

BEYOND CLOUD NINE

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PREVIEW: CHAPTER ONE

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One—Coup de Main
Jupiter Orbit, March 2247 AD

Stars twinkled below Lieutenant Brooke Davis's dangling feet. Resting her forearms on the railing, she gazed through the floor of a seldom-visited observation deck aboard the UN spacecraft carrier *Terminus*. The pinpoints of light seemed to orbit around her as the carrier rotated.

Alone at last, away from everyone and everything, she mused while almost cracking a smile. She'd chosen this hideaway near the aft engine block because the crew and her fellow pilots almost never came back here. *I'm not near them, they're not near me, and everybody's happy*. She'd given up trying to relate to people. Was it her genetic disorder that had caused this rift? Did her mixed heritage leave her stranded between Japanese and American cultures, without a people to call her own?

She wrinkled her nose at the thought. The reasons didn't really matter, and she didn't much care.

Her surroundings brightened. Brooke leaned over the railing and watched the brown belts and white zones of the planet Jupiter rising up from beneath her boots. Over the next few minutes, the gas giant's ring system scrolled into view, followed by its two Great Red Spots. Storm clouds churned and lightning crackled within the two oversized hurricanes, which stared back at her like a pair of angry eyes. The

thought of how each one could swallow the Earth three times over put the insignificance of her life into perspective.

She craned her neck upward and looked along the hull of the carrier. The observation deck hung from a curved artificial horizon like the gondola of an antique blimp. To the rear of the carrier, she could see three of its six cylindrical antimatter nacelles. Each nacelle possessed twice the size of the ancient Saturn V rocket, the vehicle that had carried the first astronauts to Earth's moon almost three centuries ago. *We're much more advanced now, but not nearly enough to get me where I want to go.* She sighed.

Jupiter rose above and behind her head before disappearing.

Vibrations reverberated through the carrier, shaking her seat. The pulsations undulated through her toes, shook her body, and chattered her teeth.

An SF-522 Starthroat launched from the flight deck and blended into the backdrop of space. The sleek black star fighter's running lights blinked, its thrusters burned, and its fuselage blotted out the occasional star.

The Starthroat ignited its afterburners, flaring like a supernova. Automatically, the deck tinted near-opaque, dimming the flare of the fighter's plasma exhaust. Still, she had to squint and turn her head away.

A second later, the blinding light faded. The Starthroat rocketed away toward the planet, on course to defend one of the atmospheric particle collector balloons that provided the Jovian system with its chief source of power.

Watching a launch never got old, but she preferred the rush of the firsthand experience. Few things in life compared to pushing hundreds of gees in the fastest spacecraft known to exist.

She reached for the travel box of Fruity Planets cereal on the seat next to her, pulled out a piece, and tossed it into the air. The blinking, Saturn-shaped marshmallow wafted up and drifted down in slow motion, thanks to the quarter-gee rotational force that pulled everything to the interior of the outer hull.

The marshmallow settled onto her tongue, and she chewed and swallowed the sweetest bliss in the universe. After two more pieces, she tapped the top of the box, which morphed into a bowl, filled with milk, and produced a spoon.

While crunching away, she magnified a nearby constellation. Supposedly, three habitable exoplanets existed in the region—none with life as complex as that on Earth, but amazing nonetheless. Her skin tingled when she thought of how the UN's Project Luminosity might make it possible to reach these worlds in her lifetime. Her career as an

Aerospace Defense pilot meant everything to her—she'd left Earth six years ago to pursue that dream—yet she'd give it up in a second to be selected as the first human to fly faster than light.

Her chest burned when she thought of the idiots who threatened the project.

Two of the hovering displays in the observation deck showed the divided nations and colonies of humanity fighting among themselves and each other. Skirmishes on and near the Earth, Luna, Mars, Ceres, and Jupiter dominated the news feeds. Pundits criticized the UN for its waning ability to keep the peace, and questioned whether its leaders should reassess the project.

One screen carried the South American Space Network, which broadcast a speech by a separatist group leader. "As of this day, March third, 2247, Minas Gerais secedes from Brazil under the direction of the Neoconservative Party." The smart-suited man palmed a fist. "We seek to gain equal footing through the procurement of antimatter and phase technology. The UN has implemented faster-than-light communications among its elitist nations and colonies without doing the same for the less fortunate. And now, the imminent arrival of FTL ships and fighters threatens to create an imbalance of power from which the solar system may never recover. We secede in the hope that others will follow and force the UN's hand."

