

BATTLECORPS

THE LAWS OF MOTION

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Structural members creaked in protest as Star Captain Herron slammed his throttles wide open. The *Sabutai* threw itself forward at its maximum four and a half gravities of acceleration, smashing Herron deep into the padded command couch that clasped his body like a desperate swimmer. He craned his neck as far as it would go, his eyes searching the void through the glare of the *Sabutai's* torch. He could almost see the DropShip behind him. He looked away.

His instrument panel flashed white and then shadows as the DropShip exploded behind him.

"*Carriion Swoop* is gone," he reported.

"Aff, Star Captain," his controller said. "Proceed along marked vector for escape."

"Aff," he acknowledged. Green traceries drew themselves on his heads-up display, threading a path through the debris field. His carrier was eighteen hundred kilometers away. The beacon pulsed on his HUD, but it was too far for even his genetically enhanced eyes to see the hatchet-faced bows of the *Conqueror*. He programmed the course and cut his thrust. There was no reason to hurry. The *stravag* bandits would not chase him, not with the rich corpse of *Carriion Swoop* to pick over. Even a shattered hull would yield valuables to those who preyed on the refuse of warriors.

The Dark Caste vessel had appeared out of hyperspace and released a pair of modified *Leopard*-class DropShips. The ancient vessels had been modified as assault ships, as *Carriion Swoop* soon found out. Before Herron, deployed on barrier combat air patrol from the *Conqueror*, could reach them, each *Leopard* had launched two Points of fighters and demonstrated a far greater weapons load than a standard *Leopard*. The *Union-C* class *Carriion Swoop* had not had a chance.

And Herron had been too late.

An alarm bleeped at him. He blinked his shame away and focused on his radar panel. Four of the Dark Caste fighters were vectoring to follow him. He laughed at their lunacy. Any *surat* could see he

was headed for a WarShip. *Conqueror* made no attempt to hide its emissions or its IFF. Anyone coming close enough would see a proud vessel in the pristine white of the Snow Ravens. She had no foes worthy of the name.

And yet they followed. Herron frowned and punched in a more detailed scan. He touched his yoke and brought the *Sabutai's* nose around, now coasting backwards. His targeting scanners locked onto the signals and began prosecuting. A beeping, one tone per second, filled his helmet as the PPC guidance computers searched for a solution. Herron knew he was far out of range, but he did not cut them off. A void formed at the base of his stomach. It was different from the usual queasiness of zero-*g*.

All four fighters boosted under six gravities of acceleration.

Herron grabbed his stick with both hands and thumbed the throttle. They would catch him before he reached *Conqueror*. A smile drew his lips back from his small teeth. He flexed his hands, his forearms. His gloved fingers tightened around the yoke.

"*Conqueror*," he said, "Bandits engaging." He cut in the thrusters and spoke through the crushing weight of deceleration. "It appears they wish a Trial of Position," he muttered.

"Confirmed, Star Captain," his controller said. "Be advised, *Conqueror* is moving to assist."

Herron chuckled. It would take too long for the lumbering cruiser to reach him before the bandits engaged him. "Enjoy the show, *Conqueror*."

Time slowed as Herron watched three indicators at once. One showed his relative velocity; that indicator was counting downward more and more quickly. The second showed his attacker's velocity; that one was climbing. The third showed the distance between them; that indicator was falling fastest of all. In order to engage them, he had to let them catch up. So he was slowing down.

And they were speeding up.

The *Sabutai's* battle computer flashed an alert on his HUD and overlaid his tactical data with a small wireframe schematic. The computer had identified his attackers. Herron bit back another smile when he saw the designation: THK-63. Forty-five-ton *Tomahawk* light fighters. Relics from a purloined Brian Cache, no doubt. The vintage fighters, while bearing the pedigree of the Star

League Defense Force, were no match for his OmniFighter. He outmassed any one of them—almost two of them together—and the difference in firepower was too radical to even figure. Herron did grunt his disdain, but then brought his attention around.

