

28. Strike Three

Chapter 28: Strike Three

In August 2008, SpaceX faced a crucial moment on the remote atoll of Kwajalein with the launch of the Falcon 1 rocket. After two previous attempts had ended in failure, the third launch was seen as the company's last chance. Elon Musk had invested nearly all of his resources into SpaceX, telling his team that they could only afford to attempt three launches. This time, the stakes were higher as the Falcon 1 was tasked with carrying a significant payload: an Air Force satellite weighing 180 pounds, two smaller NASA satellites, and the ashes of James Doohan, the actor best known as Scotty from Star Trek.

The launch initially seemed successful, with the team in Los Angeles, including Musk, watching eagerly. Cheers filled the control room as the rocket ascended, and the upper stage detached as planned, giving hope that the satellite cargo would reach orbit. However, a moment of horror quickly followed when the booster unexpectedly bumped into the second stage shortly after detaching, leading to another failed mission. The issue was traced back to the redesigned cooling system of the Merlin engine, which, while effective at sea level, malfunctioned in the vacuum of space, causing an unintended spurt of thrust.

In the aftermath of this third consecutive failure, Musk was financially drained, and both SpaceX and his other venture, Tesla, were in crisis. Despite these overwhelming challenges and personal struggles, including a difficult period in his marriage, Musk remained undeterred. He resolved to continue pursuing SpaceX's goals, declaring his unwavering commitment to achieving orbit and refusing to blame his team for the setback. The next day, in a somber conference call with key team members, Musk revealed that parts for a fourth rocket were ready in Los Angeles, directing them to prepare it for transportation to Kwajalein. This moment underscored Musk's resilience and determination to persevere despite facing seemingly insurmountable obstacles.