Similar statements resounded from factions once part of the Chinese Solar Republic, the African Star Union, and the Russian Planetary Federation. Brooke had lost track of the number of new governments and territorial realignments. They seemed to change by the hour.

The voice of the UN secretary-general Danuwa Ajunwa boomed from the IntraSolar News channel. "The UN implores all nations and colonies to leverage diplomacy to settle these disputes—but let me make one thing clear." Her low, direct tone made every hair on Brooke's neck stand on end. "Acts of terrorism won't be tolerated. Everyone must trust that the UN has the long-term best interests of the solar system at heart. Efforts on the scale of Project Luminosity take time, but in the end, each and every human being will reap the benefits of phase technology. Therefore, I request your patience and understanding."

An image of the president of the UN Security Council, Edward Collins, replaced the secretary-general. "I'm pleased to announce Project Luminosity is progressing on schedule," he said from behind a podium. "The communication systems rollout to UN installations and testing of unmanned spacecraft is now underway, and the first manned flights should happen within a year. Qualified pilots may submit applications to the Luminosity Candidacy Training Program."

Chills surged through Brooke's limbs. She visualized herself at the controls of a superluminal fighter, hopping from star to star, feeling the theorized rush of hyperspace.

Putting on her net specs, she summoned Project Luminosity's SolNet presence, only to dismiss it right away. *You've signed, sealed, and transmitted your application. There's no way they've responded yet, so stop checking every five minutes.* She tried not to think about how every pilot in the solar system had likely applied.

"Attention all hands," the flight controller's voice squawked, cutting off Collins mid-sentence. "Separatist forces have been detected over the northeast hemisphere. All units are ordered to scramble immediately. This is not a drill. Attention all hands—"

Brooke hopped up and sprinted for the flight deck.



Brooke's weightless body, clad in flight armor, floated down into the cockpit of her Starthroat. Fuel and coolant tubes slithered up the plane's fuselage, connecting to nozzle entry points.

As she settled into her seat, her arm twitched and she felt a twinge of anxiety that had nothing to do with mission jitters. *The sparks must be wearing off.* She clamped her fingers around her wrist. Even as she thought *I shouldn't take them*, she reached beneath her seat and pulled out an injector. Holding her ponytail to the side, she jabbed the auto-syringe into her neck. Nanorobotic narcotics flooded her nervous system, jolting her spine.

Clarity of thought soothed the brain freeze, and the quivering of her limbs subsided. *Nothing to worry about.*

She fastened her helmet to her armor and sealed her face shield, feeling like a futuristic knight. After the safety harness clamped down around her shoulders, locking her in place, the canopy closed. Gravity gel rose up above her boots, legs, torso, and helmet until it filled the cockpit. The gel buoyed up her body, soothing her as if she'd crawled back into the womb.

The neurotronic padding inside her helmet induced a tingle in her scalp, and her mental control systems flashed to life.

Her AI's voice intruded upon her thoughts. *<Gravgel immersion complete, ma'am. I've validated all subsystems, and flight control reports a green light. Ready for launch.>*

Sounds good, Bob. Let's go.

The flight elevator lifted her Starthroat up the launch tube and into the flight airlock. As the overhead bay doors slid aside, starlight brightened the cockpit, and the lift platform rose until it locked flush with the exterior hull.

Her fighter emerged like a mighty beast after a long slumber, ready to hunt for its prey. Latches released, and pneumatics catapulted it away from *Terminus*.

Lieutenant Jeff Braxton, her assigned wing mate, maneuvered his Starthroat into formation alongside her fighter.

“Control’s assigned us collector 59-A,” she said over the comm net. “I’m sending you the rendezvous trajectory.”

“Whatever you say, Angel.” Jeff’s slow, monotone drawl over-enunciated her call sign. “I’ll take point, if you don’t mind.”

“Actually, I do mind, Cobra. I’m the assigned flight leader for this sortie, so you’ll follow my lead.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The inflection in his voice told her he didn’t respect her authority or approve of his assignment as her dash-two. *What else is new?*

Brooke ignited her Starthroat’s afterburners. Plasma erupted from the rear exhaust nozzles. She struggled to breathe as the gel squeezed her, protecting her from the crushing acceleration. The digits multiplied on her mental speed gauge, which toggled from kilometers per hour to kilometers per second.

