

BATTLECORPS

FORGOTTEN WORLDS

Book One

The Hunt for Jardine

Herbert A. Beas II

BATTLECORPS

Chapter Four

I still can't believe she's gone. I just can't.

I've seen my share of dangers in this job. Hell, there was never an IE contract I ever did that didn't have a hazard clause for things like this. I knew—we all knew—there was a particular danger in this one, but I always presumed we could handle it. I always presumed they'd come after me, or maybe after T. Why did Marie even have to get back in that damned truck? Why?

And damn it, it had to be then that we finally found the malfing firecats, too! Someone had tried to kill us all, killed Marie and Esok, and we suddenly found the stupid beasts that caused all this trouble!

We tracked those twice-damned animals for weeks after that, and I felt about half a meter tall through the whole thing. Marie should've been there. I would've given up and told Croft to shove his entire mission, but I just couldn't. Not after the cost. I couldn't even bring myself to tell Tyler right away. How could I?

And it all led back to an IE ship! A stupid, Bast-damned IE DropShip carried those beasties to Shasta before something brought them down. Somehow, enough cats survived and escaped to breed in the rainforest, where they've been wiping out anything small enough for them to kill and eat.

Lawrence and I found the recorders, but they're maybe five years old; Trouble doesn't even think he can decipher them now, but at least we're done with Shasta.

Damn it all! Why did I have to be so angry with her on that day?

—From the journals of Brooklyn Stevens

K-1 DropShuttle Columbus

Zenith Jump Point Approach Vector

Shasta, Free Worlds League

13 October 3067

Brooke stared at the readouts before her without truly seeing them. Her fingers had paged back and forth through the information—what little of it Tibor scrounged from the flight logs—perhaps a hundred times already, and even now, she could not recall any of it. The numbers, words, and images all looked like a blur.

It took Tibor four attempts to break through the haze of her thoughts.

His jade and emerald eyes were suddenly before her again. She realized somehow that he'd been standing over her for a while. His hand was on her shoulder, but only now was she aware of it there.

I'm a mess! she told herself.

Seeing recognition in her eyes at last, Tibor let out a heavy sigh and finally sat down in the tiny booth that often doubled as the DropShuttle *Columbus'* breakfast table and a mid-day workstation. Her mind still hazy, Brooke wondered how many days she'd spent at the table, staring blankly at the computer screens, mechanically writing notes in her journals, or just plain brooding.

"You can't let it eat you up like this, Brooke," Tibor said, softly. "You know that!"

I was supposed to take care of her! She wanted to scream that out loud, but couldn't find the strength. How long had it been since she'd eaten? Her stomach growled, and her mouth felt pasty.

"Are you even hearing me?" he asked.

She shook her head.

Tibor's voice grew stern. "Brooke—!"

"Damn it, Trouble!" she exploded, fighting back the welling tears. "I know, damn it!"

All at once, it felt as though she had snapped back into the present. She could smell, now, the artificially purified air circulating through the ship, feel and hear the ambient rumble of the main

drive engines. Before her, still clutched in her hand, was a compad Tibor probably handed to her over an hour ago, before her latest bout of remorse. The screen displayed fragments of an itinerary, visuals of a planet that looked from space like just about anywhere, coordinate values that she somehow knew made no rational sense. A flight log corrupted by five years of neglect and the elements, recovered from a downed ship with Interstellar Expeditions' registry.

For this, she reminded herself, we left Marie buried on an alien world...

"Well?" Tibor asked.

"What do you want me to say, Trouble?" she challenged him. "She was closer to me—closer to *us*—than anyone we ever lost on a mission! And *you* told me not to bring her along, but I didn't list—!"

Tibor took one of her hands in his. "No," he said. "You were right, Brooke. Marie belonged in the field on this one. She knew what to look for; I wouldn't have done any better."

Brooke pulled her hand back and dropped the compad. It hit the polished steel table with a clatter. She fell back in the seat, arms folding across her chest, and avoided Tibor's gaze. The rational part of her mind knew that the proper thing to do would be to stiffen up and get back to the business of command. She shook her head again.

"Maybe," she admitted. "Maybe..."

"Brooke, if we're going to finish this mission, we need you back in the here and now. Lawrence and I are getting worried."

"I know already! But, damn it, how professional do you want me to be here?"

"Well, for starters, you can tell us what we're going to do next."

