her Python, Brooke pocketed the claw and reached for her communicator with the other. A single click put her through to Tibor.

"We may have something here," she said simply.

"And hello to you too, Sunshine," Tibor said. "What've you got?"

"Looks like a baby skatha, dead. Judging by the remains, something with red claws and an acidic venom or spit did the poor thing in."

"You're kidding!"

"*Nein*," Brooke said. "Here, Esok. Can you get a sensor camera on it?"

Esok looked down sharply, and Brooke realized he'd been watching the surroundings again. Her own eyes darted about and saw nothing.

As Esok reached for the sensor pods tucked into his pack, a sound—something between a growl and a hiss—drew both of their attention to a dark cluster of trees ten meters away. In the dusk-like shadows, she thought she could make out a shape in motion, and from the corner of her eye she saw Esok sweep his rifle toward the shape.

He waited for a few moments, holding his breath as Brooke's hand tightened around the handle of her Python.

"Brooke?" Tibor's voice came through the communicator.

"Hang on, Troub—!"

The thunderous crack that followed startled Brooke so much that she stumbled into the thick grass, landing less than a hand's breadth from the skatha carcass. She heard an answering report from Esok's rifle almost immediately, only to realize that he held the weapon skyward. With a strangled cough, the dark-skinned guide fell to his knees, the life in his eyes already gone by the time his head hit the jungle floor.

"*Scheiße!*" Brooke yelled out, finally drawing her pistol as another loud crack ripped through the trees and blasted apart the

skatha. A splash of loose earth and rotting meat sprayed across her right side and sent her diving forward.

“*Brooke!*” Tibor shouted from the communicator still in her other hand.

“Call the others, Trouble!” she yelled back.

Even as she forced her legs beneath her, Brooke’s eyes tried to track the source of the shots.

There!

She could barely make out the figure in the shadows of the forest, but the raindrops spattered around it, suggesting a man draped in a full-body cloak. Brooke didn’t need to see his eyes to know they were trained on her, along with whatever weapon he’d just used to blast a hole straight through Esok.

A flash of metal swung before the figure and she immediately ducked low, scrambling for the nearest outcropping of rocks at a half-crouching run. Her legs screamed in agony, but carried her clear of the figure’s next ear-splitting shot, which punched a fist-sized hole in the earth and scattered grass and soil in all directions.

In her peripheral vision, she caught the slightest hint of an electric-blue muzzle flash and the silvery blur of the passing slug, even as she juked her way to a thick tree. The stones that had spared her life moments before shattered beneath the pulverizing impact of another shot.

It’s some kind of Gauss rifle!

“*Brooke!*” Tibor was screaming again. “Talk to me!”

“I’m taking fire here, you *dummkopf!*” she snapped back. Her ears were ringing and her body was aching all over. Another deafening crack punctuated her answer and fragments of bark rained down on the brim of her cap.

Too close!

“Can you see who it is?” Tibor asked.

“A little busy here, Trouble!” she growled as she forced herself to run again.

Wheeling around another tree, Brooke felt her boots slip on the slick grass, and she nearly tumbled over an exposed root. Twisting

back, she fired twice into the darkness. Shooting more by instinct and guesswork, she hardly expected a hit.

"We're coming, Brooke!" chimed in a new voice, female, and filled with worry.

Marie!

Marissa sounded breathless, her voice nearly lost to a low hum somewhere in the background. Brooke suppressed the annoyance that Tibor had somehow found time to turn her firefight into a conference call.

"*Scheiße!*" she snarled. "Guys, whoever this guy is, he's wearing some kind of electronic camo—!"

Another slug pounded the earth nearby, moments after Brooke spun around to squeeze off another shot. Twisting around the other side of the tree, she fired again, and saw her amorphous attacker breaking for new cover. For just an instant, she caught the flash of his long-barreled rifle and a very distinct—but strangely disembodied—leg, clad in some kind of black armor.

"Where's Lawrence?" she barked.

"With me!" Marissa answered. "*Hang on!*"

With another heart-stopping crack, a slug ripped through Brooke's latest cover, but she was already on her feet again, half running and half ducking under a low-hanging branch. Her legs burned, but she continued to plunge into the woods, leaping over thick jungle roots and darting between trees and rocks.

Keep moving, girl! she told herself. *Force him to chase. He can't shoot you if he's too busy running!*

"Brooke?" Tibor called out again.

"Still alive," she hissed through clenched teeth. "Esok's dead."

"I've got a fix on you," Tibor's voice grew calm and level. "Can't be sure on the thermals, but I think it's only the one guy."

"*Great!*" Brooke sneered as she hurled herself down an embankment. The now familiar crack of her pursuer's Gauss rifle heralded another shot that sheared vines off a nearby tree.