The exhilaration helped to subdue the pangs of rejection.

Jupiter ballooned until it swallowed her surroundings. On Bob’s signal, she cut the main rockets and coasted above a sea of swirling shades of brown. Ice crystals shimmered within the clouds, reflecting the faint sunlight.

She burned her fighter’s retrorockets and decelerated, descending into the upper atmosphere. Her mental displays indicated the position of collector 59-A, currently engaged in its offloading ascent. Her cameras zoomed in on the oblong balloon.

Bob matched her Starthroat to the collector’s orbit and she settled into a defensive posture a kilometer away. Jeff’s fighter took up position nearby.

<I’ve detected two bogeys at one hundred thousand kilometers’ distance, ma’am.>

An additional display popped into her field of vision. Shades of violet and crimson highlighted the bandits’ armaments and weak points. UN Aerospace Defense identified the fighters as belonging to one of the separatist groups on Ganymede. They were patchwork spacecraft cobbled together from decades-old Chinese, Russian, Brazilian, and American star fighters—no threat to her sleek Starthroat.

<The bandits appear to be on an intercept course, ma’am. T-minus four minutes, thirty-two seconds until they reach the collector.>

Any other bogeys in the area?

<None that my sensors can detect, ma'am.>

“Do you have them on your scope, Cobra?” she asked.

“I see 'em, Angel. There're only two. I reckon we oughta intercept before they make a run at the collector.”

“Negative. That'd leave it vulnerable.” She thought about it. “You go. I'll stay.”

“Yes, ma'am.” He burned his Starthroat's rockets and shot away.

She tracked his progress on her instruments. Pixels blinked, indicating weapons fire.

<Ma'am, three more bandits are closing on Cobra's position,> Bob warned.

Where'd they come from? I thought you said—

<They were hiding lower in the atmosphere, ma'am. The turbulence must have shielded them from detection.>

Lower? They'd risk getting crushed to gain an extra few seconds of surprise? She shook off her disbelief and leapt away, intending to back up her wingman.

A burst of silent light flashed up ahead.

<Cobra has destroyed one of the first two bandits, ma'am. We should reach him in twenty-eight seconds, eleven seconds before the other three enemy spacecraft.>

Okay, target—

<Ma'am, two more bogies have appeared twenty thousand kilometers from the collector.>

What?! She cursed, spun her fighter, and fired her afterburners, cutting her backward momentum. Once it hit zero, her Starthroat reversed direction and rocketed back toward the collector.

<Ma'am, bandit six is coming toward us. Number seven remains on course for the—incoming warheads.>

Bob sprayed anti-missile countermeasures from slots in the Starthroat's fuselage. Each deterrent emitted hyper-frequency jamming signals designed to confuse the projectiles.

Two of the three seekers lost target lock. Their thrusters fired at random, sending them on unpredictable paths. The first seeker shot past her fighter, descended into Jupiter's upper atmosphere, and detonated amid the halo-shaped clouds. The second seeker followed a stair-step trajectory off into space.

Brooke zigzagged her Starthroat, grunting. The third seeker buzzed her canopy, missing by meters. It exploded just past her starboard wing.

Her field of vision filled with data and graphic symbols. A red icon blinked in the star field, representing the enemy fighter. Neutrino radar tracked its position and flight path.

When the targeting bracket locked on, Brooke discharged the particle cannons. Blue-white death struck the bandit, popping its force field like a bubble.

Her Starthroat rocketed straight through the exploding craft. Searing heat and shards of metal almost overloaded her fighter's shielding.

Brooke got a fix on the seventh bandit and gasped. Pangs of dread coursed through her every appendage.

<Ma'am, the bandit is on a collision course with the collector. We won't enter weapons range in time. Pull away at once.>

Gritting her teeth, she darted away and throttled her afterburners to maximum output. Thin atmosphere scraped against her fighter's force field. A red glow shrouded the canopy.

Rear cameras showed the bandit slam into the collector. Flame and shrapnel burgeoned in all directions, obscuring the turbulent troposphere below.

The cockpit shuddered when the blast caught up to her Starthroat. Debris pummeled the fighter's shielding from behind.

