

FORGOTTEN WORLDS

Book One

The Hunt for Jardine

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BATTLECORPS

Prologue

My dearest Tyler,

Well, we're here at last! I'm sure by now you've been getting bored with the usual in-transit messages, but I also know how much you worry during these field missions. What can I say, but the usual assurances that I'm fine, that I still love you, that I miss you very, very much, and that I hope to be home in a just another few months?

It's a shame you couldn't come, by the way. From orbit, Rocky seems quite fascinating. Trouble says the scans he's getting so far reveal that the planet slid back into an ice age, probably thanks to the nuclear winter from that last battle down there between the Davions and Steiners. Radiation levels now are fairly tolerable, of course—survivable, even without protection.

Better still, we think all that environmental damage played havoc with ocean currents after all these years; the Annie M is now beached on the Obsidian Coast. I won't even need full arctic diving gear or the DrillerMech to get at the target.

So it looks like everything on this job is working out right (for a change!). But don't worry, honey. I'll bundle up nice and warm in the heavy enviro-suit, just for you.

And I'll play it safe, as always.

Love!

—Brooke

RSS Annie M
Obsidian Coast
Rocky, Lyrn Alliance
13 May 3067

"Brooke, you better get your ass out of there!"

Its sound muffled only slightly through the insulation of her sealed helmet, a powerful blast emphasized the words that barked in Brooke Stevens' ears. Shuddering the length of the ancient cargo ship, the explosion set free a brief cascade of long-dead barnacles and centuries-old stalactites of ice and decayed minerals from the ceiling and walls around her. More powerful than the first explosion, this one shook the bowed, age-worn deck grates so violently that she had to reach out with her free hand, grasping at a corroded rail along the starboard bulkhead.

Not unexpectedly, the rail snapped free, denying any support—real or imagined—and leaving Brooke to fight a losing battle with gravity. Flailing, she fell back, and knew an exquisite pain that shot along her left leg when it twisted almost completely out of joint. The heavy satchel, still clutched in her right hand, bounced against the grates with a muted clatter of metals on metals. Instinctively, she tightened her grip on the satchel's carrying strap, holding on for dear life even as her other hand let go of the useless rail fragment.

The shock of pain forced a short yelp from Brooke's lips that momentarily fogged the polarized faceplate of her heavy helmet, and reflected back the stale stench of the mystery meat hash she'd had for breakfast this morning. She coughed as much from the odor as from the pain.

"Brooke?" Though robbed of some of its emotion through its transmission, Marissa Boerefijn's voice nevertheless betrayed her worry.

"I *heard* you, Marie!" Brooke spat back, then bit her lip as she forced her left leg back underneath her.

"Are you okay?"

"Ask a stupid question," she hissed.

Another explosion shook the derelict vessel and icy debris peppered her thick suit. Brooke pulled herself upright, sucking in a lungful of filtered air through grinding teeth as her leg screamed

back in pain. Just ahead, barely illuminated by the (remaining) headlamps of her envirosuit helmet, the topside hatch was an oblong pool of blackness against the mottled gray and streaking shadows of the aft bulkhead. Burned away barely half an hour ago, the heavy door lay flat before the opening, an awkward step to the chamber beyond.

Still clutching the satchel, Brooke moved again, breathing heavily into her faceplate with each laborious, pain-wracked step...

It was all supposed to be so easy, she reminded herself again.

After all, the *Annie M* had rested on the bottom of Rocky's Obsidian Sea for the better part of three hundred years, survived a nuclear war, shifted shoreward by gross changes in local currents, and undergone a deep freeze as the planet's ice age plunged the average surface temperatures to minus twenty Centigrade and below. Surely, time and the elements would have rendered useless any of the booby traps left behind by the Rim Worlders, who originally scuttled their secret prize for later retrieval.

That was what Brooke and her team had decided, anyway. Seemed reasonable enough—until she found those cargo holds piled high with ancient munitions. Chemical sensors linked to her suit fed data to Marissa, who enjoyed the relative comfort of the *McKenna*. The modified AstroLux star yacht remained parked somewhere just beyond the beaches-turned-tundra of the Obsidian Coast, a few kilometers northwest of here.

