



BATTLECORPS

FORGOTTEN WORLDS

Book One

The Hunt for Jardine

Herbert A. Beas II



Chapter Five

BATTLECORPS

I won't dare put this in a letter to Tyler. Not yet. All I can do for now is build up the list of offenses I'll need to apologize for. Between losing Marie and spending the next few weeks traipsing around that jungle short on a guide and a good friend, it's been a living hell. Adding insult to injury is the pressing need to keep the use of the box to a bare minimum, and that means the letters home have to be the short, sweet, "wish you were here" types.

This Hara guy, though. Haven't seen quite this bad a case of testosterone overload in a while. The merc and his cronies actually thought they would be able to order us about for IE's pleasure, but a short chat with his liaison (a gray-suited snake named Nathan Bellamy), and we managed to set the record straight. We even scored the Clarke's "formal" travel itinerary, hopefully enabling us to retrace her steps (based on the obtuse assumption that she actually went where her captain claimed she was going).

It's taken Bellamy a few days to gather the info (or at least a few days to decide to hand it over), but I'm certain that between his records and the collection of ancient maps we have here, we can narrow down the options immensely. Trouble's already on the case.

That is, as long as the Clarke really did visit Jardine just before she got shot down over Shasta...

—From the journals of Brooklyn Stevens

Explorer-class JumpShip Sacajawea
Zenith Jump Point
Shasta, Free Worlds League
16 October 3067

In the heyday of the Star League, the *Explorer*-class JumpShip was a favorite for the wealthy elite, interplanetary corporate officers, and—as the name implied—deep space exploration crews. The dedicated exploration craft thus often boasted science bays, an observatory complete with high-powered radio telescopes, and (for a crowning achievement) a holographic “planetarium” chamber, in which the sensor feeds and computerized maps of the heavens could be studied with almost god-like scrutiny.

The *Sacajawea* was *not* such an *Explorer*, however.

Instead of the radio-scopes and the first-person feel of an oversized walk-in holotank, the *Sac* reserved a single conference room for a bank of computers, a wall-length projection screen, and a dozen chairs. Paneled shelves lined one wall, containing racks of files—both hardcopy and electronic—behind meshed glass doors. These facilities were decidedly low-tech compared to the JumpShip’s Golden Age contemporaries, but to Brooke and her crew, they were more than enough to get the job done.

Even so, Brooke idly wondered how much more efficient the dedicated *Explorer*’s facilities might have been in her circumstances, as she leaned back in one of the room’s black synthleather chairs and sipped at the bag of bitter, lukewarm coffee in her hand. Standing before the main screen, one hand still resting near the keyboard beside him, Tibor glanced back at the sound of her loud slurp. A look of vague disgust crossed his face.

Brooke shrugged; foil-bagged coffee *was* an acquired taste.

Tibor looked back at the abstracted star map now projected on the wall. The slate black field was filled with stars that glowed with colors assigned by their affiliation: purple stars represented those of the Free Worlds League (including Shasta, which currently pulsed for easy identification), while the blue stars along the upper edge of the field were the worlds of the nearby Lyran Alliance. The white stars—which covered far more of space than most people Brooke knew ever gave credit for—represented the dead or uninhabited star systems charted in between. Zoomed in for greater clarity, the map represented only a small slice of

the Inner Sphere, along the Lyran/Free Worlds border. A hazy red circle enveloped a region of stars centered on Shasta itself, while a string of straight green lines traced the pre-logged path of the ill-fated *Clarke* expedition.

The line made only one stop in the smoky red circle, one turn before coming to Shasta. And that point glowed white on the map.

"So," he said with a sigh. "That's it."

Lawrence, taking up the chair beside Brooke, matched Tibor's scowl. "If our theories are correct, that is," he said.

Tibor shook his head and ran a hand through his dark, oily hair. "Come on, Lawrence; they're reasonable enough. One jump. Any more than that and the *Clarke's* captain or at least his JumpShip should've had enough time to check in or submit a report. But Bellamy confirms it: the ship vanished without checking in. Now we know where."

"And we presume Jardine thus lies within a jump from here," Lawrence added, "but that presupposes that the captain of the *Clarke* and her JumpShip didn't traverse a number of dead systems before returning to civilized space. It's not uncommon."