She clamped her eyelids shut. The arteries in her neck throbbed with blood and adrenaline. She gulped air, hearing a whine as the life support system struggled to keep up with her hyperventilation.

Her seat and harness vibrated like a tuning fork, and the gravgel wavered, refracting starlight in rainbow patterns.

The explosion dissipated. Her fighter rocketed up and out of the atmosphere, and she blew out a long-winded breath.

After cutting speed, she asked, *Bob, where's Cobra?*

<The other bandits retreated once the collector was destroyed. I show your wingman on a rendezvous trajectory.>

Thank the stars.

Her Starthroat passed above the first of Jupiter's rings. Fine dust particles flowed like a river within the glittering inner halo ring.

Brooke stared back at the planet. Nothing remained of the particle collector. Dense clouds of amber and beige swirled beneath the dissipating blast.

Both her shoulders slumped.

"Y'know they'd rather die than accept the march of progress," Jeff said as his craft matched her course and speed.

Brooke scrunched her nose. *How did I miss that the first few fighters were decoys? Still, I should've been able to recover in time to stop that last one.*

"I'll say one thing, though. You're quick. I couldn't have reacted fast enough to escape those fireworks."

She wiggled her gloved fingers within the gravgel. *Was that a*

compliment?

“I reckon nobody else could’ve, actually. You’ve got some kind of gene thing that makes you so fast, right?”

“My prenatal gene therapy had complications,” she snarled, “but the doctors fixed them.”

Jeff coughed, apparently realizing he’d overstepped. “At any rate, it’s stupid we’re all even out here. These dang terrorists can’t hope to stop the project.”

“I’ll take them all on myself before I let that happen.”

He sighed. “All I want is to be back on Callisto with my wife and baby girl.”

Her Starthroat cleared the rings, bringing *Terminus* into view. Shaped like a fat metal rod, the carrier measured a kilometer in length and a quarter-kilometer in diameter. Particle beam turrets, missile launch racks, and remote sensing antennae protruded from its exterior.

Bob synchronized the Starthroat’s orientation and velocity with the rotating carrier until its curved hull became her horizon. Her fighter descended and docked, followed by Jeff’s fighter.

Dread burned within her chest. Once inside, she’d have to explain how she failed to prevent a group of overmatched terrorist fighters from destroying a collector. She’d face the scorn of her superiors and pitying stares of her fellow officers. *And what if my application gets denied because I screwed up?*

The voice of *Terminus*’s flight controller yammered from the speakers in Brooke’s helmet. “We’ve intercepted a distress call from a civilian facility. Now altering course to respond. All fighter groups remain at ready status.”

Now what? Brooke longed to return to her quarters. *This day can’t end quickly enough.*

“Here’s what we received before the signal terminated,” the controller said.

The voice of a frantic woman usurped the comm net. “This is the Artemis Water Treatment Plant on Europa. We’re under attack. They’re trying to force their way into the control room. Requesting immediate UN assist—” A throat-scraping shriek cut off the woman’s words.

Brooke winced.

“Single fighter craft on approach toward *Terminus*,” the controller said. “Its triangular configuration conforms to no known design.”

Shock laced the neudar operator’s voice in the background. “The bogey’s exceeding known speed thresholds and still accelerating.”

“All units—”

The spacecraft carrier lurched, jarred by an impact. The force almost

wrenched Brooke out of her seat harness. Pain knifed into her collar bone.

<Ma'am, the command deck of Terminus has sustained a direct hit.>

A mind screen replayed an explosion bursting forth from the bridge near the bow of the carrier. The turrets mounted along the hull ceased firing.

The comm net erupted with requests for orders and every curse word in the dictionary. Pleas begging the bridge to respond went unanswered.

The bright blue exhaust of tens of Starthroats leapt away from *Terminus*.

A white blur streaked past the carrier above her head.

She replayed the flyby in slow motion. The white isosceles triangle compared in size to her Starthroat. The tri-fighter's sleek fuselage gleamed in the distant sunlight. Aft exhaust ports whited out her mental display screen.

The UN's space superiority fighters darted about like dazed mosquitoes, fleeing the tri-fighter.

"Something's frying my neurotronics," a pilot yelled.

"I've lost control," another pilot shouted. "Propulsion systems nonfunctional."

Without engines or attitude control, Starthroats coasted on straight-line trajectories. Gurgling death screeches pierced her eardrums. Blue flames winked out of existence one by one. She shuddered.