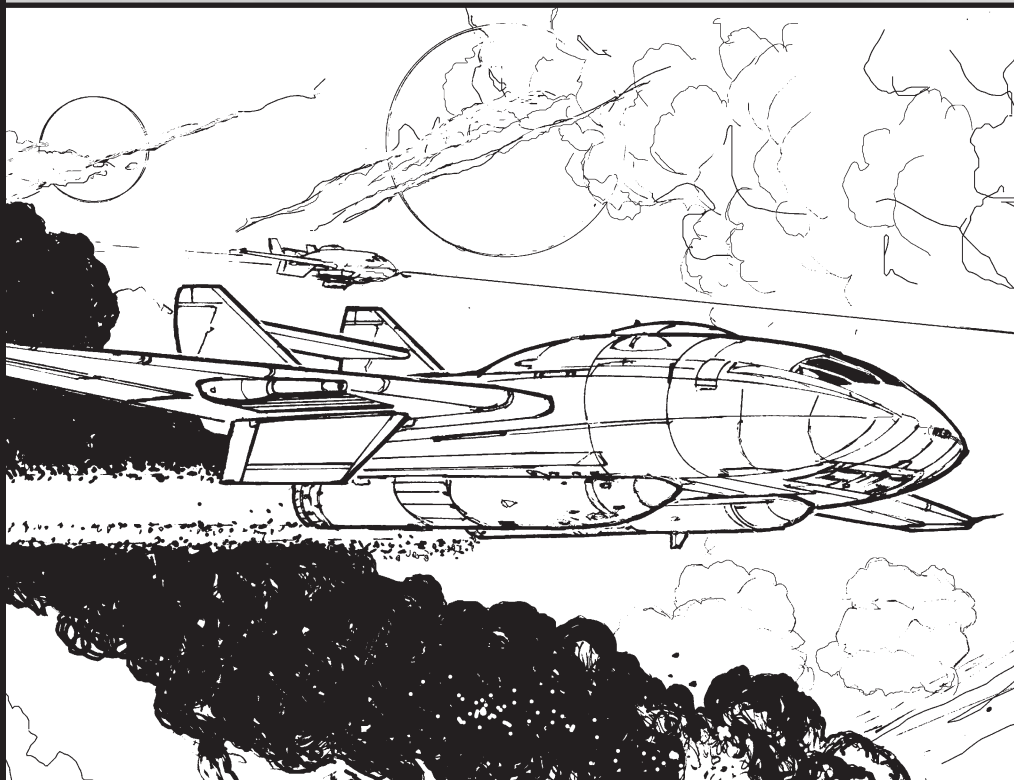
There were four of them, and they were faster. He dialed an unencrypted frequency.

"Attention, intruders. This is Star Captain Herron of the Sukhanov bloodline, Trinary commander in the Brim Naval Assault Star. Withdraw with your lives, scum, or feel the talons of the Snow Ravens." He did not expect a response, but protocols must be followed.

"You turn back, tinspawn. Maybe we'll let you go."

Herron did grin then, a predator's grin that brought his lips back and his tongue against the roof of his mouth. The dry whisper of adrenaline in the back of his throat tickled. He activated a secondary screen and traced navigation data with a light pen, still watching the indicators drop with one eye. A plan formed. He sketched it out and beamed a condensed version to *Conqueror*.

They were only bandits, after all.



Herron cut his thrusters to maneuvering when the *Tomahawks* reached the four-hundred-kilometer boundary. His targeting system painted each fighter with an alphanumeric ID tag and flashed each on his HUD. At this distance the icons were clustered in one place, but a toggle up on the magnification and he could bring his crosshairs to bear on the lead ship. Herron manipulated his controls, bringing the markers for his PPCs to hover over the *Tomahawk's* broad, delta-winged shape. He watched the range counter drop, watched the targeting reticle, waiting for a flash of gold. The computer chimed, three tones a second. He fired.