The data—and Tibor "Trouble" Mitternacht's lightning-fast analysis of it from his own post on the *McKenna*—quickly revealed the presence of chemical propellants and warhead leakage. Only semi-frozen on the flooring, where it all had spent the last century or so pooling up, the chemical cocktail was unstable in the extreme, a literal powder keg awaiting a match.

Fortunately, the cargo hold that was Brooke's destination was separated from the munitions holds by several badly rusted bulkheads and one deck encrusted with dead, frosted barnacles and other curious mineral remains.

Unfortunately, the hold—and the heavy stainless steel safes within that held the *real* prize—lay just beneath the waterline, trapped in ice that required a handful of incendiary charges to flash-melt.

Compared to other jobs Brooke had taken, dunking herself into a murky slush to blindly cut away at corroded safe latches with a

pocket plasma torch was a piece of cake, as was groping about blindly to withdraw items by touch alone. But somewhere in all that effort, she surmised, some spark or vibration she didn't even account for must have happened. Perhaps even a bit of a functional and ancient mechanical booby trap was to blame (highly unlikely, but at least *theoretically* possible).

Whatever the cause, the result was a chain reaction that even now slowly ignited the *Annie M's* explosive cargo, warhead by tricentennial warhead....

"Brooke!"

A thunderous blast followed Brooke as she hobble-ducked through another open hatchway and into a narrow spiral stairwell heavily cluttered with debris and remains. Half an hour ago, she had descended these very stairs slowly enough, subconsciously mindful of the mummified ruins that might once have been living, breathing crewmen over three hundred years before. Now, she raced, forcing pain-wracked legs—weighed down by an extra few kilograms of unidentified treasures and a partially frozen envirosuit—to pound the ancient metal steps, kicking up bits of ice, ancient metal and perhaps even fragments of long-dead corpses.

"*Brooke!*" Marissa shouted again.

"I know! I *know!*"

As the blast all but tore open the deck below her, Brooke clutched the stair rail tightly, thanked the fates for its support and made her way to the upper deck, catching a glimpse of dim daylight somewhere beyond the open hatch above.

Then the world began to spin at the sound of groaning metal, sending her sprawling back several steps, to crash shoulder-first onto the landing beneath. The satchel, following her fall, slammed back and landed full on her chest. Another yelp of pain escaped Brooke through clenched teeth. Stars swam before her as she forced herself to roll back to her feet, all the while dimly aware that the ship itself continued to lurch and shift.

"Marie!" she snarled.

"She's capsizing, Brooke!" Marissa came back in a rush.

"We're *beached*, for Bast's sa—!"

"The *bow* was on the ice shelf, *dumkopf!*" Tibor's harsher voice cut in suddenly. "That last blast looks like it ruptured the outer hull, and you're on the half that *doesn't* have the support!"

"Oh, *terrific!*" Brooke spat. Hauling herself upward again, satchel in hand, she made for the upper decks, watching the gray shaft of daylight as it gradually, shakingly turned away. Each step became a challenge of balance—and pain management—as the *Annie M's* aft continued to list, and it was onto a deck now half-sunken in partially frozen seawater slush that she finally emerged agonizing seconds later.

As ancient, oceangoing cargo vessels went, the thirty thousand-ton *Annie M* was a small beast, her length only about two hundred meters from bow to stern. Though technically beached, her final resting place after centuries of drift amounted to little more than a mere twenty meters of ruined bow settled into a beach of frozen, debris-flocked sediment. This left her wide aft section—including the decrepit superstructure from which Brooke just emerged—hanging in the water, only partially submerged.

That the ship never rested wholly on the bottom of the seabed only attested to the expert efforts of her engineers and—Brooke presumed—the equally stunning incompetence of her last occupants in failing to scuttle her properly.

But now, the aft quarter shook violently as the latest explosion rocked the ship once more. With a powerful lurch, ancient deck plates blasted skyward and the forward-port cargo boom—the last survivor of five such booms once boasted by the venerable ship—toppled over the side.