<Networked sensor data from operational units indicates the unidentified craft has destroyed twelve—correction, thirteen—friendlies, ma'am.>

Thirteen?!

Her Starthroat's auxiliary consoles flashed.

<A quantum jamming virus is interfering with onboard systems, ma'am.>

Her scalp smoldered. Static electricity zapped her brain.

Networked data, Brooke realized, grimacing. *Firewall all external data ports!*

<Done, ma'am.>

The consoles ceased flickering, and the inside of her helmet cooled. She blinked the moisture out of her eyes.

<Ma'am, we cannot receive telemetry in standalone mode.>

We'll have to do without it. Let's go.

Her Starthroat broke away from *Terminus*.

Dialogue over the comm net confirmed the remaining pilots had figured out how to block the virus.

Jeff cursed. "My launch struts won't release."

Brooke executed a series of thruster burns, positioning her fighter above Jeff's Starthroat, covering him.

Her heads-up display showed the tri-fighter on a return approach to *Terminus*. The craft blasted launching Starthroats as it accelerated toward her.

<Incoming particle discharges, ma'am.>

She rolled her fighter, dodging a series of bright white pulses.

A pulse struck one of her Starthroat's wings. The impact spun her fighter counterclockwise. Brooke suppressed shudders of fright and trusted Bob to stabilize her craft.

With even breaths, she focused and anticipated. Her perception of time and the tri-fighter's movements slowed to a crawl.

She launched a pair of seekers, waited a fraction of a second, and fired a third. The bandit avoided the first two but couldn't avoid number three. The last seeker exploded against the tri-fighter's force field, knocking the craft away from *Terminus*.

<Damage to port wing assessed as negligible on SF-522 performance, ma'am. Dispatching nanorepair bots.>

"The release protocols are busted up," Jeff said. "I'm going to have to spacewalk."

Brooke's displays showed the recovered tri-fighter streaking toward them.

Tactical assessment, Bob. Evaluate my ability to protect Cobra.

<Based on the maneuverability and armament precision of the unidentified spacecraft, the chances of preventing a positive hit on your wingman's craft are miniscule, ma'am. Cobra will avoid destruction only if the bogey refrains from targeting him.>

So, the only way to protect Cobra is to give the bandit a different target. She plotted an intercept trajectory and fired the Starthroat's afterburners.

"Where're you going, Angel?" Jeff yelled. "I've got one foot out of the cockpit here. You're supposed to cover me."

I am.

Her Starthroat rocketed toward the tri-fighter. Jupiter engulfed her forward view.

<Entering weapons range, ma'am.>

Her heart thumped in her chest, but she held off the mental trigger.

White lightning lashed out from the tri-fighter. Brooke kept her Starthroat's nose pointed straight ahead and executed a series of minute thruster burns. The bolts missed her craft by centimeters.

She launched six seekers at the tri-fighter. It avoided them as she expected, but their dispersal pattern forced the bandit into her path.

Route all power to the shield generator and reverse polarity, Bob.
She devoted her faculties to anticipating her enemy's movements.

<Ma'am, collision imminent—>

She wailed.

Her Starthroat's force field bashed into the tri-fighter's protective barrier. Discharges crackled around both spacecraft, bleeding more power than terrestrial lightning strikes.

Every mental display flickered out. The gravgel prevented the current from electrocuting her but failed to absorb the full force of impact.

Whiplash. Something snapped in her chest. She cried out through clenched teeth.

<You've fractured two ribs, ma'am. >

Electromagnetism repulsed. The two spacecraft ricocheted off each other in opposite directions. The tri-fighter sailed off into space. Brooke's fighter plunged toward the gas giant's turbulent atmosphere, spinning like a gyroscope.

Bob!

<Propulsion and neurotronic control systems failing, ma'am. Working to correct the issues.>

A blaze of crimson engulfed the Starthroat. Temperature gauges shot into the red, and sweat soaked her flight suit. Rear cameras showed a flaming wake trailing her fighter.

Warning icons blinked within her mind-vision.

Got to stay awake. She swallowed hard. *Not gonna power puke.* Her eyeballs squeezed and compressed.

<The fuselage has exceeded structural limitations, ma'am.>

The gravgel blurred. Extreme g-force pressed in on her like a trash compactor. The skin on her face pulled and stretched.

Brooke blacked out.