The powerful particle cannons mounted under the *Sabutai's* swept wings erupted, channeling white-hot ions into the gulf of space between the two craft. To a mudhead in a 'Mech on the ground, four hundred kilometers was a ten-hour journey. In the cold, comfortable reaches of space, four hundred kilometers was an instant.

The *Tomahawk* shuddered as both PPCs struck at the thick nose armor, smashing more than half of it. It rotated slightly nose-down, the impulse from the exploded armor acting as an impromptu maneuvering thruster.

The tones in Herron's helmet changed decibel, but not pattern. He squeezed another trigger. The *Sabutai* shuddered. The mammoth Gauss gun slung under the OmniFighter's nose flashed silently in the vacuum as it hurled a small mass of iron at the bandit fighter. Although frighteningly swift, the projectile was noticeably slower than the energy weapons.

"No evasion," Herron whispered, just as the Gauss round smashed into the already-savaged nose armor. It crushed a weakened member and careened through the *Tomahawk's* cockpit. The flash of released atmosphere was visible in Herron's HUD. The icon flashed and disappeared. One enemy down.

Lasers flashed around him as the other *Tomahawks* opened fire. Only one beam hit, a scintillating ruby brushstroke that wiped some armor from the leading edge of his right wing. Herron tapped a new counter into his display and juked right, using his maneuvering jets to lift his fighter higher and push it lower, all without changing his relative heading; slower, but still creeping toward the *Conqueror*.

The *Tomahawks* slowed to three *gs* of acceleration as they closed, and Herron pushed his own torch a notch higher, trying to keep his distance. He switched his primary triggers from the heavy PPCs

to the hyper-accurate pulse lasers mounted alongside. He kept the Gauss rifle as his secondary, but tied the pair of rear-facing small lasers into the third. If the engagement went as he expected, he would undoubtedly have at least one of the fighters behind him before it was over.

"That's just lucky shooting, tinspawn," one of the *Tomahawks* radioed. Herron ignored it, concentrating on watching the approaching fighters. The range was down to under two hundred kilometers, and they had ceased accelerating.

More laserfire danced around his fighter as the Dark Caste pilots opened up, each trying to melt enough of his armor and control surfaces to make him a sitting duck. The killing blows, heavy pulses aimed at his fuselage, were notably absent. Behind them their DropShips feasted on the hulk of *Carriion Swoop*. These three were after his OmniFighter.

Herron took a deep breath and fired his torch. It appeared as though he were charging toward them, when in reality he was just slowing down and bringing them closer to his *Sabutai*. He targeted the next-nearest *Tomahawk* and squeezed his triggers. Verdant green laser light, much brighter in space without the bothersome atmosphere of a world to attenuate the beams, rippled across the venerable fighter's fuselage. The Gauss round whistled past harmlessly beneath the target, but Herron was satisfied. His lasers were more powerful and more accurate than the bandits'. He was more accurate than the other pilots.

He was Herron of the Sukhanov line, pilot of Clan Snow Raven. They were filth.

The three light fighters split and blasted around to come after him. They were victims of their own acceleration now, as he dumped velocity and they sped away from him. Herron did not allow himself any satisfaction. The *Tomahawks* still out-powered him, and they had slowed much more quickly than he could. One of the fighters flipped end for end and blasted at full military power, crawling to a seeming halt and then arrowing after Herron's *Sabutai*. The lasers embedded in the *Tomahawk's* wings spat coherent light again, this time paring the armor over the *Sabutai's* torch.

Herron snap-fired the rear-mounted light lasers, but both ruby spears missed wide. The other two *Tomahawks* were closing. Herron looked at the newest indicator, watching the ranges fall. Less than a thousand kilometers now. Not much longer.

Bracing himself, Herron jerked back on his stick and kicked his thrusters to life, spinning his *Sabutai* end over end. Warning lamps flashed to life as overstressed components snapped free under the crushing weight of deceleration. The feed bin for one of his Gauss ammo bins flickered to black, indicating a failure. Herron ignored it.