Turning sharply at the edge of another dip in the forest floor, Brooke allowed her boots to slip on the earth and she tumbled

back, facing backwards as she dropped a meter or two downward. Holding her pistol out, she fired twice more, aiming wildly.

In the confusion, she barely made out the sight of swirling semi-nothingness coming up over the rise, scarcely ten meters behind her, and caught a distinctive glint off the lenses of her attacker's goggles. His rifle poked out from his cloak, already drawing a steady bead on her, and only then did she notice the faint violet beam of a targeting laser.

Too close!

For a moment, she wanted to know who he was.

Instead, she squeezed her trigger.

The man shifted and his rifle swung wide, but whether it was because she'd hit him or because she'd *almost* hit him, Brooke couldn't be sure.

And then suddenly, he was gone.

Cautiously, painfully, she pulled herself halfway back to her feet before Tibor's voice screamed, "*Look out!*"

Instinctively, Brooke dropped to the jungle floor, practically losing herself in the foliage, mere moments before the roar of a laboring engine echoed across the forest. She peeked up at the rise and saw her attacker turn and fire his weapon just as a massive blur of black and muddy tan streaked past, impossibly close to him. With ears still ringing, Brooke scarcely heard the thump of metal on flesh, but her eyes were briefly glued to the sight of the airborne Ibex RV as it screamed off to one side, eventually bouncing down to earth and crashing its way through several vines and no less than two young, white-barked trees.

"*Christ!*" she muttered, already looking for the attacker.

Dazed, and with his cloak torn open by the impact, she saw him much more easily now. He hobbled at the peak of the rise, struggling with his rifle. Definitely male, and definitely wounded, he sneered back at her and raised his rifle with both hands. But instead of another loud crack, Brooke watched as the man's weapon instead spat a cloud of sparks.

Brooke didn't give him the chance to try again. Without even standing up, she gave a primal growl and fired her Python three times. The first slug caught the man high in the shoulder, spraying

blood and twisting his body to one side. The second pounded on his armored vest, nearly toppling him.

The third drove itself through his right goggle lens and sent a cloud of blood, bone, and bits of brain scattering behind him.

As the man's body pitched forward, Brooke suddenly felt her own body giving out.

"No!" she told herself. *There may be more of them...*

"Tibor..."

"I'm still here," her communicator answered.

"He's down," Brooke sighed. "Are you *sure* he was the only one?"

"No," Tibor admitted.

"Damn it," Brooke mumbled. "Marie? Lawrence?"

No one answered.

"*Scheiße.*"

Forcing herself up again, she worked her way to the Ibex. The vehicle had slammed to a halt against the fallen remains of what might once have been an impressive sample of Shastan hardwood. Steam and faint wisps of smoke rose from the wreckage, but none of that alarmed Brooke as much as seeing Lawrence slumped over the wheel through the half-open driver's side door.

"Lawrence!" she shouted.

The gray-haired man didn't move, but in a few steps, Brooke was upon him, her fingers looking for—and finding—a pulse. The gash on his head didn't look life-threatening, and she could see no other open injuries from where she stood.

Then she saw, amid the cracks of the shattered windshield, a frighteningly distinct hole. Blasted through the passenger side...

And Marissa's body, twisted impossibly beside Lawrence.

"No!" Brooke whimpered, feeling her own strength failing all at once.

She struggled to force Lawrence back into his seat and reached across him, gave up and scrambled to the vehicle's passenger

side. Her hand reached out and found Marissa limp, unresponsive. The woman's eyes faced Brooke's, wide open but unblinking, and a trickle of blood ran from one corner of her gaping mouth. Blood stained the front of Marissa's khaki shirt so darkly that Brooke couldn't see the wound itself.

Almost reluctantly, she reached higher, searching for Marissa's carotid, holding her breath, praying for a sign...

But finding no pulse.

"No..."

"Brooke?" Tibor called out again.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no," she chanted. "Trouble, it's Marie..."

"Dear God..."

Then came the sound again, the low mix between a growl and a hiss—coming from right behind her. Despite the pain, exhaustion and shock, Brooke heard it. With a final surge of adrenaline and rage, she spun toward the sound, lifted her Python, and fired.

"Brooke!" Tibor shouted, but his call didn't really register.

Instead, she stared dumbly at the creature before her. It was a beautiful animal, graceful in form, surprisingly small. Its coat was scarlet. Its head bore distinctly feline features. Its golden eyes seemed to glow, even in the darkening shadows of the rainforest...

Even as its very life drained away...

With a final, strained death-howl, the Jardinian firecat—a newcomer to these strange lands—collapsed in a heap of alien flesh before Brooke's eyes.