The blast also drew Brooke's attention to the real problem. The *Annie M's* fractured hull was now listing deeper to starboard, its aft section literally twisting away from the grounded fore...

...with Brooke still on it.

Another explosion, more powerful than the last dozen or so, blew apart the already warped upper decks of the ancient cargo ship in a flash of golden fire. Tearing a neat line across the hull dead amidships, the blast rippled the surviving deck plates on both ends and sent a spray of ice and debris scattering in all directions. The shockwave hit Brooke almost instantly, tossing her against the superstructure walls and threatening to spill her back down inside the ruins as the stern accelerated its lazy spin toward a final sideways rest in the shallow, murky seabed.

“Scheiße!”

“Shit, indeed,” Tibor echoed in her ears. “I could see that blast from shore. Are you all right?”

Brooke suddenly found the need to suppress a laugh, despite the pain throbbing in her side and legs, and hooked her free arm around a twisted superstructure beam as the slope of the deck deepened. A lock of auburn hair, finally free of the tight bun she kept it in under the helmet, chose that moment to tumble across her left eye. She tried to blow it away, and only succeeded in fogging up the faceplate again. “I’m all mixed up here, guys,” she said instead. “Where’s my damn skimmer?”

“Go left,” Marissa told her.

Brooke looked left, and sighed. The *Annie M*’s death roll forced that side of the ship higher and higher as Brooke’s side spun lazily toward the sea. Getting to the skimmer meant climbing that rising slope while holding onto her satchel and accounting for any further explosions that threatened to blow what remained of the ship into a cloud of rusted metal and dead sea life.

“Hell with that!” Brooke shouted, and turned.

“Your *other* left, Brooke!” Tibor yelled over the din of groaning metal and rumbling blasts.

Ignoring him, Brooke slung the satchel over one shoulder, grasped the strap with both hands and lunged over the starboard rails. Eyes closed and tensed for the shock, she plunged into the murky, icy slush of the Obsidian Sea, just two meters below the sinking deck of the *Annie M*...

Shuttle McKenna
Outbound Trajectory
Rocky System, Lyran Alliance

Brooke loudly drew in a lungful of breath through her nose and bit her lip as Marissa gently prodded her with thin, nervous fingers. In the mirror bolted to the bulkhead before them, Brooke could see the massive bruise that outlined every rib along her left side, vanishing under the white of her brassiere. An even uglier blotch of black and blue peeked up from the preserving sleeve that now encased her left knee, revealing a nastier injury there that had already swollen her left ankle up to twice the size of the right, and gave the lower half of her leg an unhealthy purple cast.

"Christ, Brooke," Marissa muttered under her breath, "you're lucky that suit was padded..."

Brooke chewed on her bottom lip as Marissa's pale fingers—a sharp contrast to the light bronze of her own skin—continued to grope at her wounds, probing for broken bones. Though the cabin was heated, she knew, to a comfortable 22 Celsius, sitting on the thin foam-lined table nearly naked, she felt chills with every gentle poke. A rash of gooseflesh spread along her arms and legs, and she shuddered involuntarily.

Marissa's chocolate brown eyes—framed by a pair of classic, brass-rimmed bifocals—came up, and widened slightly as they met hers. Though Marissa had not been in the field with her, her long locks of dirty-blonde hair looked tousled and matted, and there were visible bags under her eyes. Brooke could easily guess why: as her team's researcher and a longtime spacer, Marissa rarely traveled to the mission sites any more. She had insisted this time, however, because she had grown to miss field operations.

And—as ever—something had happened to nearly deprive the team of its leader. Looking into Marissa's startled and weary eyes, Brooke recognized a concern that was all too familiar.

And maybe something else.

"Sorry," she croaked finally. "Just a little chilly in here, I guess."

She noticed Marissa's momentary reaction immediately, the flash of a deep frown and worry lines across her freckled forehead before she finally pushed herself away and back to the pile of discarded clothes by the medkit.