Brooke grimaced as she sipped away the last of her coffee. The bag collapsed in her hand with a loud crinkle, and she crushed the remainder, feeling the sharp foil edges yielding to her grip. Over the last few days, she had reconsidered the theories herself. Since the collapse of the original Star League, as technology declined, it became increasingly unheard-of for JumpShip captains to risk travel to any of the thousands of stars between the named, inhabited dots on the map. Every leap through hyperspace, after all, carried the risk of catastrophic drive failure. And with fewer shipyards left in the Inner Sphere, very few JumpShip captains (or their crews and passengers) relished the idea of such a catastrophe leaving them stranded a few dozen light years away from any possible aid or breathable atmosphere.

But Interstellar Explorers and other "lostech" prospectors had made a practice of tempting the void for centuries. After all, it was the dead systems between the dots where they made their living. These worlds would be isolated from the communications grid, completely incommunicado, and many could be inhabitable if one knew which planets had been settled before the Star League fell. With that realization came the nagging doubt that the *Clarke* and her captain, pursued by forces unknown, could have broken with

his itinerary and stuck to the dead systems for a few jumps before coming back to civilized lands.

"But you *know* the drill, Lawrence." Tibor sounded exasperated. "IE standard protocol—especially with chartered JumpShips, like the one Bellamy says the *Clarke* used—says that every jump to a dead system has to be within reach of a live system or port of call..."

"...And that they must alternate such points," Brooke said, finishing the paraphrasing of the "official" IE handbook, "but we both know not all ships do that, especially when traveling through particularly hostile space."

Tibor's expression collapsed even further. "Granted, Brooke," he said, "but come on; if we're just going to throw out the data we have here, we'll never make progress with this."

Lawrence held up his hands, "I just want to make sure we both realize that we're working off guesswork here."

"As ever," Tibor grumbled. "But let's look a shade closer, shall we?"

Brooke caught the tone and leaned forward. "You found something more?"

Tibor reached out and touched the screen where the white dot flared amid the blackness of virtual space. The view magnified again, and shifted the dot over to allow room for a stream of text.

"The stellar data," he said. "Planet name: Herakleion. Star type: G2V. Four rocky planetary bodies in the system—one in the life zone—plus two asteroid belts and one gas giant. According to Free Worlds League historical archives, Herakleion was hit by an extremely virulent bio-warfare agent sometime around the year 2815. The plague was so bad that the Captain-General placed the planet under a full quarantine and wrote off a local population numbering somewhere between forty and fifty million Leaguers."

"Okay?" Lawrence prompted.

Tibor reached down and tapped a command into his computer. The partial map vanished from its half of the screen and resolved as a new series of stellar values, now placed side-by-side with those of Herakleion.

"The archives on Jardine," Tibor began, "are a wreck. The planet vanished so thoroughly—sometime during the First Succession

War, according to every account—that what records survive tend to conflict in most cases...except what's projected here."

Brooke narrowed her eyes and studied the figures.

"G3V star," Lawrence read aloud. "Four rockies, one gas, two belts... Damn, that's close."

Tibor nodded. "Herakleion was a humble agro world according to League records. Minimal industry. Mostly strong enough for self-sufficiency and part of no major military, commercial, or political power blocs. Granted, in those days the nukes and bio-weapons flew pretty liberally, so one never knows why half the worlds that got hit were hit, but add to that the fact that this one lay about two or three jumps into League space at the time, and it seems odd that it got hit so badly.

"And Jardine, as we all have long heard, was no major industrial power base either. In fact, their biggest—and only—noteworthy export was the tabiranth, a domestic riding mount favored by the wealthy, but used locally to tend to ranches and such."

"I think you made your point, Trouble," Brooke said. "So are we saying that Herakleion and Jardine are basically twins? Some kind of clerical error, maybe?"

Tibor folded his arms and leaned back against the bulkhead. "Maybe," he said. "But there *is* a hitch here that bugs me."

"The fact that Jardine shows up on *none* of the maps we have in storage?" Lawrence asked, gesturing toward the shelves.

"*Genau*. I pulled them down myself and looked as soon as I saw these comparisons, and in the ComStar maps printed as far back as 2788, there is no mention of Jardine at all. Even the Dobless maps dating back to the Star League show no sign of Jardine. It's like all the legends say: the planet seemingly never existed, yet everyone seems to remember that it once did, and it died in the Succession Wars. A common theory is that it was one of those 'local name' things, where the inhabitants use another name than what gets printed on the maps. But of course nobody's ever been sure...

"And then there are the emphatic reports that say Jardine was nuked into oblivion, not plagued. The net result is we get two similar-sounding worlds and systems, but with just enough discrepancies to make one doubt they're really the same."

"What about the system configurations?" Lawrence asked.