Brooke sighed. Her eyes dropped back to the compad.

"You know," she said after a moment. "I have half a mind to take this data, go back to Croft, and tell him to screw this whole mission."

Tibor smirked. "Ja," he said. "I thought you might."

"But you also know I can't do that."

"Honestly?" Tibor arched her eyebrows. "I wasn't sure this time."

Brooke shook her head and met his eyes once more.

"Close," she admitted. "Centimeters close, maybe. But no. We do, I guess, have to go back to IE with this, though. The coordinates are in code, and I don't recognize the key. The flight data's all mucked up on top of it anyway, so I'd guess that even if we did decode the text, the only people who could make sense of the itinerary would be Croft's."

"Perhaps." Tibor nodded cautiously.

Brooke paused for a moment, catching something in his tone that suggested more than a lackluster agreement. All of a sudden, it was as if the fog in her mind lifted. *Of course!*

"You're thinking that I suspect Croft knew of this ship all along?" she asked. "And thus he also knows what her itinerary was?"

A thin smile crawled across Tibor's face. "Something like that."

"Well," she said, drawing out the word as she rolled the thought around. "That's possible. But as I think about that now, I think he *didn't* know. Suspected, maybe. He would've volunteered that kind of thing if he believed it completely. Then he could've simply turned this mission into a recovery op..."

The realization dawned on her like a flash of lightning. She blinked, and felt as though she had finally awoken from a long, deep sleep. "No," she exclaimed. "He wouldn't have even *needed* us if he knew all that..."

Tibor's eyes narrowed.

"I think he wants *us* to find Jardine first, Trouble. This DropShip—the *Clarke*, I think—went missing before she could report which leg of the journey she was on. You know some of the company's captains are sloppy record-keepers. Hell, maybe the *Clarke*'s captain was even the greedy sort, withholding reports in exchange for a higher finder's fee."

"IE internal politics at its most cutthroat," Tibor agreed dryly. "That's certainly possible. Plus, ships go missing during ops all the time, and so many are looking for places like Jardine. Ghosts, maybe?"

The image of the camouflaged man floated before Brooke's eyes for a moment and she shuddered. He had no identification on him when she finally checked out his body. Even his exotic Gauss rifle and the electronic camouflage failed to yield any clues, as if the gear was custom-made for its user. The Green Ghosts had been known to sport both Clan and Star League technologies in the past. Then again, so could ComStar and just about any Great House.

"Maybe," she mumbled. "Either way, IE lost the *Clarke* and wasn't sure where she went. Or, maybe, the ship *did* report in, and they knew she'd been shot down—"

"—Or," Tibor jumped in, "maybe she was too busy running from whoever wanted to keep the secret to radio in."

"*Enau*," Brooke said with a nod. "Whichever way it went down, it means that in order to find Jardine, they needed to find the ship, but they still want someone to carry forward, find the planet, confirm it, get back out alive, and report it."

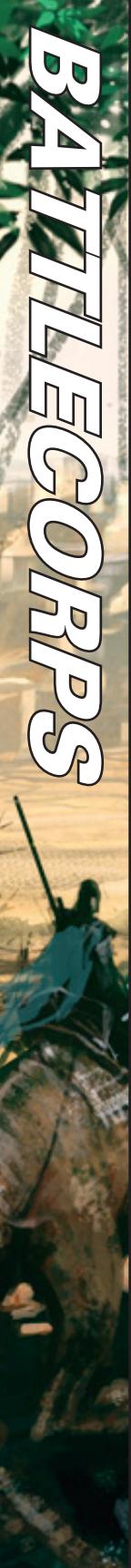
Tibor nodded. "And for that, they'd rather send in a scout who's *not* directly attached to the company, since it's now a proven risk. So, we're bait?"

"Of a sort," Brooke said thoughtfully. "But we suspected as much going in. What this means is that we're half done with the mission, though; we found the missing link, and with IE's records, we *should* be able to find a list of possible destinations. I would presume that the *Clarke*'s JumpShip also got wasted. But in deep space, debris would've scattered everywhere before anyone picked it up; by then, finding a recorder would be like finding a needle in a planet-sized haystack."

