

CHAPTER THREE

—HOPERISING LAUNCH—

**Jekotian Space Command, Outskirts of Ronan
July 13th, 2985**

“T minus five, four, three, two, one, we have liftoff,” came an unknown voice over the radio. And as the voice said liftoff, the grounding clamps holding the monolithic satellite released. All of this was seen from a kilometre away, via remote cameras stationed around the launch site. The sheer pressure created by the engines of HOPERISING made the surrounding area too dangerous for human life. As the vessel rose, the flames from the engine were no longer cushioned by the five foot thick, reinforced, flame proof, steel launch pad, and the true power of it became apparent. A supersonic roar swept across the surrounding area, and from a distance, it looked as if the vessel was being consumed by the flames from its engines. Birds in nearby trees took flight, only to be consumed by the devastating sound wave.

As HOPERISING ascended higher, the engines created a subsonic boom at one thousand feet; the afterburner igniting. At four thousand feet, things went horribly wrong: Brenodi aircraft were attempting to intercept.

“What the hell is going on out there,” Patterson boomed, “I specifically instructed for an escort of fighters to make sure HOPERISING isn’t intercepted at launch!”

“Sorry, sir,” the lieutenant at the command console replied, his voice hoarse, “There was a delay at the hangers, someone sabotaged the landing gear on one of the jets, it collapsed in the gate.”

“God damn it, the Brenodi had the whole thing set up! If we don’t get a squadron out there now, were screwed. We don’t have the time or the resources to replace HOPERISING before this war is over,” Patterson said, angered by the lack of hanger security.

“What about the AA batteries, lieutenant,” Patterson continued in a calmer tone.

“Their being air-lifted to the launch site now, ETA three minutes,” the lieutenant replied, briefly interrupted by a radio transmission, “and it seems the hanger is clear. The fighters are launching now.”

“May God be with them, our fate rests in their hands now,” Patterson said, followed by a brief prayer.

On the runway, five Raptor heavy fighters moved into takeoff positions on runway E5.

“Zulu-One to Raptor Wing Zulu, prepare for takeoff,” the wing lead said over team COM. Then, on all COM, “Control, this is Zulu-One of Raptor Wing Zulu, requesting permission for Raptor Wing Zulu to launch from runway five,” he continued over the COM.

“Roger Zulu-One, your clear, give those bastards hell,” came a reply from the control tower.

“Roger that control, igniting engines, over and out,” Zulu-One said over all COM, before closing the link.

“Ok people, power to engines, throttle to full, we got some Brandy’s to take out. Bearing twenty-three point nine degrees west, altitude seven thousand feet, flight formation Charlie-five.” Zulu-One, also known as Adrian, shouted over team COM. It was a standard V shaped formation, what really mattered about it was the five. A five in any flight formation meant all weapons free, fire at will, an order directly from High Command.

Almost instantly, pillars of fire exploded out of the Raptors engines, creating air-distorting heat waves on the runway, a wall of fire. Seconds later, after being propelled down the runway, Zulu-One nosed up, rapidly leaving the planet behind, followed sequentially by his four wingmen. At one hundred meters after takeoff, the Raptors emitted an ear splitting roar, their pilots igniting the after burners, launching them from two hundred kilometres an hour to nearly Mach one.

“Zulu-One to wing, bank hard right, heading twenty-three point nine degrees west, follow my lead,” Adrian said over team COM. In seconds, he received confirmations from the rest of Zulu, and everyone was in tight formation behind him.

“We have weapons free order, but if you hit HOPERISING you will be shot down by friendly AA. They don’t want to risk an AWOL pilot damaging it, not after the hanger sabotage. It’s more valuable than anyone or anything Jekotia has ever known, so check your fire and confirm your targets before engaging.” Adrian says, grimly broadcasting on team COM.

“Sir, we got hostiles, one thousand meters off, their heading straight for the satellite,” Jillian said over team COM. She was their radar expert. While as good as anyone else in combat, she had incredible skills with radar systems, and could interpret data faster than anyone else Adrian had ever met. He trusted her more than even the most advanced radar systems on MAC’s.

“Roger that, any idea how many?”

“Just give me a moment, sir,” she said, pausing. “Got it, three fighters, a bomber, and three gunships.”

“Raptor Wing Zulu, release safeties on all weapons systems, clearance phrase Foxtrot Charlie Zebra Nine. Break formation and engage, fire at will,” Adrian called over team COM as he broke off of the formation and headed for what he thought was the bomber. He glanced to the left and the right of the cockpit and did a quick weapons check. All systems operational, but on standby. He reached forward and turned a key recessed under the control panel: master control for all weapons systems. He turned it clockwise, until he heard a satisfying click, then rechecked the indicators. Amber lights slowly wink on, indicators that the safety for that particular weapon is disengaged. One was red.