"Well, if a little cold is all you're feeling, consider yourself lucky," Marissa said. "Damned lucky, in fact, that you didn't dislocate or break something down there. If Tyler knew about this, you'd be grounded for sure."

"Oh, come on, Marie," Brooke said, shrugging on the loose-fitting T-shirt Marissa offered. "I've been through worse than this."

"Yeah, but jogging around under thirty meters of slush while a burning ship falls down around your head had to be the dumbest move I've ever witnessed from you in recent memory, and Tibor agrees."

"Oh, I object!" Brooke scoffed. "What about Svalstad?"

Marissa paused for a moment in thought. "Okay, *since* Svalstad, then."

"Hah!"

"Of course, as I recall, Tibor and Tyler were plenty fumed at you then, too."

"Well, what Ty doesn't know won't hurt, now will it?"

Marissa finally met Brooke's brownish-green eyes again and smiled crookedly. "That still leaves you with Trouble," she said.

"He's just broken up because we lost the skimmer," Brooke said with a wink.

"Maybe. It *was* a very nice skimmer. And do you realize how hard it is to adapt a B-90 for subarctic work? I got to hear him complain about how that cost 'over a hundred man hours and maybe an easy five grand in parts', you know..."

"And it worked beautifully when I drove it there," Brooke admitted with a smirk.

Marissa matched her expression for a moment and shook her head. "You still could've gotten yourself killed out there. We said 'left', you know."

"Blake's blood, Marie! 'Left' was a forty-degree slope by then! And in case you missed it, I was a little hard-pressed to make that jump."

Bending her left leg as much as the sleeve would allow just for emphasis, Brooke instantly paid for the act with a sharp, stabbing

pain that shot up her thigh and numbed her toes. Marissa's tired eyes narrowed slightly.

"Yeah, yeah," Brooke said with a roll of her eyes. Looking at the cabin floor, she pondered jumping down, but decided that she'd better stay off the leg a little while longer. Even in the half-gravity currently produced by the yacht's acceleration, a hard landing could further inflame the torn ligaments. Instead, she met the younger woman's gaze again and gave her a wolfish grin. "But the haul still ain't half-bad, is it?"

Marissa finally smiled, with a real gleam in her eyes.

"Tibor's still scanning the bonus prizes for integrity and contamination, but I can't wait to see them up close and personal when we get back to the *Sac*. It looks to be a small fortune, all right—even if your acrobatics banged up a few pieces a little."

"Hell, in that muck, I couldn't see a thing I was grabbing. How do we know those dents weren't there already?" Brooke winked, then added, "Of course, the big prize came through intact, didn't it?"

"*That* is where you got lucky, I'll admit." Marissa smiled. Turning away again, she retrieved a compad from the counter behind her, tapped the keys once and called up the image of an exquisite vessel of fine gold and platinum, bearing the still-clearly-enameled crest of House Cameron, ringed with six brightly colored gemstones. The timestamp that scrolled across the bottom of the slowly rotating flatscreen image certified that it had been scanned in a mere two hours ago.

"If that bloody chalice had been in another safe," Marissa told her, "or maybe stuffed deeper in the corner of the one it was in, you probably never would've found it before those bombs went off."

Brooke nodded sagely and used to keys to slowly rotate the chalice's image, watching as blue-green light reflected off the broad handle that ran along one side of the artifact. Curiously asymmetrical in design, the cup easily could have been mistaken for the hilt of a nobleman's rapier from a certain angle—exactly as its craftsmen had likely intended.

A bauble of a bygone era, but worth millions—perhaps even tens of millions—in fresh kroner, if one knew the right museum or private collector to sell to.

And, of course, Brooklyn Stevens knew all the right ones.

"It's magnificent," Marissa breathed when Brooke handed the compad back to her. "It's just a pity there are no more of the DeKirks left to inherit. Just doesn't seem right to hand it off to a man like Duke Robert."

"Now, now, Marie," she said. "That's our employer you're talking about. You're starting to get as cynical as Trouble."

"Perish the thought!" Marissa winked back. "I just want to be sure that when you risk your neck like that, the payoff's worth it."