"We'll take you bondsman, tinspawn," the Dark Caste pilot said. "We may be *dezgra*, but we are still Clan."

Herron grunted in effort, bringing the OmniFighter out of its turn. One of the *Tomahawks* fell into place in his HUD, and he squeezed the triggers. The Gauss rifle fired its last slug into the bowels of the vintage fighter's fuselage, opening a gap that Herron's pulse lasers exploited. The *Tomahawk's* torch sputtered and died and the ship went dark. Herron maneuvered away, leaving the crippled fighter to follow the course Sir Isaac Newton had set for him over a thousand years ago.

"Two," he whispered. He looked—six hundred kilometers. The other two *Tomahawks* fell in behind him, and Herron concentrated on staying alive. He knew, despite the differences in acceleration, that he could outfly these *surats*. But he had to keep their attention.

"You do not believe you can outfly a Snow Raven, *quineg*?" he sent.

Laughter echoed across the com lines. "I'd say we're doing it now, *aff*."

Herron pushed his yoke toward the console and dove the *Sabutai*, hoping to coming around behind the *Tomahawks*. If they felt threatened they would keep their attention focused on him, and not look behind them. They couldn't look behind them.

Herron could not let them see the shark-toothed prow of *Conqueror* angling toward them.

Tortured metal screamed and tore as lasers probed his aft armor. Herron brought his acceleration up to maximum and triggered his rear lasers. He shouted in satisfaction as the light beams stabbed glowing divots from the nose of one of the targets, but it did not last. The next barrage of laser fire destroyed Herron's rear-facing weapons. It was up to *Conqueror* now, only 350 kilometers away. Herron brought up a magnified view of the WarShip, the white prow glistening in the gentle starlight. He was proud to be a Snow Raven, beholding such a sight.

It was close enough.

Four bright flashes sparkled on the WarShip's hull. Herron snarled and looked toward the *Tomahawks*. His eyes found them, watched them. He juked, dove, did everything he could to evade their fire. A few seconds more. A streak of light caught his eye, and his head turned.

The two *Tomahawks* exploded.

Herron cheered, but kept his movement up. He knew the fighters mounted enough armor to survive the missile strikes. Not tolerate, perhaps, but survive. A Barracuda missile massed thirty tons and carried a warhead the size of a small fighter. Attacking a forty-five ton aerospace fighter with one might seem wasteful, but not to the Snow Ravens. More missiles could be built; Herron's lifetime of training and genetic legacy could not.

Such was the value of a trueborn Clan warrior.

Only one of the *Tomahawks* emerged from the debris field. It limped away on half-thrust, barely two gravities, trying to put as much distance between itself and the WarShip as it could. Its wings were shredded; Herron saw both wing-mounts empty where there had been lasers before. He brought his *Sabutai* around and matched the *Tomahawk's* course and speed, but stayed twenty kilometers back.

"You should have withdrawn," he radioed.

"So much for your honor, tinspawn," the Dark Caste pilot said.

"My honor is intact," Herron said. "You are a bandit. There is no *zellbrigen* for bandits."

"Using a WarShip to kill a single fighter," the bandit said, "would never have been considered when I was part of the Touman." The *Tomahawk* shuddered and found half a gravity more of thrust. "First the Ghost Bears, the Nova Cats, and now the Snow Ravens. The Clans are falling."

Herron dropped back another twenty kilometers, until he was safe from debris. "All that speed wasted," he said. "You should never have followed me out here. You should have withdrawn." He did not say what he felt. He did not say the skills the other man had shown were worthy of respect. He didn't say it was more than he expected from a bandit. Instead he brought the *Sabutai's* targeting computers back up, and warmed the PPCs.

“When I was a warrior,” the other pilot repeated, “it would never have been done.”

“When you were a warrior,” Herron said, “you should have learned about the laws of motion.”

He fired.