Adrian quickly ran a diagnostic, his hull-mounted Vulcan rotary-cannon was jammed. Easy to fix, but it required unloading the weapon, resulting in the loss of a munitions belt. He thumbed the control for the rotary-cannon, and heard a series of dull thumps as the belt released, hitting the interior of the munitions hold a few times, before it dropped down to the planet. A few seconds later, the red light winked off, replaced by amber light. Quickly checking his master control, a green light winked on; all weapons systems ready to fire.

As Adrian flew closer, he picked out his target, and slowly adjusted his radar to track it. With his thumb, he flicked up the cover on the top of his left joystick, allowing access to the

yellow button underneath. When he drew within three hundred meters of his target, he pulled the trigger.

A Hawk-Eye missile detached from his left wing, and in a puff of smoke, roared toward the painted Brenodi gunship. A few seconds before impact, the gunship fired its manoeuvring thrusters, narrowly escaping the missile, not realizing it was a Hawk-Eye. The last thing he ever saw was the missile exploding as it passed him, blasting shrapnel into the cockpit, blinding him, and causing him to bleed to death. As the gunship plummeted toward the planet, 50mm tracer rounds from the now-delivered AA batteries around the launch pad tore into the gunships hull, creating a fireball in the sky as its fuel tank was hit. Flaming shrapnel rained down, narrowly missing the AA batteries.

“Shit, George, watch what your doing, you nearly got me hit by a god damn flaming gunship!”

“Sorry Fred, accident!”

Seconds later, Mark cried out for help over team COM. Three Imperial Temptress fighters are trying to shoot him down. It was the one curses of being their weapons expert; he was always a choice target because his Raptor had a heavier and a more powerful weapons load. No smart pilot would let him live. As the Imperial fighters toke another run at Mark, Pyre rotary-cannons blazing, Jessica intercepted one of them with a high-explosive round from her wing-mounted Javelin auto-cannon. Jessica was their ranged combat expert. She excelled in the use of ranged cannons, and the Javelin, in her hands, was the aerial equivalent to a sniper rifle. She could put an armour piercing round through the engine motor of a plane approximately one kilometre away. As the destroyed fighter plummeted toward the planet, Jessica pulled away, and prepared for another run.

Mark, having ‘lost’ the remaining two Imperial fighters, banked to the left, ready for another run, and revenge. As he neared his enemies, he activated both of his hull-mounted high-explosive rotary-cannons. In seconds, the rounds tore into the Imperial fighters, detonating munitions, fuel, and critical systems. Before one of them was enveloped in a sphere of roiling fire, it fired off a heat seeking missile, which narrowly missed Mark.

Jillian wasn’t as lucky. Her being directly behind Mark, the missile, a Harbinger, picked up the heat signature of her Raptor’s engines, and streaked toward her. Its armour piercing warhead breached the aft section of her Raptor, where it activated its ‘hooks,’ curved pieces of reinforced titanium that stop the missile dead in its tracks. As the missile sits inside the hull of Jillian’s Raptor, awaiting the detonation codes for its three hundred pound payload, it stopped receiving the keep-alive signal from its pilot, activating its secondary fail-safe detonator.

Shrapnel blasted through the body of the fighter, shearing Jillian’s Raptor to pieces. For a few brief moments, amidst her Raptors transformation into a sphere of fire and destruction, a miniature star exists in high-orbit above Ronan. The Imperial bomber had flown too close to Jillian, and became consumed by her flaming aircraft, detonating the munitions carried by the bomber, creating a second sunrise. A spectacular but devastating sight for both sides.

With only two high-altitude gunships remaining, the Brenodi fled. Out numbered and outgunned, they knew they didn’t have a chance in hell.

“Their fleeing, take those bastards down,” Adrian shouted over team COM.“

No sooner did Adrian give the order, than one of the gunships exploded into a plume of flaming shrapnel; the AA guns on the ground had finally calibrated for the right altitude, and were tearing the gunships to pieces.

As his last wingman went down, the remaining gunship pilot must have realized he truly didn't have a chance at survival. With one last glance upward at the now distant satellite, he fired his manoeuvring thrusters to gain altitude and turn to face his four enemies. As a final desperate act, he removed all safeties and fail-safes, armed the self-destruct mechanism, and flew head-on toward the four fighters. Billowing clouds of smoke, he passed by the enemy formation, and detonated his gunship, creating a two thousand pound explosion, a chain reaction of countless munitions, and another star in the sky. Bromus flew right into it, blocking both engines, and entering a downward spiral toward the planet. Reaching sub-sonic speeds, the fighter crashed into the launch pad, tearing a massive hole in the alloy, and then detonating into a fireball.

"It was his first real flight, he trusted us," Mark grimly said over team COM, "we failed him, and Jillian. We failed both of them, our friends."