"Not quite the same either," Tibor said. Herakleion's data says the gas giant is in the fourth solar position, while Jardine's puts a rocky planet there. I looked down to the moons level, even. Jardine is supposedly moonless. Herakleion had two moons."

Brooke tapped her fingers on the table. "So, what you're saying is that Herakleion—and not Jardine—may be the last world the *Clarke* came from. Does any other point on their itinerary match the stellar data?"

Tibor shook his head.

"So close," Lawrence said, "and yet so far."

"*Too* close, maybe," Brooke said.

Lawrence arched an eyebrow.

"Could it be possible, I wonder, that this really *is* a case of clerical error? We know the Jardine info is fragmentary. It's based on three hundred year-old accounts of a world nobody can find on historical maps today, after all. Heck, if one really thinks about it, the very existence of Jardine could be debated as the product of someone's whimsy."

"Maybe," Tibor said. "People on Terra really believed in Lemuria and Shangri-La, after all. Though I doubt it would be just a 'clerical error'. The accounts are too populous. The reports stretch back for centuries. We all did the research."

"Then that leaves us only one other option," Brooke said flatly. "Unfortunately, it's one that also explains why someone's been trying to kill everyone who looks into the mystery of this planet."

"Someone deliberately altered the records?" Lawrence asked. "All the records? Even retroactively?"

Brooke nodded slowly.

"Do you realize what you're saying?" Lawrence asked, his expression incredulous.

"There's only one way we're going to find out, you know," Tibor said grimly.

"Yes," Brooke narrowed her eyes. "I know."

Leopard-class DropShip Kaylin **Zenith Jump Point, Shasta**

Anton Hara leaned back in his command chair and rested his chin on his hands. His eyes stared out through the *Kaylin's* forward viewports, at the crisp, stark brightness of the universe, splashed across the cold, dark heavens. A chill ran along his spine, but he refused to shiver against it. In his youth, he remembered, the sight of space *from* space had filled him with an almost religious awe. The sheer vastness of the universe, infinite in all directions, yet filled to bursting with starlight and star life, had made him feel so small by comparison. In his fantasies, his younger self felt as though God was watching him, that each pinpoint of light out there was one of His eyes. Watching over all beings—all worlds—with a gaze of pure light, never blinking.

Back then, the humbling thought had made him shiver each and every time he beheld the night sky...

But that feeling had died inside Hara so very long ago. Space, he eventually came to know, was cold, harsh, and uncaring. There was no God out here, no divine will. Now, Hara knew space for what it truly was: a force of nature, a medium of transit no different from air or water—but due no less respect. Space was an element within which mankind could travel and communicate—or fight and die.

No, awe was no longer the feeling Hara got when he looked out upon a sea of stars these days. What sent shivers along his spine now was a different kind of certainty he had come to trust, a feeling born of decades spent at the controls of a fusion-powered mass of armor, weapons, and power.

The sense of a coming fight.

Beside him, unbidden, Lenard Bryce cleared his throat.

"Eagle for your thoughts?" he asked, his voice low to avoid attracting too much attention from the *Kaylin's* late evening bridge crew. The two men seated at the pilot's station, at least, appeared not to notice.

"I don't trust her," Hara muttered. Bryce was a good exec, if at times an over-eager one. After so many years with the younger man on his wing, Hara could not imagine withholding his thoughts.

To his credit, Bryce betrayed no sign of surprise. His arms still clasped behind his back, he stood at ease beside his captain, his gray jumpsuit and tan undershirt presenting a uniform match to Hara's own attire and conveying his authority as one of the *Kaylin's* crew without wasting money on hollow finery like rank insignia. Bryce's Eastern Indian skin was darker than Hara's, his short hair was jet black and slicked back, and his coal-colored eyes hid behind a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles that sat upon his sharp nose. His chin was strong, and his mouth maintained a tight, unreadable line that enhanced his officer-style appearance. Hara often wondered if the man practiced this look, or if it simply came naturally to him.

As he felt Hara's eyes upon him, Bryce finally turned away from his forward-looking stare. His eyebrows came up. "Stevens, I presume?" he asked with his distinctive Regular accent.

Hara nodded and turned back toward the viewports. Stevens' *Explorer* hung in space only a few dozen kilometers away, but with her jump sails furled and lacking any DropShips, she appeared as little more than a fountain pen suspended in space. At any moment, Hara half expected the ship to vanish, fading into non-existence with a simple start of her K-F drive.

Then *what would we do?* he wondered.

"Why did that moron have to go ahead and give her the data?" he muttered aloud.