Tibor's smile broadened. "So we cross-reference any JumpShip losses that coincide with DropShip losses—"

"—particularly around the time this little gem went missing," Brooke finished, while waving the compad. "We have a vessel name, a general location, and an estimated time of disappearance. IE should be able to give us a flight plan to work from, and I would wager that we're within 30 light years of the target. More than one jump away, and there's just no excuse beyond bald-faced stupidity why an IE explorer wouldn't check in with something."

"Well, unless they simply didn't trust the local commo-nets," Tibor said.



Brooke sagged. "I suppose that works, too, but it widens the search area considerably."

"True," Tibor sighed. "It's about a few hundred stars to choose from, but at least it's a start if we look into anything within the one-jump radius of here. I'm sure we can narrow it down with what we know of Jardine's spectral data in the archives. But an itinerary would let us make a chain of such areas to look into, if the captain followed it right..."

With a grunt, Tibor paused, closing his artificial emerald eye for a moment. "You sure Croft won't cut us loose after we ID the ship, if he has her itinerary already?"

"If he does, we can sue him for breach of contract," Brooke said blandly, "but I don't think he will. He wants *us* to go there and come back. He wants *us* to confirm Jardine before he takes credit for its discovery. And he wants *us* to trip any traps along the way so his boys can go in safe."

"The crafty old *Arsch!*" Tibor muttered. "So, then, back to the original question: What are we doing now?"

Brooke pondered again. "We can't HPG a message from here," she said finally. "Too dangerous. We could black box it, maybe, but I'd hate to reveal to IE that we still have another of their most expensive toys..."

"Good call, assuming they don't already know."

Brooke frowned at the thought. IE's possession of black boxes was one of the scattered organization's greatest secrets—one she would bet the *Sacajawea* that the Steiner and Davion families (at least) would be deadly interested in investigating. An ancient alternative to HPGs, IE had used the few dozen or so they had uncovered over the years to build their own off-grid communications network, paranoid over possible ComStar eavesdropping.

And two such boxes "just happened" to go missing from IE's inventory about the same time a certain Doctor Brooklyn Stevens and the crew of the JumpShip *Sacajawea* left their company.

"Either way," she said, "we should get clear of the area. Maybe make for Alliance space again. Whoever those bastards were who sent that man back there, they should lose our scent for a while after one or two jumps, and we can get a broadcast out or something, arrange a meeting but leave out the particulars."

Tibor nodded. "Sounds like a plan, then."

Brooke frowned again. Already, her mind was drifting, and she could feel the tears welling up. *Why—?*

Tibor's hand was on hers. "Hey..."

"Why?" she whispered. "Why did I have to be so angry with her that day?"

"You can't live every minute like it's going to be your last," Tibor said. "If you did, you'd never leave the ship."

"Maybe," Brooke sniffed. "But that's a poor damned excuse when the moment comes, Trouble."

"Anything we say at times like this is just going to sound like a platitude, hon. But you have to know, at the end of the day, that we all took risks coming out here. We knew someone was out to keep this secret."

"Yeah, but if I'd been with Marie instead of Lawrence—"

"Then in all probability, Lawrence would be dead instead of Marie?" Tibor guessed, making Brooke wince inwardly. "Or maybe that guy down there was stalking *you* and not the guide, so it *still* would've been Marie. You and I both know it won't do any good to second-guess."

Brooke sighed, the tears once more under control. "Can't help it," she mumbled. "I just—"

A metallic tap on the bulkhead doorway distracted them both. Looking up, she saw Lawrence standing tactfully silent across the room. Although he wore a sheepish expression on his face, his ice-blue eyes were intense.

"We have company at the jump point," he said simply. "And they want to speak with you."



"*Doctor Stevens*," said the leathery face on the monitor, stressing Brooke's title in a way that made Tibor's eyes roll, "I understand your surprise. My own crew was on assignment several jumps away when IE called us to come here. Henry Croft signed the orders personally, and the contract clearly defines our role in this

mission as providing military escort for your investigation, with an emphasis on acting as your security advisor. As such, I would strongly advise that your team pay heed to my experience in such matters..."

"Galatean diplomacy at its finest," Lawrence grumbled.

Tibor chuckled as Brooke sighed irritably. What with the annoying four-minute "light lag" between sending and receiving messages, and the arrogance obvious in this Captain Anton Hara's voice, her earlier malaise was giving way to simmering anger.

Oblivious to her mood, Hara's malachite eyes stared directly into the monitor, as if trying to peer into Brooke's soul across time and space. His skin was darkly tanned—to the point of premature aging—and his short mop of hair was a sandy blond. Brooke imagined that the man's homeworld was likely a colder planet than the one he grew up on.

He wore a flat gray jumpsuit, with a black turtleneck undershirt—a fashion Brooke found common among spacer crews. His voice was rich, with a trace of an accent she couldn't quite place, and carried over with a confidence of someone not used to being questioned.

"...As you know," he continued, "IE considers this expedition dangerous in the extreme. So, unless your team is packing a DropShip or two we're unaware of, it would be in our mutual best interests to work together as closely as possible from here on out, with an emphasis on the security needs of the present operations."

The image froze; after four exchanges so far, this time Hara wasn't even bothering with a proper signoff. Brooke sighed and propped a fist under her chin as she studied the monitor.

"Who the hell does this guy think he's dealing with?" she finally asked aloud.

In the pilot's seat beside Brooke, Tibor grunted, drumming slim fingers on the flight console, a bland smirk on his face. Behind them, occupying the third seat in the DropShuttle *Columbus*' cramped cockpit, sat Lawrence, keeping himself busy with yet another verification that the life support systems were working normally.

"Well," Tibor said, turning his eyes out toward the canopy, to take in the tiny points of light dead ahead that could as easily have been stars as ships. "From what we can see, he came in with his own Jumper, a *Leopard*, and some fighters, right? So I'm thinking

he's thinking that the merc with the bigger guns gets to make the rules."

"That guy's only got bigger guns in his mind," Lawrence scoffed.

Brooke allowed herself a smirk at the thought. In all likelihood, the enhanced armaments the *Sacajawea* and her shuttles possessed would surprise the likes of Anton Hara and his crew. Thanks to a legacy of years spent venturing into strange and occasionally hostile regions off the beaten path, both the *Sac* and her complement of small craft had undergone heavy modifications to improve their survivability over long-haul missions, often trading minor luxuries for armor and weapons. Together, the vessels boasted enough firepower to make any unsuspecting pirate band think twice before considering them easy prey for a casual smash-and-plunder. While that factor had saved Brooke and her crew on many occasions since they and IE parted ways, it was a surprise hidden from the casual observer.

But whether or not the extra weaponry would deter Hara didn't matter so much to Brooke as the fact that he seemed to be confusing his alleged role of "mission support" with "mission control."

"I've half a mind to tell this guy to chase a comet," she mumbled. "But that wasn't Galatean diplomacy, Lawrence. Galatean mercs like to yell and curse a lot more. That was almost scripted; fifty kroner says he's got an IE liaison whispering in his ear."

"Oh, there's a pleasant thought," Lawrence said.

"Maybe," Tibor replied. "But if so, it means we may want to compromise a little bit."

Brooke arched an eyebrow at him.

"Consider this: We were just discussing going back to Croft anyway to see if IE had records on the *Clarke*'s itinerary. Now here's this guy with an IE contract, signed by Croft, and a liaison watching over his shoulder?"

"You're not saying I should let these hired guns claim command rights in exchange for the data, are you?"

"Oh, hell no!" Tibor exclaimed, giving her his most indignant scowl. "Actually, I think Croft's plans—whatever they are—call for lending us these guys as more than just military support."

"So the mercs aren't here to escort us, they *are* the liaison, eh?" Lawrence asked.

"That sounds possible," Brooke said, mulling over the idea. "But IE has played this one close to the vest from the moment they hired us. This Hara and his boys may not even know all the details, or they're simply being misled into thinking they have some authority here. Neither of which is conducive to their actually getting it."

"Yeah," Lawrence grunted. "It could also be that the liaison is hoping to weasel what we know and—if it's enough—send Hara and his warriors off to secure the objective or maybe even bump us off."

Brooke shook her head. "That's not really Croft's style, but I won't exclude the possibility, either. It *does* bring us back to square one here. Bottom line: I think we're all agreed that we can't just trust these guys to take control, but keeping them around may help us get some missing pieces to the puzzle worked out."

"Then I suppose we got us a new partner, *ja*?"

Brooke nodded. "The trick is getting them to do what we want in such a way as to make them think it's what *they* want."

"Well, my dear," Tibor said with a grin, "I imagine that's *your* department."

Brooke sneered at him and shook her head again as she readied herself for another transmission. "The things I do for this team," she grumbled.