"IE works in mysterious ways," Bryce answered. "I wouldn't be surprised if Bellamy was simply following some pre-arranged plan they sent him here with. Hell, maybe they *want* her to try an end-run around us."

Hara nodded uncertainly. *That* was definitely plausible; he'd seen and heard of many variations on such a "double blind" play throughout his career. But being a pawn in one was never an idea he particularly relished.

"Do you think she'll really find Jardine, though?" Bryce asked after a moment.

"Maybe," Hara admitted. "IE seems to think highly of her, even though they want us to watch her, too."

"Maybe *that's* what's bugging you, Cap; guarding the objective, while watching her for the first sign of treachery. Have to admit, though, if I were the one about to find Atlantis, I might consider

ditching the hired muscle so I could renegotiate my contract with the employer, too."

Hara's eyes narrowed. *Now there's a fascinating thought...*

He was about to say as much when suddenly a light flashed on the primary sensor station. The tech already there glanced at her board, then turned so sharply that her short blonde hair looked like a momentary explosion. Her slate gray eyes—intense, but far from panicked—found Hara's in an instant and locked on.

"Heat spike!" she called out in a clipped voice. "Bearing seven o'clock low, roughly eight-fifty clicks."

The chill ran down Hara's spine again, forcing him to shiver this time. *Damn!*

"Go to yellow alert," he snapped, "Have the Ready-Five stand by for launch."

"Aye," the tech said.

"Pilot," Bryce chimed in, addressing the second crewman, a younger man who only half-turned to face him, "stand by for emergency launch."

"Aye," the pilot nodded.

Hara's stern gaze found Bryce next. "Could be anyone," he said in a low voice, "but I have a feelin—"

The lights flickered for less than an instant—so fast only an experienced spacer would notice the effect. Hara knew before the tech even called it out:

"Emergence wave! I have a silhouette... *Scout* JumpShip, one DropShip, *Leopard*-class."

Hara closed his eyes for just a second, and opened them to find Bryce's, expectant.

"Get Stevens on the line," he said, "and call the other pilots to stations..."

Leopard CV-class DropShip Luminus Omega Zenith Jump Point, Shasta

Wene Maseo blinked away the final stars that swam before his vision and ground his teeth against the wave of nausea welling up from the pit of his stomach. Almost as soon as he did so, he saw the green light flash on his console.

His heart began to race as his eyes quickly scanned the interface. Engine on-line, targeting systems active and tracking, communications on-line, weapons charged and loaded. Closing his eyes, it took but a moment to visualize the connection, to send the thruster controls into launch status. At his back, he could feel the metallic caress of the launch catapult. In his mind's eye, the wire-mold schematic of his HCT-213B *Hellcat II* appeared, glowing a brilliant green.

"Raptor Flight!" a voice called out into his ear, pure and strong. "Go!"

I am the Master's Hand!

"Raptors!" Maseo shouted aloud, activating his mike with but a thought. His eyes remained closed. He could see just fine without them. "*Launch!*"

With a powerful lurch, he felt the kick of the metal catapult against his backside, and pushed back against it with his legs, firing his afterburners for a surge of acceleration approaching 5.5 gravities, and feeling the almost immediate feedback from his cargo, thumping against his hips.

In an instant, he felt the cold rush of blessed vacuum across his arms, and saw through still-sealed eyes the glowing outline of his fellow wingmen, already arranging themselves behind him in a six-pointed star. The *Luminus Omega*, his home and mother, would wait behind him as he soared toward the two JumpShips hanging in the distance ahead, their narrow-spined forms glowing an angry red.

Reluctantly, he opened his eyes again and took in the pale colors of space all around him through his natural vision. Banking slightly to his left, he reduced his swim into the void to a modest 2-gravity jaunt.

His true senses fed him the data as he drifted his crosshairs across the targets: One *Explorer*-class JumpShip, plus one *Scout*-

class with an attached *Leopard*. Data scrolled across his peripheral vision, supplementing the sensor feeds with statistics he already knew by heart.

“Look lively, Raptors!” he called out, “At best, they may muster up to ten fighters to oppose us, plus the *Leopard*...”

Even as he spoke, Maseo could hear the launch signals coming from the enemy *Leopard*, and it brought a feral grin to his face. His mouth filled with the metallic taste of his own saliva, and a warm flush came over him as his sensors tagged a pair of arrow-shaped *Corsairs* separating from their mother ship.

“Try not to pity them overmuch,” he told his wingmen. “They are, after all, only Frails...”

End of Book 1